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Digital Boundaries and Imaginaries of Khasi Ethnic Identity in Social Media

Rajani K. Chhetri¹, Fr. (Dr) George Plathottam²

¹Department of Mass Media, St. Anthony's College, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

²Department of Mass Communication, Assam Don Bosco University, Assam, India

Corresponding Author: Rajani K Chhetri; Email: rajanikarki@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Identity is an integral aspect of human cognition and a composite of varied elements and subjectivities; it is fluidic and contextual. Identity discourses have dominated the socio-cultural and political milieu of Northeast India. A range of scholarship emanating from both within the Northeast region and outside has explored several identity dimensions. As the social media site Facebook allows for the formation of different kinds of interactional groups, this study explored a closed private Facebook group of twenty-five thousand members belonging exclusively to the Khasi ethnic community to understand the phenomenon of ascribing Khasi social identity among members in the online group. The study adopts Tajfel's Social Identity framework and engages in a *netnographic* study on an online group. The study's findings reveal a range of key symbolic manifestations in the co-constructions of Khasi identity in the online space. The study also discovers unique possibilities and affordances proliferated by social media in building collectivities, strengthening ethnic ties, and belongingness in the online space.

INTRODUCTION

Computer networks have allowed people to create a range of new social spaces to meet and interact without direct interactions. The expeditious advancement in mobile communication and the emergence of web 2.0 and social media networks have triggered a revolution in social connectedness (Chayko, 2014). The confluence of these three communicational technological advancements is also known as the *Triple Revolution* (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Such technological mediated social spaces have been interchangeably referred to as Cyberspace, Cyber society (Jones, 1995), Virtual Community (Rheingold, 1993, 2000), or Online Community (Baym, 2000). Though there lacks a consensus on the usage and implications of these terms and are often overlapping, increasing technological penetration into our daily lives and social media usage statistics across the globe are revealing interesting contours to understand human-social phenomenon. Several contemporary scholars such as Miller & Slater (2000) and Wellman & Haythornthwaite (2002), Hine (2017), Boelstroff (2015), Pink (2016) have acknowledged these

constructed online spaces. Such technologically constructed interaction-driven social spaces online are perceived as infinite reserves of human action and thereby can be an access point for understanding the organization of human action (Coudry, 2012; Horst and Miller, 2012).

There is a crucial shift in the social organization's processes due to the communication network and technology. Coleman's view of social group formation is a critical perspective to understand this emerging social phenomenon. Coleman (1990) highlighted the change in social groups from the primordial relations established by childbirth (family, clan, ethnic group, religious group) to a constructed social organization driven by a goal or a narrow range of purpose commonality of interests. This shift in the social processes of assimilation facilitated by communication technology is a potent area of engagement to understand the online social group's role in forming social identity, especially among the territorially defined social groups bounded by ethnic affiliation in Northeast India. Do such online spaces leverage or diminish the parochial distinctions of

race, caste, class, or gender? As communication technology facilitates formations of social groups in online space-what happens in such online spaces, who controls, how do people relate to one another, how bonding develops, and most importantly (emphasis of this study), what is the role of such assimilations in the construction of the social identity of the group?

The online social spaces can be an expansive canvas with multi-layered dimensions. This study limits exploring the role of one such online social group in the formation of social identity. The study adopts Tajfel's Social Identity Framework and, through a *netnographic* approach of a closed and private Facebook group, attempts to understand the processes of ascribing social identity among its members. It engages in exploring social-categorization processes and identifying the symbolic and cultural markers that are recurrently used to stir belongingness and solidarity among the online group members. This study attempts to map and contribute to the range of studies engaged in exploring communication technology's social use. The following two key questions guide this study:

1. How is a social group formed in the online space?
2. How do members ascribe a collective identity in the online social group?

