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To cite this article: Rizwangul NurMuhammad, Heather A. Horst, Evangelia Papoutsaki & Giles Dodson (2016) Uyghur transnational identity on Facebook: on the development of a young diaspora, *Identities*, 23:4, 485-499, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2015.1024126](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1024126)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2015.1024126>



Published online: 07 Apr 2015.



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## **Uyghur transnational identity on Facebook: on the development of a young diaspora**

Rizwanguul NurMuhammad, Heather A. Horst, Evangelia Papoutsaki and Giles Dodson

*(Received 25 October 2013; final version received 9 November 2014)*

How are online and social media being used in transnational spaces? This article presents empirical findings from a study of the Facebook usage among the Uyghur diaspora. We demonstrate how online identities are negotiated and developed through social media use, and in turn how the expression of identity online is contributing to Uyghur diasporic identity. Drawing upon a content analysis of Facebook sites, we attend to the construction of Uyghur ethnic identity within Facebook group sites and the ways Uyghur political identity is currently being developed online, providing insight into how Facebook is serving as a space for global, daily online interactions. The examination of discussions on Facebook sites indicates that online Uyghur identity has a youthful, emergent character, actively being explored and produced through social media use.

**Keywords:** diaspora; Uyghur; Facebook; ethnic identity; political identity; content analysis

### **Introduction**

The concept of diaspora is frequently used to describe transnational migrants (Cohen 1997; Georgiou 2006a; Karim 2003). Emphasising the importance of dispersal and homeland, Demmers defines diasporas 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. (Demmers 2007, 9)

The growth and development of the Internet and other new communication technologies have contributed to a shift in the practices and places of diasporic identity formation (Panagakos and Horst 2006; Kissau and Hunger 2010) with the Internet providing a ‘complex symbolic environment’ for diasporas (Bucy and Gregson 2001, 369). The Internet not only facilitates the imagination of the homeland, but also serves as a space to contest ‘national and transnational political ideologies and cultural expressions, or counter-expressions of identity’

(Georgiou and Silverstone 2007, 34). Cohen (1997, 26), for example, suggests that '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' rather than through territorial claims.

Online diasporic communities can foster rethinking and exploration of ethnic and political identities (Georgiou 2006b). In some cases, diaspora members who share the same homeland, language, cultural traditions, history, ancestry, values and religious practices perceive their membership belonging to, and attached to, an ethnic group and negotiate their ethnic identity based on what they share in common (Fong and Chuang 2004; Hecht 1993; Wonneberger 2004). In other instances, online communication has become a mechanism for the expression of political dissent, a way for diasporas to engage in political discussions and expressions through which they articulate political identity (Adeniyi 2007; Bernal 2006; Georgiou 2001; Mandaville 2001; Tekwani 2004). Diaspora political activists and organisations view the Internet as a high-value medium, for exchanging political information and ideas, promoting political claims, making connections with political parties and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), that contributes to the emergence of a new diasporic political culture within diasporas (Adamson 2002; Bernal 2006; Diamandaki 2003; Gladney 2003; Kanat 2005). Such cases highlight the multifaceted nature of diasporas which may include one or more dimensions of an identity, such as political, ethnic and cultural identities (Fong and Chuang 2004; Phinney and Ong 2007). While political concerns lead to strengthen political identity in the cases of some diasporas, ethnic identity construction is more significant for others. The importance of each may also change over time and in different contexts.

This article explores Uyghur use of Facebook in constructing and developing Uyghur diasporic identity. We examine the messages that are shared on Facebook sites among the Uyghur diaspora Facebook users and how Facebook usage and sharing information online is contributing to the ongoing construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity. Specifically, this article analyses the Facebook use of the Uyghur diaspora for 'everyday' transnational communication. We demonstrate how Facebook is an important means through which members of the Uyghur diaspora negotiate their identity. Attending to negotiations and constructions of ethnic and political dimensions of identity, we explore how expressions of identity are in turn contributing to, and providing insight into, the construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity. Throughout the article, we argue that transnational everyday communication on Facebook, as one of a series of social media used by members of the Uyghur diaspora, plays an important role in reinvigorating Uyghur identity among dispersed members. We conclude by reflecting upon the extent to which ethnic identity can be a unifying force for the Uyghur diaspora identity. Building upon the growing work on social network sites like Facebook use by individuals and communities (boyd and Ellison 2007; McKay 2010; Miller 2011), we argue that although Facebook is an useful tool for identity

exploration and construction, it plays a limited role in the Uyghur diaspora's practices of political mobilisation and participation.

