Negotiation, Transformation, and Reinforcement: The Role of Social Media in Shaping Collective Identity

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Abstract. In today's digital era, social media functions as a central battlefield where cultural expression, activism, and public memory converge to shape collective identity. This paper examines the multifaceted role of social platforms in the reinforcement, negotiation, and transformation of shared group identities. Through case studies such as Selena Quintanilla's legacy in the Latino community, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Iranian women's rights activism, the analysis explains how social media fosters solidarity and preserves cultural heritage, particularly among marginalized social groups. Beyond reinforcement, digital platforms transform traditional memory archives from static monuments or museums into online participatory spaces where individuals actively and collectively reinterpret and negotiate cultural narratives and thus, democratizing public memory. At the same time, the algorithmic design of social media contributes to fragmentation, misinformation, and distorted nostalgia of identity, creating both cohesion and polarization. By analyzing these features, this study highlights social medias significant duality: it enables communities to amplify their voices and redefine their cultural heritage, while also risking misrepresentation and fragmented memories. Ultimately, understanding this conflict is crucial for balancing the opportunities and challenges of the formation of digital identity in an interconnected world.

Keywords: social media, collective identity, digital activism, public memory, misinformation

1. Introduction

With ubiquitous daily life uses ranging from work, commerce, and entertainment, social media has become the predominant approach of perceiving and sharing information in today's interconnected digital world. Through online interactive platforms, individuals have unlimited access to express their opinions on various issues, shaping public and individual viewpoints. According to [1], since February 2025, 5.56 billion people worldwide were internet users, which is 67.9% of the global population. Of these, 5.24 billion — 63.9% of global population — were active social media users. Furthermore [2], reports that social media users spend an average of 2 hours and 31 minutes per day on these platforms. This prevalence highlights social media's massive impact on attention.

The concept of Collective Identity refers to the shared sense of belonging and self perception among individuals within a group, shaped by common experiences, values, traditions, and social structures. It emerges through collective memory, cultural narratives, and group interactions,

influencing how members perceive themselves and each other. Collective identity, including cultural and national identity, is actively shaped and embodied by social movements: For instance, the Lesbian Feminist Mobilization of the early 1970s discussed by [3] marked a pivotal moment in the LGBTQ group identity development. Advocating for women's rights and sexual identity, lesbian feminists contributed to broader societal shifts in how gender and sexual identities were understood.

As a global battlefield of diverse voices, social media has revolutionized social movements, allowing digital activism for a wider spread of information and greater impact. On digital platforms, movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have been erratically viral, and are central in reshaping racial, gender, and sexual identities through collective activism, using social media to amplify voices, share experiences, and forge a stronger sense of belonging.

Therefore, in today's digital age, social platforms play a significant role in the reinforcement, negotiation, and transformation of collective identity. They provide free and open spaces for cultural expression, intersection, and preservation, making individuals to reevaluate their identities. Understanding the influence of social media on collective identity is crucial, as it offers opportunities for cultural confidence while risks misinterpretation and fragmentation.

2. Reinforcement: cultural identity in marginalized groups

Taking credit from contemporary cases, online interactive platforms has shown significance in preserving and reinforcing cultural identity among ethnic communities, positively encouraging participants to maintain and encourage cultural legacy. Unlike traditional forms of cultural memory, which rely on fixed records like museums and monuments, social platforms create interactive spaces, where one's opinion can be easily received by worldwide users. It allows individuals to engage with their cultural legacy, reinterpret historical narratives, and share personal experiences that resonates with other social group members, thus reinforcing a sense of belonging and solidarity within their communities.

2.1. Selena Quintanilla's legacy and the Latino collective identity

In the late 20th century, when social media was not known to be as impactful as today, Selena Quintanilla, a renowned Tejano singer, has become an icon of the Latino Identity, with her cultural significance exponentially growing after her tragic death in 1995. According to [4], traditional forms and recognition, such as the Selena museum and tribute concerts, along with early digital commemoration such as biographical movies and albums, have played an essential role in preserving her memory in her worldwide fan group and solidifying her place in Latino cultural history, making her music and herself unforgotten in today's fast pace world.

However, Selena's legacy has flourished even more through social media. In 2025, stated by [5], "In the 30 years since her tragic death, the Tejano queen's star has never shone brighter" (para. 2). Selena's growing fame in recent years is not surprising, as this is only one of thousands of web pages paying homage to Selena. Through fan pages, hashtags, and tribute videos, Selena, this legendary singer with a stark yet tragic story, has transformed from a beloved singer into a cultural icon in both the music industry and Latino community. As [4] notes in Selenidad: Selena, Latinos, and the Performance of Memory, "Selena and her subsequent phenomenon opened up a space for the representation of working-class brown women and made visible traditionally ignored Latina/o histories and the ongoing Latina/o presence within U.S. cultural, political, and economic spheres" (p. 13).

2.2. The Black Lives Matter movement

Similarly, the Black Lives Matter movement emphasizes social media's role as a platform that reinforces cultural (racial) identity. Fused by scandals of police officers abusing innocent black citizens, the BLM movement, sparked by the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on Twitter in 2013, quickly expanded into a global call for racial justice, becoming viral through impactful platforms like the NBA and YouTube [6]. highlighted how social media has allowed minorities in the society to share personal experiences of racial discrimination, creating an online community united by shared struggles, making vulnerable individuals protected and backed up by this unity. Social platforms, especially Twitter and Instagram, facilitate and protect real-life activism, enabling the Black community to control the narrative around them, ensuring that their voices are not restrained to the margins of mainstream media.