Characteristics of social groups and conceptual framework

In a transformative world, the one aspect that remains consistent and unchanged is humans' desire to connect and assimilate. Like our primitive ancestors living in small social groups such as family, tribe, and clan, we spend a considerable time amidst various social groups built around home, family, workplace, or hobbies. This assimilation is crucial to human existence and is the foundation of culture and society at large. Social groups can be of varying types based on several factors such as primordial or goal-oriented, or geographic space driven, or in contemporary times through communication networks. A social group is defined as "interdependent individuals who influence each other through social interaction." (Forsyth, 1999, p. 5). "A group exists when people define themselves as members of it" (Brown, 2000, p. 3). A social group can be defined as "individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or perceive themselves to be members

of the same social category" (Turner, 1982, p. 15). These definitions stress interaction, interdependence, self-categorization, and perception as central themes in a deriving understanding of social groups.

Social groups are a significant source of people's identity, and Henri Tajfel's (1974, 1978) Social Identity Theory (SIT) is based on this core premise. Tajfel (1979) proposed that the groups people belonged to were an important source of pride and self-esteem. He proposed that stereotyping (i.e., putting people in groups and categories) is a normal cognitive process. In doing so, people tend to exaggerate two aspects: -Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) begins with the premise that individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity. The creation of group identities involves both the categorization of one's "in-group" with regard to an "out-group" and the tendency to view one's group with a positive bias vis-à-vis the out-group. The result is an identification with a collective, depersonalized identity based on group membership and imbued with positive aspects (e.g., Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

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1. The differences between groups and
2. The similarities of things in the same group

The creation of group identities involves categorizing one's "in-group" in contrast to an "out-group" and the tendency to view one's group with a positive bias vis-a-vis the out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that there are four sequential processes involved in evaluating others as "us" or "them" (i.e., in-group and out-group). It

takes place in a particular order- the first is social categorization, followed by social identification, social comparison, and psychological distinctiveness. This paper attempts to analyze these four interrelated concepts in the context of technologically mediated online space.

Techno-social connections: Facebook groups

Despite several controversies over data protection, breach of privacy, fake news, and surveillance, Facebook is the most widely used social media site in India. As per the latest reports published by Statista in July 2020, there are over 290 million Facebook users in India alone, making it the leading country in terms of Facebook audience size (Clement, 2020). The data further reveals that 98% of active Facebook users access the platform through mobile phones. As per Kantar, ICUBE™ 2019 report, “Rural India registered a 45% growth in the monthly active internet users in 2019”.

In 2019, Mark Zuckerberg unveiled a subtle redesign for Facebook that emphasizes *Groups* as a venue for a more intimate and meaningful social interaction online. *The group* is an emerging Facebook network structure that enables people to form social groups online over shared interests or hobbies. The groups on Facebook are bounded spaces with a range of privacy settings. It can be open or public groups, closed or private visible groups, and secret or hidden groups. Many Facebook groups are private hidden groups where people connect outside their friends and families’ prying eyes. The Facebook group’s structural framework is developed on the community model of having members, a social organization, language and patterns of interaction, and culture and shared identity.

Meghalaya: the land of the Khasi Matriliney

Meghalaya, which means “abode of clouds” in Sanskrit, is predominantly a tribal state located in the Northeastern region of India. It is a homeland to the three major ethnic communities: the Khasi, the Jaintia, and the Garo. This study focuses on one of the dominant tribes of Meghalaya, i.e., the Khasi. According to the Indian Census of 2011, Meghalaya has over twenty-nine lakhs, and Khasi constitutes 49.54% of this proportion. The Khasi tribe is also popular for its unique tradition of matriliney, where the lineage and family descent pass through the mother’s side unlike the rest of India. Khasi as a

