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Local Identity Communities on Facebook. Exploring "Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com"

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ABSTRACT

The systematic emergence of Facebook communities dedicated to local identities has been visible in the last decades in Croatia and worldwide. This work aims to examine social network communication reflecting a specific collective local micro-identity inside the region with a massive diaspora and its power to overlap generations, digital literacy, and time and space gaps, making a tangible impact on physical community life and creating a significant online database on the shared place of origin. The study relates to the Facebook community under the overall name "Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com" (original title: "Digitalni zavičaj – jakovlje.com") with nearly a thousand members spread over several interaction channels. The mixed-method research approach, including quantitative and qualitative communication methods procedures, was used, with in-depth, semi-structured, and structured interviews. Methodology tools included an online survey with 24.9%

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central Facebook group participants over two months with simultaneous thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis of the posts' content, online and field interviews during a previous five-year observation, and finally, comparative analysis with three similar Facebook communities in Croatia. Along with presenting content features and ways of social network group communication, findings reveal that, unlike larger virtual communities dedicated to national identity, the ones based on a local identity present more impact as an extension of the municipal activities for the people living close to the place of origin than a real cohesion with their digital diaspora. The study also shows that Facebook wall can provide valuable amateur media products disseminating relevant information, which makes it a resource for broader social and scientific use and a part of the bigger heritage database in preserving local micro-identities.

Key Words: Social networks, Facebook, homeland, micro-identity, online communication, local community, virtual community, digital culture

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Introduction

Digital culture (Gere 2008) is already integral to all the segments composing a networked society (Castells 1996). It develops despite evident digital disconnects (McChesney 2013) caused by global and local sociopolitical, economic, cultural heritage, or information literacy differences. Social networks are undeniably among the most successful ways of surpassing the space-time gaps between people of similar interests. Perceived mainly as channels for entertainment and idle chatting, they took some time to raise the interest of scholars in different scientific fields and disciplines. As the most prominent among these global online media platforms, Facebook has recently become the subject of a broader area of information and communication science research. That is understandable, as it reflects many aspects of

the communication patterns based on the immediate all-to-all interaction principle and fosters virtual communities formed around various issues. Regarding shared collective identities, they mainly rely on sex, gender, race, nation, politics, or cultural preferences. There is also the question of age, as Facebook is a confirmed cyber meeting point for older generations. Nevertheless, some Facebook groups are prone to overcome the generation gap, thanks to the specific thematic niche they cover. That is often the case with Facebook pages, profiles, and communities dedicated to the identity of particular geographic spaces where actual inhabitants want to keep the feeling of belonging to their ancestry alive and try to transfer it to descendants. They range from big national online communities to the tiniest groups based on specific micro-localities. Regularly maintained by committed volunteers eager to contribute to their heritage, these groups are initiated with a serious goal – not just networking with the primarily targeted audience, but exchanging meaningful information of potential general interest that surpasses merely evoking old customs and folk traditions. Thus, they make a significant difference by creating content that is valuable, widely accessible, and free. In these cases, the social network, as a participatory media platform, connects the elements of grassroots journalism (Gillmor 2004), convergence culture (Jenkins, H. 2006), and non-profit independent media production, creating a new level of the public sphere (Habermas 1964). Facebook is convenient for that purpose as it is easy to use even for people with modest digital culture, offering the incorporated tools to create posts containing multiple elements, from text, images, emoticons, and gifs to documents, videos, and maps, but also to share them on other platforms, and to insert links redirecting to any available URL. It grants the further evolution of the new age electronic *tribal drums* (McLuhan 1964) now in the hands of *everybody* (Shirky 2008) who has will and skills to participate, or even more so, collaborate. The results of these collaborative efforts on the broadest Internet social networking platform may lead to exciting, innovative online communication paths in preserving local micro-identities. This work focuses on one of numerous Facebook communities based on local heritage, intertwining traditional and modern identity patterns to maintain, transform, and communicate specific local identities in a global digital environment. Similar Facebook groups are given special attention as a potential way of cohesion with digital diasporas and reliable data sources about any given locality.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical frame of this study was determined by the dynamic evolution of contemporary new media theory in understanding communication processes inside social networks and virtual communities tackling narrow identity areas. It eventu-

ally led to an interdisciplinary approach comprising several layers: above all, communicological (new media, social networks, Facebook), bordering with psycho-sociological aspects (individual and group identity, physical and virtual community), ethnological (folk traditions, cultural heritage), linguistic and semiotic (use of verbal, written and symbolic expressions), and even economic (non-profit, volunteer work, creating social capital). The consulted literature defined three main thematic directions to follow while preparing the ground for the empirical research and drawing conclusions afterward: communication, identity, and community.

The communication part deals with fundamental theoretical issues of new media interaction (McQuail 2010) in a networked society through growing participatory platforms that operate on the *bottom-up* principle mirroring the convergence culture on the electronic media level, the phenomenon of *webvergence* that Thornton and Keith (2009) used to describe the practice of making online carriers the final direction of all the produced media content, and new ways of developing the well-known McLuhan's (1964) *tribal drum* concept on the Internet. Social networks are suitable for hosting groups based on shared interests in any field of life, be it political orientation, cultural inclination, following art, fashion, or any other trends. They can equally play a role in expressing, restructuring, and redefining collective identity (Jenkins, R. 2008). This process is particularly intriguing, as participating requires only a minimum of digital or bare media literacy, especially on Facebook, the social network that changed social life in general (Zgrabljić Rotar 2023). It also evokes doubts about creating trustworthy information by people that Keen (2010) calls *noble amateurs*, in contrast to Shirky's (2008) support for the further evolution of collaborative platforms (Shirky 2008) towards new media genre niches.

The identity aspect concerns the role of purposeful online networking in the processes of social identity identification (Jenkins, R. 2008) following a primary person identity (Burke and Stets 2009) in rebuilding a micro-local identity. It includes redefining the place related shared collective identity between "high" official and "low" folk culture (Edensor 2002), and avoiding the threats of the spiritual unification (Le Brun 2018) due to globalization (Tomlinson 2003) through plausible *glocalization* (Robertson 1995) solutions.

Examining the community sense of online gathering naturally involves the notion of *imagined community* (Anderson 2006), such as nation, compared to the locality-driven one. At the same time, there is the theoretical distinction between *virtual and real communities* (Rheingold 1993; Etzionis 1997; Bateman Driskell and Lyon 2002) and conditions for an online group to be considered a virtual community. Online action and interaction mechanisms on social networks are observed through the social capital theory introduced by Bourdieu (1985), and the *thank you economy*

concept elaborated by Vaynerchuk (2011), compatible with the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al. 1973) applied to social networks. Narrowing the observation field to the Facebook community as a primary platform for group communication (Vaidhyanathan 2018), its potential to strengthen the cohesion inside the physical local community and favorise the inclusion of the digital diaspora (Everett 2009; Diminescu et al. 2021) is questioned.

Trends in interpreting various facets of local heritage through social networking have already made their way to scientific research (Giaccardi 2012). Mention just two examples: the German Facebook community “Kerpener und ex-Kerpener” examined as a source of micro-history (Stock 2016) or the Macao region perception illustrating database content analysis method on social networks (Lai and To 2015). Sources concerning Croatian local identity-driven virtual communities have been so far accessible mainly in the ethnology (Kalapoš 2000; Pleše and Senjković 2004; Čapo and Gulin Zrnić 2011; Perinić Lewis 2017) and sociology domain (Skoko 2004; Baloban 2005; Horvat 2011). The way to deepen this kind of research in communication science is taken through further questioning specific problems of the digital culture, methodically approached by Uzelac and Cvjetičanin (2008), media audiences reinvention (Nenadić and Ostling 2018), information and broader media literacy (Špiranec and Banek Zorica 2008; Zgrabljić Rotar 2023).

