Exploring the Role of Digital Technologies in Uyghur Political Activism

A qualitative study among Uyghur forced migrants living in diaspora

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Abstract

Since the start of the 2010s, the Chinese government has implemented highly advanced technologies for both on- and offline surveillance of its Muslim population in the northwestern Chinese province Xinjiang. Besides severely affecting the freedom of Uyghurs (and other ethnic minorities) living within the Chinese borders, this tightening of control is subsequently being felt among Uyghur refugees living in diaspora. This diaspora has nevertheless been characterized as politically active, especially within the online sphere (Clothey & Koku, 2017; Kuşçu, 2014). This research further investigates this claim and shows how Uyghur forced migrants perceive and make use of social media technologies for engaging in diasporic political activism.

This thesis relies on a qualitative research methodology through a combination of ethnographic participant observations and in-depth interviews. On the collected interview data, a thematic analysis has been conducted to explore the perceptions and practices of the participants in relation to social media technologies. The findings show that Uyghur political activism evolves around different target audiences, namely in-group, out-group and institutional, through various strategies, namely information politics, identity politics and cultural brokerage, to incite change within both the host and home country. Furthermore, the research reveals an ambivalence in the perception of participants towards social media, namely that they perceive them as both inherently untrustworthy, as well as being the most important source of information and means for political activism. The study has ultimately shown that through their online activism, Uyghur diasporans deploy their own cultural resources to symbolically resist the Chinese cultural, social and political oppression. Accordingly, the data revealed how Uyghur political activists perceive the promotion of their cultural identity as essential for engaging Dutch citizens with the Uyghur cause.

Keywords
Digital diaspora, political activism, authoritarian governance, China, Uyghur
Along life’s road I have always sought truth,
In the search for verity, thought was always my guide.
My heart yearned without end for a chance of expression,
And longed to find words of meaning and grace.
Come, my friends, let our dialogue joyfully begin.

Abdurehim Ötkür
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1. Introduction

The stage lights dim and the audience silences awaiting the closing piece of today’s new year’s festivities. Dressed in colourful Uyghur traditional clothing and wearing the evenly bright coloured doppa headdresses which are delicately embroidered with fine gold thread, a family of six enters stage to portray a happy family dinner. The father of two smiles at his children and plays them a festive tune on his dutar, a citar like musical instrument. To the surprise of many, the sounds of gun fire roughly interrupt the happy scene. Shouting men and women dressed in black and wearing fire arms enter stage and without warning start enacting the arrest, torture and eventually killing of the whole dinner party. Sounds of despair start to rise up from the audience, which increases when footage is shown of YouTube videos reporting on the current events in their homeland in Xinjiang province, China. The stage fills with a group of small children in torn clothes, wearing candles and holding up photos of missing people and signs that read “Where is my father?” Instead of closing their eyes for the painful reminder of their situation, Uyghurs in the audience collectively grab their phones and start recording while sobbing and seeking comfort from their neighbours. “People must know what is happening,” my translator sighs when I speak to him afterwards.

On 17 March 2019 the annual Nuruz festival took place in The Hague: a day filled with traditional arts and food, attended by members of the Uyghur forced migrant community in the Netherlands. Like in most events and gatherings organized by the community, raising awareness for the current political situation in their homeland took centre stage on this day, even though the event was almost exclusively attended by Uyghurs themselves. However, due to the deployment of various digital technologies, Uyghur political activists aim to bridge the gap between themselves and those unaware of their situation or even existence. Spreading information among the international community through social media is their attempt to incite change for themselves and especially for those whom they have left behind in a fiercely repressive regime that does everything in its power to silence dissident.

This thesis will dive into how digital technologies, specifically social networking media, are perceived and used by those who face difficulties with engaging in diasporic political activism in the online space, namely refugees coming from a digitally advanced, authoritarian regime. In order to shed light on this topic, interviews have been conducted with Uyghur forced migrants coming from China living in diaspora. The concept of diaspora is in this thesis understood as “a people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis, outside the borders of their ethnic or religious homeland – whether that homeland is real or symbolic, independent
or under foreign control,” (Shain & Barth, 2003, p. 452). In other words, the term diaspora typically “carries a sense of displacement” (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010, p. 4). Taking in mind that this study investigates the online perceptions and practices of the Uyghur diaspora, the term digital diaspora subsequently appears relevant to take into consideration, especially in relation to political activism. Important consider here is how a digital diaspora differs from a general virtual community. That is to say, digital diasporas utilize the internet to actively improve the real world through digital means, whereas virtual communities generally evolve (and possibly remain) within the stronghold of the digital space (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). In other words, for a digital diaspora, the internet is an extension of social ties and activity grounded in a tangible collective context. Accordingly, a digital diaspora is using digital technologies for “a variety of political, economic, social, religious, and communicational purposes that, for the most part, may concern either the homeland, the host land, or both, including its own trajectory abroad” (Laguerre, 2010, p. 50).

For a thorough understanding of the subject at hand, the following subparagraph will provide the reader with a key social and political background in which this study should be understood. Following this section, the remaining part of the introduction will provide the research aim, relevance and outline of this thesis.

1.1 Contextualizing the Uyghur Diaspora

Uyghurs are a Muslim population mainly inhabiting the Northwest of China. The region, originally named East Turkestan, has been in conflict with China for hundreds of years, with an increase since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power over the Chinese territory, including East Turkestan, on October 20th 1949 and renamed East Turkestan as Xinjiang province. Since the 1950s, the CCP enforced the imagined common value that the Chinese nation had “the will to live together,” constructing “a common history and a shared communist future” and implementing standardized political, social, economic, and cultural norms throughout the Chinese territory (Castets, 2015, p. 222). This however caused socio-political tensions for ethnic groups who became regarded as “minorities” within this imagined Chinese unity. For the inhabitants of the newly established Xinjiang province, of which Uyghurs form the majority1, this became especially poignant because their home land covers 1.7 million square meters, which makes it the largest Chinese province. Although being inhabitants of China, Uyghurs strongly distinct themselves from the Chinese majority through their religion, language,

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1 The population of Xinjiang province is historically made up by Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Hui, Han-Chinese and smaller ethnic groups like Kyrgyz, Mongols, Tajiks and Volga Tatars.
cuisine and physical appearance. However, communist control over East Turkestan entails, to this day, the reformation of local infrastructure, education system and the social sphere, increasingly normalizing (Han) Chinese language and culture and accordingly marginalizing Uyghur (Muslim) identity. Promoting secular and communist thought, while undermining Islamic representations, became one of the main means to transform daily life in order for Xinjiang citizens to fit within the Chinese unity (Castets, 2015). This slow but steady dismantling of local sociocultural structures increasingly raised determined resistance towards the CCP, resulting in violent uprisings against the Chinese authorities. On 5 July 2009, an estimation of 1,000 Uyghurs took the streets of Xinjiang’s capital Ürümqi, which quickly grew larger and eventually resulted in violent confrontations with police forces that allegedly left 197 people dead and over 1,700 injured according to Chinese media (Barbour & Jones, 2013). Events like these were eventually used by Chinese authorities and media to warn the nation for the ‘three evils’ of religious terrorism, separatism, and extremism, framing Uyghur citizens as the “criminal Other” (Barbour & Jones, 2013, p. 96). In recent years, low-tech measures of control of the area were followed by the introduction of increasingly high-tech surveillance methods, for example through obliging Uyghurs to download spyware applications on their phones, putting tracking devices on their cars, and introducing an extensive system of paid informers who would report misconduct of fellow citizens like religious expression (Millward, 2018).

Since the CCP took control over East Turkestan, Uyghurs who held the sufficient financial resources started leaving China in the 1950s in search for safety and better opportunities (Shichor, 2013). However, Uyghur migrants only started to form considerable communities in Europe from the nineties on, most noticeably in Munich, Germany (Shichor, 2013). The entire Uyghur diaspora however, has spread all over Europe and beyond. At the end of the 2000s, it was estimated that the Uyghur diaspora consisted of an estimation of 500,000 to 600,000 Uyghurs, which comes to 5 to 6 percent of the global Uyghur population (Kuşçu, 2014, p. 146). In the Netherlands, the first Uyghur refugees settled in the late 1990s and formed, although slowly, communities through the foundation of diasporic organizations in mostly the west of the country from 2010 on. According to estimations by one of the Dutch Uyghur diasporic foundations, Stichting Uyghur Cultuur en Informatie Centrum, the Uyghur diaspora in the Netherlands counted 2000 to 3000 people in 2018, making it a relatively small community in the country.

Further expansion of the diaspora has slowed down in the past years, even though and exactly because, governmental oppression has severely increased. The construction of so-called “re-education camps” at the outset of the 2010s heralded the start of further intensified
oppression of Muslim groups in Xinjiang (Nebehay, 2018; Westcott, 2018a). These ‘re-education camps’ are said, by Chinese officials, to have been built as a response to the spread of religious extremism and militant separatism in Xinjiang province (Barbour & Jones, 2013; Castets, 2015). A human rights panel of the United Nations has however concluded that these camps resemble “political camps for indoctrination” in which an estimation of 1 million Uyghurs are detained “solely on the basis of their ethno-religious identity” (Nebehay, 2018). Human Rights Watch (HRW) additionally found that since 2016, the Chinese government has implemented high-tech innovations to control Uyghurs (Human Rights Watch, 2019). For instance, through obliging Uyghurs to install a police surveillance application that collects data which is directly linked to one’s ID-number. The online data is subsequently linked to video footage which has been recorded by the country’s surveillance cameras through face recognition technology.

Refugees of the area have told journalists how Uyghurs are imprisoned for a wide variety of violations, ranging from refusal of selling or consuming alcohol because of Muslim religion, to having (contact with) Uyghur family members abroad (Harris & Isa, 2018; Perper, 2018; Westcott, 2018b). In case of the latter, members of the Uyghur diaspora in among others, the United States, Turkey, and (in the current study) the Netherlands, have reported how they have been approached by the Chinese government to hand over personal information, resulting in suspicion that Chinese authorities are not only compiling a database on local Uyghurs, but subsequently on Uyghur diasporans (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2018; Perper, 2018).

Even though the severity of the digital surveillance, Uyghurs have nevertheless been identified as active participants in showing online resistance and participating in digital activism, both within China and beyond (Clothey & Koku, 2017; Kuşçu, 2014). Additionally, it has been argued that, even though increasingly suppressed inside China, the Uyghur diaspora and therefore the Uyghur cause have become more visible due to their extensive use of digital technologies and outreach to international media (Kuşçu, 2014; Shichor, 2010).

1.2 Research Question

This thesis investigates how Uyghur forced migrants in the Netherlands understand and make use of social media technologies in the context of diasporic political activism. The primary aim of this study is to better understand how the Dutch Uyghur diaspora is influenced by the increasing severity of the oppression in their homeland. Accordingly, the guiding exploratory research question for this thesis is formulated as follows:
RQ: How do Uyghur forced migrants in the Netherlands perceive and make use of social media technologies for engaging in diasporic political activism?

1.3 Social and Scientific Relevance

Research on the Uyghur diasporic community is scarce, both on a global and local scale. The recent political developments however urge for the expansion of both academic knowledge and social awareness about the circumstances Uyghurs live in, both within and outside of the Chinese borders. Coming from an (online) environment which is fiercely monitored, Uyghur migrants towards Europe arrive in a setting which is characterized by freedom in great contrast to their socio-political circumstances in China. However, in the past few years cases of retaliation on left-behind family members of diasporic activists came to light, further expanding the authoritarian power of the Chinese government outside of its borders (Mooney & Lague, 2015). This makes the Uyghur minority an interesting case for media and migration studies because physically migrating away from oppression, does not automatically mean increased freedom due to the far-reaching digital surveillance of their homeland. Exploratory observations on social media, conducted in the preparation phase of this master research, showed however how the Uyghur diaspora can nevertheless be characterized as visibly politically engaged.

In order to understand this arguably precarious diasporic political engagement, the current study takes a qualitative approach by including interviews with Dutch Uyghurs. This inclusion of personal experiences and practices of diasporic members is considered to be a unique contribution to the growing scholarship on Uyghurs, since academic research that has recently been conducted on the Uyghur diaspora barely includes such personal accounts. Research in which personal accounts are taken into consideration are studies which focus on Uyghur internet usage within the Chinese borders and/or rely on analysis of indirect personal accounts in online content like YouTube videos, WeChat posts or blogs (Clothey & Koku, 2016; Harris & Isa, 2018; Kuşçu, 2014; Vergani & Zuev, 2015). The only exception, known to the researcher of this thesis, is the work of professor emeritus Yitzhak Shichor (2010; 2013) who has dedicated a considerable part of his academic publications to the Uyghur diaspora and Chinese foreign policy in relation to the middle east.

The studies by Kuşçu (2014) and Clothey and Koku (2017) are both primarily based on content analysis of online Uyghur forums, respectively in 2012 and in 2014. However, in 2019, a few of the diasporic forums studied by Kuşçu (2014), and all of the local Uyghur forums studied by Clothey and Koku (2017), are currently no longer accessible. This observation further
strengthens the urgency for further and continuous investigation of the online practices of Uyghurs both within and outside the Chinese borders.

Lastly, although the current study focusses on a relatively small diasporic community, the findings should have considerable significance for the scholarship on online practices of other diasporic refugee communities, within and outside of the Netherlands, coming from similar authoritarian or communistic political regimes. The goal of this research in terms of relevancy is therefore two-fold. Firstly, this study aims to contribute to the scholarship on the Uyghur people in order to increase both social and academic awareness about this minority. Secondly, the study aims to contribute to future research on political online practices of diasporic communities similar to the Uyghurs.

1.4 Chapter Outline

In order to answer the research question of this study, academic theory on three overarching topics is discussed in the theory section of this thesis. First, a foundational framework will be laid out through a discussion on whom diasporic communities consist of, and on which strategies diasporic activists generally rely to achieve their goals. This will be followed by considering previous studies on diasporic political activism through online media specifically. Grounded in this paragraph is the scholarly discussion on how social media affordances function as a double-edged sword in the context of political activism, bringing along both benefits and disadvantages for raising awareness. Lastly, the theory section will present research on Chinese mediated transnational governance via digital technologies, arguing that the Chinese authoritarian influence reaches far beyond its own territory.

