Moroccan Diaspora in France: Web 2.0 and Identity Narratives (Yabiladi Portal As a Case Study)

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Abstract

The present article tries to offer an empirical explanation of how members of the Moroccan community in France use social networking sites as a reference for their diasporic collective feelings as well as a space to negotiate and express their diasporic identity narratives. Identity is considered in this article as an ongoing process for self-understanding as well as how the 'Other' defines it. Hence, identities are created at the cross-over of the ever-changing boundaries between 'We' and 'They'. It is on the level of these boundaries that identities are negotiated, created and re-created.Some media scholars pin down that the Internet indisputably provides diasporic communities with the fundamental tools for information and communication essentials. Therefore, it has become a structural element for many ethnic communities. The present research endeavours to further investigate the intricate meaning as well as the function of virtual diasporic spheres in the process of circulating the diasporic narratives of identity.This ethnographic research sheds ligh on the online forum of the Moroccan *Yabiladi* portal in France. This forum provides a suitable research landscape chiefly because it represents an active discussion platform. The research offers an analysis of data which were collected in eight-month period in the forum archives.

Keywords: *Moroccan diaspora, Identity, Internet, Ethnography.*

Introduction

Identity has become one of the main areas in the landscape of migration studies and investigation on belonging and identity has proliferated in the last two decades. Mandaville [1] contends that diaspora usually involves a dynamic search and negotiation of their identities thanks to their detachment from their land of origin. In addition, media play a significant role in forming, sustaining and articulating identities.

A considerable scholarly literature on media and diasporic identities has come to the fore across more or less all social sciences. This appears to confirm Appadurai's idea that migration and media are 'two major and interconnected phenomena, whose relationship with each other is the key to understanding the link between the global and the modern' [2].

This article works towards revealing the role of *www.Yabiladi.com*, the online discussion room of the Moroccan migrants in France, with reference to the construction and articulation of identity narratives. The finding introduced in this research are a section of my ongoing Ph.D research which investigates the identity discourse of Moroccan diaspora in France and spotlights the role media play in the negotiation and articulation of diasporic identities. This research also attempts to illuminate the diverse media consumption of Moroccans in France.

Mythodology

The concepts of identity and belonging are characterized by constant change. Also, they can barely be fathomed by qualitative approach without the possibility of over-simplifying the concepts.

For this reason, in the field of migartion, diaspora and ethnicity, the majority of studies are likely to apply qualitative approach.Additionally, in order to grasp the identity discourse of a diasporic community as a dynamic and collective process of negotiation and articulation, a long-lasting involvement in that community is necessary. Hence, ethnographic framework tends to be the most suitable for the ends of this paper chiefly because it permits the researcher to fully understand the whole map of a specific community and to grasp the meanings this particular community connects to their social world [3].

With reference to the Moroccan diasporic groups, there is a shortage of research in respect of their identity narratives and media use. Therefore, this research is to a large extent investigative and for this reason, it evades suggesting theoritical link between identity and media diet/ or consumption. By applying a qualitative approach, I intend to grasp the identity narratives of the Moroccan diaspora members in France and also understand how these identities are constructed, especially in the context of media.

Studies have manifested that cyberspace plays a significant role for diasporic communities [4]. Specifically for the Moroccan community in France, the Internet and the online discussion forums of Yabiladi portal represents the main aspect in the life of the community members.

The forum on Yabiladi portal constitutes a rich database for information about Moroccans as a community, how they see themselves and others. The forum permits access to information to a lengthy time period, hence, containing significant phases in community life. Another key feature about the forum under study is that identity reveals naturally through experience and stories of its users.

Embracing the concept of virtual ethnography by Christine hine [5], this artical is a research on how members of an online forum experience this medium, as well as how they use it to negotiate and articulate their identites.

