

THE IMPORTANCE OF NATIONAL AND CULTURAL BELONGING FOR CONSTRUCTING ONE'S IDENTITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA



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ABSTRACT

The article principally aims to define the relation between national culture and online identity as well as to examine the extent Facebook users might use the platform as a tool for manifesting their cultural and regional identity. In order to do so, the point of departure is taken in empirical findings. The content of the article is primarily based on the in-depth analysis of data uploaded on Facebook by its users. The research sample consists of 25 Latin American immigrants living in Spain. The research proves the evidence supported by empirical examples, which illustrate what socio-cultural elements from our everyday life are the most relevant ones for one's online identity construction.

Key words: Facebook, online identity, national culture, Latin America

INTRODUCTION

Linking online identity with national culture in the first place is not a random choice. Internet space as such does not have any geographical references. However, some researchers working in the field of cultural studies identify culture with good consumption and leisure activities such as art, music, film, clothing, food, sports, etc. (e.g. Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams). Thus, looking at the problem from this particular perspective, national culture should be seen as a possible behaviour driver and a significant source of values (Huang, & Park, 2013, p. 334-343). Culture, therefore, determines the way we communicate with others, also on the Internet. Having said that, national culture cannot be ignored in terms of scrutinizing human behaviour online.

Moreover, increasingly the technologies related to communication are being extended in use as tools of self-presentation in an alternative reality. This is where social media platforms start being exposed as spots in which issues of national culture and online identity, however defined, find each other. One of the social media platforms serving as a tool of conveying one's online identity and recognized as especially significant in the global world today is Facebook. Since its introduction in 2004, the website has expanded over the last decade into a global phenomenon with 1.59 billion monthly active users on a world wide scale (Facebook Newsroom).

What makes the chosen problem especially interesting is the fact that social media platforms, and among them the above mentioned, allow people to stay in touch with realities beyond their everyday life in a completely new way. As an explicit example of such case we might find emigrants following current events happening in their homeland. By posting and commenting news, sharing photos or liking content of the other users' profiles they become active participants of cultures that can be even thousands kilometers away from them. Hence, due to new possibilities brought by social media, elements from one's national culture may become present in his or her virtual life, even if the person does not have a chance to participate in it physically.

A particularity attention-grabbing case can be found in multicultural Spain. Through the centuries, the Spanish Empire as one of the first global empires and one of the largest in the world conquered lands on different continents. As a result, throughout the years people from these lands migrated to Spain in varying numbers. In 2010, 14% (over 6 million people) of the Spanish society were immigrants (Eurostat, 2011). A large percentage of these, over 1,5 million, were immigrants from Latin America, especially from countries like Ecuador, Colombia, Bolivia, Argentina and Brazil (Spanish National Statistic Institute, 2009). These statistics can be in fact much higher. According to the Spanish law, immigrants from countries belonging to the former Spanish Empire can obtain Spanish nationality after legal and continuous residence of 2 years in Spain, after which naturalized citizens are no longer counted as immigrants.

PROBLEM FORMULATION AND SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Based on the perception that there is a significant relation between national culture and online identity, and the extensive use of Facebook and other social media in the contemporary and global world, the first and main hypothesis, which is leading throughout the presented article is the assumption that people are seeking to communicate their identity through social media, e.g. Facebook. Therefore, this research aims to answer the problem statement, which is as follows: "Taking the point of departure in Latin American immigrants living in Spain and their communication on Facebook, to what extent does national culture matter for constructing one's online identity?"

To sum up, the paper aims to broaden the existing knowledge within the field of self-presentation and communication on social media platforms and examine the relation between national culture and online identity, which, as the research literature indicates, is the field still not satisfactory explored.⁵

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In order to answer the above question, the point of departure was taken in empirical findings supported by the use the secondary data as supplementary

5 There is not much empirical research related to the chosen angle, at least by comparison to some other problem-related areas. See, for example, the very substantial research literature on personal branding or image construction.

knowledge. Being specific, the research is primarily based on the in-depth analysis of data collected on Facebook and uploaded on the portal by the research sample consisting of 25 Latin American immigrants living in Spain.