### **The Uyghur diaspora**

The Uyghur is an ethnic and religious nationality in China. Less visible than the Tibetans who occupy a similar status, they are Sunni Muslims of Turkic origin living in far western region of China called Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), a homeland for over 10 million Uyghurs. The relationship between Uyghurs and the Chinese state has been marked by political, ethnic and other tensions, at times, violence and death. In the post-Mao era, Uyghurs have been treated as an 'illegitimate nationality' which should be incorporated into 'Chinese' and 'Han' nationality (Shichor 2007, 119) through a forced assimilation policy. 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 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% to 40% (Howell and Fan 2011). Financial development and employment have also declined. The Chinese state views Uyghurs' dissent and mobilisation as terrorism, separatism and religious extremism (Petersen 2006; Becquelin 2004). As a result, Uyghurs have called for civic, political and religious freedoms, which have been reflected in the increasing politicisation of the Uyghur cause both in and outside of China (Petersen 2006; WUC 2004).

Uyghur discontent with the political and social circumstances in China has contributed to a series of outward migrations over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, beginning with migration to neighbouring countries in Central Asia, followed by a small number settling in Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the 1930s and early 1940s and Turkey and the Soviet Union in the Cold War era. Since the 1980s, the Deng Xiaoping-era Open Door Policy<sup>1</sup> 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 (Dilnur 2012; Shichor 2003, 286). Currently a significant number of Uyghurs live in Central Asia, Turkey, Western Europe, the United States and Australia.

Although there is a long history of Uyghur migration, Uyghurs abroad did not begin forming a network among diasporic members and communities until the 1990s. Prior to this area, the active members of the Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia, Turkey and Germany relied on conventional media, such as newspapers, journals, theatre, books and radio transmissions in Uyghur language; a few of the media were in Turkish, English and German languages (Shichor 2010). Although conventional media such as the 'Eastern Turkestan Information Bulletin' (by the East Turkestan Information Center established in Munich) contributed to the

preservation of Uyghur identity, the fostering of transnational audiences and communication was limited (Shichor 2010). While Uyghurs established associations and organised cultural activities (Shichor 2003), their attempts to organise the Uyghur diaspora were local in nature, and ultimately not effective in reaching the geographically dispersed Uyghurs (Shichor 2003).

Access to the Internet in the 1990s provided Uyghur diaspora members and communities with a way to come together to engage in transnational communication. Online communication enabled diasporic Uyghurs to establish networks with governmental organisations and NGOs at international level to support the Uyghur cause (Shichor 2003, 2007, 2010; Chen 2010), to establish connections and increase communication among Uyghur diaspora members and communities at both local and transnational levels (Chen 2010; Clarke 2010; Dilnur 2012), and to represent political and cultural identities (Chen 2010; Kanat 2005; Vergani and Zuev 2011). As such, the Internet has been central in facilitating the very construction of the Uyghur diaspora identity, which Dilnur (2012, 3) suggests is a 'diaspora under construction'. This article explores the reinvigoration that the Uyghur diaspora is experiencing through its engagement with transnational social network media and the consequences of this process for ethnic and political identities.

## **Methodology**

In order to understand the construction of diasporic identity online, we examined the use of Facebook by the Uyghur diaspora through a two-stage content analysis. In the first stage, the Uyghur use of Facebook was 'mapped', providing an overall view of the nature, composition and extent of the Uyghur diaspora's Facebook use (Dodson et al. 2013). In the second stage, a detailed qualitative content analysis of selected Facebook groups was conducted. Since Facebook is prohibited in China, we were not able to identify Facebook sites created by Uyghur in China.