The observation of the informants and the analysis of contents are used to investigate the postings on forum and their meanings with relevance to the topic highlighted. Therefore, data used in this research exceeds eight-month period, including posts and threads. This is typically useful for the analysis of the data presented as it contains significant moments in the life of the Moroccan community in France and the impact they have on identity strategies.

Diasporic Identity and Media

There is a considerable scholarly literature relevant to migration and media. Some studies give prominence to media consumption of diasporic communities, while others give emphasis to the involvement of diasporas in the production of their media landscape.

A number of studies claim that media consumption and media production by diasporic communities could signal the extent to which integration in the host land is happening. Mixed feelings about longing for the homeland and its culture, and staying loyal to another hostland sometimes is obvious. Deuze [6] asserts that some schoalrs come to realize that the increasing importance of ethnic media will in due course cause problems to the fabric society [6]. Still, evidents points out that diasporic communities seldom consume solely media from the country of origin.

Media Diet

A clear idea about the media diet patterns of Moroccans in France can not be established simply from data obtained from the forum. However, impressive information has appeared while having a close look at the forum discussions which occur online.

The forum contributors use different types of media, but with regard to sources (media from Morocco as well as foreign media) and also with reference to the medium (TV, radio, etc.)

A large deal of forum discussion threads have begun as a response to news introduced in the media. Examples of these are news about the economic and political crisis, news about Moroccans in French news or other foreign media ; news regarding the conflict in Moroccan Sahara, religious and national days, large-scale projects in Morocco, etc.

Media from country of origin are consumed by the forum members chiefly to keep themselves informed about what goes on in the homeland on various levels: economic, political, cultural, social, etc., also to stay informed about what occurs in other Moroccan diasporas. Fairly few Moroccan newspapers have sections concerned with moroccan diasporic communities. Moreover, radio and TV sometimes debate in their progarms issues related to Moroccan migrants.

Noteworthy is the fact that not all forum contributors are satisfied when engaging with media from home of origin. Several participants, for instance, confirm that they intentionally attempt to distance themselves from Moroccan media. They justified that by the realities introduced by homeland media are to a great extent hurting and disheartening (particularly when Morocco burning issues are discussed by political parties' representatives just before parliamentary elections).

According to some forum participants, this *self-distanciation* from Moroccan media interprets an unwillingness to access Moroccan TV or radio satillite receiver or even to watch Moroccan TV or listen to radio online. Regardless of their symbolic opposition to Moroccan Media, a lot of these forum participants ironically

appear to be well-informed about what takes place at home and this happens primarily because they discursively take a look at the online Moroccan newspapers.

French media are also, to a large degree, alluded to by the participants of the Moroccan forum. Practically, all newspapers, TV channels and radios have been mentioned and the connotations of the news have been examined discussed on the online sphere.

The issues that receive much interest are: the constant circumstances of the French economy and political affairs (the aftermaths of the world financial crisis, recession, austerity and job opportunities, presidential elections), immigration regulations (new regulations on Chengen) and requirements for citizenship.

In addition to Moroccan and French media, a large number of international media sources are used. This is relevant principally to media from the United States (CNN, The Times), Arab (Aljazeera, Skynews, Al-mayadeen), The United Kingdom (BBC, the Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, The Economist) and a lot of other sources.

The multiplicity of media sources to access information provides the forum participants with a clear picture of the world's economic and political landscape and also to ascertain the general opinion about the image of Morocco and Moroccans in the world. Consequently, they find themselves enabled to draw comparisons and conclusions about which countries are liable to be migrant friendly' or, contrarily, exercise more prejudicial treatment towards migrants.

The findings introduced untill now seem to indicate to the fact that the use of this variety of media sources usually highlights multiple information needs of the forum participants. Moroccans online seem to be concerned not only with

Moroccan and French affairs, but also world news. Additionally, Moroccans on the forum appear to lean towards various sources of information with the purpose of cross-checking the same piece of infromation from different sources.