In that context, the development of a small virtual community on the Facebook social network and its role in preserving the homeland heritage and communicating local identity is followed primarily as monitoring a communication process rather than describing a fixed phenomenon.

Empirical Research Approach

The general purpose of this work is to explore new ways of mass communicating in digital environments, notably on social network platforms. The chosen Facebook private group is the starting point for exploring the emerging phenomenon of a virtual community marked as a *digital homeland*, with its structure, ways of action and interaction, the range of members’ motives for participation, and nature of the need for belonging to the shared identity. The specific study goals are to identify trends and patterns in developing tiny but firm Facebook communities based on individual self-identification through symbolic restructuring collective micro-identities, to determine the reach of their initiatives in respective physical local communities and their place in broader heritage databases, as well as to point out the evolution of the notorious feeling of nostalgia among displaced population in the networked society.

The central subject of the research is the Facebook community dedicated to the area around the small town of Jakovlje in northwestern Croatia, which represents an advanced amateur media project under the common name "Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com."

Four hypotheses and two additional research questions are set:

H1: Communication via Facebook transforms the ways of local community cohesion and identity preservation while bridging time and space disruption.

H2: The incentive for communication in the virtual community is the feeling of belonging to a common origin and the desire to personally contribute to preserving the local identity.

H3: Participation in the virtual community is realized mainly through different symbolic forms: comments, photos, and emoticons.

H4: Active participation motivates displaced members of the homeland virtual community to make more visits or permanently return to the place of origin.

RQ1: Can this type of Facebook community become a relevant source of information for broader social and even scientific needs?

RQ2: Does the virtual community contribute to the cohesion of the physical local community and the digital diaspora?

"Digital Homeland" Facebook Components

Facebook is the first-ranged global social networking service (SNS) with almost three billion active users by the beginning of the year 2022 (as per DataReportal) when the crucial part of the research for this study was done. It was then used by 64% of the entire Croatian population, and its 32000 active users lived in the Krapinsko-Zagorska County (source Arbona.hr), where the online community of "Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com" is placed. About a thousand steady members have been using all its available social networking channels. The number has been constantly growing in a rather slow pace since its founding in 2015. At the moment of the final online survey and quatitative content analysis in January 2022, the membership on all the existing Facebook features of the online community is as follows:

- Facebook page "Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com": 931 followers, 908 likes. The administrator's last post dated January 4, 2021, comments still posted

- Facebook page “Zagorje Once – Croatian Zagorje in Old Photos” (original title “Zagorje nekad – Hrvatsko zagorje na starima fotografijama”): 5398 followers, 5210 likes. The administrator’s last post dated December 21, 2020, comments and photos still posted.
- Facebook private group “Guardians of the Heritage of the Bistra and Jakovlje Region” (original title “Čuvari baštine bistranskog i jakovljanskog kraja”): 780 followers, 678 likes, 1 admin, 3 collaborators. This group is the hub of the actual communication among the active members of the examined online community, and the axe of the conducted empirical research.

Methodological Frame

After the ground preparation, based on a broad interdisciplinary theoretical approach, the choice of the empirical research methods is based on standard quantitative and qualitative methods used in the humanistic sciences to build new knowledge upon the existing theories.

The research material consists of all the social media channels forming the project bearing the overall name “Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com,” in particular their private Facebook group “Guardians of the Heritage of the Bistra and Jakovlje Region” (original title: “Čuvari baštine bistranskog i jakovljanskog kraja”), which is the backbone of the online community members’ interaction.

The applied empirical methods are field and desk quantitative (Lamza Posavec 2021) and qualitative (Patton 2001; Merriam 2002; Creswell 2013) communication methods, including online surveys, quantitative and qualitative content analysis, in-depth, semi-structured, and structured online and field interviews. Additionally, Facebook’s standard interactivity insight statistical methods are followed during the five years of observation, gathering, and analyzing data, depending on the group activities. The online methodology tools are applied with Facebook community members, and the field research included participating in group-organized activities, data-gathering, and qualitative ethnographic interviews with the persons directly or indirectly included in the project development in their real-life context (Lindlof 1995; Halmi 2005). Additional data was gathered through direct messages on the Facebook group, e-mails, and telephone calls. For the comparative analysis of the crucial research elements with citing similar examples according to the principles of the grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2009; Strauss and Corbin 2014), three similar Facebook social network products were used to draw more trustworthy conclusions (Stake 1995; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin 2007). All the resear-

ch methods have complementary functions. Procedures were determined in function of verifying hypotheses' presumptions and research questions.

The quantitative research method included primarily the online survey, posted on top of the Facebook group "Guardians of the Heritage of the Bistra and Jakovlje Region" timeline, and kept there for two months. A pilot survey was conducted previously to prepare a more focused final questionnaire. The standard Google questionnaire form was used both times. This method was selected to confirm the socio-demographic characteristics of the Facebook group: gender and age composition, level of education of members and their habits of using social networks, geographical reach of the group, motivation for participation and degree of physical connection to the place of origin. The targeted questionnaire contained 24 closed questions and one additional open-ended to add remarks at will. The questions were grouped by thematic units, with five offered answers and, in some cases, the possibility of adding a note. To better understand and interpret the survey results, focused quantitative research was conducted by analyzing the posts on the Facebook group wall.

Simultaneously, the qualitative analysis of the posted content was conducted. That part of the research included monitoring the posts and recording everything important regarding information and communication to get a valid data sample for developing theoretical principles. The collected quantitative analysis data was processed using Excel sheets and informetrics analyzing tools according to the established categories of post elements and reactions to them. The standard Word count within the Microsoft Word program and the Leximancer software for mapping and topic recognition were used to qualitatively analyze the posts' content data according to the established descriptive criteria.

Regarding interviews as part of qualitative research, three in-depth interviews were conducted with the project founder and administrator of all concerned Facebook groups between the pilot and the main questionnaire. At the same time, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two online group supporters from the physical community. Systematic communication was constantly held in the Facebook group via comments and direct messages, e-mails and/or telephone calls, with the most active Facebook group members. Depending on the group's activities, contacts were made with members of administrative, cultural, or religious institutions from the area, who participate at their own initiative or by invitation, depending on the nature of ongoing projects. Finally, structured interviews were conducted with administrators of three similar Facebook communities in Croatia.

The Facebook network facilitated data gathering and classification with built-in insights and analytics. The group members' mutual communication, the response

rate and expansion of the online community, the placement of the content type and quality were monitored daily. The data were recorded and combined with statistical and graphical tools. Notes, photographs of key processes, computer screen shots, and audio recordings accompanied the research. The recorded conversations and transcripts were stored on an external hard drive, protected by a password.

Results

As previously mentioned, the study material refers to all the segments of the project “Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com.” The frame for quantitative data gathering is the Facebook private group “Guardians of the Heritage of the Bistra and Jakovlje Region,” the members’ principal communication channel. Thus, the survey includes the most interactive part of the targeted online community, and the content analysis reflects their real activity over the two months given for completing the questionnaire. Given the insights into the group communication numerical data, qualitative analysis of the posted content was conducted to assess individual contributions’ quality, communication potential, and real community value. The tools for both qualitative and quantitative analysis directions were structured to examine the hypotheses statements and research questions, the same as individual interviews. The results will be presented and analyzed accordingly, followed by additional findings and a discussion of their practical function.