As already mentioned, the presented study is empirical in scope, aiming to contribute to the established online self-presentation and its relation with national culture. In order to reach the goals and answer the posed research question it was decided to employ a qualitative research strategy treated by the constructivist point of view, where I used a combination of methods. Here, Mediated Discourse Analysis and semiotics are used as the main source of inspiration. Finally, it is important to mention that the research is primarily based on data collected on Facebook and all the theories included in the project are meant to be rather supportive than inference-driving. The methodological summary can be viewed in the table below:

Table 1
Methodological summary

Paradigm	constructivism
Research strategy	qualitative approach
Research design	case study
Data collection	data collected on the research sample's Facebook profiles
Primary methods	a combination of Mediated Discourse Analysis and semiotics; analysis of online behaviour, pictures and video materials
Research sample	25 Latin American representatives living in Spain

Source: Own study based on Bryman, 2008.

A BRIEF THEORETICAL ELABORATION IN RELATION TO THE KEY CONCEPTS OF THE RESEARCH

It is important to underline that the research sample in the presented project may be scrutinized through the filter of two different cultural settings. One refers to the group of people as Latin American immigrants living in Spain (with their own national cultures), the other makes us perceive them as a group of Internet users.

The study of the existing literature indicates there has been a significant amount of discussion and empirical studies on the Internet-related issues over the past few decades, going back to classics such as Lévy's theory on cybersculture (see: Pierre, 2001) and ending up with representation of actual researchers like Michał Kosinski, David Stillwell and Thore Graepel examining new forms of online communication (2013). Furthermore, there also has been a wide debate on culture-related issues in other disciplines, including the sociology of communication, organizational studies, intercultural studies, the social-psychology of the Internet (Goodfellow, & Lamy, 2007, p. 2-10). All of the insights brought by such variety of scopes and approaches towards the topic may be found relevant to the study on the Internet communication and online identity presentation in the specific context selected in this article.

However, the principal aim of the presented research is not to test any of the already existing theories as the collected data are rather supposed to "speak for themselves". For this reason, the theories included in this section should be treated as the conceptual and analytical framework, which provide me with information and tools relevant in terms of approaching academically the posed research questions. In particular, I consider the following areas to be especially significant for the research:

- characterization of the internet environment; introduction to social media and Facebook,
- national culture conceptualization,
- elaboration on the notion of online identity and self-concept.

Roughly speaking, the conceptualization of the research field is supposed to be a help in structuring and approaching the analysis. The general theoretical frame shows how traditional theories on the Internet culture correlate with the social practices of online communication. By bringing a new perspective into the discourse and focusing on the particular case of Latin American Facebook users' communication, I no longer ask what we know about the online identity and self-presentation phenomena, but what the existing theories do not tell us about the ever-expanding online communication channels and the relation between national culture and online identity.

Additionally, especially valuable for the presented article are the outcomes of the current studies, which suggest that processes related to identity are driven by particular motives or goals of an individual (Breakwell, 1988, p. 189–203). For analytical purposes I found important to bring the aspect, which Vignoles et al. term as *identity motives*, into the field of the research (2006). As the mentioned authors point out, "Identity motives are defined as pressures toward certain identity states and away from others, which guide the processes of identity construction." (Vignoles et al., 2006, p. 308-333) They add that "people are not necessarily aware of these motives – nor are they necessarily unavailable to consciousness – but their operation can be interfered from their predictable effects on people's identities." (Ibid).

The scholars distinguish six conceptually different motivational goals (Ibid, 2006). Each of these constructs generates motivational assumptions and predictions from several theoretical perspectives. Distinct theories argue that people are motivated to construct identities characterized by feelings of:

- the *self-esteem motive* - the motivation to maintain and enhance a positive conception of oneself
- The *continuity motive* - the motivation to maintain a sense of "continuity across time and situation" within identity (Ibid, p. 310);
- The *distinctiveness motive* – refers to establishing and maintaining a sense of differentiation from others by an individual;
- The *belonging motive* - refers to "the need to maintain or enhance feelings of closeness to, or acceptance by, other people, whether in dyadic relationships or within in-groups." (Ibid, p. 310).
- The *efficacy motive* – maintaining and enhancing feelings of "competence and control" (Ibid, p. 310);
- The *meaning motive* - the need of finding significance in one's own existence.