The theory section is followed by the research design of the qualitative study conducted for this thesis. This section will justify the methodology, address the choices made for data sampling and validation, and discuss the procedure of the interviews and the analysis. Furthermore, the ethical considerations of this study will be taken into account.

Chapter four presents the findings of this study in accordance with the thematic analysis conducted for this thesis. Accordingly, these results are analyzed in light of the theory discussed in chapter two. The results chapter is divided into three overarching themes following a chronological order of cause and effect. That is to say, the first section presents how social media are used for (governmental) surveillance, and subsequently discusses how surveillance is affecting (online) communication and political activism of the participants. Second, the interview data has been analyzed in the light of using social media for political activism in response to experienced oppression. Here it is discussed how the “double-edged sword” of social media affordances is
indeed affecting diasporans and additionally how they make use of social networking sites to strengthen in-group solidarity and identity. Lastly, the interview data has been analyzed within the theme of looking towards the future of Uyghur diasporic political activism. Raising issues which the community argues they need to overcome to effectively incite change, and the importance of international recognition and support.

Finally, chapter five will summarize and present the main arguments of the whole study and answer the research question accordingly. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as practical implications. Lastly, recommendations for future research on the topic at hand.
2. Theoretical Framework

This thesis investigates how members of the Uyghur diaspora in the Netherlands perceive and make use of social media technologies for engaging in diasporic political activism. Accordingly, the theoretical concepts addressed in this chapter involve theory on diasporic communities, digital transnational activism, and Chinese digitally mediated transnational governance. Given the extensive scholarship on these subjects, they are broken down into sub-paragraphs identifying and summarizing the most valuable themes relevant to the current study.

2.1 Diasporic Communities and Transnational Engagement

2.1.1 Categorizing Diasporic Communities

Like addressed in the introduction of this research paper, the term ‘diaspora’ carries a sense of displacement. A group of people who either voluntarily or forcefully moved away from what they consider their place of origin. According to Dhoest, Nikunen and Cola (2013), diasporas are often plainly referred to as communities or regarded as homogeneous groups. They argue however, that this notion should be taken with a grain of salt and that the narrative on diasporic communities needs to be rethought. In their argument they build on a study by Georgiou (2006) who argues that homogeneous communities or singular identities do not exist: “Diasporic identities are always positioned and dialectically shaped in relation to other identities, such as gender, age, class, generation and sexuality,” (as cited by Dhoest et al., 2013, p. 18). In a similar vein, Gillespie (2007) notes, “No one social category (for example, ethnicity or religion) defines a person’s social identity,” (p. 285). Taking this nuance in mind, a discussion on different diasporic roles and strategies is in place. To start with, I will first address a theoretical approach on categorizing diasporic communities as whole, after which the discussion will narrow down to individual roles. However not taking into account internal differences, this theory nevertheless provides useful insights into the workings of diasporic efforts.

Political scientists Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth (2003) have identified three types of diasporas: 1) passive diasporas, 2) active diasporas in relation to the host land, and 3) active diasporas in relation to the homeland. They define how diasporic communities can be passive actors when they become involved in international relations not by their own doing. That is to say, they are passive actors because the active actors are either their homelands or other states who have an interest in making the specific community visible. These diasporic communities themselves are however not actively organized as a community, and are not actively advocating for homeland causes in their host country. Therefore, they are not influencing either the home or
host country’s policies through their own efforts. Secondly, Shain and Barth (2003) define how diasporas can be active actors through their influence on the foreign policies of their host land. This is mostly done by diasporic lobby groups who actively advocate for their homelands, aiming to influence the host lands’ approach to their home country. Illustrative of this example is the case of diasporic lobbying for Israel (Shain, 2002). Thirdly, diasporas can be active actors through their influence on the foreign policies of their home lands. Especially those diasporas who have gained economic and political power can directly put pressure on their home country operating from abroad. Illustrative of this example is the diasporic lobbying for Tibet (Drissel, 2008). Such active diasporic communities have the ability to support their home country’s wars (through recruitment abroad), economy (through financial remittances) or politics (through international support). In other words, Shain and Barth (2013) argue that active diasporas are either way actively influencing the international relations between two regions. However, referring back to Dhoest, Nikunen and Cola (2013) who urge for a more nuanced and inclusive approach in the discourse on diasporic communities, further insight into different internal roles is desired.

The second theoretical approach on categorizing diasporic communities relevant to take into consideration is that by Østergaard-Nielsen (2003). Contrary to Shain and Barth, Østergaard-Nielsen does not differentiate strictly between different types of diasporas, but rather between the strategies they can commit to. She proposes to refer to direct and indirect strategies for diasporic activity. With direct strategies she is referring to transnational activities which are directly targeted at the homeland. For example, and in line with Shain and Barth (2003), through financial support, political support or military support. Indirect strategies are referring to diasporic activities that are indirectly targeted at the country of origin through other actors, for example through lobbying or putting pressure on the international community. According to Østergaard-Nielsen (2003), diasporic communities often commit to both strategies simultaneously, depending on the circumstances they reside in and the resources they have access to. That is to say, different migrant groups may choose different strategies drawing on the available knowledge, manpower, finances and political freedom they enjoy.

In addition to establishing a horizontal distinction between diasporas as groups, Shain and Barth (2003) have also vertically categorised individual diaspora members; namely into core, passive and silent members. Core members they define as “the organizing elites”, those who are “intensively active in diasporic affairs and in a position to appeal for mobilization of the larger diaspora” (p. 452). Passive members however, the authors argue, are most prone for mobilization when the core members (“the active leadership”) calls upon them. Lastly, silent members are defined as the majority of diasporans who are typically uninvolved in diasporic affairs, but who
may be assembled in times of crisis. According to Shain and Barth (2003) diasporic communities often consist of a majority of silent members, and it can thus be argued for that diasporas are in fact *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983). That is to say, these groups of migrants are typically referred to as a “community”, and are thus imagined as being a tight, homogeneous social group with its own practices and identity. Because of its majority of silent members however, this idea is to a large extent misplaced (see also Horst, 2008, p. 326). Silent members are merely symbolically – and often conveniently – regarded as members because of a shared ethnicity, religion or home country, and not because of their active contribution or participation in diasporic affairs.

The latter again exemplifies how diasporas should not be regarded as homogeneous communities. In line with this notion stands the fact that diasporas often do not stand alone in their activism. As seen with the transnational advocacy for both the Israeli and Tibetan causes, diasporic networks often extend beyond those members originally from the homeland. That is to say, ideally, diasporic activists gain support from the international community over time, and sympathetic individuals may join forces. Drawing from both international relations and social movement theory, Keck and Sikkink (1999) introduced the concept of *transnational advocacy networks*, referring to social networks that include “actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services” (p. 65). Their study mostly focused on transnational social movements targeted on (global) humanitarian and environmental issues. However, their findings can be partly related to the study of diasporic refugee activism. For the purpose of this current study I therefore propose to further specify Keck and Sikkink’s (1999) definition of transnational advocacy networks with a focus on *diasporic advocacy networks*. With this notion I refer to social networks that include diasporic members and those – individuals, groups and/or organisations – sympathetic with their cause.

### 2.1.2 Diasporic Advocacy Networks and Strategies

Diasporas are often defined as challengers of traditional boundaries of state, identity, citizenship and loyalty (see Cohen, 1997; Shain & Barth, 2003; Tölölyan, 1991). That is to say, “because they reside outside their kin-state but claim a legitimate stake in it, diasporas defy the conventional meaning of the state,” (Shain & Barth, 2003, p. 450). Tölölyan (1991) therefore defined diasporas as the “paradigmatic Other of the nation-state”, referring to their unique status of being perceived as both geographically “outsiders” of the motherland, as well as “insiders” through their cultural and political identity (p. 166). This unique status is mostly due to their high
degree of transnationality: not only do they establish connections between their home and host country, but also among their groups scattered over different host countries, and subsequently with other like-minded diasporas originating from other home countries.

Drawing from various studies on strategies for transnational advocacy (see Horst, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Shain & Barth, 2003), three main strategy pillars have been formulated to structure relevant theory: identity politics, information politics, and transnational lobbying and cultural brokerage. Three strategies differing in being – with Østergaard-Nielsen’s (2003) words – either direct or indirect measures, aimed at – in line with Shain and Barth’s (2003) findings – host or home land. In addition to this, I aim to introduce another focus of activism, namely the individual. All from the perspective that strategies do not stand on their own, but rather work like stages of impact; one strategy being intertwined with, and building upon, the other.

**Identity politics**

In a discussion on diaspora identity politics of (forced) migrants, the concept of identity building should first be addressed. Identity building can be understood in the same way as migration is generally recognized in scholarly discourse. That is to say, identity building is, like migration, “a social product – not as the result of individual decisions made by individual actors, not as the sole result of economic or political parameters, but rather as an outcome of all these factors in interaction,” (Boyd, 1989, p. 642). Having migrated from one context to the other, people need to reinvent themselves in many ways. The way they do this is however strongly depended on the resources they have access to, and the socio-political context they reside in. Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004) point out, “migrants do not make their communities alone: states and state politics shape the options for migrant and ethnic trans-state social action,” (p. 1177).

Identity building becomes identity politics when an individual or a community deploys an identity to shape or direct the perceptions of those belonging to the ‘out-group’, and additionally to engage others who share the same identity with a political aim (Kumar, 2018; Sökefeld, 2006). Like shaping a community, shaping oneself is done through interaction with others; others within the diasporic community, as well as those outside of it. Vice versa, through this interaction, others get shaped as well and thus, indirectly, identity building can be deployed as both an individual strategy as well as a political strategy for creating awareness, place making, as well as integration. Here, the latter should be understood like in the acculturation theory by Berry (2006), who defines integration as valuing both home and host society through equal sociocultural senses of belonging. This arguably results in a transnational identity, meaning that
(forced) migrants remain having a certain attachment to their national or ethnic identity despite the new geographical area they have settled in (Komito, 2011). Andersson (2013) argues that such an attachment may be reinforced through the use of digital technologies since “media are an integrated part of migrants’ multiple identifications with the city they reside in and their country of origin” (p. 387).

An interesting concept in relation to identity building of forced migrants is oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge, 2001). Oppositional consciousness can be developed when a subordinate group adopts a positive self-identity, in spite of the domineering group they are marginalized by. In other words, people come to identify the injustice that is done to them and in response create a positive self-image. Mansbridge (2001) points out that such a positive self-image may create hope and can strengthen the social and cultural empowerment of the community, which is necessary for eventually demanding changes in one’s marginalized position. Mansbridge subsequently claims that oppositional consciousness can be shared and realized in relation to others, and that it thus includes others “identifying with members of the subordinate group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices” (2001, p. 5). This thus illustrates how identity building within in the community can be regarded as an indirect strategy because the individual and collective awareness of injustice may eventually lead to collective action. Similarly, Horst (2008) argues that through the creation and support of national identity politics, forced migrants can construct “nationalist mythologies … as a way of dealing with their own physical and existential displacement,” (p. 323, emphasis added). That is to say, migrants tend to create an ideal version of their homeland and use this vision and imagined identity to strengthen their self-senses of purpose, belonging and justice. This positive identification subsequently strengthens their commitment to political advocacy and lobbying abroad.

Following oppositional consciousness, the concept of oppositional culture or culture of resistance by Mitchel and Feagin (1995) is an interesting one to consider for the current study. This concept describes how subordinated groups resist a dominating culture through the expression and emphasis of their own cultural resources (as cited in CLothey and Koku, 2017, p. 354). “While oppositional culture may not lead to systematic change, it serves to preserve the dignity of a subordinated community, and provides an alternative construction of identity from that of the dominant group,” (p. 354). Additionally, expressing one’s positive self-identity and cultural goods can be regarded as an indirect strategy for activistic action because the attention of the out-group may be caught, which ideally results in (greater) oppositional consciousness and engagement of diasporic outsiders.
The construction of such a collective identity within a diaspora is inherently fuelled by the shared experiences of escape, displacement, and survival in the host society of the diasporic members (Woldemikael, 1996, as cited in Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010). In a study on the online practices of the Eritrean diaspora in the United States at the start of the current millennium, Victoria Bernal (2010) identified how shared experiences in the home country and during the migration journey contributed to a continued identification as Eritreans, even though diasporans held citizenship of their host country.

Shared personal histories of lives disrupted, loved ones killed, and families separated by war provide an impetus for Eritreans in diaspora to keep contact with fellow Eritreans who understand firsthand what they have been through. The histories of Ethiopian oppression, war, and displacement that members of the diaspora share thus contribute to the bonds of community and connectedness even among Eritreans who had no prior relationship with each other back in Eritrea. (Bernal, 2010, pp. 123-124)

Through these identifications with one another, diasporans can both find comfort and additionally spur ‘in-group’ engagement to convey a cultural or political message to the out-group. In order to so, diasporans however simultaneously draw from other advocacy strategies, namely information politics (2.1.2.2) and cultural brokerage and lobbying (2.1.2.3).

**Information politics**

The practice of information politics has much to do with the concept of *agenda setting*, which refers to the practice of putting a pressing issue in the center of attention of society, governments and media through actively raising awareness by informing and campaigning (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). It can be assumed that the more information a diasporic advocacy network is able to spread, about itself and its cause, the more effective their efforts for raising awareness are. Clifford (1992) points out how in this way, diasporans can function as transporters of cultural and political views. In this light, information politics can be understood to fit into Østergaard-Nielsen’s (2003) definition of an *indirect* strategy of diasporic activity because it aims to change the cultural and political situation in their homeland through the means of informing the host society.

In order to do so, a diasporic advocacy network has to develop means of communication to effectively reach out to those who need to be involved. Keck and Sikkink (1999) argued that the majority of information produced by members of the advocacy network is “small”
information, like telephone calls, e-mail, and the circulation of newsletters and pamphlets (p. 71). In other words, they argued that at the start of the twenty-first century, most information is spread within the reach of the personal social network. However, with the increased usage of digital technologies, it can nowadays be argued for that the outward reach of advocacy networks has consequently further expanded through these new means of communication. The internet has thus enabled new ways of information politics.