To sum up, if we maintain establishing a relationship between media diet patterns and the degree of integration, this diversity of media sources that Moroccans on the forum use could simply point out to a hybrid significance of diasporic identification, instead of pledging their allegiance to either the adoptive land or the country of origin. Hence, we can infer that the forum represents a platform where information from various sources are brought and discussed the time meanings, interpretations and connotations identified with these news are created collectively.

Media and the Internet Access

Moroccans on Yabiladi portal heavily depend on the media content (TV, radio, newspapers, etc.) in the forum discussions. This happens although approximately all forum members consume contents of the French TV and radio stations and several others even consume transnational chanels through satellites.

The clue to the explanation of their inclination for online content resides in the interaction patterns between the forum users : when members launch a discussion on a particular topic protruding from the media, they feel obliged to make certain that other users know the topic. They hence offer links where everyone can have access to the topic before discussing or commenting on the news.

This corresponds to an interesting situation as the Internet gets a significant means Moroccans use to meet their media needs. Consequently, the Internet in general and the forum

inparticular become a channel that appear to cancel the boundaries between media types (visual, and written) and combine together various media sources.

Representation of Minorities and Migrants in the Media

Another significant field in the literature of migration and media investigates the representation of migrants and ethnic communities in the media. A considerable scholarly literature contends that media go on to perform a racist discourse despite the fact that they often pledge in public to a society which is characterized by supreme ideals of multi-ethnicity and multi-culturalism [7].

A lot of others members think that descriminatory views still continue in mainstream media by means of constant associations such as criminality, prostitution, drug, poverty as well as other hurting descriptions.

Some forum participants indicate to the fact that foreign media are liable to depict Moroccans, including other peoples from the Maghreb as scapegoats for some crimes. Additionally, a lot of forum users believe taht there is a directed campaign against Moroccans in media especially after the terrorist attacks which took place in France and Belgium and revealed that on one of the master minds of the attacks is a Moroccan migrant. Humiliating representations in the media are anticipated by the contributors on the forum to have a negative impact that will persist for a long time. The forum users highlight that the dominant problem with such representations is that these recurrent associations between Moroccans and criminality/terrorism are expected to create lasting correlation in the minds of people (as terrorist, criminal, etc.)

One of the unexpected findings in this research is that some forum contributors feel that the most painful discrimination come from the Moroccan media,

especially the electronic ones. According to them, electronic media sometimes single out news that strenghten a sense of valuelessness and laziness by targeting the unemployment benifits offered by the French government to the unemployed. Besides, such Moroccan media, which sometimes contain criticism like this, is denounced by forum for its inclination towards focusing on the negative details of Moroccans abroad compared to positive ones.

Consequently, the feeling of inferiority associated with Moroccan identity sometimes gets ingrained in their perception of who they are. Some of such negative representations are seen by the forum users as unmanageable for the cyberspace of the Moroccan diasporic community. Yet, it is interesting to analyse the forum participants' responses when the Moroccan community in France was given the chance on French TV, radio and news papers.

The opinions aired by the forum users are rather disapproving. Many of the users state that these occasions have not been exploited properly. Still, several users express the same views about such situations which they attribute to shortage of experience by members of the community.

Users on the forum often respond immediately to denounce the negative representations of Moroccans in the media. Fortunately, a fairly good number of users on the forum forsee a plan of action to defend themselves against such negative representation. For them, only if the Moroccan government and the members of the Moroccan diaspora get united, then will they be able to counter these representations, make it difficult for the disapproving contents to be expressed, and thus promote a positive image for the Moroccan diasporic community.

Most of these details which are linked to media misrepresentations have been extensively discussed by the forum members. They have attempted to define who is responsible for the negative image that some Moroccans have. In addition, the forum users collectively try hard to conceptualize some strategy to restore the good image that was already established.

The forum on Yabiladi forum hence becomes a sphere where these collective senses of disaproval, embarrassment and opprobriously-described identitied are conveyed and diaspora strive in order to improve the image of the Moroccan community and release the Moroccan identity from the mark of disgrace associated with it.