In the first phase of the research, we began by using Facebook's search engine with documented Uyghur Facebook sites using carefully considered keywords.<sup>2</sup> These searches generated 639 Facebook sites (e.g. pages and groups). We then reviewed and refined to include only the Facebook pages and groups created by organisations, associations, communities and members of the Uyghur diaspora, filtering out individual Facebook accounts, groups and pages created by international human rights organisations, or non-Uyghur Facebook users. Given the rapid rate of change on social media sites like Facebook and the potential limitations of our initial search, we were able to obtain a sample of 99 pages and groups which we analysed and then identified 18 additional pages and groups which meant our final sample frame included 117 Facebook sites (56 pages and 61 groups). These sites constituted the core sample for the mapping exercise (Dodson et al. 2013).

In the second stage of our content analysis, we conducted a qualitative analysis of a smaller number of Facebook groups using a purposive sampling method (Reinard 2008). Facebook groups were selected because they are spaces where people come to communicate about shared interests and the administrator and, most importantly, group members have an equal chance to upload postings and send comments. Although anyone can make comments on postings, only the administrator of the page has the authority to upload postings on Facebook pages. Given these differences, Facebook groups were considered more suitable for examining everyday communication on Facebook. From the 61 Facebook *groups* identified within the sample frame, we selected four groups for detailed qualitative content analysis. The selection was based on using purposive selection criteria including accessibility, thematic category, frequency of updates and popularity, in order to ensure substantial, active and open groups were included in the analysis. Hence, publicly open, generalist, and frequently updated groups with over 100 members were chosen. In publicly open groups, postings uploaded on their walls are intentionally open for viewing and consumption. We chose generalist groups because the research sought to analyse how identity is constructed in everyday communication practices and how identity is embedded in general everyday discourse. Moreover, generalist groups helped to mitigate potential bias resulting from examining specific interest groups, such as those specifically established for political, business or education purposes. We also eliminated groups with no updates during the data collection period (January–April 2013) and with less than 100 members.

We organised a qualitative content analysis to identify emergent themes; many of these are also prominent in the diaspora literature (e.g. Bernal 2006; Kanat 2005; Sheyholislami 2011). Themes included politics, hometown concerns, ethnicity, religion, culture, history, education and entertainment. Then codes were subsequently developed based on these themes to include different aspects of Uyghur diaspora identity, including political, ethnic, national, cultural and religious identities. In this article, we focus upon ethnic and political identity construction. For privacy and ethical reasons, we are unable to identify more specific details about the participants we quote, but have been careful to select representative quotes that have been translated from Uyghur to English.

### **Identity negotiation on Facebook**

Facebook has become dominant within the social network media sector globally. Facebook is an important forum of discussion and dissemination of information and opinion relating to a range of issues, from posting personal pictures of friends and family, to the creation of a sense of belonging and community across a range of local and global scales (Ellison and boyd 2013; Mckay 2010; Miller 2011).<sup>3</sup> Given the relatively recent recognition of the dispersed Uyghur community as a diaspora, Facebook sites are key spaces where tensions over the definition and meanings of being an Uyghur<sup>4</sup> diaspora emerge. In this section we discuss two

key areas – ethnic identity and political identity – that are significant for members of the Uyghur diaspora using Facebook. While there are not fixed lines between ethnic identity and political identity, as aspects of identity overlap, we found that these analytic categories enabled the understanding of the ongoing construction of the Uyghur identity and the different dimensions of the ways it is being articulated online.

### *Language and the maintenance of ethnic identity*

Uyghur ethnic identity is strong among diaspora members participating in Uyghur Facebook groups. The need to develop and maintain a coherent Uyghur ethnic identity appears in their Facebook posts, with emphasis placed on the collective responsibility for protecting and maintaining Uyghur identity through language use. Participants frequently assert that maintenance of the collective ethnic identity is the responsibility of individual Uyghurs. As one member stated:

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, you will be representing 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.

The participant also states that Uyghurs are anxious about losing their ethnic identity. Younger generations who have grown up in a non-Uyghur society may not have developed a strong awareness of their identity and, as another post highlights, they may not even ‘care about their identity’.