Besides the exchange of factual information, scholars have additionally identified the production and spread of more emotional and personal information to direct attention to a specific issue, namely through *testimonies* (Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Wiebelhaus-Brahm, 2016). Within the context of the current study, ‘giving testimony’ is understood as the sharing, either online or offline, of a spoken or written statement regarding one’s personal experiences with the aim to provide evidence of something. Keck and Sikkink (1999) argue that through collecting touching, shocking or identifiable testimonies, advocacy networks aim to make highly factual or political issues more personal and understandable for a broader audience. In doing so the authors state that “activist groups frame issues simply, in terms of right and wrong, because their purpose is to *persuade* people and stimulate them to take action” (p. 71, emphasis in original). This persuasion is thus mostly targeted at audiences unfamiliar with the issues. However, in line with this assumption, the current study aims to specify that such persuasion is not necessarily exclusively targeted at the out-group, but as well on the in-group with the aim to encourage internal support to join in on the political activistic efforts.

**Transnational Lobbying and Cultural Brokerage**

In her research on migration and transnationalism among Somali diasporans, Cindy Horst (2008) identified ‘advocacy and lobbying’ as one of their main diasporic activities. In reference to advocacy and lobbying, Horst points out how members of diasporas are strategically situated between regions to gain access to information through their network within and outside of their homeland. This way, Horst argues, diasporic members aim to inform other members, foreign news media and political organizations with the goal to place the homeland issues – or human rights abuses in general – on the international agenda (2008, p. 324). That is to say, in continuum on the argument of information politics; active transnational lobbying between parties, like citizens, media and politics, is an essential strategy for diasporic advocacy networks.

A similar point is made by Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013) in a study on the media work of Syrian diasporic activists. These scholars conceptualize such diasporic efforts as *cultural brokerage*.
In the context of the media, the term applies to the crucial intermediary role diaspora activists have taken on in contemporary networked communication. As members of two worlds, they are able to both coordinate the information flow between otherwise disconnected groups and frame messages that speak to target audiences. (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013, p. 2188)

Their study on the practice of cultural brokerage identifies three main aspects of brokerage performed by Syrian diasporic activists: linking, managing and collaborating. **Linking**, meaning that diasporic members are transferring information (back and forth) between the protesters inside their home country and the outside world. **Managing**, referring to their ability to bridge the gap between local and international diasporic media, and the local and international mainstream broadcasters and media platforms. Thirdly, **collaborating**, meaning that the activistic members of the diaspora are themselves cooperating with professional media and journalists through translating, informing and assisting in the verification of (activist) material.

On a similar note, Keck and Sikkink (1999) refer to such practices as **leverage politics**, meaning that diasporic networks aim to build transnational relations with “powerful actors” like governments, international institutions and private actors like transnational corporations. “By exerting leverage over more powerful institutions, weak groups gain influence far beyond their ability to influence state practices directly” (p. 72). Benefits from such connections can be either material (e.g. money, goods, votes or seats) or moral. The latter should be seen as the “mobilization of shame”, meaning that “the behavior of target actors is held up to the bright light of international scrutiny” (p. 73). In other words, harming individual’s, companies’ or the state’s (international) prestige which ultimately benefits the diasporic community. The authors point out that such influence and benefits from having powerful allies often depends on the network’s ability to “mobilize the solidarity of their members, or of public opinion via the media” (p. 73). As a matter of fact, this statement ties together the three diasporic practices of identity politics, information politics and transnational lobbying discussed in this paragraph.

### 2.2 Diasporic Political Activism in the Online Space

#### 2.2.1 Social Media Affordances for Community Building & Diasporic Activism

In the context of this study, the concept of **social media affordances** refers to what social media facilitate or make possible in terms of both community building and diasporic political practices (Tufekci, 2018). It is as Dumitrica & Felt (2019) stated in their study on mediated collective action: “Social media have become integral tools for those wishing to provoke social
change,” (p. 2). This sub-paragraph therefore highlights the positive social media affordances diasporans can draw from, followed by a sub-paragraph which addresses the barriers and limitations associated with social media usage for community building and collective action.

For starters, one of the major affordances of social media usage is that it allows forced migrants to construct complex interpersonal communication networks with both each other and left behind family, as well as with newly gained social contacts in the host society and with international (media) institutions (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu, 2012). In other words, social media, and digital media in general, can strengthen individual agency and thus offer possibilities to reinforce one’s social capital. Madianou and Miller (2012) in fact point out how social networking sites enable people to decrease the distance between the home and host country. This notion of using digital media to decrease distances is especially relevant for those migrants who engage in political activism since it affords them to act on a transnational level. That is to say, by using social media for activistic purposes they are potentially able to engage those who are sympathetic with their cause on a transnational scale and can thus expand their reach to audiences outside of their physical surroundings. The internet thus permits and simultaneously reinforces the construction of a diasporic transnational identity (Komito, 2011), and the expansion of diasporic advocacy networks.

Additionally, Bernal (2010) identified that online communication platforms enable diasporans to mend “ruptures in the social body” because members can bridge physical distances towards their homeland through online social interaction (p. 124). In other words, social media can potentially afford migrants to mend emotional discomfort through (re)building social ties with their homeland on a long distance. Ultimately, this might be beneficial for diasporic engagement because such transnational bonds can function as a mouthpiece for (symbolic) support from the homeland, and subsequently as a source of information which makes the diasporans less reliant on traditional media as mentioned by Dumitrica and Felt (2019, p. 2).

Besides facilitating transnational communication, social media have further been identified as affording (forced) migrants to integrate into a new host society. In terms of diasporic political activism, integration processes should be understood as an essential step towards effective activism, lobbying and cultural brokerage. That is to say, scholars have argued that social technologies are an essential tool for migrants because they allow them to adapt to their new environment, reinforce their social capital, and to acquire language and cultural skills (Alencar, 2017; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). More specifically, Díaz Andrade and Doolin (2016) argue that information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer migrants five specific affordances, namely “to participate in an information society, to
communicate effectively, to understand a new society, to be socially connected, and to express a cultural identity,” (p. 405). These affordances related to integration combined arguably help diasporans to strategically set out their political efforts in a way that fits into the social and cultural context of their new environment. Being well integrated can thus be beneficial for political activism because members can strengthen social ties within the host society which may result in more engagement from those belonging to the out-group.

In line with such mechanisms of cultural adaptation, Nedelcu (2012) argues that social media usage by migrants can be thought of to contribute to the development of “transnational relations and new cosmopolitan notions” in the broad sense of the word. That is to say, she highlights “the ongoing blurring of boundaries between migrant and non-migrant populations” and argues that “Social life is gradually becoming a deterritorialised process for both mobile and sedentary populations,” (p. 1353). Kumar (2018) accordingly argues that the internet helps to “mobilize and build new nodes (and sites) of diasporic representations” which contribute to the construction of transnational political networks (p. 2). Additionally, social media afford diasporans to be highly self-organizing since they are able to mobilize people, potentially in large numbers, without formal organisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011).

Both Kumar’s (2018) and Nedelcu’s (2012) arguments on the development of transnational relations and new cosmopolitan notions remind of a discussion by Arjun Appadurai (1996) who argued that digital communication technologies have facilitated the creation of diasporic public spheres (pp. 21-23). Building on Habermas’ (1962) foundational discussion on the public sphere, Appadurai argues that diasporic spheres often similarly consist of (displaced) students and other intellectuals who engage in “long-distance nationalism” by forming transnational digital communities or activist movements. Nowadays, Appadurai argues, public spheres are thus no longer enclosed by the boundaries of a nation state but are comprised of (forced) migrants from across the world who interconnect via digital means of communication.

Similarly, Komito (2011) points out that social media can, apart from strengthening social ties with the out-group, strengthen social ties within the diaspora. However, he argues that this in fact might delay or even harm integration in the host society because communication mostly happens with in-group members. In his argument he refers to the difference between the concepts of bridging and bonding considered by Putnam (2000). These concepts relate to the difference between strengthening the collective membership within the own community (bonding), and strengthening ties with those from other communities (bridging).
In line with Komito’s (2011) critical analysis of the relation between social media usage and integration, Siapera and Veikou (2013) conclude that the scholarship on social media affordances in relation to the integration of migrant communities often appears to be contradictory. That is to say, they point out that scholarly research has, on the one hand, illustrated that social media contribute to the adoption of liberal values of a host country because of their positive contribution to acculturation processes, while other studies have shown that certain diasporas in fact radicalized through their use of social media because they reinforced radical political in-group sentiments. These contradicting aspects of social media affordances are, according to Siapera and Veikou (2013), due to the different contexts in which diasporic communities move about; arguing that listing “the” causes and effects of social media is simply inconceivable because various internal and external factors determine the extent to which diasporans can utilize and benefit from digital technologies.

Besides acknowledging the potential benefits of social media, many scholars are critical on the democratic potential and effectiveness of such technologies in terms of collective and grassroots action. The next sub-paragraph therefore provides various counterarguments on the effectiveness of digital media in relation to diasporic action.

2.2.2 The Double-Edged Sword of Diasporic Activism

Even though some scholars have argued that social networking sites, e.g. Facebook, offer great possibilities for activism and are thus a useful tool that can ultimately lead towards effective social change (in Joyce, 2010), others have been fiercely critical of the democratic potential of both the internet and social media. For example, Morozov (2009) states that online activist efforts are merely “an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group”. In a later publication Morozov (2011) additionally describes online activism as “a delusion that makes us unable to recognize technologies are used for the purposes of propaganda, manipulation, censorship and surveillance,” (as cited by Leurs, 2015, p. 20). Similarly, Dumitrica & Felt (2019) argue that the easy accessibility of engaging in online collective action through liking and sharing, leaves users (unknowingly) vulnerable and ill-prepared for various forms of surveillance. Risam (2018) accordingly identified how various actors such as both terrorists and governments use digital traces of random people or specific target groups for the purpose of surveillance and control (see also Pearce, 2015). On the contrary, various authors in the publication Digital Activism Decoded edited by Mary Joyce (2010), counter-argue that especially in repressive regimes, social networking sites afford citizens to challenge authorities. Mostly because oppressive regimes are
forced to choose between either blocking websites and thus risking social unrest, or instead allowing dissidents to spread provocative information and calls for action. It is thus believed by these authors that social media sites instead present activists with an imperfect weapon for countering authoritative oppression.

Critics on the democratic potential of the internet have nevertheless deemed online activism a generally futile effort of political engagement by dismissingly referring to it as clicktivism or slacktivism (Halupka, 2014; Morozov, 2009; Rotman et al., 2011). Clicktivism is broadly understood as the “simplification of online participatory processes [like] online petitions, content sharing, social buttons, etc.” (Halupka, 2014, p. 115). To contrast such online efforts with more traditional forms of socio-political engagement, clicktivism is often depicted as an easy, lazy or overly convenient alternative. In his study on clicktivism, Max Halupka (2014) illustrates how academics have used the term as a type of insult to denounce certain forms of online activism. He points out how it is often argued that such efforts are “driven by a desire for instant gratification and self-satisfaction” and therefore do not hold any substantial engagement or meaningful solidarity (Halupka, 2014, p. 117).

This is largely due to the fact that activism is often measured in terms of risks and costs. For example, Rotman et al. (2011) define ‘slacktivism’ as a “low-risk, low-cost activity via media, whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity” (p. 3). Where Rotman et al. speak of the contrast between “high” and “low” forms of activism, Halupka (2014) uses the words “thick” and “thin” to differentiate types of engagement, arguing that clicktivist efforts can be understood as belonging to the latter because the intention of the action is rarely premeditated.

Clicktivism is not a sustained political action or complex set of actions, but, rather, a reaction to political content … An individual does not go out of her way to engage via clicktivism, but, rather, employs it as a response to something they have read or seen online. In this way, clicktivism is a reactive gesture. (Halupka, 2014, p. 119)

What Halupka (2014) is saying here, is that the act of online liking and sharing requires little effort or commitment. Other scholars argue that advocacy networks driven on social media participation consist of rather “weak ties”, meaning a network of people who do not know each other and thus have little commitment to each other (Gladwell, 2010). However, Tufekci (2017) reminds us that such an assumption would mean that individuals only connect online, “and that the online world is somehow less real than, and disconnected from, the offline one” (p. xxvi).
What stands out in the academic discussion on clicktivism is that *who* the users are that engage in such activistic efforts is generally not thoroughly taken into consideration, neither the cultural, societal or political contexts in which clicktivism may be performed. That is to say, it should be assumed that acts like producing, liking and sharing online content within one context brings along different risks and costs than performed within another.

Another general counterargument in the discussion on the democratic potential of social media concerns the outward reach of online activism. In their study on political participation and social media usage, Fenton and Barassi (2011) argue that the debate on the democratic potential of social media networks is often constrained by a focus on individual agency, and by the assumption that people will be increasingly engaged with politics and social issues through their individual participation on social media. They illustrate however, that social media technologies - because they are so self-centered - rather challenge instead of reinforce the impactful reach of, and involvement in, collective social movements. That is to say, users of social media are said to be generally focused on maintaining their own individual online image and needs, and online platforms are likewise programmed to cater these individual interests for a commercial purpose, instead of being built to incite or support social change. In other words, social media are inherently focused on the individual, which contradicts the aim of political activists who are generally aiming to reach out to the collective.