social group has been deeply territorialized, and since time immemorial, has thrived on its oral tradition. Whatever little is known of the history of the tribe is through the oral tradition in the form of folktales, legends, and songs passing down from the tribe elders. The Khasis had no written script until the arrival of Welsh Presbyterian Missionary Thomas Jones in 1841 (Blah, 2020). He introduced the Khasi to Roman script and transcribed the Khasi language into the Roman Script (May, 2012). The Khasi and Jaintia hills that makeup half of present-day Meghalaya were the first territories to be brought under British Colonial control. An extensive understanding of the Khasis and their way of life have emanated from the colonial travelers and administrators. Besides the accounts of these colonial ethnographers, many Khasis to this day believe that they belong to the *Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum*, and that is why they also popularly call themselves “*Ki Khun U Hynniewtrep*” (“Children of the Seven Huts”). As social media technology is making deeper inroads into the Khasi hills, this study attempts to gain an insight into the voices of the local indigenous actors and their efforts in constructing a collaborative online space. The study engages in understanding social categorization processes in the online space and the role of several interactions on the group wall in creating belongingness and unified collective identity as a social group. Through a *netnography* approach rooted in Social Identity Framework (Tajfel, 1978) and thematic analysis of the observational data of the interactions in an online group wall, the study explores the dominant narratives that emerge from within the group and probes into the implications of such narratives in constructing and solidifying the collective Khasi identity. The study of the social group and their collective identity is a broad canvass with multiple dimensions. However, this study is limited, as it takes into account only one of the online groups and conducts an in-depth inquiry to assess the group and its role in social identity formation among its members.

METHODS

This study adopts a *netnographic* method to find answers to the questions raised above. Netnography is a “qualitative, interpretive research methodology that adapts the traditional, in-person

ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 135). This approach is in sync with the conceptual underpinning that views the internet as an emerging space of cultural and personal expressions (Hine, 2000).

This study integrates the two critical aspects of *netnographic* inquiry, i.e., participant observation and online interviews, to collect relevant data. In online qualitative methods such as participant observation, Salmons (2017) identifies three typologies viz. extant, elicited, and enacted to collect data based on the degree of direct interaction the researcher has with the data and with participants. As enumerated by Salmons, the researcher adopted the extant typology, where the researcher lingered unobtrusively on the online group wall watching minute-by-minute streams of conversations among the group members. Thus, the extant data comprised online interactions among the members on the group wall, where they would express their views and opinions on a range of matters, while the other members would react through comments and emoticons. This study comprises extant data collected for six months. During this period, the researcher closely monitored the online group’s activities and prepared a detailed database of the top five posts each day based on the highest member engagement in terms of comments. The data also comprises online interviews with the group admins. The data thus collected were sorted and coded thematically and analyzed guided by Tajfel’s Social Identity framework.

Field site

This study is based on a private and closed Facebook group operating from Shillong (capital of Meghalaya) named “*Ka Thymmei U Hynniewtrep*” (henceforth KTUH). According to available records on Facebook’s group profile page, the group was created in June 2017. “*Ka Thymmei U Hynniewtrep*,” when translated, means “*The Foundation of Seven huts.*” The group has over twenty-five thousand members and is growing. The membership to the group is restricted exclusively to people belonging to the Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo ethnicity irrespective of their age or region, i.e., their place of stay. One needs to fulfill this primary and important ethnic criterion to be a member of

KTUH. The group’s prime objective is to decipher news, share other important information, and stir debates and discussions on relevant topics affecting the Khasi and Jaintia people residing in different parts of Meghalaya. It is one of the biggest Facebook groups operating from Shillong.

Out of the approximately 25 thousand members in the group, there are about seventeen thousand members, i.e., 85.13% who are between 18-34 years of age category. The group insight data also reveals that 68.85% of the group members are male, while 31.14% are female. 82% of the members are from Shillong, while the group also has about 1 % of members from the neighboring country of Bangladesh. Each day, the group adds approximately 65-70 members and uploads about 100-120 posts.