Feeling anxiety and responsibility for the loss of their ethnic identity, members of the Uyghur diaspora take action to maintain and develop their ethnic identity on Facebook, most explicitly through the contradistinction they draw between themselves and the Chinese Han population within China. Uyghurs on Facebook self-identify as Uyghurs. They use words like *Uyghurlar* (the Uyghur people) or *biz Uyghurlar* (we Uyghur people) to identify themselves as members of Uyghur ethnic group. These words are a reminder of who they are, in their own terms. They also use words like *Qerindashlar*<sup>5</sup> (brothers/sisters), *Biz* (we), *Bizning* (our), *Dostlar* (friends) and *Qerindishim*<sup>6</sup> (my brother/sister) to refer to Uyghur ethnic people, which distinguishes themselves from those of Han ethnicity: *Zhongguoluqlar* (the people of China), *Henzular* (the Han people) and *Xitay* (the Han people). Moreover, instead of using the words China or XUAR to identify the place where they lived in China, Uyghurs use several other selective words such as *Weten* (motherland/homeland) and *Yurt* (hometown). Notably, these words are preceded by words indicating belonging, including ‘ours’ or ‘my’, as such *yurtimizda*, *wetende* (in our motherland/homeland). In many cases,

participants state that they are longing for their homeland. Although it is not clear if they hope to return, the postings convey a common sense of loss and nostalgia for their homeland.

Facebook posts also indicate anxieties over the protection of and development of a distinct Uyghur identity based on the Uyghur language. While the Uyghurs that live in XUAR have faced forced bilingual education, diasporic Uyghurs face the challenge of passing their mother language to the new generations. Uyghurs, both in and out of XUAR, are increasingly realising the importance of preserving their mother language. In one post, a video shows a foreigner teaching an Uyghur language course. A comment follows this post: 'The challenge we are facing now is losing our language while overseas, even more tragically Uyghur youth are ignoring this issue.' Another, related post highlights the issue of language loss and attendant issue of preservation in shape of a question: '[h]ow can we (Uyghurs living abroad) make sure that our children learn their mother language without feeling additional pressure on top of their current study?' Several members discussed this dilemma, stressing the hindrances and obstacles of teaching Uyghur children the Uyghur language. Participants responded by emphasising the importance of creating Uyghur communities abroad and suggested that Uyghurs should try to live close to each other because they believe children learn their mother language faster when they are in a Uyghur language environment. Others advocated the need for Uyghur language schools for children and several members highlighted the important role of parents in passing the language to their children by speaking Uyghur at home.

As we have demonstrated in this section, ethnic identity formation among the Uyghur is often articulated in terms of identity loss. As one group member noted, it is the Uyghur diaspora's responsibility to protect and maintain their identity:

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 as an Uyghur... 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?

Like other diaspora grappling with issues of identity loss (Anchimbe 2005; Candan and Hunger 2008; Merolla and Ponzanesi 2005; Tsaliki 2003), there is a particular concern about who can uphold and represent Uyghur identity. The transmission of identity from one generation of migrants to another (first to second generation) is clearly identified as a responsibility of the diapsora. The need to transmit and maintain Uyghur culture and, particularly, language is nonetheless a cause of significant inter-generational anxiety among the diaspora.



**Facebook as platform for political identity?**

Facebook sites provide a forum for discussion of political issues facing the Uyghur diaspora. Participants use the sites to garner and solidify support for Uyghur political causes, sharing information and updates about conditions for Uyghur friends, families and associates within China and debating over political strategy in relation to Uyghur causes. However, while Facebook provides a forum for everyday expression and facilitates the exchange and publicity of political information, the extent to which Facebook can facilitate the emergence of a strong and unified political voice for the Uyghur diaspora interested in changing the political situation in XUAR remains unclear.