The authors of the presented model argue that these aspects of identity may be expressed through the process of one's self-presentation. This is especially important in the context of the elaborated research, where data collected on Facebook is supposed to correspond with identities of the research sample, their self-conceptualization and self-presentation.

Furthermore, as the introduction to identity is a significant part of the theoretical framework of the research, it is important to be bear in mind how complex and multidimensional the given phenomena is. In the field of the research one should be aware of the fact that the notion of identity as well as self-presentation on the Internet gains an entirely new dimension. Following Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011), this is possible due to "an increased open communication through anonymity and the eradication of real world boundaries, such as appearance (e.g. race, gender), physical ability, and socioeconomic status, which may inhibit identity." (p. 37) On Facebook, all personal elements within a profile (such as graphic choices, personal information, photographs, etc.) can be modified by its user. In this way people, through complex self-negotiations and making adjustments in an effort to maintain a coherent identity, are able to project a desired identity, which later may be viewed by a global audience (Ibid, p. 38).

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Before analyzing the data, it is important to mention that there is a significant variety within the overall communication of the research sample. However, although the examined Latin Americans differ one from another in many aspects, there are a lot of characteristics and shared tendencies that make it possible to scrutinize them as a group. Furthermore, the same language they speak, geographical region they come from and live in, the historical background they share, many common values they are exposed to - all these factors are part of their cultural identity, which may distinguish them as a group on the international scale.

Picture 1. "This is what I always say..." - America has 35 countries, America is not just the United States. Thanks.

Source: Facebook.



In order to make the research as valid as possible, in the analysis I focus only on strong and clear general tendencies characteristic for the examined group. I find it especially important to emphasize that cultural elements taken into consideration are the ones I had no doubts about, in other words, the ones evidently attached to Latin American culture and with obvious cultural connotations. This was decided in order to avoid over-interpretations, which could bring into question validity of the research.

FEATURES ATTACHED TO BEING LATIN AMERICAN ON FACEBOOK - GENERAL CHARACTERIZATION OF THE SCRUTINIZED DATA

In general terms, within the data uploaded by the research sample on the Facebook platform a set of significant tendencies can be recognized. After examining all the collected data it became clear that in most of the cases online identities are closely related to what one could call Latin American culture. However, being Latin American is oftentimes presented indirectly. Overall interpretations helped me to draw a general picture of what being a member of Latin American culture in the virtual context could possibly mean. These features, exposed throughout self-presentation, oscillate around certain values and attitudes common for most representatives of the research sample regardless of the individual's exact nationality, personality or gender.

An attempt at specifying Latin American culture on Facebook is a complex process, where interpretation is one of the key elements, which lead to understanding of one's online self-presentation and its relation with national culture. Values and elements related to national culture are normally exposed through data uploaded by the research sample: hundreds of pictures, posts and comments describing their everyday life as well as their perception of reality. The way they select and filter what is uploaded on Facebook is, of course, determined by variety of values and elements, which frequently are culture-related, but to a large extent illuminate also their personality or interests. At the same time, the collected data, which refer to Latin America exposure, let me draw a general picture of one's online identity and self-concept. In many cases, communication filtered through national culture channel told me a lot about what, according to an individual, stays right, interesting, attractive, exciting, moral, funny, etc.

However, due to the massive amount of data it turned out to be difficult to take all aspects into consideration. Instead, it was decided to characterize the main tendencies within the collected data, which finally have been split into categories. Based on what was discovered through the whole process of data collection, namely on components such as shared links, posts, photographs, personal information, likes, preferences and other Facebook activities within the scrutinized research sample, the following semantic field related to the Latin American culture may be constructed:



Picture 2. Semantic field related to the Latin American culture
Source: Own study.