Sample and Procedure

The survey was kept on top of the “Guardians of the Heritage of the Bistra and Jakovlje Region” Facebook group’s timeline for two months, from November 16, 2021 to January 16, 2022. It was completed by 169 respondents, which means 24.9% of the 678 active group members. The pilot survey was conducted from September 1 to November 1, 2019 in the same control group, with the participation of 78 out of 645 active members at that time. Some respondents joined both times. Their anonymity was guaranteed. The results were analyzed separately. Only the results of the second survey were taken for discussion.

The corpus of the quantitative and qualitative content analysis consisted of 41 posts published on the targeted Facebook group wall during the principal survey time frame, with their interactive threads. The posts were taken as meaningful analysis units. They were organized in two Excel table sheets, the first containing quantitative data: frequency, reach, and response level, and the second containing qualitative

data: authors, topics, published content elements, textual and symbolical reactions. A code matrix for entering relevant data into tables was created. The number of comments was taken as an interactivity indicator, and previous similar studies were consulted to set the analytical criteria (Lai and To 2015; Stock 2016; Cifci and Knautz 2016). The comments without any sense or connection with the treated subject were not considered.

Three field in-depth interviews were conducted over the five-year observation period with the initiator and administrator of all Facebook community activities Mario Šimunković. In October 2016 two semi-structured field interviews were taken with their most persistant supporters: the former Jakovlje municipality mayor Snježana Bužinec, and Kraljev Vrh parish priest don Ivan Hrastović, followed by e-mails and telephone calls in multiple group event occasions. Three structured interviews were taken in August 2022, with administrators of the Facebooks communities: "Požega People" (original title: "Požežani") Dražen Muljević; "Mapping Trešnjevka" (original title: "Mapiranje Trešnjevke") Vanja Radovanović; "Vrgorac Once Upon a Time" (original title: "Vrgorac nekad") Branko Radonić.

Additional ethnographic field and online interviews were conducted with the targeted Facebook community members and participants of the related events, as well as the communication through the social network itself. It makes a total of 36 interviewees directly in the field, 7 participants in online actions, and multiple interactions through direct messages with Facebook group members depending on daily activities. They provided a closer view into the users' structure, motives, engagement, feeling of belonging to the virtual community, and its impact on the physical one.

Facebook Group Structure and Communication

Regarding the general data about the group composition, survey results match the Facebook analytics and the usual structure of similar Facebook groups: they are mainly between the ages of 46 and 65 (51.3%), the slight majority are women (54.3%), and education degree mostly goes to middle (39.5%) and high school (29.9%).

Some Facebook homeland community studies (Androutsopoulos and Vold Lexander 2021; Oiarzabal 2011) show that their members regularly communicate on several social networks. In this case, preferred alternative networks are WhatsApp (33.5%), Instagram (24.6%), Viber (21.5%), TikTok and Twitter (X) in equal percentage (10.2%). Among other forms of online networking services, they prefer Messenger (37.8%) and YouTube (36.9%); some like reading blogs (15.85%), visiting forums

(8.3%), and rarely getting to chat rooms (1.2%). Most of them visit Facebook three times a day (54.3%), and it is their chief address for this community. It implicitly testifies about the moderate information literacy of the group members' majority. During further communication via direct messages with some survey respondents to clarify that attitude, ten out of twenty said they do not care for social networks unless connected to specific topics of interest. For the same reason, they feel no need to network with people from this Facebook group elsewhere.

The content analysis data best reflect the number and type of actions and interactions among Facebook group members, their selection and exchange of specific thematic content based on individual preferences, motives, communication capabilities, and skills.

The overall activity peaks at 40 to 50 members present on Friday and Saturday evenings from 6 to 9 pm CET. The lowest evening activity with less than 30 interventions is on Monday evenings. Mornings are regularly low with a maximum of 10 members around 7 am CET on both working and free days. It signalizes that they are mainly among the mature working population and confirms Facebook's statistics about their residence mostly in Europe. During the two-month intensive observation period, 41 published posts received 319 comments, 962 likes, 197 emoticons, 47 gifs, and 19,702 mere views. The symbols used are as follows. Emoticons: 92 smileys, 64 hearts, 20 support, 12 applause, 5 sad, 2 thank you, and 2 "ha-ha." Gifs: 22 hearts, 15 great, 5 congrats, 3 thank you, and 2 "wow." Despite some tears or sadness, there is never downright anger, protest, or hate. Comments are also free of hate speech. If expressing disagreement, they are reserved for data correction and constructive criticism. The administrator explained it in a follow-up interview as the result of careful building group etiquette and "crowd control." Most posts are textual, with 135 accompanying photos (99 in the posts and 36 in comments), 7 galleries (containing 10-30 images), 20 facsimile documents, and 11 external links, sometimes leading to videos. Only two posts contained a video. The three most active members, who followed the administrator's 21 posts with 10, 4 and 2 posts, had 77, 18 and 15 comments, respectively.

Posts were categorized and counted by content description: *present*, *past*, *past/present*, *event*, *communal interest*, *personal interest*, and *communal/individual interest*. The number and kind of reactions were taken as interactivity indicators, and comments with meaningful content were also considered. According to these criteria, the three most popular posts, provoking the liveliest discussion, were: Remembrance of the Roma and Sint massacre on Dec 12, 1944 (reach 607, likes 22, comments 3); Acquisition of the Croatian Club Jakovlje Chicago 1937 ribbon (reach 596, likes 50, comments 19); Mardi Gras in Gornja Bistra 1960s (reach 590, likes 45, com-

ments 27). The least popular posts were: Invitation for the Women's Day literary meeting (reach 356, likes 5, comments 0); Search for the noblemen family Wynhal descendant Mimi (reach 346, likes 11, comments 2); Opening of the Christmas nativity exhibit (reach 341, likes 40, comments 3).

From these examples, it is evident that a more valid discussion revolves around multilayered topics and that the highest reach is not a guarantee for the real engagement of the group. Even without a distinct interactive component, some posts are rich in information, primarily thanks to the administrator's engagement. He incites online and field events, i.e., best photo contest, genealogy workshops, interactive map of local inns, or shares documents tackling local identity, such as his book *History of the Kraljev Vrh Parish*. In an interview, he pointed out the goal of reconciling political dissenters living traditionally side-by-side in that small geographic area. That is why encouraging discussions on sensitive topics like the long-lasting consequences of regional wars, the history of economic problems, and depopulation. Analyzed comment threads to such posts regularly end in conciliatory tones without mutual condemnation. The most engagement is noted in topics closely related to local identity but also bearing emotional weight, regardless of sad or fun content. It is a regular behavior pattern in reactions to posts, confirming a sense of empathy and connection among the members of the observed Facebook community.

The presented results support the first research hypothesis on transforming the ways of local community cohesion and identity coexistence brought by the native group while bridging time and space disruption via Facebook communication.

Local Identity Connection

The overview of local and global self-identification among reference respondents within the target Facebook group is based on the results of survey questionnaires and analysis of the posts' content, including the interactions online and later in the accompanying field events.

The identity preservation mentioned in the first hypothesis is partly reflected in the survey respondents' thematic preferences, as shown in Table 1.

