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Digital Diaspora and Nationhood: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Practices of Nationhood

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Drawing on digital ethnographic observations I carried out on Instagram between June 29, 2020, and July 2021, as well as interviews with content creators and activists, this article considers the digitally mediated identity negotiations and nationalist boundary-making practices of diaspora youth during Ethiopia's 2020–2022 war. On top of protesting, debating, and transmitting information, young people used Instagram's communicative affordances to formulate collective identities and competing imaginaries about Ethiopia and their respective ethnonational identities. Using visual affordances like emojis, hashtags, profile images, and bio statements, they adopted and inscribed markers with political meanings that enabled them to signal difference and belonging as well as readily identify potential wartime allies and adversaries. These sociotechnical and constitutive processes shaped the formation of diaspora youths' national imaginaries as well as the features and uses they associated with Instagram.

Keywords: digital nationalism, Instagram, Ethiopia, emoji, sociotechnical change

Between June 2020 and July 2021, I observed young diaspora Instagram users' digital engagements by scrolling, reading, listening to, watching, and tracing the discourses content creators, digital activists, and their interlocutors forged about Ethiopia's ethnic and national politics. In addition to using Instagram to debate about and influence international responses to the unfolding conflict, they deployed Instagram to construct and represent national imaginaries about themselves and Ethiopia's competing ethnonational groups. Drawing on interviews and ethnographic observations of Instagram users' discursive practices, and scholarship on nationalism and media, this article considers how national imaginaries are discursively constructed within a sociotechnical conjuncture marked by diasporification, digital media, and ethnopolitical conflict. Doing so, I argue that the contemporary sociotechnical context shaped the technical and discursive practices available to diaspora youth—informing their national imaginations as well as the uses and meanings they, as a segment of Instagram's users, came to attribute to Instagram's technical and visual affordances.

Nationalism as Discursive and Mediated Practice

Nations and national imaginaries are politically salient discursive formations used to constitute political solidarities and legitimate material claims. Despite nationalists' attempts to essentialize ethnic and national categories of identification, Stuart Hall (2017) argues that ethnicity and nationalism are sliding (floating) signifiers whose meanings are not fixed but worked and reworked through discursive and cultural

contestations. Alongside race and ethnicity, nationalism constitutes what Hall (2017) calls "classificatory systems of difference" (p. 33) that symbolically mark human variation with meaning, hierarchically order societies, confine human imagination, and in the process, *produce* difference. Similarly, Calhoun (1997) argues that nationalism is the dominant discursive form through which claims to political autonomy and self-determination are made (p. 213). As a modern discursive formation and framework, nationalism gives shape to the modern world by providing compelling accounts for imagining, structuring, and legitimating political units of belonging and exclusion like the nation-state (Calhoun, 2007, p. 27).

Communication technologies influence the collective imagination and political salience of nations. Scholars of media and nationalism have looked at how nations are imagined and established through mediated rituals and technological developments. For instance, though comprised of geographically dispersed and heterogeneous people, Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that nations are imagined into being through the mass, ceremonial consumption of newspapers. For Anderson (2006), the novel and newspaper "provided the technical means for 're-representing' the kind of imagined community that is the nation" (p. 24). James Carey (2008) argues that early U.S. statesmen like Thomas Jefferson hoped that transportation and communication technologies would facilitate not only economic but also political and cultural unification by reducing the effects of geographic separation and promoting national unity (p. 6). Other scholars have looked at the effects of sociotechnical developments like rail systems, the telegraph, and the radio on nations and national imaginaries. For instance, Hilmes (1997) argues that radio broadcasting, advertising, and the emergence of commercial networks like NBC promoted cultural unity and an imagined American nation that was unified, homogenous, and white to mass audiences.[1]

Scholarship on nationalism and media also consider how the Internet, digital media, and phenomena like platformization influence nationalism, national imaginaries, movements, and discourses (Eriksen, 2007; Mihelj, 2023; Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Yadlin-Segal, 2017). While early scholarship offered more utopian perspectives by suggesting that the Internet would facilitate cosmopolitism and democratization recent scholarship focuses on how digital media facilitate political polarization, fragmentation, and ethnonational extremism. Within this context, digital media—as facilitators, infrastructures, and intermediaries—have contributed to changes in nationalism and national imaginaries.

For instance, Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) argue that the proliferation of digital platforms made "digital nationalism and nations qualitatively different from their analogue predecessors" (p. 332). This difference is attributed to the participatory affordances of digital media, which enable diversification while simultaneously leading to the "greater fragmentation and polarisation of national imagination" (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 333). Additionally, the underlying commercial logics and political economy of digital media (that shape the parameters of digital infrastructures and their affordances) promote practices that commodify nationalism like the pursuit of consumer nationalism, selling branded nationalist merchandise, boy/buycotting, nation branding, and self-promotion (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, pp. 340–342).

[1] The racial signifier "white" is lowercase because Hilmes does not capitalize it, and capitalization risks essentializing socially constructed racial categories.