2.3. "My Stealthy Freedom": the Iranian woman rights campaign

Globally, social media also enables marginalized groups to challenge oppressive systems, as exemplified in the Iranian women's rights campaign, or "MSF", where one single post from an average person can inspire heated back-and-forths. As introduced by [7], "In 2014, Mash Alinejad, an Iranian journalist working in the United Kingdom, shared a photograph of herself driving an open-roofed car without her traditional head covering, known as a hijab" (p. 1). This single post ignited everlasting flames of rebellion: her facebook page "My Stealthy Freedom" (MSF) received over 60000 followers, becoming an impactful campaign calling for the rights of Iranian women. Just as the case of BLM, a single post or video can gain massive attention and inspire widespread action. This phenomenon demonstrates how digital platforms facilitate and strengthen collective identity construction, allowing movements to grow and gain momentum through collective engagement of individuals from diverse backgrounds, making marginalized, oppressed groups heard.

3. Negotiation: static archives to participatory spaces

Public memory, throughout history, was traditionally preserved through fixed documents such as monuments and museums, serving as tangible symbols and archives of collective memory. Reference [8] emphasizes that public memory is foundational to the roots of US democracy, illustrating how commemorating events along with monuments of historical events such as the American War of Independence embody and reinforce national values such as liberty and democracy. These tangible, physical structures not only serve as homage paid for past events but also shape and strengthen contemporary perceptions of national identity.

However, digital technology's prevalence has transformed collective memory, taking the pivotal role in shaping national identity. Reference [9] argues that digital platforms have shifted the nature of public memory from static documents to active, participatory spaces. It exemplifies its statement through a case study of the September 11 Digital Archive, an online space that stores information relating to the September 11 attacks in 2001, containing over 150,000 digital files including images, videos, audios, and over 40,000 first-hand accounts. Reference [9] highlights how this online platform allows individuals to contribute personal narratives, Images, and reflections related to the events of September 11, 2001. This participatory approach democratizes the construction of this piece of collective memory, enabling diverse voices to establish and continually reshape the historical narrative.

A relevant example of this shift is the commemoration of Tejano singer Selena Quintanilla [4]. explores how Selena's legacy was celebrated, commemorated, and reinterpreted through various forms, including documentaries, museums, and tribute performances. This phenomenon, which [4] terms Selenidad, reflects the dynamic process by which collective memory is actively constructed and negotiated within the Latino community. Selena, a deceased cultural figure, no longer able to redefine her own image, has made global music fans, especially Latino community members to take over, shaping her spirit of art in means that align with their own cultural identities. The ongoing engagement with Selena's image and legacy exemplifies how participatory spaces allow communities to continually redefine their cultural identities.

Therefore, the transition from static archives to participatory spaces facilitated by social media has profoundly influenced the formation of collective identity. By creating an open space for multiple narratives to negotiate their interpretation on collective memory, these platforms empower minor communities to actively engage in the construction of collective identity, evolving through constant negotiation.

4. Transformation: distorted information & fragmented narratives

While social media rapidly transmits information, allowing for the reinforcement of collective identity through participatory negotiation, it also contributes to identity distortion by spreading misinformation and making online participants only to hear from fragmented narratives. According to [10], it is stated that "Misinformation is not like a plumbing problem you fix. It is a social condition, like crime, that you must constantly monitor and adjust to," emphasizing the irremovable nature of misinformation on the internet. Accordingly, instead of creating a unified sense of identity, social media fosters confusion and polarization, constructing collective identity based on false, distorted information.

A compelling example of this hazard can be seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to [11], misinformation, including false claims about virus, treatments, and vaccines, led to public health confusion, making expert and government responses to lose authority and trust. This fragmentation of narratives illustrates how social media can distort reality, causing the public to reject factual, science-based information only due to several false tweets.

Moreover, social media also promotes false nostalgia, where memories are romanticized to strengthen collective identity, bringing social groups together at the cost of historical accuracy [12]. Argues that social media often presents distorted views of history, celebrating "simpler times" while overlooking difficulties in actual situation. This idealized history can be politically instrumentalized by selectively delivering messages to the public, ignoring complex truths. False nostalgia thus strengthens group identity, but by distorting cultural memory in ways that simplify and idealize the past, it undoubtedly obscures the full reality.

Analyzing the basics of social media, its algorithmic nature fosters these issues by personalizing identities for each user. According to [13], the algorithm of social apps prioritize content that aligns with users's existing beliefs, personalizing what information each user receives from the platform. As people engage with content aligning to their own perspective, they become less likely to encounter alternative viewpoints, contributing to the creation of peaceful, resonating narratives, creating a cohesive, collective identity. In the same way, this personalization creates fragmented viewpoints for users, making individuals identify and join their own digital tribe, strengthening diverse collective identities through the distortion or transformation of information.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has become an undeniable force in the reinforcement, negotiation, and transformation of collective identity. By creating strong backup unities for individuals to speak up, offering participatory spaces for users to freely express their cultural legacies, and personalizing information that lies within the user's own cultural identity, digital platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok serve as strong boosters for the construction of collective identity. However, social media's massive influence also presents challenges of misinformation and fragmented narratives, which can possibly distort collective memory. While social media facilitates formation of identity, it is required for governors to continuously monitor digital platforms to ensure that the information rooting for these identities remain accurate and diverse.

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