Networking in Black: Africana Culture in the Web 2.0 Age

Bessie Rice-Soley
Department of Africana Studies
Department of Communication Studies

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Ikaweba Bunting
Department of Africana Studies

Abstract
This study explores the ways in which Africana culture is articulated and reinforced on the Afrocentric social media site (SMS), Palavahut.com, as well as on popular sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. It examines the characteristics and the extent to which users of such social networks affect culture when using this medium and how the present culture of social interaction in cyberspace influences cultural performance and ritual. I discuss how participation on such sites addresses and creates components of a Black Agenda for the Africana World. A mixed method approach is employed that includes content analysis, thematic analysis, and participant observation to analyze culture-specific activity within the sites’ videos and blogs. Conventional wisdom is expressed by some scholars that globalization engenders cultural homogeneity and that different cultural groups worldwide embrace this uniformity. This loss of cultural distinction, however, is contrasted with indications that suggest a deep commitment to the retention of traditional culture and heritage. The larger implications of the study are that networks formed through SMS function as environments in which Africana cultures can flourish. In turn, these cyber communities serve as safe havens for communities historically marginalized by society.
Introduction
The phenomenon of globalization has engendered socio-economic and cultural dynamics that impact nations and peoples in a myriad of ways, resulting in both positive and negative consequences. Conventional wisdom regarding globalization argues that the imposed cultural homogeneity inherent in the process is embraced, instead of resisted by various cultural groups and nationalities. However, observations in this work indicate that cultural groups adapt the technology and improvise methods of expression to enhance their own cultural experience rather than fully acquiescing to the impositions of the dominant cultural paradigm. Increased social interaction within and among communities facilitated by the widespread and rapid diffusion of technology significantly impacts the character of communication, political power, and knowledge construction. It presents new challenges and ideas as to the elements and boundaries of cultural production and reproduction.

Culture is often associated, and at times synonymous, with the ideas of the exotic other (Snibbe, 2003). Alternatively culture is associated with the values and norms of the dominant group and assimilation of the dominant culture is synonymous with being civilized. For the purposes of this study, culture includes the learned beliefs, practices, values, norms, and customs transmitted generationally by language and ritual (Parson, 1949). There is a power coefficient in regards to the diffusion and control of cultural product such that communities defined as minorities, specifically Africans and their descendants, do not necessarily control the representation and distribution of their cultural product. Africana culture reflects a duality, one of resistance to domination and an emancipatory impetus of cultural self-determination. A feature of the modern epoch, including globalization, is the cultural hegemony of Europe. The hegemonic imposition of the Western cultural world order delegitimized, marginalized, repressed, often times violently, indigenous cultural expression and practices and in some instances succeeded to eliminate all traces of the oppressed groups’ cultural identity. Colonialism, neocolonialism, and globalization might appear to have successfully supplanted indigenous cultures with Western cultural values, norms, and social structures. Conversely, the elements of resistance and emancipatory self-determination have managed to
preserve the resilience of indigenous culture. In the face of the assault upon their socio-cultural world, Africana peoples have historically created intricate systems, or social networks, in order to preserve and maintain their values and social wellbeing. The cultural continuities manifested in the African Diaspora and the African Continent are foundational to the social networks formed by Africana peoples. The very existence of distinct networks among Africana peoples is a direct result of a national consciousness, which invariably strengthens networks.

**Literature Review**

Scholar, Yeboah Kwame’s assessment of the impact of globalization on African culture illustrates the detriments globalization imposes on indigenous populations and expresses the importance of cultural retention, production, and reproduction. What is presented as free trade activities is the literal subjugation of African peoples and the ravaging and exploitation of the Continent’s resources. “Globalization eclipses or at least subordinates all previous ways of answering need and dealing with the vicissitudes of human life. Western adventures (make) frantic efforts to marginalize the cultural heritage of various peoples around the world, especially Africa” (p. 2). The idea of a Western, mono-cultural society is advanced, neatly packaged in the form of increased technological distribution and access and illusory promises to alleviate the economic, political, and social ills engendered through the Eurocentric imperialist paradigm.