Fenton and Barassi are not unique in their argument that we should be skeptical of the assumption that social networking sites afford their users with extensive outward reach. Tufekci (2017) points out, “Ad-financed platforms use algorithms – complex software – to control visibility, sometimes drowning out activist messages in favor of more advertiser-friendly content.” Various scholars have referred to this issue by pointing out how these algorithms create *echo-chambers* or *filter bubbles* (Dumitrica & Felt, 2019; Dylko, 2016; Hampton, Shin & Lu, 2017; Ott, 2017; Tufekci, 2015), meaning that content circulates within networks of like-minded people, preventing opinions and ideas to be challenged and reinforcing the idea that a certain (political) view is common sense. Some argue that even if people are confronted with ideas different from their own on social media, for example written or shared by their own friends or family, this is more likely to result in a “spiral of silence” rather than an on- or offline open debate (Hampton, Shin & Lu, 2017, p. 1091). These dynamics pose as obstacles for online activists who aim to spread their content to the largest audience possible. The struggle with which forced migrant diasporas are thus dealing, in the accurate words of political scientist Matthew Hindman, is the existing “difference between speaking and being heard” (2009, p. 16).
This difference is however not exclusively rooted in the technological workings of digital communication technologies. Social media afford diasporas with a great deal of possibilities for communication, entertainment, learning and political involvement, but the discussion on these affordances should additionally be placed within a non-deterministic discourse in which social, cultural and political contexts are also taken into consideration. Tufekci (2017) accurately states: “Movements are making their own history, but in circumstances, and with tools, not entirely of their own choosing” (p. xxix). She illustrates how advocacy networks are to a large extent self-determined but are nevertheless subject to the extent of freedom and resources they can acquire. Building on her own research during the Arab Spring and in a local activist movement in Mexico where governments repeatedly used mass violence to silence (online) advocacy networks, Tufekci points out how other governments often have chosen different approaches in controlling (online) visibility of activists. She refers to such approaches as “policies more suited to the new era,” because of the extensive incorporation of digital technologies to control the networked public sphere (p. xxvii).

Surveillance and repression, do not operate primarily in the way that our pre-digital worries might have forecast. This is not necessarily Orwell’s 1984. Rather than a complete totalitarianism based on fear and blocking of information the newer methods include demonizing online mediums, and mobilizing armies of supporters or paid employees who muddy the online waters with misinformation, information glut, doubt, confusion, harassment, and distraction, making it hard for ordinary people to navigate the networked public sphere, and sort facts from fiction, truth from hoaxes. (Tufekci, 2017, p. xxviii)

On a positive note, Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013) point out that, “the power of diasporic groups is said to grow when media access is banned or limited in the home country,” (p. 2188). That is to say, the more media oppression in one’s home country, the more active a diasporic group generally becomes. In the next paragraph this notion will be further explored in the light of Chinese digitally mediated oppression of Uyghurs within, and outside the Chinese borders.

2.3 Qiaowu: Digitally Mediated Transnational Oppressive Governance

In recent years, ‘overseas Chinese work’ (qiaowu) has become increasingly important for the Chinese economy. Qiaowu refers to the state-coordinated and promoted temporary migration
of workers, students and tourists from China, whose task it is to promote Chinese loyalty abroad, especially among the Chinese diaspora (Jian Hua To, 2014; Liu & van Dongen, 2016). Now, entering the next decade, qiaowu has become integral to “the ‘Chinese Dream’ of economic modernization, scientific and technological innovation, and cultural revival” (Liu & van Dongen, 2016, p. 805). Especially with the Belt and Road Initiative, also referred to as the ‘New Silk Route’, increasingly taking shape on a global scale, good international relations and overseas influence have become essential for the Chinese state. Worsening ethnic relations within the Chinese border in recent years has however forced the Chinese state to continually rethink and adjust their domestic and overseas ethnic minority policies as well (Barabantseva, 2012). Among other measures, this has increased the control over ‘minority-heavy’ provinces like Tibet and Xinjiang. The Chinese state is thus managing its influence on both the domestic and overseas level, and in addition to that, in both the on- and offline space.

This paragraph examines Chinese transnational governance in both the on- and offline area. First, academic studies are discussed on how the Chinese government is controlling its domestic online cyberspace, which will be followed by an exploration of scholarly research that has investigated how this control of especially the online space is translated towards the Chinese diaspora.

2.3.1. Chinese Cyberspace: Domestic Control and Surveillance

A general misconception about the Chinese internet is that its use is limited and largely restricted. Even though the Great Firewall does indeed censor most foreign and certain domestic content, the Chinese internet itself is rich and knows a very active domestic usage. Chinese cyberspace can in fact be characterized by a wide landscape of advanced social applications and the production of billions of social messages a day, which are not necessarily pre-approved before sharing. State governance of the online space does however exist and influences the available content to a large extent. Tufekci (2017) points out that the “Chinese censorship is a careful and deliberate one, brandishing a potent mix of selective censorship and distraction” (p. 232).

In her book, Tufekci (2017) refers to the extensive research of a team of Harvard University scholars who succeeded in studying the censorship system of China (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). In fact, they found that the Chinese government was not specifically censoring all critical content, but rather focussed on content that had the potential to encourage collective action. Surprisingly, they found that this also applied to content that inspired collective action in favour of the communist party. In her writing, Tufekci imagines how the Chinese authorities must
realize, “Once people learn to mobilize, even if they do so to support us, who knows what they will try next?” (2017, p. 235). She argues that the censorship measures seem to value passivity in the population above all. Likewise, scholars have argued that allowing critical content online is in fact favourable for the government, because it can provide them with factual pushback on (foreign) critics (George, 2007; Kalathil & Boas, 2003; Tufekci, 2017).

Such a system of control is similar to what George (2007) describes as the governing strategy of calibrated coercion. In his study on press-control in Singapore, Cherian George (2007) describes calibrated coercion as a form of indirect force from the government towards its citizens in a way that there is just enough freedom on the outside, so people don’t feel the urge to collectively speak up. It is said that Chinese and Singaporean officials have cooperated and shared ‘best practices’ on sustaining societal control (George, 2017; Kalathil & Boas; 2003). The difference between the Singaporean and the Chinese approach however is, that the control over Singaporean media hides behind the scenes, whereas the Chinese government makes their control visible every now and then. Here, think of spectacular imprisonments, public shaming, or the (temporary) disappearances of individuals seen as security threats (George, 2007; Worden, 2016). Such actions serve both as punishments and as warnings for others, with the aim to maintain control.

Besides allowing some critical content and censoring calls for any kinds of collective action, another strategy the Harvard team identified was distraction (King et al., 2013). Scholars and journalists have often expressed their suspicion that the Chinese government has a large pool of citizens working for them to control internet content, jokingly referred to as the ‘50 Cents Party’ because members of this pool allegedly only receive very minimal wages (Glaisyer, 2010; Tufekci, 2017). Glaisyer (2010) refers to this governing practice by the Chinese authorities as counter-activism because it empowers officials to suppress dissident by using the same digital tools on which the opposition relies on (see also Dumitrca & Felt, 2019). The Harvard team found no tangible evidence of whom such a pool consists, but they did confirm the suspicion that such practices are performed by the Chinese government. For example, they found that members of this “party” are instructed not to respond to critical content, but rather to publish distracting content en masse to redirect the audiences’ attention away from content that could harm national security or the communist party. In this context, Tufekci (2017) rightly points out, “This elaborate scheme makes sense if one conceptualizes attention rather than information as the key commodity that a social movement needs. Without attention, information means very little.” (p. 237, own emphasis added). She refers to this governing strategy as disinformation campaigning.
Disinformation campaigns are not necessarily carried out to persuade people or to make them believe any particular set of alleged facts. Instead, the goal is often simply to overwhelm people with so many pieces of bad and disturbing information that they become confused and give up trying to figure out what the truth might be. (Tufekci, 2017, p. 241).

2.3.2 Chinese Diaspora Politics: Expanding Public Control

In her study on the Chinese governmental control over its ethnic minorities both domestically and overseas, Barabantseva (2012) argues that in recent years, the Chinese government has been faced with a fear of national instability resulting from instable relations with its ethnic domestic relations. In addition to that she points out that China is increasingly dealing with global anti-Chinese sentiments towards their migrants. In understanding how the state aims to counter such issues, Barabantseva (2012) looked into the measures taken by the Chinese government and identified these as transnational ethnic unity initiatives. These policy initiatives are on the one hand focussed on creating a more diverse and inclusive notion of overseas Chinese, and on the other, are concerned with nationalizing these multiple identities through increased Chinese loyalties. One of these policies, Barabantseva (2012) argues, is to persuade Chinese diasporic members, who are often better well off in terms of finances and educational background than the average Chinese (Chan, 2010; Kalathil & Boas, 2003), to invest in China-based initiatives which aim to increase the nationalistic sentiment among ethnic minorities. Patriotic Chinese schools in Xinjiang are for example party funded by overseas Chinese. Through such investments, Chinese diasporic members show loyalty and involvement with the Chinese state and are thought of to simultaneously contribute to securing domestic unity. Another example of a transnational ethnic unity initiative is the distribution of a survey in 2010 among Chinese diaspora members, which asked participants to indicate their attitude about the Tibet issue and subsequently where they got their information regarding the Tibet situation from. International human rights organizations raised their concern about this questionnaire because of the lack of transparency about its use of the results (Barabantseva, 2012).

It is argued that through measures like such a survey, the CCP is reaching out to both Han Chinese and Chinese ethnic minorities overseas in an attempt to exercise their “soft power” (Barabantseva, 2012; Ding, 2015). This soft power is mostly exerted through a hand full of both public and private actors who encourage, coordinate and control all migration from China (see Liu & van Dongen, 2016). One of the biggest institutions is the State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO). Barabantseva (2012) has looked into the language choices in official
OCAO documentation, available in 2012, in regard to ethnic minority migrants from China, like the Tibetan and Uyghur diaspora. Focussing on Uyghurs, Barabantseva (2012) identified that the official language emphasizes their negative relation to China: “although they [overseas Chinese] are not separatists, they might be connected to separatists and hostile forces” (Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, n.d., as cited in Barabantseva, 2012, p. 85). That is to say, she identified how the authorities base their relationship with the Uyghur diaspora on distrust and treats them as a potential security concern. This is strikingly different in their approach on the Han Chinese diaspora, which they stress is based on “blood ties, culture, values, interests, and patriotism,” (p. 85).

Shichor (2010) mentions in his study on net nationalism and the use of digital technologies among the Uyghur diaspora that the Chinese government has been putting increased pressure on its neighbouring countries in controlling the (Uyghur) Chinese diaspora. China’s distrust of the diaspora can be explained by understanding that migrants are often better educated and have more financial resources compared to those who stayed behind. Additionally, when migrated to democratic countries, they have been introduced to different political views which can potentially encourage them to oppose the regime at home (Kalathil & Boas, 2013). In the case of the Uyghur situation, Shichor (2010) therefore points out that even though most of the Uyghur migrants are located in neighbouring countries of China; the ‘heavy weights’ in terms of political activism are residing further away from China’s borders, mostly in democratic countries. In other words, their contribution to Uyghur activism is out of proportion compared to the actual size of the communities in democratic countries. Nevertheless, because of their increased international visibility in democratic countries are Uyghurs, of all Chinese ethnic minorities, the least well off in terms of online freedom because they are “subject to a constant, uncompromising, and ongoing Chinese brutal cyber offensive” (p. 304).

Among various measures this cyber offensive has included, since the late 1990s, the occasionally blocking of foreign websites dealing with controversial topics like the Uyghur issue because they could potentially “harm national security” or “the interests of the State” (Kalathil, 2001, pp. 74-75). This blocking of both domestic and foreign websites, and therefore limiting the information flow between China and the diaspora, has a considerable negative effect on diasporic members. The lack of information, and the large amount of misinformation available online, results in great dissatisfaction and insecurity among diasporans. Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek (2017) refer to this situation as information precarity, a “condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, potentially leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumours that can affect their economic and social capital,” (p.
On the contrary, Schram (2013) points out that information precarity may in fact unite those who have been marginalized for collective action, an argument similar to the earlier discussed argument of Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013) who state that limited media access can in fact increase the power of diasporic groups.
3. Research Design

3.1 A Qualitative Approach

The aim of this study is to determine how Uyghur forced migrants in the Netherlands perceive and make use of social media technologies for engaging in diasporic political activism. In order to achieve this, a combination of qualitative in-depth interviewing and ethnographic participant observations was considered to be a fitting methodological approach due to its potential to identify the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The findings of this study accordingly draw on the results of a thematic analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews with 11 Uyghur forced migrants living in the Netherlands.

The research conducted for this thesis is grounded in a phenomenological approach, which aims to redirect the focus of the research away from a deterministic, or media-centric perspective of communication technologies and places their usage within the context of daily routines and social environments (Eberle, 2013; Krajina, Moores & Morley, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Like phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues, people naturally encounter the world through invisibilities, meaning that they make sense of their observations not only through what they literally see or hear, but additionally through how they subjectively perceive and understand the situations or personalities they encounter. A phenomenological approach will thus offer a more nuanced and individualized account on how one makes meaning of things. In the context of the current study, such an approach adds empirical grounding to the concept of the digital diaspora, and in the words of Kevin Smets (2018), it “allows for a more ethnographic and humane viewpoint in which the agency and subjectivity of the refugee is emphasized rather than her/his inescapable victimhood and despair,” (p. 116). This phenomenological approach is especially reflected in the pre-liminary research phase of this study, in which the researcher conducted exploratory observations of both social media content and socio-political events organized by the Uyghur community, and naturally in the incorporation of first-hand interview data. Since previous research on the Uyghur diaspora has generally left out personal accounts of diasporic members, such contextual and narrative-based evidence is understood to have provided further consolidation of the existing knowledge on the political perceptions and practices within the Uyghur community.

3.2 Data Collection

3.2.1 Participant Observations

The purpose for attending events organized by the Uyghur community was twofold.
Primarily, the goal for attending was to strengthen ties with the community in order to recruit more participants for the study. Secondly, the events provided opportunity for conducting participant observation. The method of participant observation can be useful to notice nonverbal expressions and behaviours, enables the researcher to observe who communicates with whom, and to identify practices and behaviours which interviewees are unable to explain or are simply unaware of (Kawulich, 2005). Even though the primary focus of this thesis research has been investigating the perceptions and behaviours in the online space, understanding of offline behaviours was nevertheless perceived as essential to the researcher since the on- and offline space are believed to be inherently intertwined instead of being two separate or disconnected spheres in which people engage with one another (Tufekci, 2017).