KTUH has two sets of members- the admin and the general members. At the time of this study, the group had eight admin members consisting of six male and two female admin members. The prime goal of the admins is to coordinate, draft rules, and moderate the group. They also perform a significant role in gatekeeping the content in the group. Any member can share content in the group adhering to the group rules. However, all such shared content is published and visible to other members on the group wall only after the admin’s approval. The eight admins strictly monitor the group’s content on a rotational basis dividing the 24 hours into different work shifts. There are no monetary benefits attached to this role, and it is voluntary. Also, there are no rules on the selections of the admins, nor are there any elections. The creator of the group arbitrarily selects the admins.

The majority of updates in the group are in Khasi language. Admins actively engage in the group and share news links from different web portals of local dailies, govt directives, and notifications, and any other information that they think is relevant for its members. The group also largely depends upon its members to bring quality content to the group wall.

Ethical considerations

Online and particularly social media studies challenge the traditional notion of informed consent. Gelinas, Pierce, Winkler, Cohen, Lynch, & Bierer (2017) identified two most salient ethical considerations guiding the social media researcher (i) respect for the privacy and other interests of

social media users and (ii) investigator transparency. Adding to this, Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder (2017) also emphasize being sensitive to the specific research context entailing people's values or expectations in different settings. While it became practically impossible to receive consent individually from all the group members, the researcher approached the group admins who created the online group and sought their written permission to conduct the study. Besides, elaborate strategies were adopted to anonymize the data, and all identifying information was encoded into a unique identification number to protect the subject and group privacy and confidentiality. All the individual names and group names mentioned in the study have been changed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Network affordances and Digital boundaries of Khasi ethnicity KTUH is a manifestation of the Facebook design structure with strict membership norms and criteria. The membership to KTUH is restricted to Facebook users belonging to either Khasi, Jaintia, or Garo ethnic communities residing anywhere in the world. One has to send a joining request to the group admin by filling in an online form consisting of three questions posted in Khasi language to gain entry and access to the online group as a member. The three vital entry questions to gain membership to the group as shared on the group profile page are below:

1. What is your aim or goal towards our motherland and our tribe (referring to Khasi community)?
2. What steps or is the way forward for our tribe (Khasi) to excel in our manners and behaviors, prosperity, and our rights as an indigenous community?
3. We are almost approaching the 50th year of Statehood (Meghalaya). Have we served our state well? Are our present and past legislators qualified enough? Give your three strong reasons.

These questions posed in Khasi language draw distinctive language boundaries ensuring that anyone who joins the group is well versed in the Khasi language. The admins justify the entry-level questions as an important parameter to test one's language proficiency and most importantly to assess one's commitment and belonging towards the Khasi

community. One of the admin's shares "*one can easily learn a language, and there are many non-tribal speaking the Khasi language, but not all have feelings of belongingness or commitment towards the community*" (Personal interview with Shan on 19 May 2019).

The admins go through the member responses and accordingly approve the membership to KTUH. On any given day, KTUH receives about 65- 70 new member requests. The admins closely monitor and check the online members' background as depicted in their Facebook profile and their timeline of activities before granting them membership into the online group. Once approved membership, the member needs to adhere to the group norms and rules as highlighted on the group profile page. The group norms are primarily on public decency, the fair use of language, and respect for one another. Besides these, the other cardinal rule in the group, as Chen (one of the admin) highlights, are "*not to create any trouble or animosity by using words against the Khasi community*" (Chen, online interview, June 26, 2019).

The rigid boundaries drawn on ethnic lines define KTUH and it emerges as an exclusive and homogenous social category in the online space with members exclusively belonging to the Khasi ethnic community. The boundaries of KTUH are stringently maintained through the strict membership procedures and active vigilance and awareness of the co- members. As per one of the admins, boundaries in the online group are much easier to guard and maintain than the logistics, infrastructure, and workforce in the geographical spaces.