Kwame’s skepticism regarding the idea of an increasingly culturally-homogenized world is validated by the notion that “the fact that we are all human does not mean that we are the same. Africa’s cultures are abound with various customs and traditions that are rich, colourful, and exciting” (p. 3). As a result, such cultural centers need to be preserved rather than eclipsed by Western rituals. The sheer fact that intra-continental cultural heterogeneity thrives is testament to the fact that individuals of African origin wish to retain their own cultural conventions and resist hastily assimilating into Western culture. The creation of a homogenous world culture is manufactured by the negation of the national reality of marginalized peoples as it can only be achieved
through the repression of cultural heterogeneity. Kwame asserts that in order to avoid the imminent destruction of diverse national identities, no one can have a monopoly on culture. That is, national cultures need to be allowed to flourish independently of Western “influence” (Kwame, n.d., p. 4).

Despite attempts to subjugate or destroy African socio-cultural expression, African cultural values and practices persisted. Anna Everett’s (2002) work is illustrative of this phenomenon. Everett expresses how African people overcame dehumanization and cultural repression through the creation of self-sustaining communities and transnational communication systems and networks of song and dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentation. Expressing the instinctive need to identify with similar others, Africana peoples “forged out of necessity a community of intercultural kinship structures and new languages in which to express them” (p. 129). Displaced Africans maintained their cultural heterogeneity through collective efforts that preserved the distinctive characteristics of their cultural diversity. While the prevalent assumption is that Africans openly embrace Eurocentric ideologies and wish to assimilate Western cultural values and norms, Africana people, on the contrary, resist assimilation through the formation of niche communities in which they assert their own cultural identity and cultural rituals that counter European influences.

As Mitra (1997) notes, the early use of information and communication technologies by Africana peoples demonstrated the capacity of community building to reach well beyond the strict, finite boundaries of smaller networks such as neighborhoods, towns, cities, or nations, such that the concept of community has global implications. Individuals throughout the African world carried with them this practice of cultural assertion and resistance into the cyber sphere. Africana people sought online communities in which they shared a common background with other members. The idea of community took on a larger meaning as the African Diaspora expanded the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web to serve communicative and community building processes beyond local, state, and national boundaries (Mitra, 1997). Not only were individuals taking advantage of their physical social networks, but they
carried with them their African-centered cultural articulations into their cyber communities (Tait & Barber, 2001).

This gravitation towards similar others in cyberspace shapes and reinforces the identity of community. Consequently, interaction in cyberspace seems to fortify one’s identity through this cultural exposure. Such connections are significant because they reduce socio-psychological distance among individuals throughout the Africana World. The dissolution of this psychological distance among individuals results in group sustainability and enables the collective addressing of social, economic, and political issues on a grander scale (Tait & Barber, 2001).

The creation and addressing of a Black Agenda is necessary to change the condition of the Africana world. While there is no standard definition for the term “Black Agenda”, a Black Agenda would encompass the prioritization of collective cultural affirmation as well as the prioritization of components that are appropriate instruments for resolving the social, economic, political, and cultural distress generated by the Eurocentric world order. The addressing of an agenda is initiated by the decolonization of one’s mind and comfort in calling oneself African. Furthermore, a sense of unity is achieved from the inside out, starting with the reclamation of one’s mind, followed by collectivity achieved at the meso level, and finally leading to the banding together of the larger community (Hare & Hare, 2002).

**Theoretical Framework**

The Afrocentric Paradigm is the dominant theoretical lens through which I conducted this study. This paradigm relocates the African person from the state of being an object to one of a self-empowered subject. Within this framework, Africans become the central agents of their socio-cultural determinations. This paradigm posits Eurocentrism as a socio-cultural, political construct that elevates and normalizes the European experience, while it simultaneously denigrates and abnormalizes the other. The Afrocentric paradigm, however, does not propose a simple rearrangement of the hierarchical order. Rather, it proposes the elimination of hierarchy in preference of cultural pluralism.
Within the Afrocentric paradigm the problem of location is of critical importance. The historically profound dislocation of African people necessitates the examination of all data from the standpoint of Africans as subjects and human agents. This dislocation has resulted in a psycho-social disorder whereby the objectified African internalizes the Eurocentric norm, creating a paradox of object-subject. The Afrocentric paradigm becomes essential in resolving this paradox (Asante, n.d.).

In conjunction with the Afrocentric theoretical paradigm, I have incorporated the use of the theoretical construct, Symbolic Interactionism. This has allowed me to study and interpret the symbols used to communicate identity and culture within the social media sites.