The first meeting attended by the researcher was a symposium on Uyghur diasporic media in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. During this event, the researcher was introduced to and accompanied by, an interpreter who was able to translate parts of the talks which were all held in Uyghur. Additionally, the interpreter introduced the researcher to other participants willing to engage in the study, and subsequently to notable Uyghur diasporans who attended from the United States and Germany. The second gathering which the researcher attended to get more familiar with the community and to recruit participants was the Nuruz (or Nowruz) festival, as mentioned in the introduction of this study. Nuruz celebrates the spring and the start of a new year in accordance with the Iranian (or Persian) calendar. The festivities during this day were mostly focussed on children, being with friends and family, and a stage performance of traditional Uyghur arts like music and dance. The third event which the researcher attended was a dinner organised in collaboration between Uyghur diasporans and the (international) youth organisation of Amnesty International Rotterdam. During this event, intercultural exchange between Uyghurs and the international community took centre stage through sharing Uyghur food, listening to a talk about the political struggles of the Uyghurs in China, and dialogue between the attendees.

### 3.2.2 In-Depth Interviews

Qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews were considered to be the most appropriate research method for this study because this method enabled the interviewees to share their opinions and experiences during a conversation in which the researcher adopted the role of involved participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This prevented a sense of formality and thus made the encounter more of an informal “conversation with a purpose” in which both the researcher and the participant gained new insights (Burgess, 1984, p. 102). Through active
engagement, by probing and asking follow-up questions, the researcher subsequently had the flexibility to explore the meanings participants gave to their experiences and ideas (Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Also, as political activism might be a socially and politically sensitive subject to discuss for many Uyghurs, it was thought that one-on-one interviews in a private setting would minimize pressure to answer in a normative or socially accepted way, which might have harmed the openness of the conversation.

Initially an interview topic list was deductively developed for the exploratory interviews conducted in December 2018. In accordance with these interviews, a new topic list was eventually constructed for the semi-structured in-depth interviews in order to specifically get insight into the digitally mediated political practices of the participants (see Appendix C). During the in-depth interviews this topic list gave guidance to the conversation instead of providing an inflexible list of questions by allowing for follow-up questions, probing and discussing topics that organically emerged during the conversation (Hermanowicz, 2002).

The final topic list was structured as follows. Starting the interview, the researcher asked participants questions related to their personal background. This, in order to get to know the participants better and to make them more familiar and comfortable with the setting starting with answering “warming up” questions (Hermanowicz, 2002, p. 489). The second section of the interview focussed primarily on individual political engagement via digital technologies, discussing one’s perceptions on the effectiveness of social media in relation to inciting social change and creating awareness. Furthermore, questions were aimed at understanding what kind of online content the interviewees deemed most important and most effective to read and/or share in regard to the Uyghur cause. The third section of the interview concerned questions directed at engaging in collective action. For instance, participants were asked about their personal view on whether or not s/he considered the diasporic community to be politically active enough. Besides this, interviewees were asked about what they considered to be the primary goal of utilizing social media for diasporic activism. The fourth section dealt with the topic of experiencing surveillance via both digital technologies and in the offline space. Interviewees were asked about their views on such claims and subsequently whether or not they had experienced surveillance, threat or oppression themselves while residing in the Netherlands. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe if, and if so how, such threats are influencing their use of the internet in general, and social media platforms specifically. The fifth section touched upon contact between the Uyghur in-group and the Dutch and Chinese out-groups. Interviewees were asked to what extent they maintained social contacts with Dutch citizens who are not of Uyghur decent. These questions especially touched upon the tension between Uyghurs
and Chinese within the Netherlands. The final section dealt with perspectives on the future of Uyghur online activism. Here, the participants’ hopes and dreams for the future were discussed, the obstacles which the diaspora still has to overcome, and what kind of support the interviewees considered to be essential to achieve such personal and collective goals.

3.2.3 Sample Criteria

In order to gain insight in how Uyghur forced migrants in the Netherlands understand and make use of social media technologies in the context of diasporic political activism, the findings of this study were based on the opinions of members of the diaspora themselves. Prior to the data collection phase of this study, the researcher had no prior connections to the Uyghur diaspora. Therefore, in order to build such connections, the researcher started a preliminary research phase in November 2018 by reading academic studies and news articles about the re-education camps which then recently came to the attention of various Dutch news media (Hendriks, 2018; Houthuijs, 2018; Volkskrant, 2018). Most academic and news articles written about the Uyghurs were identified by the researcher as not considering in-depth the views and opinions of Uyghur diasporans themselves, which potentially indicated reaching out to this community as a difficult undertaking. Based on this information, the sample criteria for the thesis research were formulated as minimal as possible in order to increase the feasibility of successful participant recruitment. The three main sample criteria were: 1) the participant is born in Xinjiang province, 2) the participant considers itself an active user of online media, and 3) the participant is aware of the current political situation in Xinjiang and is able to explain why or why not (s)he is involved in political activism. Initially a fourth criterion was enforced, namely that the participant should be proficient in either the Dutch or English language. However, the researcher ultimately agreed to conduct two interviews in the presence of an interpreter.

3.2.4 Recruitment

In December 2018, the researcher sent out two e-mails and three personal messages over Facebook Messenger to Dutch Uyghur diasporic organisations and openly political active members of the Uyghur diaspora in the Netherlands. Scholars have argued that virtual snowball sampling can benefit researchers in reaching out to “hard-to-reach” populations because, in the case of Facebook, showing your personal page and photo will increase the level of trustworthiness (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). These messages therefore contained additional information about the researcher herself, and subsequently about the exploratory nature and the purpose of the interviews. A response was nevertheless only received on one of the Facebook
messages, which initially led to e-mail correspondence, followed by contact over WhatsApp and ultimately resulted in a face to face meeting. This first participant eventually opened the doors to other diasporic members by referring the researcher to colleagues and friends, starting the process of respondent-driven snowball sampling (Heckathorn, 1997). Between December 2018 and January 2019 three informal, but semi-structured, interviews were conducted with Uyghur diasporans to explore the relevancy of research topics and to obtain foundational knowledge of the community and its political activism on online media (Table 1). This data is however not included in the thematic content analysis of this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploratory Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s ID</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Being introduced into the community, the researcher was eventually invited to attend several gatherings and meetings, as previously discussed. During the first event, the symposium on Uyghur diasporic media, the researcher collected contact details of 12 people. The second gathering, the Nuruz festival, showed to be less suitable for participant recruitment for two reasons. Firstly, because of the event’s main focus on cultural instead of political activity, and second because of the nevertheless highly political closing piece of the stage performance which left the attendees in a state of collective despair and mourning. Due to the loaded atmosphere, the researcher deemed it inappropriate to further interfere in the setting. Therefore, contact details of only 2 people were collected during this second event. During the third event, the dinner with Amnesty International Rotterdam, no new participants were recruited but being present arguably further strengthened contact with those attendees already familiar to the researcher.

Everyone who initially showed interest in participating in the study during these events was subsequently contacted via WhatsApp or e-mail, however some people eventually changed their mind about participating because of time constraints or without further notice. Therefore, another round of respondent-driven snowball sampling was set in motion via successfully recruited participants, specifically aimed at female participants in order to ensure a more balanced gender distribution, which resulted in two more (female) participants.
3.2.5 List of Participants

The final participant sample for the in-depth interviews was composed of 11 Uyghur forced migrants, of which 10 held a Dutch residence permit and 1 was in the process of retrieving its permit. The participants came from various educational backgrounds and belonged to various age groups, the youngest being 18 years of age and the oldest participant being in his fifties. Additionally, the sample consists of a balanced gender divide, namely 5 women and 6 men. The average time of residence in the Netherlands of the sample group is 10.2 years, with one participant living in the Netherlands for 2 years and one participant living in the Netherlands for 18 years. With regard to protection of privacy, all participants have been randomly (although based on gender) assigned a pseudonym (see paragraph 3.4 on the ethical considerations of this study). Table 2 shows a general overview of the participants, a more descriptive overview can be found in Appendix B.

Table 2 List of participants of the in-depth interviews in alphabetical order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Time in NL</th>
<th>Education / Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alim</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Master of science (MA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aygul</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Chinese university degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ehmet</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Middle management degree (MBO4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilham</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Applied sciences degree (HBO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Middle management degree (MBO4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehmut</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Truck driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patime</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reyhangul</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Applied sciences degree (HBO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turghun</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Hospitality industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Middle management degree (MBO4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zordun</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Chinese university degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.6 Interview Procedure

At the start of the interview meetings, all participants were informed about their rights as participants to this study. The majority of participants signed a form of informed consent, dependent on their preference in either Dutch or English, which ensured the confidentiality of the conversation (see Appendix A). Two interviewees preferred to provide their consent orally instead of signing the document with their signatures.

Several procedures were implemented to decrease an imbalance of power between the interviewer and interviewee. First of all, the preliminary research phase in which the researcher
aimed to become more familiar with the community, and vice versa, resulted in a more
comfortable and familiar interview setting for both parties. Second, the interviews were carried
out in a face-to-face setting on a location familiar to the interviewees. The researcher believes
that this has decreased power imbalance because the researcher took on the role of visitor, and
the interviewee the role of host. Furthermore, giving the interviewees the final choice in deciding
the setting is believed to increase the possibility of participation (Sturges & Hanharam, 2004).
Thirdly, at the start of the interview, participants were encouraged to take on an active role
during the conversation in which they had the agency to ask counter-questions for clarification
or to complement the subjects at hand. Although this caused certain conversations to sidetrack
into detailed personal stories and general assumptions, the researcher has ensured consistency as
much as possible by guarding that all topics were eventually touched upon during the interviews.
Additionally, all interviews were concluded with the question whether or not interviewees felt
like certain essential topics were not yet touched upon.

The interviews were consequently conducted in various cities in the Netherlands, in a
variety of settings. Two interviews were conducted in participants’ homes and three interviews
took place in a Uyghur restaurant. The remaining interviews were held in public places such as
cafés, a library, an office and a university. Seven interviews were conducted individually, and one
interview was conducted with two participants at once. Since both participants were neither
fluent in Dutch nor English this enabled them to assist each other in finding the right wordings
and additionally having someone familiar joining the conversation might have created a safer
environment for them to tell their story. The remaining two interviews were conducted in the
presence of a translator who translated from Uyghur to Dutch. The majority of interviews were
conducted in Dutch, except for one interview which was conducted in English. All interviews
were audio recorded, lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and took place between March 20th and
April 26th 2019.

3.3 Data Analysis
3.3.1 Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) is a methodological approach for systematically
identifying, analysing and interpreting underlying patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative
data like interview transcripts (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Such themes are derived from codes based
on either theory-driven (deductive) coding, data-driven (inductive) coding, or a combination of
both (Boeije, 2010; Joffe, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). By generating codes based on theory and/or
interview data, potential relevant subject matters within the narratives are captured and
subsequently function to construct overarching themes between several interviews. These themes thus identify the key shared ideas among the interviewees and will eventually provide the researcher with a framework for adequately structuring and reporting analytic observations (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Identifying recurring themes additionally helps the researcher to reduce the collected information in a systematic and flexible way (Schreier, 2014; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

3.3.2 Conducting Thematic Content Analysis

The interviews conducted for this study have been transcribed verbatim in the language they were conducted. That is to say, 9 interviews were transcribed in Dutch and one interview in English. During this process, the researcher has gone back and forth between the transcript and the audio file to make sure no content was overheard. Generally, the researcher has aimed to note down all pauses, utterances and slips of the tongue of both the interviewees and the researcher herself in order to reflect the contents of the conversation in the most accurate and valid way. However, as Flick (2013) has argued: “There is in fact no transcription notation system capable of providing to the researcher a completely accurate and comprehensive narrative of the original performance: all transcription is in principle selective and entails the inevitable risk of systematic bias of one kind or another,” (p. 3, emphasis in original). Being conscious of this limitation, the researcher has performed the validation practice of member checking three times during the transcribing process to ensure statements were noted down and understood correctly. That is to say, an interviewee was asked to clarify a given statement, and twice given factual information was double checked with another member of the community. Furthermore, the researcher has strived to construct a consistent notation system throughout the whole data set. Eventually, all Dutch transcripts have been translated into English by the researcher to ensure transparency of the data for potential readers.

After the transcribing process was completed, the thematic coding analysis was started. The interview data was initially analysed through inductive, open coding. After a list of over 160 codes was composed, these codes were related, refined and further developed into broader analytical themes through axial coding (Boeije, 2010; Saldana, 2013). Throughout the coding process, certain parts were double coded to increase the validity of the data analysis (Schreier, 2014). During this process the researcher subsequently went back and forth between theory (deductive coding) and the qualitative data to further specify the coding frame (Joffe, 2012). The final coding frame consists of five themes, and 22 codes (see Appendix D).
3.4 Ethical Considerations

Since this thesis research investigates the experiences, perceptions and practices of a considerably sensitive migrant population, the researcher has pursued to implement research ethics in the best way possible. During the exploratory research phase, the researcher has discussed the issues concerning privacy and safety of potential participants with cultural insiders and consequently determined that potential interviewees would in no way be harmed by voluntarily participating in this study. The researcher has nevertheless been aware of the necessity to ensure anonymity of participants. Therefore, the researcher has made sure that the study complies with the Guidance Note for Research on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants drawn up by the European Commission (n.d.). As discussed earlier in this report, the interviewees were made aware of their rights, the risks and the benefits of the study by either reading the form of Informed Consent themselves or being read and explained by the researcher prior to the interview (see Appendix A). The audio tapes of the interviews and the anonymized list of participants were subsequently saved in a password protected file.

By taking the above research ethics into account and by drawing up interview topics primarily related to political activism and social media usage, the researcher has aimed to prevent interviewees from emotional harm. However, during one interview a participant was triggered by the conversation to sidetrack into an emotional account about fear for retaliation and the harm which is done to Uyghur children. Since comforting the interviewee with a short break and by changing the subject did not prove to be effective, the interviewee and the researcher decided together to end the interview premature in order to guard the interviewee from further emotional discomfort. The data retrieved from this interview nevertheless showed to be essential and is thus included in the thematic analysis with the permission of the interviewee.