Culture and education are on top, followed by history, politics, religion and sports[1]. These results illustrate the massive importance of local cultural heritage for the online community and indicate its concerns about the treatment of the regional cultural treasure on the ground, which the members have expressed on multiple occasions in

[1] The order of possible answers in the questionnaire is the same as in the original survey.

Table 1. The influence the Facebook community on members’ personal and group identities

Tablica 1. Utjecaj Facebook zajednice na osobni i grupni identitet članova

SENSE OF IDENTITY (%)	
What topics do you find most interesting from the local identity point of view?	
1. Politics	8.8
2. History	24.4
3. Religion	1.9
4. Culture and education	63.5
5. Sport	1.4
Which of the following do you think most defines your personal identity?	
1. Sex	15.7
2. Age	12.5
3. Race	6.5
4. Nationality	29.5
5. Regional affiliation	35.8
Which of the following do you think most defines your social identity?	
1. Birthplace	31.8
2. Region of origin (Zagorje, Dalmacija, Slavonija, Baranja, Istra, Međimurje…)	34.3
3. Country of origin (Hrvatska)	12.8
4. Broader region of origin (Europe)	9.8
5. Nothing listed (citizen of the world)	11.3
How much do you think participating in this FB community affects your social identity?	
1. Not at all	6.4
2. Very little	23.5
3. To some extent	37.5
4. Significantly	25.2
5. Decisively	7.4
How does participating in this FB community specifically affect your social identity?	
1. Building a personal identity related to our locality	12.2
2. Building a group identity related to our locality	18.3
3. Making contacts with people of the shared local identity	24.3
4. Acquiring new knowledge about our local identity	40.5
5. None of the above listed	4.7

their Facebook group discussions. Posts on these subjects usually lead to fruitful comments, which regularly contribute to common conclusions or even action proposals.

As Table 1 shows, in grading the feeling of one's personal identity, regional affiliation surpasses nationality, gender, age, and race. For social identity self-identification, the priority goes to the narrower region and place of birth, Croatia as a country, and Europe as the broader region of origin. That could be expected in this reference group based on local background, signaling a global social network's paradoxical role in building a positive local collective identification amid general identity standardization happening out of legacy mass media. Although few members estimate that this Facebook group does not affect their social identity decisively, some feel it significantly, or at least to some extent. However, the majority appreciates most the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and make contacts with compatriots wherever they are, then building a group or personal identity related to the shared micro-locality.

The result of observing the most engaging content that brings together the Facebook group members is that it occurs around the posts carrying elements of surprise, intrigue, discovery, and emotional charge. As a rule, the interaction starts with a question concerning the attached image. Three examples are insightful in that regard. The gallery with 17 photographs of the member's grandfather on the boat of the World War I Italian Fleet got 26 likes, 3 emoticons, and 15 fruitful comments about other locals sailing for different reasons at different times, from serving in foreign military boats to traveling overseas in search of jobs or adventures. The quest for the genealogy of the Orsag family from Igrišće, starting from a marriage photo, led to making swift connections with known relatives and identifying their old house with a local inn and the new owner in only 7 constructive comments. Also, the response to the request for pictures of members' anti-fascist ancestors for book research immediately brought five of them in comments. In other words, the admin Šimunković puts it in an interview: "We managed to speak only when we really have something to say." According to his directions, group members should always have in mind two main things: local identity and common interest. When publishing images, videos, or documents, to respect copyrights, they must never forget the authenticity and contentment of the mentioned persons and their relatives in case they are deceased.

These interactions in creating media content spread to the physical community networking of people from different backgrounds. For instance, Snježana Bužinec, the former mayor of Jakovlje Municipality from the ranks of the Social Democratic Party of Croatia and, at the same time, one of the less active members of the Facebook group, offered free spaces for the organization of exhibitions, workshops, book presentations, and even financial assistance in acquiring equipment for digitizing

documents to be presented online. She confirmed in an interview that the group helped trace her family branches back to the first documented grey grandfathers.

At the same time, the priest of Kraljev Vrh, Don Ivan Hrastović, who does not even have a Facebook account, gave the administrator access to the entire church archive for reconstructing individual parish family ties in the last few centuries. In his opinion, expressed in an interview, it is a real gain for a region to have somebody “persistent, communicative and scientifically instructed to collect dispersed data and make them a valid treasury for the community to build upon the past and establish a continuity toward present and future.” His motive for cooperation is the possibility of contributing to both the parish and municipality, regardless of whether they belong to the congregation. One more interesting interaction: the administrator is a young man in his 30-ies with an obvious liberal leftist worldview, and the group’s most active contributor is a middle-aged woman inclined to conservative values whose profile name is Temple of God.

All these facts go in favor of the second hypothesis about active participation as a personal contribution to the affirmation of shared origin in the Facebook community. They also highlight the role of horizontal communication between people, as Castells (2010) names it, in maintaining interpersonal dynamics, regardless of age, gender, educational structure, assigned roles, psychosocial prerequisites, civilizational, and even political connotations in the social networks sphere. The only thing determining them as an interest group is the shared micro-identity.

From Virtual to Physical Community

The research section concerning the functioning of the chosen Facebook group as a community relies firstly on the survey and analysis of the most relevant content on their wall, then on verifying the findings in additional communication with persons directly or indirectly involved.

To start with new members’ ways of joining the group, the majority (41.7%) have found it thanks to the systematic monitoring of the sources related to the region, some by accidental discovery on the Internet (20.5%), others at the invitation of friends (19.7%), acquaintances (12.3%), or the administrator himself (5.8%). This Facebook group is a daily online destination for more than half of the members. The rest is elaborated in detail in Table 2.

When members’ personal involvement is in question, one-third mostly consume the content posted by others, whose participation varies from regular or occasional contribution posting on the Facebook group wall to engagement in online actions such

as virtual meet-ups, discussions, quests for people and places, and even physical presence in field events like exhibits, workshops, lectures, and book presentations. The administrator regularly initiates the former, and the latter are organized either by group members or other people and organizations suitable for their shared affinities. This percentage fits in Facebook statistics for similar size and interest groups. The addition of almost 12% of members taking part in online and field events indicates a plausible cohesion of the virtual and physical communities. In practice, occasional and regular contributions consist mainly of likes and some comments, then emoticons, gifs, images, and rarely videos and links to other websites. Individual members' persistent activity often results in progress in acquiring new digital skills like scanning documents, creating maps, composing galleries, or uploading videos taken during field events. The positive effect on these occasions is visible from multiple reactions to appealing content on the Facebook group wall. For example, if the photo of the world adventurer Josip Mikulec from Krušljevo Selo got instantly 38 likes and 54 emoticons, the interactive map of local inns never stopped being updated with new data, refreshing linked articles about added items. It is part of the plan to "contribute to creating a general basis of the local heritage information as a free source conforming to the sustainable development principles and practice," that administrator Šimunković stresses in an interview.