The ethnic exclusivity is further strengthened through language parameters as most of the interactions in the group wall occur in Khasi, followed by English and Jaintia (a subtribe of Khasi) language. Such digital boundaries based on ethnic parameters determine the 'ins' and the 'outs' of the online group. The deep trenches of boundary laid on ethnic lines are fiercely guarded against the non-tribal who are considered as "others or outsiders". The list of others also included the researcher. Though born and brought up in Meghalaya and married to a Khasi man, the researcher belongs to a non-tribal (non-Khasi) community. The group's admins had to take the critical decision of allowing access to a non-tribal

researcher to undertake the present study, which was against the group norms of membership. After much deliberation, the admins approved the researcher's fixed time entry into the online group but were also highly skeptical about the other member's reaction towards the inclusion of a member of an out-group or non-tribal. As a result, the admins enacted a set of membership conditions for the researcher's entry into the group. The researcher's background of belonging to a non-tribal (non-Khasi) community was a significant challenge and a drawback for active participation in the online group, however, the researcher's marriage to a Khasi man somewhere ruptured this ethnic wall to an extent allowing partial access to the online space, as one of the admin stated, "*since you are married to a Khasi man so now you are like one of us*", while another admin cautioned the researcher stating "*you know how people are on Facebook, so it's better you remain in the group but don't post anything or comment, in case you want to post anything, you can let us know, and we will post it on your behalf...*" (excerpts from a personal interview with Shan on 19 May 2019). Such ethnic differentiation and categorization are noticed to manifest into a whole new dimension, expression, and enactment in the social media space. The psycho-social behavior that dichotomizes "us" and "them" quickly draws distinctions and is conveniently forged and reinforced through the various security and privacy controls of the social media network structure.

Relationship ties, belongingness, and cohesion in the online group

It was fascinating at the same time intriguing for the researcher to learn that the eight admins who have been moderating the group for over a year have never met each other in person, nor do they know each other personally. The eight admins lived in the rural fringes of the different district headquarters of Meghalaya. Their ties are built entirely on Facebook based on their membership and participation in the group wall. They have never spoken over the phone, nor have they ever shared personal details beyond what is evident in their personal Facebook accounts. The admins have an exclusive group chat in Facebook messenger, where all the deliberations and operational decisions related to KTUH are taken. Beyond this contact point, the admins have never resorted to any other

means of communication nor attempted to reach out face to face.

As a researcher traditionally confined to relationships and social bonds in the offline or face-to-face settings, it was slightly challenging to grasp the social relationship that was built exclusively on Facebook. However, as the researcher delved deeper into the group's activities, she felt a sense of solidarity, togetherness, and bonding over the group wall's many interactions. The cohesive bond of togetherness and belongingness among the online group members was difficult to measure. However, there were some key phrases and terminologies that the group members invariably used to reach out and relate to one another in the online group and thereby construct a distinct collective identity of us against the other. A close analysis of these key phrases and terms helped the researcher map the relationship ties, belongingness, and cohesion in the online group.

Imagaries of *Ri* and *Jaidbynriew*

One of the most recurring terms in the group wall was "*Jaidbynriew*." *Jaidbynriew* is a Khasi word when translated, means "race." It is a collective term or a uniform entity used to denote Khasi divided across the region and religion. *Jaidbynriew* is used as an umbrella term encompassing the Khasi superstructure that comprises of several clans (*Kur*) at the base, followed by the *Shnongs* (Village level), *Riad* (Commune), and the *Hima* (State) at the top. *Jaidbynriew*, as a term, comprehensively glues the ruptures within the Khasi social structure arising due to religious conversion, migration, and modern living. The term is used symbolically in the online group to bond the Khasi into a uniform stream tracing its root to the children of the seven huts (*Hynniewtrep*, *Hynniewskum*). The online group members use the term in their interactions in the group wall to relate to one another, and the discourse always revolves around "we" the *Jaidbynriew*.