During the processing of the interview data, all personal information has been omitted from the transcripts. For instance, personal names and places of (prior) residence. In reporting the results, all participants have been assigned a randomly (although Uyghur and based on gender) pseudonym. The researcher has deliberately chosen to assign interviewees with names instead of neutral IDs like ‘Participant 1’ to give the participants of this study a sense of personality even though they had to participate anonymously. The researcher believes that this will stimulate the awareness of the reader that this study is dealing with actual people and will thus increase the impact of the participant’s contributions.
4. Results & Analysis

To determine how Uyghur forced migrants in the Netherlands perceive and make use of social media technologies for engaging in diasporic political activism, this section of the paper presents the main themes and findings that were identified through thematic analysis. Additionally, these themes are connected to theoretical findings previously discussed in the theoretical framework of this paper. This chapter is divided into three main paragraphs which are subsequently broken down in to various sub-paragraphs. The first paragraph discusses how social media is used as a tool for both governmental and lateral surveillance and how the interviewees are positioning themselves online with regard to such digital threat and oppression. Accordingly, the second paragraph deals with how members of the diaspora are utilizing social media platforms for political engagement of both in-group and out-group members through various strategies for diasporic activism. Lastly, the third paragraph considers challenges and prospects for Uyghur digital activism by analysing how the interviewees perceive the future of their political efforts.

4.1 Social Media for Surveillance

Either being asked questions related to social media usage, community forming or safety, throughout all interview topics participants indicated feelings of frustration, fear or desperation regarding the various ways of Chinese oppression they have experienced, or are still experiencing. Three subthemes related to oppression via digital media emerged from participants’ discourses: 1) online misinformation and fake news, 2) encountering espionage, and 3) surveillance of communication and the threat of retaliation. The first subtheme is primarily focused on oppression rooted within China, the second subtheme relates to oppression that reaches over the Chinese borders, and the third subtheme further narrows down to oppression directly affecting the (online) behaviours of the interviewees.

4.1.1 Misinformation and Fake News

A recurring theme in the majority of the conducted interviews is the spread of fake news and misinformation regarding Uyghur culture, religion and identity which negatively affects Uyghurs in multiple ways. Most importantly, the interviewees indicate, is the experience that the Chinese government is withholding information from ethnic Chinese about the political situation in Xinjiang. Ilham, a higher educated woman in her thirties who has been living in the Netherlands for more than 10 years, explains, “Actually, many Chinese people, they don’t know
our situation. They don’t know that we are being oppressed.” The lack of knowledge of ethnic Chinese places Uyghurs, according to all participants, in a difficult position because a great number of people take the CCP’s side and thus function as their mouthpiece both inside China and within the Chinese diaspora. This recalls the findings of research by Jian Hua To (2014) and Liu and van Dongen (2016), who identified how the Chinese government uses its citizens to promote Chinese loyalty abroad through ‘overseas Chinese work’ (*qiao*). Ilham addresses that, from her point of view, the practice of withholding information from Chinese citizens is in fact another oppressive measure of the government to control its people, “But they [Chinese citizens] are not aware of it themselves.”

Reflecting the concept of disinformation campaigning (Tufekci, 2017), information about Uyghurs which is publicized, is thought of by the interviewees as mostly discrediting Uyghur culture, religion and identity. Ilham explains,

The Chinese government has worked hard to tell the Chinese people that we are thieves, that we are very, eh, very… like, retarded people. But that is actually not true. When I studied in China, they always asked me like, how did you come here? And, do you have trains in your province? Do you have cars? They honestly thought that we moved around on camels and easels.

In line with this, three participants indicated that Chinese authorities are structurally problematizing Islamic religion, in opposition to communist thought, by structural fabrication of fake news and allegedly by manipulation of foreign journalists and scholars (see also Bitter Winter, 2018; Introvigne, 2019). Interviewee Alim, a higher educated man in his early thirties who dedicates both his working and free time on Uyghur activism, points out,

Chinese people do not really know about the actual situation, because they just learn about it from the government. And what the government is telling them is, Uyghurs are […] radicals, they are extremists. […] And they think the Chinese government is doing a really good deed to us, and that we are refusing these good deeds and are rebelling against the government. It’s not, actually.

One of the interviewees, Zordun, a prominent Uyghur activist who has been living in the Netherlands for around 10 years, indicated similar practices but argued for a more constructive approach to this oppressive measure. He explained that Chinese communist propaganda and misinformation can in fact be used to strengthen the Uyghur claim by providing the public with
counterarguments and proof that governmental statements are false, “With the use of their own propaganda, we can stand up against them.” This is for example done through publishing articles online that contain evidence that certain news is false. For instance, Chinese officials have argued that the re-education camps in Xinjiang function as schools to teach the uneducated Uyghurs morals and values. In response, diasporans have created and shared photo collages on social media of prominent, high educated Uyghur business men, politicians and artists who have gone missing in the past years to proof that education level cannot be considered a valid reason for “residence” in the camps. This practice recalls Keck and Sikkink’s (1999) argument that activists can use leverage politics for the “mobilization of shame” by drawing attention on the flaws and untrustworthiness of their opponents.

Nevertheless, in general, holding back information and the spread of fake news is pointed out by the interviewees as the foremost obstacle to overcome by the diaspora. Besides the ongoing fight against disbelief of the international community, as will be discussed in paragraph 4.2, lack of knowledge and truthful information is said to further fuel anti-Uyghur sentiment among the ethnic Chinese diaspora. Combined with the increasing political and economic power of China, the interviewees perceive practices of Chinese espionage to have spurred.

4.1.2 Encountering Chinese Espionage

Chinese espionage relates to oppression that reaches over the Chinese borders through neighbouring countries towards the rest of the Uyghur diaspora. On their migration journey from China, four of the interviewees explained, many Uyghurs temporarily stay in neighbouring countries like Turkey and Kazakhstan but are eventually pushed further away because safety issues and better opportunities elsewhere. Having alternately lived between Turkey and the Netherlands, Alim explains that he believes the Chinese influence abroad is increasing, and that Uyghurs often feel safer further away from the Chinese borders. With the increasing power of the Chinese communist party outside of its own territory, interviewees expressed their concern for espionage abroad. Two participants in fact indicated to have encountered the Chinese intelligence services outside of China, which made them and others decide to continue their migration journey towards more democratic areas, like the Netherlands. These encounters generally involved receiving threats via both (anonymous) phone calls and messages via online media.

Living in the Netherlands however, seven of the eleven interviewees provided examples of how they are experiencing Chinese threat and espionage both on- and offline, of which one
on a regular basis because of his extensive political activism. The remaining four interviewees who have not experienced threat or espionage in the Netherlands are all considerably less politically active, but nevertheless shared stories heard from other diasporic members. Most of these stories relate to encounters with (Dutch) Chinese civilians during political demonstrations. Aygul, a woman in her late thirties who considers herself as moderately politically active, remembers an encounter during a demonstration in The Hague where she felt especially threatened. To welcome Chinese premier Li Keqiang, who visited the Dutch parliament, a large group of Chinese exchange students gathered next to the Uyghur, Tibetan, Falun Gong and Amnesty International activists (Amnesty International, 2018; Lelieveld, 2018). Aygul recalls,

Those students stand here [points on the table], in between here we passed through. And those students looked at us very funny, and with big voices, they started singing Chinese songs, ehm, folk songs. … And I saw how some people made photos of us, like, a little secretly. So actually, these are probably not Chinese tourists, no, these are people who take pictures secretly..

Whether or not, and if so where, these specific photos and videos were openly shared on social media or indeed sent to Chinese officials remained unknown to the interviewees. However, either truly spread or not, the fact that Chinese civilians make footage of the demonstrating Uyghurs seems to already be effective to frighten protesters. In this light, think of the metaphor of the panopticon (Foucault, 1975): the fact that inmates or citizens are unable to determine whether they are watched or not, motivates them to act as though they are, because of the invisible threat of observation and punishment. Additionally, a reference to the concept of lateral or social surveillance is in place here (Andrejevic, 2005; Marwick, 2012). Lateral surveillance concerns the practice in which, for instance, a government places part of its control over citizens on citizens themselves, who in turn keep each other in check through social control.

According to the interviewees, this invisible threat of surveillance has been a reason for many Uyghurs not to engage in diasporic activism. However, others continue their activism no matter the risk. For instance interviewee Ehmet, a man in his late thirties, works five days a week after which he spends every weekend demonstrating for the Uyghur cause. “Sometimes I am scared. For example, two months ago, two Chinese men picked a fight with me. Some people asked me something, … so I was explaining and behind me there were two Chinese saying shit, shit, shit, and trying to kick me.” It is only one of the negative encounters he has had with Chinese bystanders during his allegedly peaceful protest. He has subsequently received such Chinese threats via digital ways, he recalls, “Last year, I received a message on Facebook, … I
have seen your kid on your Facebook, your kid looks like you. … I know your son, I have seen it all, you have been protesting.” Later on in the conversation Ehmet pointed out that “Many of the Chinese students here are spies. They need to keep an eye on you. That is why, I do not believe in people. That is why I’m always aware of this, look out for them, and eh, keep distance.”

In line with Ehmet, three other interviewees expressed their worries about the influence that the communist party has on Chinese exchange students. Reyhangul, a woman in her late thirties who came to the Netherlands 5 years ago, explains,

If we protest, they [Chinese] are waiting for us and make pictures. And immediately in my own country, in the capitol, they will know who is there and what they are doing. And some Uyghur people also work for them, and point out like, oh that is he, that is she. … One day demonstration in The Hague, and next day mother was sent to the re-education camp. That is why people are afraid.

In the exploratory research conducted for this paper, Uyghurs not only indicated feelings of mistrust towards Chinese but subsequently, like Reyhangul, towards members of their own community because of the possibility that members are forced by Chinese officials to report back on diasporic activities. This concern was later confirmed by one interviewee who recalled to have been approached by Chinese officials to report on the activities of certain organizations. After s/he refused to do so, s/he had no choice but to break all contact with family still living in China and to keep a low profile.

Accordingly, responding to a question on whether or not he participates in demonstrations without hesitation, Yusuf, a young man in his late teens, admits, “Do you want me to be honest? Eh.. of the Uyghurs who are there.. I don’t even trust all of them.” The subject of mistrusting other Uyghurs also came up during the conversation with Ilham, a mother of two living in the Netherlands for around 10 years who runs several activistic and non-activistic social media accounts. Ilham explained how she is regularly approached on Facebook by people she does not know with Uyghur looking photos and names, asking her in Uyghur language to share personal information. In this light Ilham explains, “They [Chinese authorities] use people within our own community. They are spying in such a way … But I never respond to personal messages if I don’t know them. Especially when it’s my own people.”

4.1.3 Surveillance of Communication

In general, speaking about social interaction with family still living in China, all
participants expressed frustration about not being able to freely communicate with their loved ones. Before the oppression further increased around 2016, the most often used communication tools for voice and video calling were landline telephone, Skype and WeChat. Mehmur, a man in his late thirties who describes himself as not being very politically active but nevertheless attends all gatherings “to listen what they do”, recalls the time he was still able to contact his family: “If we called home, they immediately listened along, … We never spoke about political situation. Yea, just, we are good here, our children grow up well, yea we work, now the weather is nice, here is a bit of rain. Like this.” Only two of the eleven participants are still in contact with their family but feel like they can only do so in very restricted ways. They have therefore developed various strategies to circumvent surveillance of communication. One interviewee explains, "I am able to contact them once every month. But, my father always communicates non-verbally. Like this, [holds finger in front of mouth], because they have placed microphones inside their home." Another participant has taken the protection of the self and family members a step further by exclusively using muted video calls in which communication goes through silent writing on a white board. “A data security, eh, expert told me that, this way, they know there is a data transmission between Netherland and that area, it is risky in that way, …. but as long as you use the camera, they don’t know about the content.” Using social media under a fake name, or alias, has been identified as another tactic employed by the interviewees to circumvent surveillance of online communication. Such a practice reflects findings of other studies on forced migrant diasporas like that of Moss (2016) and Alencar, Kondoca and Ribbens (2018) who both investigated internet usage of the Syrian diaspora.

Of the nine participants who are no longer in contact with their family members, the majority lost contact in the past one to two years due to the increased oppression in Xinjiang, which at the same time became increasingly noticeable within the diaspora. This is evidenced by the fact that three interviewees indicated not to contact their family any longer after having received multiple indirect threats via their own family members living in China. Aygul explains, “My parents normally said you should not do this-this-this, you have to send us your study address, your home address, you really have to send this to us. If you do not send this, we will be in trouble.” Another participant explains how her parents-in-law repeatedly addressed that Chinese police officers stopped by their house on a daily basis to warn them that they were not safe because their children are living abroad. Similar to other interviewees, Reyhangul explains, “They are controlling us with the people from our own country. That is why many people here do not feel like they can demonstrate. That is why you need to go with mask, and with scarf. Unrecognizable.”
4.1.4 Turning Oppression into Action

Even though the interviewees explained that the Chinese oppression has paralyzed many within the Uyghur community, more often did they express feelings of increased personal dedication exactly because of the severity of the situation.

What initially called the attention here was how the concept of oppositional consciousness is reflected in the interview data (Mansbridge, 2001). Oppositional consciousness refers to the process in which a subordinated group adopts a positive self-identity in spite of the domineering group they are marginalized by and becomes conscious of the harm which is being done to them. This was evidenced by the data through accounts of highly valuing East Turkestan as one’s “own country” and continuous praising of Uyghur culture, identity and language as opposed to Chinese culture, even though questions were not specifically aimed at these topics. For instance, speaking about how Dutch people could be engaged more with the Uyghur cause, Aygul shared her ideas for a cultural fair that could travel from city to city: “We have a really beautiful dance, [and] people who can sing very beautiful, and play an instrument, this kind of things, that people like. Then they can also try our different foods, pastries, … we have so much to share!” Another often touched upon topic was that of valuing the Uyghur language, as opposed to Chinese language. Because speaking Uyghur is currently prohibited in China, many interviewees fear for its extinction. Madina, a young girl in her late teens, explains, “We must keep our language safe. I don’t want to lose [it]. … That is why, here I teach the Uyghur language, alphabet, to children.” Accordingly, those among the eleven interviewees who have children all indicated to highly value speaking Uyghur at home and to bring those children old enough to Uyghur language classes every week.