Judging by the survey respondents' self-assessment, the main benefit of the observed Facebook community is the exchange of information about the shared place of origin. Almost equally important are confirming one belongs to it and maintaining the native language, culture, and traditions. In most cases, language directly evokes a local dialect, which is confirmed by the linguistic part of content analysis. Monitoring activities related to the shared micro-locality is not negligible, and the convenience of showcasing one's own moves in that direction is not to be overlooked. The prevailing motive for participating is the shared local identity, but quite close is the desire to contribute to the permanent preservation of its heritage – which, in addition to culture, can be historical, geographical, economic, and even human potential. Showing the world the region's values has its place, too – that includes the broadest range from protecting spoken and written words, songs, and costumes to initiatives such as restoring historic buildings, opening ethnic houses, thematic fairs, and presenting family trees. For some, networking with people from their region worldwide is a valid reason to participate, too. The follow-up explanations sum up that this online community helps them create a better version of themselves, optimizing the time invested, concentration, and communication of precisely defined ideas in the appropriate place. Together with the feeling that the people's voice is not heard enough in the state and municipal authorities' heritage preservation strategic plans, often expressed in the comments, the above confirms the second hypothesis claim

Table 2. The meaning and ways of participating in the local Facebook community
Tablica 2. Smisao i načini sudjelovanja u zavičajnoj Facebook zajednici

SENSE OF COMMUNITY (%)	
How often do you visit this FB community?	
1. Very rarely (two to three times a year)	1.2
2. Rarely (every two to three months)	3.1
3. Occasionally (once a month)	17.7
4. Often (once a week)	27.6
5. Regularly (on daily basis)	50.4
What is your prevalent involvement in this Fb community?	
1. I follow what others contribute	35.3
2. I occasionally contribute	31.2
3. I regularly contribute	21.7
4. I participate in online events and campaigns	9.5
5. I participate in the organization of physical events and actions	2.3
How do you participate in this FB community most often?	
1. Like	66.3
2. Comment	14.5
3. Emoticon or Gif	9.6
4. Image	8.1
5. Gallery, video, external link	1.5
What is your main benefit of participating in this FB community?	
1. Useful information about the shared micro-locality	35.4
2. The opportunity to showcase my activities related to the micro-locality	7.1
3. Monitoring the activities of others related to the micro-locality	11.2
4. Confirmation of origin and belonging to the micro-locality	23.7
5. Maintaining the native language, culture, and traditions	22.6
What is your main motive for participating in this FB community?	
1. Shared local identity	45.3
2. Networking with people from our region around the world	7.7
3. The desire for the permanent preservation of the local heritage	30.6
4. Showing the world the values of our region	15.3
5. Nostalgia	1.1

about the desire to personally contribute to the local identity they belong to inside the virtual community.

The survey results also prove the third hypothesis presumption on mainly symbolic forms of participation in the Facebook group. At the same time, the content analysis and permanent observation indicated a few individuals who research topics, raise questions and take action using more complex contribution forms. It raised the issue of coordinating online and field actions that encourage others to a personal engagement and opened the research question about their potential value in local heritage databases. In this regard, a communication pattern based on posts containing valuable content is evident. It regularly leads from interesting information, through group members' interaction, toward a relevant institution, be it a local school, city museum, or state archives. Individual Facebook group members contribute with documents, photographs, and personal testimonies. The results of this collaborative networking are some items permanently stored in the local Brdovec Museum, opening the Eco Museum in Bistra as a filiale of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, two books published by the Memorial Museum of the World War II concentration camp Jasenovac, co-authored by administrator Šimunković, and seven more online or paper publications he enterprized from 2016 till 2021. During that period, the online group initiated multiple field events: genealogy workshops, art workshops in the Sixta castle in Jakovlje, historical walks, exhibitions, book and video presentations. According to the respective event organizers' data, the attendance was from 10 to about 200 persons; group members' presence was regularly visible, though not precisely documented. These findings underscore the importance of the content strategy that makes this Facebook community a touchstone for topics related to the local identity. Their invested volunteer work creates significant social capital. It shows how even a numerically small online community can use its opportunity to connect both on the Internet and in physical space (Levine, Locke, Searls and Weinberger 2009; Zandt 2010).

While shared local identity is the most important motive for participating (45.3%), nostalgia appears as the least important one (1.1%) in the survey. The examined Facebook group is neither exclusively diasporic nor just an extension of the physical one; nevertheless, this result is somewhat surprising. Therefore, it will be analyzed separately in the part of the research results dealing with diaspora problems.

Nostalgia and Digital Diaspora

The examples in the existing domestic literature (Pleše and Senjković 2004; Čapo and Gulin Zrnić 2011) mention nostalgia as one of the reasons for the digital dias-

pora virtual gathering. Given the region’s history of significant emigration and the presence of the displaced population in the observed online community, part of the research questioned the element of their longing for the homeland and the implicit motivation for more visits or a definitive return.

The targeted Facebook group refers to the area with about ten thousand inhabitants and has almost seven hundred members. The survey showed that 46.2% live in their birthplace, 28.9% within Croatia, 20.8% elsewhere in Europe, and 4.1% in the rest of the world. Facebook insights place them first in Jakovlje, Gornja Bistra, and neighboring Zaprešić. Those who live abroad are mainly settled in Germany, USA, Austria, and Sweden. Most respondents (25.3%) visit their homeland as often as possible, i.e., several times a year. The rest come sometimes (18.7%) or rarely (5.4%). The smallest number never comes (4.4%), so online activity is, in reality, the most potent form of expression of their native identity. The possibilities of cohesion between the physical local community and its digital diaspora are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Relation between diaspora and virtual homeland community

Tablica 3. Odnos između dijaspore i virtualne zavičajne zajednice

DIGITAL DIASPORA CONNECT (%)					
	Not at all	**Very little**	**To some extent**	**Significanty**	**Decisively**
How much has this FB community influenced your connection with people in your place of origin?	12.2	17.7	31.4	36.5	2.2
How much do you think this FB community contributes to the positive development of the local community?	2.9	12.5	37.5	43.8	3.3
How much do you think this FB community helps make your homeland a real better place?	6.3	14.5	34.3	28.2	16.7
How much do you think this FB community contributes to the return to the homeland of those who have moved out of it?	28.9	36.2	22.4	11.3	1.2
How much do you think this FB community contributes to the return of their descendants?	39.2	36.3	21.2	2.5	0.8

Regarding the influence of this online community on connecting with people in the shared place of origin, developing the local community, and bringing realistic positive change to the homeland, most of the answers are on the fourth and third degree of the 1 to 5 intensity scale (not at all, very little, to some extent, significantly, decisively). However, the results reveal that the feeling of belonging does not have to be a prerequisite for the desire to return to the place of origin physically. The theoretical expectation was not confirmed – on the contrary, when grading from 1 to 5, an almost negligible percentage of answers foresee possible returnees among those who moved away, and even smaller among their descendants. It indicates a difference between the static local identity of those who stayed and the multi-layered one of those displaced or born abroad. Despite the residual nostalgia, mainly in older participants, direct answers from the middle-aged group members with a long-term stay in a foreign country confirm economic factors as prevailing in the absence of that crucial decision. The additional factor is the dual identity of their children, which is connected equally to their birthplace and place of origin.

For similar reasons, and thanks to the Facebook practice of machine-assisted translation, the language gap is easily overlapped in this Facebook group. English is the only foreign language used in 3 posts and 7 comments posted during the two-month intensive monitoring of the timeline content. It also displayed the importance of directly exchanging personal stories with the possibility of immediate action on social networks instead of consuming stories chosen by professional media channels. The instant mobilization in finding the Bistran genealogy of Facebook group member Kathy Considine Pack from the USA is illustrative. Her family tree was reconstructed, starting from an old necklace, within 24 hours. It resulted in new connections with homeland relatives and multiple visits of the American descendants to Zagorje. This case witnesses how the feeling of the primary micro-identity can be passed on to new generations of the diaspora, and it can also be partially taken over by "associated" members of the group – spouses, new relatives, and friends made in the new homeland.