Moreover, one of the most significant characteristics of the presented data is the fact that the above elements communicated on Facebook correspond to all the three levels pointed out by Windley (2005).⁶ Latin Americans eagerly communicate their places of origin through attributes (e.g. music they listen to or pictures they publish), preferences (e.g. joining political fan pages or liking posts and links of others) as well as traits (personal data, personal photos). What does it possibly mean for the research findings? National culture is present in many aspects of online communication. Interestingly, it is relevant due to the fact that in the case of the scrutinized research sample, observed attributes, which from their nature tend to be changeable and traits, which change slowly, if at all, seem to be in a close relation to each other. It is because all the small unstable activities represented by attributes represent a genuine involvement. A good example to this could be supporting and linking articles related to sport (e.g. Messi, FC Barcelona football player with Argentinean origin) or flag exposition on national holidays, what represents national pride in both indirect and direct ways.

YOU ARE WHAT YOU LIKE AND SHARE

The presented outcomes in a large extent are based on observing and analyzing Facebook activities related to what the examined people share and like. Especially the latter activity serves as a completely new and fascinating source of knowledge regarding social life of an individual. Kosinski (2013) defines *Likes* as “example of a generic class of

⁶ In his book *Digital Identity* Windley distinguishes three elements one’s online identity consists of. They are namely: attributes, preferences and traits.

digital record from which predictions can be made." In the research they let me to distinguish a set of genuine characteristics of the scrutinized group without a necessity of interacting with them.

The common tendencies and characteristics were not derived from sets of obvious Likes solely. Hereby, I claim that all kind of online acts, even seemingly irrelevant ones such as an interest in a new relationship of a pop-star or liking a photograph of a friend having dinner are highly informative. Putting together a bigger amount of such data with a bit of interpretation may lead a researcher to a valid information about an individual.

The conducted research shows which dimensions and elements of Latin American culture play a significant role in Facebook communication among the research sample. Throughout the process of analysis it became clear that certain aspects of the given culture are more important than others due to different motivations and characters. Generally speaking, the research clearly indicates that the examined people are very consequent in the communication of Latin American culture focusing on the key components common for all nations such as lifestyle, values, traditions, music.

The strongest tendency common for all the representatives of the research sample refers to exposing national pride. Here again, it is expressed in different contexts by the usage of many different channels, e.g. direct communication or hidden meanings, like in case of sharing pictures and movies presenting beauty of one's country of origins or listening to and promoting national music. At the same time, some other aspects can equally generate negative emotions. Here, economy or politics can be pointed out as examples of situations, where the majority of the research sample express strong feelings like anger, frustration or aversion. Apart from that, there are three particularly strong categories that can be distinguished: one with reference to food, the second to politics and latter to religion.

CONCLUSION

Virtual space as such has no geographical reference. Even though, throughout the research it became clear that on the Internet people apparently still tend to represent bigger national groups with a range of significant cultural connotations attached to them. The given case of Latin American immigrants living in Spain proved that the same language used in both regions of the world indeed appears as a relevant bond. Still, the language itself stands only for one part of the multi-faced Facebook communication, where its overall codification is based on broad culture-related semantic fields used to express one's self-concept.

One should pay particular attention to the fact that Latin American representatives, geographically displaced and spread around the two biggest Spanish cities, seem to broadly use social media technologies to sort of re-create a sense of national community in virtual space, where some cultural patterns, likely to be used by them in everyday life, are transmitted from reality to the Internet. For this

reason, the discussion in regard to community will be moved hereby to the more abstract level. This can help to understand how Facebook users adopt shared language and common cultural codification to create online communities that do not require traditional geographical closeness.

Living in Spain puts the research sample in an interesting analytical situation, where the presence of the Spanish culture makes it possible to observe and understand better the relation on the level of national culture – individual's online identity. Here, the research indicates that the examined individuals evidently distinguish the two given cultures and include them in their Facebook communication in different ways. The Spanish culture has clearly less emotional involvement than the Latin American one.

Hereby, this is a good moment to make an attempt to answer the posed research question regarding the extent to which Latin American culture matters for one's online identity. Taking into consideration the overall outcomes of the research, I believe that Facebook, as the biggest world-wide social media platform, is broadly used by the research sample as a tool for communicating one's cultural identity. When scrutinizing the data one can have no doubts that the fact of being a Latin American matters in terms of Facebook communication of an individual and stays in a close relation with online identity of an individual.