Such explicit expression of the own cultural resources relates to the concept of culture of resistance by Mitchel and Feagin (1995). In the context of the current study, the notion of culture of resistance can be understood as an activistic response to oppression. That is to say, the interviewees of this research all expressed their desire to truly make a change now that the oppression of their homeland has further increased. Aygul explains:

Now I believe we have to rise up. Otherwise, we will disappear anyways. We, the Uyghur culture, the language, really everything will disappear. We have many people in the concentration camps, and every day many people there die, we have to do something. Otherwise really fast.. it is going so fast..
Of the nine participants who lost all contact with their family living in China, the majority in fact decided to increase their political engagement after all contact was broken off. The analysis of the interview data identified that because of this broken contact, these participants shared the idea that there was not much more to lose at this point. This was evidenced by statements like the following from Yusuf: “But now, since I really don’t have any contact with family members there anymore, and since I don’t know if they are still alive, I believe it is now really much more important to, like.. stand strong.” This sentiment reflects the scholarly argument that dedication to the cause of a diasporic community may grow when they are confronted with limited media access (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Schram, 2013), or, in line with the terminology used by Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek (2017), when they are confronted with information precarity. In other words, the fact that diasporans have become increasingly disconnected from their roots and loved ones, seems to in fact make many feel more connected with their homeland and those whom were left behind. In this light, interviewee Zordun states,

People live in their whole life.. eighty years? A whole life does not last long. In my eh, in my living moment, I want to do something for my ethnic group. I have already lost family members, they are detained, they are killed. All bad feelings, we have endured. … My life does not count, I don’t need to be scared. If I, in my life, can mean something to my people, that is enough. Yes-yes. I live with faith. How long can I live? This is not decided by people, this is decided by God.

In this discussion it must however be borne in mind that most of the diasporans interviewed for this study are active political activists themselves, which generally indicates that they indeed broken all contact with family in China. Only one interviewee openly expressed her concern about truly being able to make a contribution, especially since she has not yet lost all contact with her family members. Even though she also stated to be highly motivated to contribute, Reyhangul explained: “[Sometimes] I’m like, never mind, I cannot do anything about it. … First, I need to stand on my own two feet, and earn some money. After that, I can really mean something.” Based on the interviews, this statement is likely to be exemplary for a large proportion of the Uyghur diaspora. This was evidenced by the fact that many of the interviewees showed concern about the “self-centered” perspective of many of their fellow diasporans. Alim emphasized, “We have to, just forget about them [family], because China is taking advantage of this. Eh, how can I say.. It is, the weakness of humanity. The result should come with a sacrifice.
So, that’s what I did.” Taking an opposite stance from Alim, Reyhangul speaks for those who feel differently,

This feeling, like, when you are doing a demonstration here, for all Uyghurs it is good. But for me specifically, for my family, it is not good. My father, mother might need to go to the re-education camps straight away. Who can take such a risk? Other people say, I can forget about my parents, they say that very easily. I am a very honest person: I cannot say that.

4.2 Social Media for Political Engagement

4.2.1 Information Politics: Issues of Trustworthiness and Credibility

The participants identified trustworthy news as one of the key pieces of content they needed (Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek, 2017), and indicated social media to be their main news source for information about current events in their home country. Generally, Facebook was indicated as the most often used platform for news gathering, followed by YouTube and Instagram. The latter was however solely indicated as an important news source by two interviewees, who are both considered to be part of the “younger generation”, meaning below 21 years old.

Interestingly, social media in general and Facebook specifically, were simultaneously considered as unsafe and untrustworthy by the majority of interviewees. Perceiving social media as unsafe can be understood through the reasons addressed in the previous paragraph. Additionally, likewise in line with the previous section, perceiving social media as untrustworthy is partly based on Chinese efforts of spreading misinformation. Another reason for considering social media as untrustworthy is its lack of source transparency. In their study on social media usage and the threat of fake news during the 2016 USA elections, Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) point out that “The format of social media – thin slices of information viewed on phones or news feed windows – can make it difficult to judge an article’s veracity,” (p. 221). A similar argument was heard in the interviews for the current study. Zordun argues, “We should be able to see the source, the true events behind the news, if we can’t trace the source, it is just a myth.” With this statement, Zordun touches on both the, according to him, troublesome workings of social media and the social media practices of Uyghur diasporans themselves. That is to say, the lack of source transparency affects the diaspora in two ways. Firstly, the difficulty of verifying online news makes it hard for Uyghurs to retrieve new, trustworthy information about their homeland, which subsequently weakens their argument to the outside world. And secondly, the credibility of Uyghurs is said to be partly harmed by the fact that so many Uyghurs are using aliases on social media to protect their privacy and safety, which additionally makes it hard for both members and
non-members of the diaspora to traceback the original sources. “We really need to use our own name, own photo, that is better. People … can recognize [us], and they can trust [us],” explains Aygul. This observation reflects the argument of Columbus (2010) who states that anonymity as a countermeasure for digital oppression can have contradictory outcomes: increasing personal safety on the one hand, and harming the activist’s credibility on the other (p. 177).

For this reason, interviewee Turghun, a man in his fifties who has been living in the Netherlands for almost 20 years, believes it to be better to exclusively repost content coming from “big media, like BBC” because if he would write content himself, he believes his message will have “less of an impact … in terms of trustworthiness”. This reliance of migrants on international media was similarly identified by Alencar and Deuze (2017) in their study on the functions of news collection in relation to acculturation processes of migrants. Especially in times of extreme information precarity (Wall et al, 2017), online media thus afford forced migrants to collect information which they consider to be trustworthy and understandable, in a variety of languages (Alencar & Deuze, 2017).

Besides international news media like BBC and CNN, another news source frequently mentioned as trustworthy by the interviewees is Radio Free Asia (RFA). RFA is a North-American non-profit media organization whose aim it is to provide (diasporas with) news on Asian countries whose governments restrict access to free press. The organization consists of eight newsrooms, which focus on news from Cambodia, China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong), Laos, North Korea, Myanmar, Tibet, Vietnam and the Uyghur region. During the two-day International Symposium on Uyghur Media and Broadcasting attended by the researcher, US representatives of RFA attended the event to speak about the importance of diasporic news media. During this event, the theme of information precarity was continuously touched upon by various speakers. The presentations and dialogues during this symposium revealed how many Uyghur diasporans are determined not to primarily sit on the receiving end of the information flow, but additionally desire to contribute to the production side. Especially aiming to challenge and counterargue misinformation available online.

4.2.2 Audience Engagement through Testimony

All downsides considered, using social media is nevertheless perceived by the respondents as the most important and effective measure for political activism. One of the interviewees even explicitly considered social media to be the most effective strategy for activism, arguing that engaging on social media has shown more positive results than either demonstrations or political lobbying. The analysis of the interview data identified two main
discourses related to social media affordances in relation to audience engagement with the Uyghur political campaign, namely, 1) the ability to reach out to the out-group to create awareness, and 2) the ability to conveniently reach out to the in-group to increase engagement.

Perceiving social media as a means to reach out to an extensive out-group audience was for instance evidenced by the fact that four interviewees described social media as the ultimate platform to “show the world”. This was thought to be achieved in two ways, namely through directly creating awareness among members of the out-group through online calls for action and online sharing of information, and secondly through providing international news media with first hand sources. Zordun explains,

If there would not have been social media, then the Chinese would have us, 6 million Uyghurs. they would have disappeared silently. … Via social media we made testimonies. And so, journalists could discover these people, and have contact with them. Such news in the media, on important social media, is essential.

Interestingly, this trust and positive evaluation of the abilities of social media contradicts with the perceived high amount of untrustworthy and fake news that is said to be found online. Six interviewees indeed referred to this discrepancy as one of the biggest challenges for Uyghur political activists, of which two referred to this struggle as “fighting a social media war” with both the Chinese authorities and the public’s disbelief.

Additionally, the interviewees indicate how they integrate online media in their offline activism to increase audience engagement. For example, Mehmut explained how he would like to inform Dutch people, but that his Dutch language ability is sometimes withholding him from convincingly explaining his situation. Therefore, he encourages people he meets to take 5 minutes and have a look at websites he considers trustworthy. Interviewee Ehmet uses another tactic to integrate the on- and offline space. During his demonstrations he encourages bystanders to take photos or videos of him and his posters, and to share those on social media. Especially when people ask him what they can do for the Uyghurs to help out. “Writing something down in their own language, and placing it on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, yes, tell about it. That is the power of social media.” These practices of interconnecting the on- and offline spaces reflect Tufekci’s (2017) argument that in studying media usage of diasporas, these two spaces should not to be regarded as two disconnected spheres.

The second identified discourse related to social media affordances is their ability to conveniently reach out to in-group members in both the Netherlands and beyond. Ilham points
out, “Nowadays, we can’t really do without social media … [Despite] our busy lives, we can quickly come into contact through social media.” However, even though diasporans can potentially reach out to each other relatively easy via digital means, the majority of participants expressed their concerns about the low percentage of diasporic Uyghurs that engage with diasporic matters. Interviewees identified several tactics to increase internal engagement, of which one was the spread of identifiable stories and information on social media to gain trust among those hesitant to participate. In this light, several interviewees mentioned publishing written or video recorded testimonies on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as an essential measure to spread awareness. This practice is in line with what Keck and Sikkink (1999) identified in their study on the political practices of transnational advocacy networks, and reveals that the Uyghur diasporans, either knowingly or unknowingly, align their political practices with other advocacy networks like NGOs and social movements. Additionally, contrary to the argument of Keck & Sikkink that testimonies are generally deployed to inform the out-group, five interviewees indicated that sharing testimonies (of others) is an important strategy to increase internal engagement because inactive Uyghurs can relate to the personal stories and may consequently be persuaded to join the activities. Fear for retaliation, as discussed in the previous paragraph on surveillance of communication (4.1.3), is however thought of to be widespread within the diaspora. Alim explains, “For the sake of other relatives, they still hesitate to stand up. But, that is [something the] Chinese government is taking advantage of. So, what I’m trying to pursue is: my friend, your father is my father.”

In February 2019, Uyghur activists launched the hashtag #MeTooUyghur, a social media campaign to put pressure on the Chinese authorities, and subsequently with the aim to increase both external awareness and internal engagement through personal testimonies. The campaign built on the unrest that had unfolded in the Uyghur diaspora after the news had spread that musician Abdurehim Heyit had died during his detainment in a re-education camp. In response to this news, and after Turkish officials had criticized China for the mass detention of its Muslim minorities (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019), the Chinese authorities released a short video of Heyit on both the YouTube channel and Twitter account of CRI Türk, the Turkish-language Chinese broadcaster. The 25-second testimony video that was released showed a man, said to be Heyit, stating that he was in “good health” and had “never been abused” (CRI Türk, 2019). The footage sparked debate on social media whether or not the video is real, some arguing that the tape could have been pre-recorded, others saying that the picture quality and certain vibrations in the background indicate that the tape had been digitally constructed. The hashtag was quickly shared by diasporic Uyghurs across the world, increasingly
inspiring people to give online testimonies. Madina recalls how she and her Uyghur friends, whom live in Turkey and she only has contact with over social media, all followed the events and posted the hashtag themselves, “I had written as well, like, I am also Uyghur, I also want to know where is my family, is they living or dead? And like, yea, I want answers.”

In considering efforts like sharing testimonies and hashtags it should however be mentioned that even though most of the interviewees evaluated such online practices as an essential political tool for creating awareness about the Uyghur case, these interviewees subsequently indicated to have limited to no contact with out-group members via social media. Keeping in mind that social media are driven by algorithms that determine what users encounter on social media, it is therefore not likely that people who have never heard of the Uyghur situation will be confronted with a testimony video. The question should thus be raised how effective sharing information online indeed is for reaching out to members of the out-group. This critical note reflects the findings of studies on both algorithmic echo-chambers (Dylko, 2016; Hampton, Shin & Lu, 2017; Ort, 2017) and slacktivism (Morozov, 2009; Rotman et al., 2011; Halupka, 2014). That is to say, it is plausible that much of the information which is shared online by diasporic members mostly reaches other like-minded members, which nevertheless results in the idea that one has contributed to increasing awareness about the Uyghur cause. However, these two arguments do not necessarily have to be contradictory if we assume that such online practices could increase internal engagement through identity politics, which eventually may increase external engagement on the long run.

4.2.3 Identity Politics Through In-group Social Networking

A recurring theme which interviewees addressed was how they interacted with other diasporic members, both within and outside the Netherlands, often combined with the discourse that communication with Dutch citizens is limited. The most important reasons for this are said to be issues of integration, Zordun explains: “I don’t have a very big Dutch network. The most contact with Dutch people is through my colleagues. But because [I am very busy], I can’t really maintain social contacts. And therefore, my Dutch language development is limited.” Exception to this rule were the two interviewees under the age of 21, whose social networks for the most part consisted of non-Uyghurs.

Opinions on whether the diaspora should focus its attention on the in-group or on the out-group diverged to great extent among the interviewees. Some viewed this difference in focus as an obstacle or internal conflict, whereas others judged this variety in approaches as an essential feature of successful activism by simultaneously increasing the engagement of both diasporic
members and non-members. Being critical of the inward focus of the community, one interviewee described this dynamic as “water in a plastic bag floating in the sea”, meaning that “it looks like it is mixing in with the sea water, but it is actually not”. That is to say, according to the interviewee, the Uyghur issue is talked about extensively within the community both online and in gatherings or demonstrations, but it is struggling to be picked up by the societal circles surrounding them because non-members are not actively involved in such practices by many of the organizing elites of the diaspora. This is said to be generally due to the lack of social capital and language proficiency of the community, as exemplified by Zordun’s statement above. This can again be related back to the concept of (algorithmic) echo-chambers, however in this context the echo-chamber is situated in the offline sphere when a community lacks strong social ties to other groups in society.