Thus, the fourth hypothesis about the virtual community as a tangible motivation for the return of the digital diaspora was contested almost entirely, except for the desire for more frequent visits to the place of origin. The answer to the second research question about cohesion with the physical community is partially affirmative, as the social network remains the primary way of bridging spatial and temporal exclusion and the driver of the displaced population's participation in the social life of the real homeland in real-time. The lack of nostalgia, being only an indirect factor of cohesion with the displaced population, may be interpreted as subjective, reflecting the small part of the actual Croatian diaspora in this very "Digital Homeland" virtual

community. The finding may well challenge further research in defining new aspects within the general digital diaspora concept.

Comparative Analysis

Three Croatian Facebook communities are chosen for comparison based on relevant similarities and regional variety. Here are the basic numbers:

- "Požega People" (Slavonia) – NGO Facebook page "for the those who have Požega under the skin or deep in the heart." Since 2011, 3 administrators, 10 associates, 8000 followers, 7800 likes, 3000 active members, average 1-2 posts per day
- "Mapping Trešnjevka" (Zagreb County) – Facebook community founded by a local Culture Center exploring the identity of a Croatian Capital neighborhood. Since 2013, 2 administrators, 2 associates, 6070 followers, 5750 likes, 20 active members, average 1 post per day
- "Vrgorac Once Upon a Time" (Dalmatia) – Facebook page dedicated to the town's history and education through photographs and postcards. Since 2015, 1 administrator, no associates, 4500 followers, 4500 likes, 20 active members, average 1 post per day

Structured interviews with ten identical questions and follow-up individual contacts revealed significant differences and similarities with "Digital Homeland – jakovlje.com."

Regarding *general content*, in Jakovlje virtual community posts prevalently focus on local history popularization; in Vrgorac and Trešnjevka it is a cross-section of life from the past to envisioning future, and in Požega it is mostly about important local events, including deaths of meritorious citizens. In accompanying images, Jakovlje and Vrgorac prefer older ones, valid for deeper research, while in Požega and Trešnjevka, photos from the 1970s to 1990s featuring local celebrities are especially popular. The most stimulating discussion subjects in all groups are lesser-known information, authentic testimonies of social life, sports and school activities, ancestors and historical figures, and old communal spaces compared to their places today. The eventual devastation or demolition of well-known gathering places provoke many comments, some strongly pointed and helpful in municipality strategies.

On the *communication level*, online dialogues in all four Facebook groups contribute to exchanging ideas and experiences, even possibly solving specific field issues through "crowd" interaction. As a rule, interpersonal relations are polite and constructive. Administrators agree about a scarce need to ban members or remove comments. On the contrary, they emphasize the authenticity and integrity of their

communities, volunteer work, and the non-profit nature of their independent initiatives as key factors for creating added value to their local identities. Another similarity is building understanding between generations and friendships with all their members, serving as virtual meeting points, regardless of geographical location.

In preserving *local identity* through targeted online actions, Facebook communities go different ways. The Jakovlje group mainly uses online campaigns to collect historical and genealogical documents for the books the administrator prepares. In Vrgorac, collecting photos 4-5 times a year goes by answering the administrator's call for loans for digitization and in Požega during regular contests for the publication of new photos with city motifs, which even earn prizes. In contrast, the Trešnjevka group gets special invitations for actions and meetings instead of online campaigns.

Therefore, in *building community spirit* through field actions, Trešnjevka quarter is the most prominent, with 20 events in five years, each with a unique approach and including cooperation with city institutions, activists, and artists related to the district and, whenever possible, with international organizations, ex., at least one Jane's Walk yearly. During the same five years, the Vrgorac group had several photo exhibitions authored by the administrator with the theme of the Homeland War in Croatia and local agriculture, one dedicated to his book on local gastronomy. They prepared a permanent exhibition entitled "Vrgorac Once Upon a Time." On the other hand, "Požega People" put the least effort into field actions, such as cleaning the area of the former athletics stadium, where only about a hundred people participated. The previously presented field activities of the Jakovlje group, regularly preceded by studious preparation, could be classified in the middle of the line between the most frequent and the rarest. The finding indicates that a larger community tends to have a broader range of online interactions, while smaller ones focus more on fieldwork.

The outreach and evident public interest of the cited either online or field events coming as a result of the collaborative Facebook group activities support the platform's *reliability* as a source of material related to the heritage of local identity. The fact is that not every post or comment on the wall is directly relevant to a common identity. Some touch on private interests, notices, and requests. In that regard, it is crucial to note that the majority of content contributions do not come from experts but from people with average knowledge and education. Therefore, the overall quality of information in these Facebook communities largely depends on the actions of group moderators and a few most active participants.

According to the administrators, the share of the *digital diaspora* varies in the compared Facebook communities. "Požega people" count around a thousand displaced

members and, at most, 30 of their descendants. In the smaller town of Vrgorac, almost 77% of followers live in Croatia, and there are members of the first, second, third, and even fourth generation of emigrants from the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and twenty European and South American countries. The Trešnjevka group, placed in the Croatian capital, has less than a hundred members who have personally moved away, and their descendants only come forward sporadically. It can be explained by the fact that their essential topics deal with less historical and nostalgic elements and are more focused on the practical everyday life of the city district. The almost non-existent percentage of nostalgia in all groups is less surprising if native communities are not viewed stereotypically amid the *glocal* networking. For the second and third diaspora generations, cultural mixing also creates *hybrid identities* (Chambers 1996 as per Kalra, Kalhon and Hutynik 2005) due to a massive assimilation in new homelands, which is even stronger if their background is an urban milieu, notably more flexible in changing places of residence. Also, the phenomenon of the multiplication of homelands has already been noted in the Croatian diaspora (Grbić 2004). That makes another step toward denying the fourth hypothesis of this study. Nevertheless, the expressed awareness of the original local identity and its heritage values to be shown to the rest of the world significantly confirms the contemporary media potential of groups compatible to “Digital Homeland” on social networks.

Limitations

Wrapping up the results review, it is opportune to note some data-gathering limitations. Firstly, a relatively small number of posts on the Facebook group wall appeared during the two-month intensive data collection period around Christmas and the New Year. It was selected based on the objective parameters of their expected content relevance during the multi-year observation and compared to the pilot survey timing in September and October after the Summer Holidays. It opens up possibilities for more comprehensive research with larger groups and extended timeline monitoring periods, promising conclusions with fewer limitations. Secondly, the systematic lack of genuine engagement of community members who remain passive observers (McQuail 2010) is not to be ignored. The absence of a meaningful contribution from the majority of the examined Facebook community creates an additional difficulty in objectively interpreting the results. That is why the obtained data connections may not necessarily affect the cause-and-effect relationship between all the analyzed content published on the Facebook group timeline. The present sample can be considered more convenient than representative. It points to

caution in broader conclusions and limits the generalization of the findings to all communities containing "Digital Homeland" elements on social networks, as they are diversified and rapidly multiply. The present findings are to be taken primarily as descriptive and indicative of further studying similar initiatives on social networks, which are undoubtedly bound to expand and become more intricate with the evolution of information technologies. Therefore, the primary function of this research is to anticipate future incentives for communicating the richness of individual local identities through all available means of digital culture, where a quality product at any level of the global network is a source of information for media professionals, scholars, scientists, and laypeople. The recommendation for interested researchers and representatives of cultural heritage institutions is to collect and preserve Facebook content that is potentially interesting for deeper processing in their databases.