One of the most important political issues discussed during the research period was the internal migration of Han Chinese into traditionally Uyghur areas. There were several postings expressing discontent with Han people for depriving Uyghur farmers of their land, the forced bilingual education system and the punishments allocated to students who wear traditional hats and dress in school. For example, one post notes

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

One member responded by posting his personal experience at a school he worked in back in China, outlining the shock he felt by a mistake a Han graduate made during an experiment in laboratory. However, he was told by the school principal to not to expose this issue. Other commenters affirmed the posters conclusion that Han helpers were not proficient in their subjects. Such posts suggest that the Uyghur diaspora are sharing information and are aware of the political and social developments in XUAR. However, in contrast to the posts on language and ethnic identities, comments or responses to such postings are rare.

Other posts of political nature include sharing literature focused upon hope and freedom among the Uyghur. For example, *Wild Pigeon* is a famous poem written by Nurmemet Yasin Orkishi that portrays Uyghur people who are deeply unhappy with life under Beijing's rule; Nurmemet was jailed after the publication of the poem. Participants shared the poem widely on Facebook and one member posted a website link where the poem was translated into 10 different languages, including English, Mandarin, Italian and German. Responses to the post expressed sympathy for Nurmemet (e.g. 'will he rest in peace at Heaven'), including references to Nurmemet's own words 'I can die freely'. Another member responded by uploading news announcing that 20 Uyghurs were sentenced to life imprisonment by Chinese authorities and commented: 'those people are the ones who fight for Uyghurs'.

Fear of persecution by the Chinese authorities also emerged as a main concern and a potential source of fragmentation. For example, a member provided a website

link that leads to an article, 'It is a bit early to set up the flag, brother'. The article recounts an argument around setting up the blue flag in a park where Uyghurs were planning a picnic. The organiser wanted to set up the flag earlier so it would make it easy for attendees to identify the gathering place. However they were cautioned against doing anything that might be perceived as political: '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 noted the 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 response to the comment: '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 is an example of the fragmented political views among the Uyghur diaspora, including the practice of self-censorship due to the fear many Uyghurs have of being seen as acting political.

This contestation around the visibility of Uyghur identity became even more apparent in group discussions about being Uyghurs. As noted previously, some commentators placed responsibility for the maintenance of Uyghur identity in the hands of Uyghur individuals, whereas others cited problematic traits within Uyghur culture, such as self-criticism, as a key barrier to identity formation. These portrayals are increasingly challenged through comments on Facebook. For example, one post posed the question: 'Why do we often scold for our faults, why do not we start to be positive?' Other posters stated, 'The person who is blaming their own people either are concerned about those people, or regret to being one of them' and that 'The faults are on individuals, they shall not be generalized for all Uyghurs; if Uyghurs have faults, we need to correct them, shall not leave them there unsolved'. One member explicitly suggested that self-criticism can undermine identity formation:

I praise Uyghurs not because I am an Uyghur myself, 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. 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 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-scolding can be a psychological obstacle for being positive for Uyghurs.

These kinds of discussions are critical for participants' ability to identify themselves as members of the Uyghur diaspora.

### ***Diasporic identity and Facebook politics?***

Members of the Uyghur diaspora on Facebook express an awareness of social network sites and other social media as useful tools for identity exploration and

construction. Facebook is a platform where the Uyghur diaspora share information and experiences. For the first-generation members of the diaspora who grew up in the XUAR, and in a context where self-expression of a political nature was constrained, the use of platforms such as Facebook represents a novel way to connect to the homeland and discuss Uyghur identity. The second (or 1.5) generation who self-identify in Facebook group discussions use Facebook to explore and even redress the sense of ethnic identity loss. In both cases, the narratives of Facebook as a space of exploration and dialogue are almost celebratory. For example, one group administrator noted:

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.

Disseminating and discussing political messages among members on Facebook enables diasporic Uyghurs to express their criticism of the political regime, and their fears and anxieties in relation to Chinese repression and intimidation. Indeed, participants created 29 political Facebook sites, out of an overall sample of 117 sites in our research sample. Collating and sharing political information about the Uyghurs in China, these political sites provide a platform for awakening political consciousness or, in the words of one administrator, ‘raise awareness of the Uyghur people’s struggle for freedom and justice’. Through sharing and discussing political issues, participants develop political stances and express different political views.