The ability to construct, signify, and legitimate ethnic and national identities online ultimately enables people in the diaspora to engage in what Victoria Bernal (2014) describes as "networked nationalism." In *Nation as Network*, Bernal (2014) considers how conditions of diasporification, national politics, and new communication technologies facilitate the formation of collective identities, struggles, imaginaries, and civic engagement for diaspora Eritreans that fall outside the nation-state's formal political boundaries. That said, diasporic communities' mediated political engagements and nationalist imaginaries are sociotechnical processes influenced by their sociopolitical conditions as well as the techniques and tools they have at their disposal.

Sociotechnical Context

The 2020–2022 war inflamed nationalist sentiments and worsened ideological and political polarization within Ethiopia and its diaspora communities. Warring parties and their supporters promoted competing perspectives on Ethiopia's national status. While Ethiopian nationalists supported Ethiopian nationalism and statehood, others recognized Ethiopia as a "nation of nations" comprised of distinct ethnonational groups that preserve the right to self-determination (up to secession). On the other end of the ideological spectrum, ethnonationalists opposed Ethiopia's political legitimacy and sought secession. Divided along these competing nationalist perspectives, those from Ethiopia either supported the Ethiopian government's claims to political legitimacy or the Tigray People's Liberation Front and its ethnonational political claims.

As ethnic violence, political polarization, and territorial contestations intensified, diasporic communities who encountered these politics online responded by deploying digital media for their national struggles. Versed in the culture and communicative affordances of Instagram, young people, mostly 1.5 and 2nd-generation English-speaking U.S. immigrants, quickly reconfigured their everyday uses of the application and its affordances to produce national imaginaries, solidarities, and movements. Changing their profile icons and bio statements they signaled their national identities, ideological commitments, and desired political outcomes. They created activist organizations and accounts, produced hashtag campaigns, disseminated infographics, and live-streamed discussions, vigils, fundraisers, and protests on Instagram.

Though Instagram has evolved since its start as a photo-sharing mobile application in 2010, its visual aesthetics and affordances still determine the way its users present themselves, the kinds of content they share, and the interactive possibilities they have available (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Instagram's "platform vernacular," or communication genre, consists of a "unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics" (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015, p. 257). For instance, Leaver and colleagues (2020) explain that while users can participate on Instagram without ever posting visual content—let us say, by leaving comments under existing posts—Instagram requires new content to have a visual element like a photo, illustration, screenshot, or video. While these built-in allowances and constraints delimit the modes of expression and social participation readily available to users, Instagram's vernacular is also "shaped by the mediated practices and communicative habits of users" (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 257). In other words, even if Instagram is designed for particular uses, end-users can forge emergent practices "which employ the technical and communicative possibilities of the platform outside of what is prescribed within [its] initial design" (Leaver et al., p. 65).

Said differently, Instagram's vernacular is informed by its architecture *and* derived through sociotechnical processes like those discussed in this article. At the same time, diaspora communities' national imaginaries are shaped by the commercial, technical, and visual parameters and possibilities of Instagram. Features like profile icons, biographical statements, and emojis—and their combinatory possibilities—influence the metaphors and symbols users produce and employ to collectively imagine and signify national belonging and difference.

In the following sections, I illustrate how Instagram contributed to the process, form, and content of diaspora youths' national imaginaries. Because Instagram is primarily a visual application, I focus on young people's uses of affordances like emojis, posts, and profile markers.

National Imaginaries and Practices on Instagram

Emoji Nationalism

Inspired by pictograms and manga, Shigetaka Kurita created 176 emojis in 1999 for Japanese telecom giant NTT DoCoMo. By 2010, "emoji were incorporated into Unicode, the standard that governs the software coding of text" (Stark & Crawford, 2015, p. 5). Since their origin, the influence, graphic quality, quantity, and types of emojis available to users have expanded to include 3,664 pictograms of people, nonhuman animals, inanimate objects, and other symbols.

Though Unicode continues to accept proposals for new emojis, and flags constitute the largest emoji category (Daniel, 2022), it does not currently accept proposals for new flag emojis. Unicode's "Guidelines for Submitting Unicode Emoji Proposals" explains that under current standards, "flags for countries with Unicode region codes are automatically added," while "only a handful out of the five thousand or so subdivisions [states, provinces, cantons, etc.] have RGI emoji" (Unicode, n.d.). Requests for new flag emojis were curtailed because of technological constraints like limited memory on smartphones, "usability issues in keyboard palettes," and low usage frequencies (Unicode, n.d.). Furthermore, adding new flag emojis for some subdivisions and not others may engender claims that Unicode practices favoritism (Daniel, 2022; Unicode, n.d.).

This means that while Vatican City, Antarctica, and subdivisions of the United Kingdom have flag emojis, other regions and groups with technically valid claims will no longer be considered for emoji flags. Unicode's emoji subcommittee chair further explains, "Identities are fluid and unstoppable which makes mapping them to a formal unchanging universal character set incompatible. [Furthermore,] despite being the largest emoji category with a strong association tied to identity, flags are by far the least used" (Daniel, 2022, para. 14). More versatile emojis like colored hearts are frequently used to represent identities like Pan African pride (❤️ 💚 🖤; Daniel, 2022). These sociotechnical conditions present discursive constraints and possibilities for Instagram users who use emojis to engage in national politics.