Discussion

Discussing the obtained results to build upon existing theories, the initial division into basic problem sections is kept: the ways of communication within examined Facebook groups, their impact on the identity of the physical local community, cohesion with the digital diaspora, and the benefits of this social media product as a multi-use data source.

In terms of the *communication media theory*, all Facebook group members fulfill two primary criteria for participation in social network groups, as defined by Levinson (2001): a human tendency to independently gather information and decide which group to join. During the establishment of their virtual connections, sharing local identity is confirmed as a crucial factor for forming these online communities as a substitute for direct live communication in the place of origin or as their extension through new social interaction ways on the Internet (Castells 2003). The free creation of content on the exclusively participatory social media platform supports the theoretical premise that modern technology is an increasingly integral part of our existence (Gere 2008), conditioning the democratization of the entire media space. "People formerly known as audience" (Rosen 2012), i.e., group members with skills and information literacy sufficient for the Facebook environment needs (Špiranec and Banek Zorica 2008) have an opportunity to become content *prosumers* or *produsers* (Carpentier 2011 and Bruns 2008 as per Kunić 2024). The selection, processing, and communication potential of topics in analyzed Facebook wall posts mirrors the current fading of the information and media dichotomy, making Internet users, and not technology or market, the key to the digital age, just as Zgrabljić Rotar (2011) argues. The quality of the published content guarantees a

constant audience and helps build mutual *digital trust*, emphasized by Guo (2022). By fulfilling the group's thematic interests, reliable amateurs, such as the "Digital Homeland" administrator, acquire reputation, known in cyber space as *social capital* (Bourdieu 1985, Zandt 2010). Polite interpersonal discourse, in line with Postman's (2006) theory of media ecology, over the years, makes the Facebook group a valuable "school" of positive interactivity. At the same time, the "Digital Homeland" community on a social network can represent a form of continuation of the *tribal drum* (McLuhan 1964) on an electronic new media platform. It has both communication and identity meaning, becoming a virtual gathering place on fertile ground for cultivating local, collective identity in the digital network of McLuhan's *global village* (as per Horrocks 2001). Sharing information by *noble amateurs* (Keen 2010) on a social network also includes varying quality. It implies the different reach of "amateurs who really care" about the narrow content they deal with and now have the tools to harness society's *cognitive surplus* (Shirky 2008, 2011). Their potential should not be underestimated. After a series of similar studies, each identity carrier identified as compatible with the first proposed "Digital Homeland" could be assigned that name, appropriate to one of the specific future genre niches that McQuail (2010) evokes.

As for the *identity theories aspect* of the research, this study did not intend to discuss the definition of Croatian identity as a whole, including national implications of the state, religion, and values bordering on stereotypes. It took the example of cultivating micro-identity at the level of popular culture as a possible factor in media strategies in heritage management within the media templates offered by social networking on a widely available Internet platform. There are specialized, reliable, and unquestionable sites dealing with it in a more or less institutionalized way. Most of them also have accompanying Facebook pages or profiles. However, many local communities find Facebook convenient for directly networking with people related to their place of origin. Considering the two fundamental functions of the social network, according to Cifci and Knautz (2016): maintaining contacts and managing identity, there are many reasons for further discussions about how different targeted Facebook groups fulfill their purpose of keeping alive, restructuring, reinterpreting, and communicating their narrower cultural-historical identity in a global digital culture now part of all segments of human life. That topic certainly requires more research, as the articles compiled in the comprehensive review by Uzelac and Cvjetičanin (2018) abundantly demonstrate. The issue of keeping separate personal identities (Burke and Stets 2009) within the collective strivings in the networked society of the third millennium (Castells 2003) is another area that needs immediate attention. There is a strong point of view that *heritage objects* should be seen as

witnesses of the culture framing a specific micro-history (Stock 2016) because they tell stories that are "basic to all human cultures [...] by which we structure and make sense of our common experiences" (Jenkins, H. 2006: 121). The stories about different micro-identities enrich the global landscape with "similar but not identical" (Lawler 2014) virtual communities, making social network a *culturally meaningful space* (Čapo and Gulin Zrnić 2011). This way, the broad Facebook platform truly opens up an "infinite range of possibilities for the creation of alternative identity networks" (Edensor 2002: 33).

Regarding the researched *aspect of community*, when it comes to the identity-based group on social networks, it is important to have in mind the theoretical distinction between *virtual* and *imagined communities*, such as the nation in the sense that Anderson (2006) proposes, which is just a step away from theories of nationalism (Gellner 1964) that emerged with industrialization and the rise of so-called high culture as opposed to everything related to rural traditions and multicultural values. It turns out to be irrelevant in the observed Facebook groups that reflect the potential individual initiatives in redefining local identities and preserving cultural traditions in post-traditional times using new media tools suitable for the rapidly evolving digital age. Specific Facebook features and ways of functioning create a sense of *virtual reality* (Helsel and Roth 1991). According to the theory of virtual communities (Rheingold 1993; Etzionis 1997; Bateman Driskell and Lyon 2002), their size is not decisive enough for them to be considered quality communities or to have a distinctive social reality (Jenkins, R. 2008). So, if they have around 700 or 7000 members, the group dynamics play a crucial role in shaping a virtual community. Furthermore, if the majority hesitates to express more than a symbolic contribution, they regularly increase the reach of meaningful content with frequent views. It directly contributes to the further development of the thesis that local collective identity does not have to be "the fragile flower that globalization tramples" but "the upsurging power of local culture" (Tomlinson 2003: 270) amid the ongoing *cultural planetarization* (Geiger Zeman and Zeman 2010). During this communication, the increasing interactivity, as the natural consequence of using more tools for sharing identity-driven content, contributes to the paradigm of the use of digital technology in new media. Even more so, the research revealed the power of Facebook communities to reinforce the physical ones with online actions that contribute to a broader understanding of respective local identities. Thus, as an online communication channel, social network makes possible the long-term maintenance of a micro-community that eventually will become a recognizable identity cube in the mosaic of a better world, evoked by Shirky (2008), without any intentions or pretensions to broad-spectrum social movements.

The awareness of Facebook group moderators of the wealth of information they want to share through social networking, together with systematic cooperation with local official data sources (parish, school, archive, library, museum, memorial center), eventually leads to what Zittrain (2008) calls the *institutionalization* in the sense of branding their volunteer efforts. Integrating a local individual online initiative as a place for exchanging specific knowledge within the virtual space of Facebook, even seen as an “antisocial network” (Vaidhyanathan 2018), is a per se media message about the need to preserve smaller interest groups in cyberspace. Ambitious amateurs with technical capabilities for publicly distributing their creative expression are now unstoppably arriving into the mass media world through all available free communication channels. Thus, they create an occasion for expanding the “third way” of the independent non-profit sector, which contributes to the development of a democratic media system regardless of state and market boundaries (McChesney 2013), where reputation proves to be an achievement more valuable than ordinary capitalist profit (Vaynerchuk 2011). Recognizing the social network group as an information resource by national heritage institutions is a testament to its role in preserving and developing local micro-identities, moving from the global unification that Le Brun (2018) warns about to the glocal variety envisioned by Robertson (1995). Webvergence (Thornton and Keith 2009) of everything in modern media gives them a chance to become *grassroots* or *citizen scholars* (Sikarskie 2013; Stock 2016) like *grassroots journalists* (Gillmor 2004) outside institutionalized media platforms that still wander between their primary function of serving public interests and market competition (Nenadić and Ostling 2018). These local experiments can lead to the future “knowledge communities” (Jenkins, H. 2006) as nodes in a network of a unique model of sharing collective intelligence on the way to abolishing the divisions and suspicions of the other that characterize the current world order.