Jaidbynriew was also used conjunctively with the word "*Ri*" or "*Ri Khasi*" in the interactions in the group wall. When translated, the word *Ri* means land (Nongkynrih, 2001), and *Ri Khasi* means the Khasi land or the land inhabited by the Khasis. However, it will be limited to derive any inferences based on the literal meaning of these terms. *Ri Khasi* is not so much the geographical space

demarcated through history and the politics of the times (Ghosh, 2018). The word *Ri* or *Ri Khasi* once denoted a tangible demarcated geographical boundary in the past. Before the arrival of the Britishers, the Khasi hills were divided into different Kingdoms (*Himas*), and the conglomeration of different kingdoms (*Himas*) formed the *Ri* or *Ri Khasi*, thereby signifying a Nation where Khasis lived. The concept of Nation is amorphous and varied. However, Smith (1991, p. 14) defines a Nation as a “named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths, and historical memories.” At the same time, Tamir (1995) defines it as a “community whose members share feelings of fraternity, substantial distinctiveness, and exclusivity, as well as beliefs in a common ancestry and continuous genealogy” (p. 425). For Barrington (1997, p. 713), “nations are groups of people linked by unifying traits and the desire to control a territory thought of as the group’s national homeland.” These ideas of Nation are crucial to gain contextual clarity and the implications of the term *Ri* and *Ri Khasi* and its usage in the group wall. The word *Ri* and *Ri Khasi* were convenient category labels in the past. However, Post-Independence, especially after the signing of the Instrument of Accession in 1948, *Ri Khasi* (the land of the Khasi) was metamorphosed from literal (territorial) to symbolic significance. The recurrence of the terms *Ri* or *Ri Khasi* in the online group discourses is a social construct and used symbolically. In KTUH, these terms unite the members into a single fold and invoke a sense of unity and belongingness based on a “shared historic territory, common myths and historical memories” (Smith, 1991, p.14). The term further garners “substantial distinctiveness and the feeling of exclusivity and beliefs in a common ancestry and continuous genealogy” (Tamir, 1995, p. 425). In the online group discourses, the term also signifies a “homeland, that members in the group believe it is theirs” (Barrington, 1997, p. 713).

These terms and phrases dominate the group’s interactions and can be perceived as glue agents solidifying ties and building the boundary enclosures, which brings and confines members together in the online group and creates a simultaneous distinction and differentiation from the other. The technical affordances such as access and ease of expression facilitated through KTUH

strengthen the ties of kinship and ancestral bonds among the members in the online group while creating a distinct differentiation from the other.

Fear of the other

The interactions in the online group are laden with the rigid dichotomy between them and us. The “Other” is a robust, imagined entity and dominates the discourses in the group wall. The constant repertoire of different social acts and practices in the online group wall leads towards a pattern of deeply embedded values, beliefs, and attitudes. According to Cioldi and Clémence (2002), individuals’ actions, behaviors, and thinking are anchored in the normative rules grounded in their groups’ ideas, values, or beliefs.

we should not have a difference of opinion regarding the evacuation of the non-tribal since we have been giving them the place. When a snake is filled, it often bites the owners. So, we should be united as a community and be healthy and fight against the tactics of non-tribal. Post no. 679, KTUH
The Khasi in Shillong city within 20 years will lose identity because there are too many Khasis looking after non-tribal...who want to live comfortably without working hard and be filthy rich but ultimately turn into slaves. Response to post.no. 935 KTUH

Khasi women are trading license in the eyes of the non-tribal. Post no.473, KTUH

With our Khasi women, we cannot do anything much; as much as we are trying for the good of the tribe, they are trying to sell it...I saw now on WhatsApp a Khasi woman got married to a Muslim...what an overwhelming delight that I cannot mention (laughs) Post no. 935 KTUH

Two weeks back I went to buy plum from one lady in Mothphran towards the entry of the Iewduh after giving the money to that lady surprisingly she gave the money to non-tribal - a man who shouts paisa bachat paisa bachat...after that I walked away and kept thinking why did she do that, why did she give the money to non-tribal? I want to know, whether it is true or not, what the NGOs have always been talking about that they protect the

non-tribal by claiming ownership of the shops, so I went back and asked for another 250gms of plum as it may not be sufficient. In the same manner, this lady gave back the money to that non-tribal and from that very day I have decided to never to buy again from that lady, I do not know if he is her husband or what...or who is he? Post no. 479, KTUH