Identity and Diasporic Media

According to media scholars, ethnic media appear as a reaction to the exclusion and misrepresentation of some particular matters of ethnic minorities in the mainstream media outlets.

As a consequence, diasporic communities embrace strategies to dispute the truth and validity of the widespread discourse and make their diasporic ethnicities visible [7-9]. Diasporic media, however, is not a tool that diasporic communities use to fight against the misrepresentations and exclusion in mainstream media. Diasporic ethnic media have become a crucial constituent in the process of identity construction.

Habermas [10] claims that public sphere should be perceived as a realm of social life. This public sphere, according to Habermas, is 'a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussions of matter of general interest was institutionally guaranteed' [10]. It is in this space where cultural meanings are communicated through particular means TV and radio stations, magazines and newspapers.

As far as Moroccan community is concerned, there have been several endeavours over the last decade to set up

Moroccan diaspora websites. Fortunately, some of these websites get the better of the biggest challenges, chiefly financial challenges. The Moroccan community on Yabiladi and its forum, however, has managed to last and remain popular thanks to the loyalty of its members.

The forum users perceive it not only as a place of accessible information, news, TV, radio and advice for pre-migrants, but also as a necessary platform for discussion where Moroccans debate their settlement in France and the destiny of their homeland. More, Yabiladi forum plays the role of a space where Moroccan diasporans can dispose of some of anxiety and hopelessness which are endemic to the first phases of the integration process.

For many members, the forum is also seen as a space from which Moroccanness originates. One of the participants argues that '*the forum is highly accessed because it is Moroccan and not only for information*' (Simo1978, male). Moreover, it facilitates Moroccans to use *Darija and Tamazirght* (Moroccan dialects), though they are enforced to translate their dialects into a combination of Latin alphabet and numbers. Additionally, the forum represents a place for respect for Moroccans and Moroccanness. Hence, this digital sphere helps make it possible for user to construct a sense of unity of Moroccans as a comunity and it offers them the chance to make their issues and concerns heard.

It becomes clear that the Moroccan community forum on Yabiladi portal constitutes a sphere that is produced and reproduced daily through the participations of members of the Moroccan community. It stands for a dynamic forum where infromation is communicated and collective cultural meanings and identities of the Moroccan diaspora in France are negotiated. These findings are congruous with findings from earlier research [11] contending that

Internet in general and discussion forums in particular perform a complex function in voicing ethnic belonging and diasporic identifications. On the forum of Yabiladi portal, identity circulation is everywhere. The postings offer an insight into how Moroccans define themselves and how they are defined by others. To sum up, Yabiladi forum constitutes a public space where members of the Moroccan diaspora in France articulate and negotiate their sense of Moroccanness while also struggle to tackle the challenges of their diasporic identity.

Conclusion

This research spotlights several crucial aspects becoming visible from empirical research on the Moroccan online diaspora living in France and their media consumption to negotiate symbolic identity spheres.

Findings point out that Moroccans consume media from a vast array of sources. Yet, a lot of opinions conveyed on the forum claim that some of the representations of Moroccans in the media prone to be negative and this influences their identities.

For many participants, the forum constitutes a refuge where they can re-gather the positive aspects of Moroccanness and use the symbols to strenghten respect for their home of origin, their culture and language (*Darija and Tamazight*) and eventually for their diasporic fellows. Hence, Yabiladi forum where meanings and identities are nogotiated, may ultimately result in a significant reconfiguration of what it means to be Moroccan.

In accordance with existing literature (Tsagarousianou, 2004) these findings appear to state that the re-construction and re-negotiation occur through daily interactions, like the day-to-day postings on Yabiladi forum. Taking these findings into consideration, the Moroccan community forum on Yabiladi portal is

seen as one of the important spaces where diasporic identities are created and cultural meanings constructed and re-constructed.

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