While more than 80 ethnonational groups are officially recognized in Ethiopia, the country flag is the only emoji encoded to represent them (🇪🇹). During the conflict, digital media users responded to this limitation and their disidentifications with the Ethiopian state and flag by appropriating and producing new

uses for existing emojis. For instance, the pictogram of a half-red and half-yellow capsule of medicine (💊), whose colors resemble Tigray's national flag, was adopted to symbolize Tigrayan solidarity, resistance, and nationalism. The pill's newly nationalized meaning emerged through its use with other visual signifiers like hashtags (#Tigray, #Tegaru, #FreeTigray, and #TigrayGenocide), profile icons that contained symbols of Tigrayan nationalism like the official Tigrayan state flag or users wearing branded merchandise, and other emojis like hearts (💛❤️) and the raised fist (✊🏾).

Similarly, icons like the eagle (🦅) and deciduous tree (🌳) were recast to signify ethnonational identities and struggles by young Amhara and Oromo activists, respectively, while the hut (🛖) became a symbol for young Ethiopians with southern ethnic identities like the Gurage. In all these cases, emojis became visual shorthand for signaling ethnonational differences, struggles, and imaginaries and were often included within users' biographical statements, handles, captions, stories, and comments. In this sense, users reinscribed emojis with meanings that were culturally and politically specific to them and different from the denotative meanings assigned by Unicode and the originators of the emojis.

National Imaginaries and the Formation of Digital Enclaves

In addition to visualizing national difference through emojis, users employed Instagram's built-in affordances to aestheticize and codify their ethnonational solidarities. During different phases of the conflict, they engaged in an iterative self- and national presentation process. Below, I illustrate some examples and consider the implications on young diaspora Instagram users' national imaginaries.

Users wanting to distance themselves from the Ethiopian government's role in the conflict removed markers like the Ethiopian flag emoji from their profiles. Those supportive of the Ethiopian government produced and adopted markers of Ethiopian nationhood. Some of those critical of the Ethiopian government took on ethnicized signifiers to support their ethnonational group and its contestations against competing national interests. Through this process, users' accounts and engagements became coded in ways that inferred and produced a discursive landscape of ethnic and ideological enclaves.

For example, a young graphic designer and activist I interviewed explained that she only started to know of her Instagram friends' ethnic backgrounds because of changes in their Instagram use. Their profile icons began to include national symbols, they followed activist pages dedicated to their ethnonational group's concerns, started to engage primarily with accounts that had similar national markers, and even reduced their engagements with her. Within a few months of the conflict, she noticed that many Instagram friends and accounts were signaling exclusively Oromo, Tigrayan, and Amhara identities rather than "Ethiopian," "Habesha," or non-nationalist identities.

Consequently, Instagram users began to self-categorize and isolate their interactions to accounts and individuals whose discursive presentations—and thus their presumed ideological and national commitments—they aligned with most. As a college student from Washington, DC, explained, the discursive space became constrained and polarized. When users engaged with accounts they perceived as belonging to competing ideologies and groups, they limited their (public) interactions to criticizing and opposing those pages to avoid amplifying or supporting issues and perspectives that could undermine their ethnonational

group's claims and goals. If users did not adopt signifiers consistent with the discourse communities they participated in, their engagements were (even when sympathetic) ignored, criticized, or perceived as disingenuous. In other words, users were incentivized to alter their digital presence and strengthen social ties with accounts that portrayed similar national and political interests. Within this context, it was challenging to present political positions and self-identities that were fluid and in flux, multiple, and negotiated.

As a young content creator for a popular Instagram account called @shadesofinjera explained, even those without nationalist iconographies on their profiles were read as supporting "a side" or seen as complicit in the war's violence. Users who deferred or refused to use national identification strategies had their engagements dismissed or were still characterized by other users as nationalist, undermining their otherwise nuanced perspectives, identities, and experiences. As the content creator elucidated, this phenomenon was exacerbated by platform features and incentives, which encouraged users to make their accounts into "brands" and seek out followers and likes.

To manage and mitigate the psychological and social effects of continuous exposure to contentious and distressing national politics on Instagram, users employed technical responses like changing their privacy settings, anonymizing their accounts, and temporarily uninstalling, deleting, and reducing their use of Instagram. While diaspora youth bypassed and altered the limitations and intended uses of Instagram, their use of the application profoundly shaped their identities and perceptions of Ethiopia's political debates. In fact, those I interviewed and spoke to during my observations explained that they found themselves and others *becoming* ethnic because the digitally mediated discourses they took part in incentivized and naturalized framing issues and people along ethnic lines.

Instagram became one of the primary vehicles through which young people in the diaspora engaged in the national politics of the homeland and explicitly came to perceive and position themselves through national imaginaries and markers of difference. By incentivizing and inhibiting certain kinds of participation, Instagram informed the types of conversations available to users regarding complex sociopolitical phenomena and, in turn, shaped their identities, relationships, and political ideologies. Instagram's discursive landscape informed the interpretive frameworks young people used to understand Ethiopia's contemporary national politics and, ultimately, their national imaginaries and hopes for Ethiopia's future.

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