Like the famous writer U So So Tham said, Khasis would be servants/ slaves to outsiders. Examples are the names of the areas like Police Bazar Laimu Cherrapunjee. People have tended to use Hindi and other names instead of using Khasi names of the areas. Mostly, Assam people love to give the names of their places in Assamese but not our people. Post. No.621, KTUH

The above excerpts are a glimpse of some of the distinctive differentiating posts in the online group. These and several other related posts and comments emerge a common agreed-upon understanding that “outsiders primarily conceived as non-tribal are a threat and the Khasi need to protect themselves and be united to fight the outsiders.” The dominant narrative in the group constructs the non-tribal as “problematic other.” There is an inherent building up of fear, insecurity, and uncertainty from the outsider (here non-tribal). The online group’s discourse also positions Khasi men in particular and the pressure groups in general as the custodians and protector of the Khasi tribe, whereas the Khasi women through whom the lineage and kinship pass a weak node weakening the ethnic boundaries. The common consensus in the online group characterizes the Khasi community as lacking vision, lazy, self-centered, greedy, and opportunistic. Thematic analysis of the several posts in the group wall also leads to recurring values and beliefs, suggesting that the Khasi tribe is in grave danger and progresses towards becoming the tales of the past. Several posts projected Khasi as being frequently misled and, in several instances, also cheated by the outsiders, especially in the trades and business avenues. Such posts depicted Khasi as naïve and straightforward while the outsiders as cunning, manipulative, and smart. One of the most popular notions that emerge in online interaction is,

“we are a small community, and so we are weak” against the vast majority of outsiders. Several interactions in the group wall attribute Khasi as vulnerable to the outsiders’ manipulative practices, and hence victims. There is a joint appeal in the online group to the pressure groups (voluntary organisations) to reignite belongingness and awaken the community. Several discourses in the online group invoke the eminent Khasi poet *U Sosotham* and a foreword from his poem “*Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniewtrep*,” where he expresses his fear of losing one’s identity and turning into mechanized slaves of the others. The discursive wall of KTUH emerges as an epicenter of ethnocentric discourses as it effectively raises ethnic consciousness, constantly stirring the ethnic identity narratives among its members.

CONCLUSION

The majority of interactions in the online group wall extrapolates on the politics of ethnic identity. The online group becomes an echo chamber, harboring fear and insecurity while reverberating hate and anger towards the non-tribal/ outsiders. The voices that differ are quickly drowned in the cacophony of opinions subscribing to violence as an ultimate solution. What is common and agreed-upon understanding and in unison with most online group members is “we need to be united and protect ourselves and fight the outsiders.” The stream of ethnic consciousness is meticulously constructed beneath the humor-coated memes, often marred in-jokes, laughter, photos, videos, the trivialities and mundaneness of everyday life. These identity constructions are not an accidental recurrence and are subtly intertwined around the contention of power, control, dominance, and ownership.

This study is limited to KTUH, which is a small fraction of the social media space. The online space is littered with several groups’ variations and can be deep and rich mines to understand various aspects of identity politics, conflict, and hate as a result of one’s ethnic affiliations. At a time when rapid expansion of technology has shrunken the world, propelling a higher movement and migrations of people across the globe, where information technology is presumably bridging the global-local distinctions, KTUH, on the contrary, emerges as a collaborative canvas, relatively

homogenized, bounded space in the interconnected “network society” (Dijk, 2006). The discursive wall of KTUH links the private sphere of one’s thought and imagination to the public sphere of the community wall. Thus, it facilitates the negotiation of the private self and the social self. KTUH emerges as an online community whose roots are offline, but aspirations, collectiveness, and bonding are shaped and nurtured in the online space.

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