The manifestation of cultural identity may be expressed in many different ways. One of the core observations is that people attempt to communicate certain elements of their culture not only in direct communication (by the usage of their personal attributes), but also through their attitudes, interests, moods, social or economic status, beliefs, etc. Through self-presentation on Facebook, Latin Americans living in Spain place themselves among others, expose and communicate certain culture-related values and features, and finally present the roles they have in society. Therefore, we are not talking about verbal communication exclusively, but a range of different aspects like stylistic and nonverbal factors like behaviour, physical appearance, association with other people or material possessions and food consumption. All these elements in a large extent affect one's self-concept.

Hereby, I claim that social roles and values should be seen as tools, which the research sample uses in order to mark their online identity and perform personal self-presentation. Hence, it can be inferred that different social roles and values attached to them directly affect one's online identity. Combining the cultural identity with a set of one's personal features results in a complex self-concept, which is driven by a variety of motivational factors. Throughout the analysis it became clear that for the research sample the Latin American culture corresponds with all the motivational influences pointed out by Vivian Vignoles, Camillo Regalia, Claudia Manzi, Eugenia Scabini shaping their online identities. This relation may be observed in the following model's implementation.



Picture 3. Motivational influences attached to being Latin American

Source: Own adaptation from Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, & Scabini 2006, p. 308-333.

From the above listed, especially the belonging, continuity, self-esteem (cultural/national pride) needs should be emphasized as the most relevant ones.

Additionally, it is important to mention that in most of the cases we can speak of a coherence in the scrutinized Facebook communication. The coherence and consequence in the research sample's communication suggests the examined people are highly aware of their self-concepts. It can be argued with the fact that the majority of the analyzed self-concepts are transparent, well-presented and very clear to the recipient.

To sum up, the overall findings extend the previous studies in the field of online communication and identity. The research in a large extent also adopted traditional methods and brought them from the real world to cyberspace, offering a fresh perspective to investigate social behavior across different cultures by the usage of Facebook as a valuable source of data. Further, from a social and cultural studies angle, this research provided interesting insights concerning specifics of

the Latin American culture. This can serve as an inspiration for a further investigation in the given area.

DISCUSSION

In case of every investigation there is always a range of limitations attached to the methodological approach one must take into consideration. Being aware of these aspects of the applied methodology is especially significant when talking about conducting a valid and reliable research. Having stated that, a significant weakness attached to the constructivist approach is that the interpretation of data is threatened to become fairly subjective. It was a relevant aspect to hold in mind during the analysis stage. Here, especially the aspect of hidden meaning of the collected data must be reflected on and measured as a major limitation of the study since a researcher can never be 100% sure that what he observes is driven by a certain motivation.

This issue becomes problematic also in case of the language the research sample speaks. One could point out the semantic differences within the Latin American countries in this regard. However, considering the specific paradigm I worked within, the outcomes could always be blamed for subjectivity as, following my personal believe, there are no 'right' criteria to examine and interpret one's Facebook communication. Taking this into account, in order to minimize possible misinterpretations I decided to focus only on the strongest tendencies and observations that clearly indicated influences of one's national culture on his behavior.

Furthermore, the combination of research methods was chosen to provide me with the most accurate findings, which could correspond well with the posed research question. Regardless to that, some aspects which were not included in the initial research design turned out to be relevant. Throughout the process of analysis an apparent distinction in communication within the scrutinized Latin Americans representing different social groups and gender could be observed. It is important to mention that the research sample in majority consists of students. Therefore, it may be assumed that in case of this particular group we can also talk about sort of a student subculture as one of their online behavior drivers.

Finally, considering the data collection approach within the presented article, also ethical questions cannot be ignored. There is a transparent website policy of Facebook.com, which informs its users about the privacy regulations. Therefore, when creating an account on the platform one must agree on these rules. Additionally, Facebook provides the users with a range of tools that allow them to manage the privacy on their personal profiles. As a result, what can be found on one's Facebook is, in theory, nothing more than the user wishes to share with others. However, respecting the research sample I have not published any material I gathered through the process of data collection without an authorization of the person, who had uploaded it on his or her profile. I also decided not to use the examined people's personal data.

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