The Study
The social media sites (SMS) Palavahut, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were chosen in order to assess Afrocentric cultural activity on a variety of online social networks. These websites were chosen because of their substantial, yet diverse, range of communal spaces for addressing the question of cultural production, reproduction, and identity. Palavahut’s aim to deliver culture-specific information, news, and entertainment attracts users from a variety of demographics throughout the African World, all with similar motives pertaining to establishing and maintaining unity among Africana peoples. Likewise, the Africana community participating on the more popular social media sites, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, exhibit similar characteristics regarding the preservation of cultural heritage. A distinguishing characteristic between Palavahut and the more popular SMSs, however, is the target demographic. Palavahut is uniquely aimed to serve Africana peoples and their social and cultural interests; whereas, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have a more wide-ranging target audience. African users on such sites have, therefore, formed smaller, niche communities to serve their more refined interests. The sites accessed in this study, with the exception of YouTube, do not release statistical demographic data for their users. However, observations related to the existence of African-centered content and themes among the communities under study suggest that such sites are highly trafficked by African peoples and others with African-centered interests. Also the
difficulty of maintaining complete anonymity on profile-driven SMSs allows one to visually assess and gather user demographic information rather than needing to rely on statistical data alone (Byrne, 2008). Not only do the visual provisions, such as profile pictures and videos, aid in the gathering of demographic data, but other profile components, such as interests, hobbies, and affiliations, allow one to gain insight into the characteristics of the larger community.

Methodology
In order to explore cultural production and reproduction in social media sites, I used an interpretive approach to analyze symbols and cultural meaning. In order to produce data I raised several research questions:

1. What motivates Africana people to connect through SMSs?
2. How is African-centered culture produced and reproduced on the given social media sites?
3. In what ways do Africana participants use SMSs that are unique to their population within those sites?
4. How is a Black Agenda created and sustained through these social networks?

It was necessary to generate data that represented the conventions of the distinct sites. For example, when conducting content and thematic analysis on cyber-communication-related activities, the dialogue was represented in distinct ways. On Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, discussions emerged in the form of “tweets”, profile “activity”, video responses and comments. Discussions on Palavahut, however, utilized conventional cyberspace formats of boards and forums. Within the scope of this work, assessment of culture-specific activity was restricted to a rather simple analysis of content and themes. The data that is presented for analysis is a sample of the entire pool of data gathered and is generally representative of the phenomenon under investigation.

Findings
This is not an exhaustive account of the nature of African-centered cultural production and reproduction on SMSs. These findings provide a
limited degree of insight into culture-specific behavior and activities among African peoples on the selected web-based social networks.

The diversity of the different SMSs generates a variety of cultural articulations. For example on Twitter, tweets emerged that sought to raise an African national consciousness that would facilitate individuals of African origin from embracing cultural values reflective of their African historical origins. The former is true of the other social media sites as well. Participants operated under a similar agenda, but merely adapted the provisions of the websites such as video sharing and blogging to advance a Black, Afrocentric agenda. In other words, African-centered cultural production and reproduction on SMSs encompassed the adaptation of the tools to suit and reinforce a culturally-specific agenda. This was often manifested in the form of physical cultural markers such as dress and the manner in which one’s hair is worn, most often seen in Palavahut’s website design motif and within YouTube’s “Natural Hair Community”, a network that has arisen from a contemporary social movement to return to one’s roots.

I found that although Africana individuals participated on SMSs for similar, leisure entertainment purposes as other communities of persons, participation for the Africana community, as well as some SMSs, displayed culture-specific symbols indicative of an Africana agenda. This agenda predominantly revolves around uniting the Africana world through the development of a new national consciousness, starting with the creation of spaces within the cyber sphere in which the performance of African culture is embraced rather than denigrated and labeled as taboo. Instead, Africana people adapt the websites to meet their socio-cultural and political needs. While Palavahut’s overall mission supports this finding, YouTube guru, Tonya TKO’s 4-part video series, “3-Ways to Unleash Your Inner Afrocentric” illustrates how the participation on SMSs deviates from a pure leisure entertainment function. Through a series of symbolic expressions in the form of style, beauty, cosmetics, and artifacts, Tonya TKO’s videos literally attempt to instruct viewers on how to be “Afrocentric.” The final video in the series encouraged viewers to upload their best articulations of TKO’s Afrocentric style. The participant that achieved the best expression of her style received authentic African garments as a prize. TKO’s videos have received (to
date) over 90,000 views and 507 comments. Though the responses to the videos vary, many viewers express appreciation for this type of video. YouTuber ASegrest08 openly thanks TKO for posting the videos and expresses that she had been “looking for ways to unleash [her] inner beauty.” YouTubers QueenDamn1 and VayLoc310 also express their appreciation while emphasizing a prideful return to embracing one’s roots.