Yet there are questions about whether Facebook itself is the most useful or effective platform to develop political debates and discussion. For example, 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. In an effort to build community and subscriptions, the editors requested interesting and relevant photos from their everyday life in diaspora. People responded enthusiastically. However, members ignored repeated calls to subscribe to or economically support the journal despite repeated requests, mirroring the trend towards fewer comments in political sites, and the general resistance to making political stances visible. This selective engagement – the ability to ignore requests, avoid logging on or stop visiting a group or page when it is not convenient and privilege the sociality over sharing photos and information – peaks to the limits of mobilisation in online forums like Facebook among the Uyghur diaspora.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings indicate that the Uyghur diaspora use Facebook for their everyday communication across transnational spaces, making Facebook a common platform for identity construction. The findings resonate with existing literature about diaspora and the Internet (Diamandaki 2003; Karim 2003; Kissau and Hunger 2010; Tsagarousianou 2004) revealing how the construction of identities takes place through everyday interactions, such as daily postings on Facebook walls. In the light of these findings, Uyghur Facebook sites stand out as one of the key areas where diaspora identities are articulated in everyday online communication in ways that have never been possible through traditional media for the Uyghur diaspora. The members and communities of this diaspora transcend boundaries of geography to converse with like-minded co-ethnic members around the world. Sharing information and opinions through Facebook, the ability to communicate emerges as the most important feature of Facebook as a platform for transnational communication. Facebook usage enables Uyghurs to share their sense of self through everyday conversations and commitments (Marcheva 2011; Oiarzabal 2012).

Our research suggests 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 about various aspects of life in the Uyghur region, creating a sense of communality resulting from the sharing of common experiences and concerns and a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in their collective longing for their homeland. We highlight how Uyghur diasporic identity centres upon expressing discontent and resistance towards the Chinese regime, the importance of preserving Uyghur ethnicity and language and claiming political rights and freedom for religious practices in China.

While political identity is constructed through political awareness and discussions among participants, the extent to which this identity can unify the Uyghur diaspora and create a stronger political voice remains uncertain. Given the historical experience of political mobilising among Uyghurs in China, expressions of political consciousness are subsumed within the expressions of ethnic identity. For this reason, the main focus of Facebook posts revolves around the maintenance and development of a coherent Uyghur ethnic identity. Uyghur ethnic identity construction encompasses various dimensions, such as self-identification as Uyghurs, a sense of ethnic group attachment, commitment in exploration of ethnicity, representing and preserving Uyghur language and culture, and positively evaluating being members of the Uyghur ethnic group and hope for the preservation of the Uyghur ethnicity. Dimensions of Uyghur political consciousness and identity, such as discontent and resistance to political suppression, are discursively integrated within expressions of hope for preserving the Uyghurs and the Uyghur ethnicity.

This article thus contributes to the research on how diasporas use Internet platforms to construct a shared imagination of their identities and homelands (Kissau and Hunger 2010).<sup>7</sup> As Georgiou (2002, 13) argues, 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. As we have outlined throughout the article, it is important however to refrain from seeing the Internet and online communication as ‘producing’ diasporic communities; rather this research emphasises the critical role of Internet in enabling the transnational communication essential for the development and maintenance of diaspora communities.

### Disclosure statement

No conflict of interest has been identified.

### Notes

1. The Open-Door Policy is a Chinese state policy seeking to boost economic development by encouraging foreign technology and investment (Shichor 2007).
2. Keywords included search terms such as: *Uyghur*, *Uygur*, *Uighur*, *Uigur*, *Uighuir*, *Uiguir*; *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].
3. Ellison and boyd (2013) have recently (re-)defined 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’.
4. Some people may pronounce the word Uyghur as /'wi:gor/. However, Hahn and Ibrahim (1991) state that an acceptable English pronunciation closer to the Uyghur people’s pronunciation of it would be /u:i'gor/. Therefore, in this paper, the indefinite article ‘an’ is chosen to be used.
5. Words used in Islam to call others Muslims.
6. See footnote 3.
7. The observations in this research could only account for the communicative interactions among the group members who participate actively on Facebook in terms of uploading postings and making comments. Hence, the findings from this research cannot be generalised because of the limited samples and the 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.

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