Ultimately, examining the *share of the digital diaspora* in the intertwining of life flows between the virtual and physical community demonstrates a clear connection of participating in the Facebook group with increasing desire, or even more frequent realization, of visits to the shared place of origin. It includes deepening awareness of that part of their identity for displaced members, their descendants, and foreign relatives. However, it does not facilitate the digital diaspora’s decision to return to their homeland permanently. Adding the finding about a negligible percent of feeling nostalgia as a motive for participation expressed in the survey, it is unrealistic to expect their potential contribution to changing the demographic picture of the region from which approximately as many people have moved out as they live in it. Despite this, the diaspora community remains resilient and committed to their heri-

tage. If, in previous studies dedicated to different digital diasporas, the distinct feeling described as the "longing is belonging effect" phenomenon pointed out by Ponzanesi (2020) and connected to time-space and age disruption, or simply missing everything reminding of "good old times back home," it appears as less dramatic in Facebook groups dedicated to micro-localities than nation-based ones. Native groups on social networks, in general, either alleviate the longing for a physical return to the homeland, shifting from co-present to mediated interaction (Androutsopoulos and Vold Alexander 2021), or the priorities of expatriates change by accepting their hybrid identities (Kalra, Kalhon and Hutynik 2005) – and both are equally correct in the examined Facebook communities. Thanks to the new ways of communication in the modern networked society that appear with the help of digital media the concept of *affective online capital* (Oiarzabal 2011) is developing. Thus, the digital diaspora, defined by Everett (2009) as "a race of cyberspace", becomes a less fateful and more acceptable category in the terms of self-identification (Giddens 1991) in the global digital cartography (Diminescu et al. 2021). That opens a broad field for study in all countries permanently faced with the issue of emigration in the light of new world migrations, and it brings new ways of identity cohesion, surpassing chronological and spatial limitations. It presents a challenge for further research focused specifically on the subject.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive insight into Facebook communities dedicated to a narrow geographic and cultural space as a response to the challenges of maintaining local identity in the face of globalization trends. In terms of structure, the findings reveal diversified groups comprising mainly middle-aged members with secondary education and diverse social backgrounds, led by skilled, younger, highly educated administrators. The most prominent participants are often ready to undertake extensive volunteer research on specific topics and enhance their online skills, thereby increasing the group's interactivity and average media literacy level. This proactive approach brings a new quality to the feeling of local identity and the preservation of its heritage, which they see as primary benefits of participating in the Facebook community. Most survey respondents link it to their social and personal identity, as a meeting point for positive collective self-identification and making new contacts while exchanging information, coordinating actions, and collaborating with relevant institutions. However, except for a few leading contributors, the rest are more or less passive users, communicating through the symbolic forms and icons that Facebook offers. One of the key findings is the minor role of digital dias-

pora in the virtual community, both in terms of numbers and impact. Shared identity as the first and a lack of nostalgia as the last motive for joining, can be explained by the ubiquitous connectivity of the networked world. The partial influence on making more visits to the old homeland, and the almost nonexistent power of the group to increase the chance of permanent return, is due to economic reasons and the faster assimilation that occurred during the era of mass migrations. On the other hand, the Facebook group favors the cohesion among local community members who are permanently settled in their place of origin. They rarely meet in person, except during events initiated on the social network, where communication functions equally between all participants regardless of their physical location. In the process, the free content they create finds its way into the more substantial heritage databases, complementing that of traditional mass media in the domain of specific micro-localities. The Internet proves to be an ideal platform for the activities of independent media amateurs. In their sphere of interest, they compete with similar multimedia content from traditional, better planned, and more financially stable mass media. Thus, social networks contribute to the democratization of media in the broadest sense.

The existence and proliferation of such independent amateur online media products call for a thorough scientific description, definition, and, in time, a suitable generic name for the growing phenomenon. As Facebook has become an integral part of everyday social life, where every interest group can find its niche, it creates new communication patterns and social habits that will only become more complex with the development of information technology. The emergence of various *digital homelands* can significantly impact the general understanding of Facebook’s role in reshaping local identity, communication patterns, and the effects of native virtual communities in the global networked society. It is necessary to highlight the methodological limitations inherent to the study, which relate to the use of an example within a specific socio-cultural environment. The research results are mainly descriptive and provide empirical references for new theoretical insights. Therefore, this work primarily serves as an indicator of a general phenomenon and presents an individual contribution to the broader development of online communication theories. Underlining the high potential of social networks for academic research, it is recommended to systematically monitor similar products by amateur journalists, writers, historians, ethnologists, anthropologists, or simply Internet collectors. If proven to be reliable sources of information, they can contribute to gathering and freely sharing valid data in any targeted virtual community domain without requiring initial investments by official institutions in uncertain research projects.

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Zajednice posvećene lokalnom identitetu na Facebooku.
Istraživački put kroz “Digitalni zavičaj – jakovlje.com”

Daria Marjanović

SAŽETAK

Sustavna pojava Facebook zajednica posvećenih lokalnim identitetima vidljiva je posljednjih desetljeća u Hrvatskoj i širom svijeta. Cilj je ovoga rada ispitati komunikaciju na društvenim mrežama temeljem specifičnog kolektivnog lokalnog mikroidentiteta unutar regije sa značajnom dijasporom, njezinu moć premošćenja generacijskih i prostorno-vremenskih jazova te različitih stupnjeva digitalne pismenosti, realan utjecaj na fizički život zajednice i stvaranje značajne internetske baze podataka vezanih za zajedničko mjesto podrijetla. Istraživanje se odnosi na Facebook zajednicu pod zajedničkim nazivom “Digitalni zavičaj – jakovlje.com” s gotovo tisuću članova raspoređenih u nekoliko interakcijskih kanala. Pritom je korišten mješoviti istraživački pristup s primjenom standardnih postupaka kvantitativnih i kvalitativnih komunikacijskih metoda, uključujući dubinske, polustrukturirane i strukturirane intervjue. Metodološki alati uključili su online anketu s 24,9% sudionika središnje Facebook grupe tijekom dva mjeseca uz istodobnu kvantitativnu i kvalitativnu analizu sadržaja korisničkih objava, komentara i reakcija, online i terenske intervjue tijekom prethodnog petogodišnjeg promatranja i nakon online ankete, te komparativnu analizu s trima sličnim Facebook zajednicama u Hrvatskoj. Uz predstavljanje značajki sadržaja i načina komunikacije promatranih grupa vezanih za tu društvenu mrežu, rezultati su pokazali da, različito od većih virtualnih zajednica posvećenih nacionalnom identitetu, one temeljene na lokalnom identitetu djeluju više kao proširenje općinskih aktivnosti za ljude koji žive blizu mjesta zajedničkog podrijetla nego kao faktor kohezije s njihovom digitalnom dijasporom. Istraživanje je također dovelo do zaključka da se Facebook zid može promatrati i

kao vrijedan amaterski medijski proizvod koji u pojedinim segmentima pruža relevantne informacije, što ga čini resursom za širu društvenu i znanstvenu upotrebu te dijelom veće baze baštinskih podataka u domeni očuvanja lokalnih mikroidentiteta.

Ključne riječi: društvene mreže, Facebook, zavičaj, mikroidentitet, online komunikacija, lokalna zajednica, virtualna zajednica, digitalna kultura