User subscription to themes of consciousness and unity provide insight into what influences these connections. In analyzing my observations, I deduce that a primary reason African peoples gravitate towards establishing connections through SMSs revolves around the regulation of spaces online. In the online sphere, content and spaces are virtually unrestricted. With that, Africana peoples express a degree of confidence and freedom in their ability to be their cultural selves and to advance an African-centered agenda. Also, a notable observation in terms of what motivates this desire to connect in this mode is that African peoples online tend to appreciate the dissolution of the physical spatial boundaries in the cyber sphere. The visibility and clarity of other users’ agendas not only makes communication throughout the Africana world easier and more efficient, but it also aids in the dissolution of psychological boundaries and therefore creates a stronger sense of unity among the Africana population online and vice versa.

The connections established through SMSs are reinforced by network interconnectivity. This provision of SMSs in the Web 2.0 age is imperative to the expansion and sustenance of African-based populations online. This can be seen through Palavahut’s activities. This particular SMS targets a distinct cultural community. Therefore, its creators have subscribed to the more popular SMSs in order to gain broader exposure. This subscription to the other social networks inherently expands and reinforces Palavahut’s individual network, which in turn promotes network visibility. For example, Palavahut, as a single network, has Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter accounts that promote the network as a separate entity. This is also true of other social networks, with the exception that the individual promotes his/her own causes within the larger network.
I have found that a Black Agenda is not created, but rather participants come with various agendas constructed prior to entering their online environments. They in turn use the tools available within these spaces to advance and sustain these agendas. Participants either used blogging techniques, tweets, video sharing, or a combination of any of these for the purposes of advancing their Afrocentric agendas.

**Discussion**

Participants embraced the technological components of globalization such as increased Internet penetration and the more widespread diffusion of technological gadgets that promote more efficient connectivity among communities. While I found that Africana individuals embrace the technological advancements of globalization, I also discovered that they use these technologies as a means to resist the Eurocentric, hegemonic cultural imposition inherent in the process of globalization in order to claim space for their own cultural and social affirmation.

Byrne’s (2008) study of racial identity in computer-mediated public spheres underscores the idea of using technology and SMSs as a means to maintain community, culture, and ethnic identity. Upon investigating youth participation on three, racially-dedicated SMSs, Asian Avenue, MiGente, and BlackPlanet, Byrne concluded that participating on racially-dedicated SMSs is an invaluable means of strengthening cultural identities through “a more globalized, yet unfixed conversation about their community histories” (p. 31). Here, technological globalization is a critical component to community unification and strengthening among Diasporic communities in general. Furthermore, Byrne’s findings substantiate the claim that communities desire their freedom of cultural expression and resist the idea of a monocultural world society in which Eurocentric cultures take precedence.

Cabral (1970) places emphasis on culture as a critical element to the resistance of foreign domination. In online SMSs, Afrocentric, cultural activity is representative of this resistance. Similarly, the culturally homogenizing effects of globalization are representative of foreign domination. The potential, repressive eclipse of cultural expression necessitates the affirmation of an African cultural personality. This process of cultural affirmation, however, does not serve to denigrate Eurocentric cultural expression, but rather emphasizes cultures of
African origin as equally viable and preferred among Africana communities. Freedom of cultural expression facilitates Africana individuals’ understanding of who they are in the context of community. In the Web 2.0 Age, SMSs serve as vehicles in which cultures and histories are transmitted among geographically distant communities throughout the Diaspora and continent enabling communities to gain and enhance their understanding of self in terms of the larger community. Reliance on technological advancements with respect to cultural transmission and production, however, raises an important question about the future of these racially-dedicated cyber communities; are these communities merely a product of the technological provisions of SMSs today that may potentially change or cease to exist with the introduction of new technological capabilities among participants?

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