Lacking the resources to build an extensive Dutch network, Zordun deliberately focuses his political activities on the in-group: “My goal is, my wish is, to wake up my people so more people will engage with political activities. … I trust in this approach.” Interviewee Yusuf shares the opinion that an inward perspective can be beneficial: “I think it is mostly important … to create a community ourselves first. And then as a next step, bring it to, like, the world.” In contrast, interviewee Turghun exclusively focusses his online and offline efforts on Dutch citizens: “I want to use all my power to inform the Dutch people. I’m not concerned with informing the Uyghur people themselves.”

During the interviews, eight interviewees pointed out that they use social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube exclusively for activistic purposes. One interviewee said to additionally use these platforms for (in-group) social interaction, while the two youngest participants (below 21) indicated to use these platforms almost exclusively for social interaction and entertainment. These two youngest interviewees pointed out to also make use of Instagram and Snapchat on a daily basis. The social media tool that all interviewees are using most frequently for social interaction is WhatsApp. Aygul explains,

On Facebook, I mostly share useful things, eh, like news, and actually not so much my own story. But on WhatsApp, I feel it is a bit more safe then Facebook, I can just eh, write to the people who know me. A video, or yea, like telling a bit more about myself, or to organize things, I can explain more.

This tendency of preferring one social networking platform over the other was also identified by Harris and Isa (2018) who found that by 2016, the Chinese control over
communication spread beyond the Chinese borders when contact with diasporic Uyghurs became regarded as a violation for China-based Uyghurs. This consequently resulted in a digital migration from the Chinese social application WeChat to the North-American mobile communication service WhatsApp (p. 16). On WhatsApp, Dutch Uyghurs have created multiple groups which all address a different theme. For example, all interviewed Uyghur women are part of a women’s WhatsApp group, although it stayed unclear during the interviews whether this was one and the same group or if this concerned several different groups. Besides separate WhatsApp groups for Uyghur men and women, interviewee Reyhangul explains how there are many more themed WhatsApp groups:

"One is on sharing free stuff, like toys and books, or furniture. The second is purely an information group regarding the demonstrations, and eh, Dutch Uyghurs doing something together as a community. The third group is eh, only for the children, to learn the language. And about reading books in the mother tongue. … And another one is car, like, giving information about repairs.

These WhatsApp groups were revealed to be essential for the Dutch Uyghur diaspora to construct a diasporic community and shared identity among diasporans living all over the country. Accordingly, the interviews identified how Uyghur activists aimed to deploy this constructed sense of (imagined) community to persuade inactive or silent members (Shain & Barth, 2013) to join political activities. This was for instance evidenced by statements like the following of interviewee Aygul. In answering a question on how inactive Uyghurs could be engaged with political activism, she explained how she used WhatsApp groups to invite in-active members to cultural and fun activities, hoping they will eventually be interested in participation in more political gatherings: “For example, this is only for children, or only for women, so this way new people will we attracted, we can still expand bit by bit and slowly the ideas of these people will change.”

4.3 Challenges and Prospects for Uyghur Digital Activism

In addition to their current practices on, and perceptions of, political activism on social media platforms, the interviewees subsequently elaborated on their expectations for the future of their activistic efforts and community as a whole. This paragraph therefore addresses both the internal and external challenges which the Uyghur diaspora allegedly are facing in their efforts to effectively create awareness and incite change through both on- and offline means.
4.3.1 Challenges for a Unified Uyghur Community and Activism

Various interviewees pointed out how forming a united community will eventually help to effectively convey a collective message on social media. At the same time, it was addressed how forming a unity has not yet been achieved. With regard to such internal obstacles to overcome, the interviewees indicated three overarching challenges: 1) internal opposing views and commitment, 2) issues of integration, and 3) decreasing mental health.

Internal opposing views are indicated as a pressing issue by generally all interviewees. In line with previous paragraphs, the main challenges mentioned are trustworthiness of other diasporic members, opposing views on what is considered as effective activism, and different levels of commitment to the Uyghur cause. In addition to these, disagreement on diasporic leadership is another often heard issue within the Uyghur community. In line with the argument of scholars like Dhoest, Nikunen and Cola (2013) addressed in the theoretical framework of the this report, all these internal differences can be understood along the lines of perceiving the Uyghur diaspora as a heterogenous group of migrants, rather than a homogenous community with one history, identity and political aim. Scholars on the Uyghur diaspora have identified similar tendencies: “Uyghur identity is not unified but fragmented along the same lines that separate social groups,” (Rudelson, 1997, p. 168). Rudelson (1997) additionally argues that these differences pose a challenge for those aiming to unify the diaspora: “These divergent Uyghur self-identifications at the local level pose the greatest challenge to intellectuals’ efforts to shape an overarching Uyghur nationalist ideology,” (p. 168). This tendency is indeed reflected in the interview data. According to the interviewees, disagreement about diasporic leadership mostly relates to the existence of various diasporic organizations within the Netherlands, and additionally to the largest Uyghur diasporic organization, the World Uyghur Congress (WUC). WUC is located in Munich, Germany and aims to unite all diasporic Uyghurs across the world under one umbrella organization. The interviewees of the current study indeed differ in their opinions on WUC, some being especially supportive, while others argue that in almost 20 years, this organization has not achieved anything substantial. However, two interviewees point out that these internal differences do not necessarily need to be resolved, but rather that diasporic members need to learn how to cooperate and coexist together like a democratic body. Reyhangul explains, “China is [a] dictatorship, only the power of one party. But we, like in the Netherlands, we look at how many seats a party has, that is democracy. We also need to learn that.”

The second recurring theme in the data with regards to challenges to overcome is that Dutch Uyghurs are facing issues of integration on several levels. Mentioned most often was the
fact that many Uyghurs hold limited Dutch cultural and social capital. That is to say, six interviewees indicated that many diasporans do not understand the Dutch language well enough to engage in Dutch society. Additionally, four interviewees stressed that the community is in need of more highly educated members but that many do not have the language proficiency or financial resources to continue their education. They expect that higher educated Uyghurs will increase the effectiveness of online diasporic political activism because they will be able to produce and share content in both Dutch and English, instead of almost exclusively in Uyghur. Additionally, interviewees referred to the expectation that the more integrated a member is in the Dutch society, the better he or she is able to engage Dutch citizens with the Uyghur cause because they will know which online channels to focus on and which organizations and institutions Uyghurs might obtain support from. That is to say, in the terminology of Putnam (2000), more integrated Uyghurs are thought of to be more likely to be successful in *bridging* and *bonding* with the out-group. However, the thematic analysis of the interview data also revealed that the youngest interviewees, including the one interviewee considered to be most integrated because of its current study enrollment, language ability and extensive Dutch social network, to be currently the least involved in political activism, especially online. As previously indicated in the section on online social interaction (4.2.3), the younger interviewees almost exclusively use social media for social networking and entertainment, rather than for political activism. The main reason for the relatively limited involvement of the younger generation with online political activism was said to be time. Yusuf explains:

> Right now, I’m more focused on my school. And I already feel like I have way too little time to do my own things. Like, I already almost have no time to meet up with my friends, because like, I’m in school … I have to work … On Sunday [I] do things with friends.

Three of the interviewees who belong to the older generation indeed indicated that they expected integration to show a positive effect on political engagement *on the long term*. For instance, interviewee Turghun explains,

> Those Uyghurs who do not come to demonstrations, we can’t look at them angrily. But we should be happy, that they are now living in the Netherlands and that they are raising their children in a Dutch way, emerged in Dutch society. In the future, we will have a Uyghur community within the Netherlands who is capable of truly making a change.
The third issue which the diaspora is facing was said to be the rapidly decreasing mental health of its members. This was indicated as a pressing issue because of its inherent relation to digital media practices. That is to say, two interviewees indicated that they preferred not to use Facebook anymore because the content they were confronted with on this platform was often too painful and too depressing for them. Reyhangul explains, “It’s very painful to read and look at those things. To collect that kind of information, every day, in daily life, to see that … that is not a nice feeling … and you bring that back into your home.” Similarly, interviewee Aygul emphasizes how the constant stream of bad news via social media takes its toll on the community:

Women, many Uyghur women, are sitting at home, they cry, they are busy with their children every day, and in between, always crying. Yes. We cannot.. we do not have any good news. If a person only hears bad news, of this kind, this really will.. mentally destroy [us].

This strongly reminds of what Wall, Otis Campbell and Janbek (2017) referred to as information precarity. It was previously discussed in the results section how information precarity can result in the increased power of a community, for example due to increased feelings of vengeance (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013) and how this may enforce the unity a community (Schram, 2013). The accounts of the interviewees above however show that instead of resulting in increased feelings of resistance, information precarity can subsequently cause the opposite, namely increasing a sense of discouragement and sorrow. Three participants expressed their worries about what the outcome of this collective state of being will bring in the future. Aygul explains:

I am very afraid that many Uyghur people have psychological damage because of the Chinese government … No contact with parents, no contact at al. This feeling is so bad. This can eh.. mentally we are all not normal right now. I think the Dutch government really has to.. they should really be aware that this is important. Because, if everyone is mentally like, tuut tuut tuut, something bad can happen. Many people should look in our direction.

Aygul’s reference to the importance of interference of the Dutch government was a statement often heard during the interviews. The final paragraph of this results section will therefore further address what the participants indicated as external challenges to overcome for the Uyghur community and its political activism.
4.3.2 Performing Leverage Politics: the Urgency for International Support

Dissatisfaction about the extent to which the international community has been interested in the Uyghur cause so far was a recurring sentiment among generally all interviewees. The interviews revealed that some members of the community are especially focused on engaging both Dutch and international organization with the Uyghur awareness campaign. In academic theory this strategy for diasporic activism has been referred to as *leverage politics* (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Leverage politics involves seeking support from parties with influence and power, and has in the context of the current study been linked to the practice of *cultural brokerage* (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). The latter entails practices of linking, managing and collaboration between various actors within a diasporic advocacy network in order to collect and distribute new information about the current situation in Xinjiang. This was in particular reflected in the transnational efforts of interviewee Alim, who is part of a transnational diasporic network which aims to collect updated information from newly arrived Uyghurs.

My job is just to collect any kind of proof, of the situation of my people, like testimony. Or, like today, I came to the airport to interview newcomers, the eh, Uyghur refugees. And I hear their stories and collect any kind of photographs. We collect it, classify it, and send it to organizations. And then we have a group in America who translate it in different languages and share it on social media to raise awareness as much as possible.

Other interviewees instead indicated to be primarily concerned with seeking support from Dutch politics and institutions. Interviewee Aygul, who is active for one of the diasporic organizations in the Netherlands, explains, “We have been in contact with [the Ministry of] Foreign Affairs and Amnesty International, there has been contact with these organizations. At Foreign Affairs they do say that they would want to do things for us.” However, asked what the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs has done so far, Aygul could not provide a clear answer.

Similarly, Alim explains how he and his colleagues have been in contact with various organizations and governmental institutions in search for support, “I made a phone call to UNHCR. And they put me through with several Dutch media, and then they made a phone call to me, to listen to my story properly, and then just.. get lost.” In search for governmental support to protect his brother-in-law from execution in one of the re-education camps in Xinjiang, Alim could neither get a foothold on Dutch authorities because of his current refugee status, “I think the Dutch government still do not know about the severity of the Uyghurs.” Nevertheless, the majority of the interviewees indicated to generally feel safe in the Netherlands and that they felt safe to use social media for political activism. Zordun explains,
I also contacted AIVD\(^2\), and I received a phone number that I can call if needed, so I can be protected. … I’m very content with the Netherlands. This is a free country. I have not been in contact with my family for 10 years, but I can still live healthy. This is because of the policies of the Dutch authorities.

However, taking into consideration the extent to which most of them need to take precautions in order to use online media “freely” and the fact that certain members are in need of such a phone number would indicate otherwise. Indeed, Ehmet also received a phone number to call whenever he is in need of protection. However, this has not decreased his fear that one day this assistance will come too late to protect him, “Yesterday [I] sent a letter to Foreign Affairs … Protect me, and my family.” When speaking about the future of his activism in relation to his safety, Ehmet states: “Soon I will also make a video and telling my story and post it on YouTube. If I go.. I will have this on YouTube.” This statement not only exemplifies the severity of Ehmet’s insecurity about his safety, but subsequently the tremendous commitment to the Uyghur cause which characterized many of the interviewees. Additionally, it identifies the importance of an online platform like YouTube for the spread of testimonies which are thought of to function as evidence and make the effects of the Chinese oppression visible to a large public (Keck & Sikkink, 1999).

Besides being involved in leverage politics to increase institutional engagement for protection, three interviewees indicated that international support was subsequently needed to raise awareness about the global threat of Chinese interferences. That is to say, it was argued that oppressing Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other (Muslim) ethnic groups both within China and abroad through digital means could potentially be only the start of further international interference. Additionally, international support was identified as important for diasporic members because the ultimate goal of their political campaign was said to be the independence of East Turkestan. In this light, interviewee Medina stated:

Who knows, maybe East Turkestan will be free in five years. I’d rather go back. I miss my own country. Everyone… yea.. everyone thinks their own country is really special. I was born there, I had so many friends there, all my big family is there, and then, yea.. hm.. I just want to go back, if it is free. I definitely want to go back.

\(^2\) Dutch Intelligence Service
5. Conclusion

This thesis has considered how Uyghur forced migrants in the Netherlands understand social media technologies in the context of diasporic political activism, as well as how they consequently make use of these online platforms. Insight into these perceptions and practices offer new scholarly perspectives on the challenges forced migrants from China face within the context of an increasingly digitally mediated and therefore transnationally interconnected world.

Aiming to substantiate the relatively limited scholarship on the Uyghur diaspora with first-hand accounts of diasporic members themselves, this thesis drew upon in-depth interviews with 11 Uyghur Dutch citizens and status holders, complemented by three exploratory interviews and three field observations of two cultural and one political gathering in the preliminary research phase of this study. The results show that among politically active Uyghurs in the Netherlands exists an unmistakable profound devotion to the homeland cause, through both extensive on- and offline activistic efforts.

Reflecting the findings of Shain and Barth (2003), the Uyghur diaspora has been identified as an active diaspora with core members, passive members and silent members. This was evidenced by respondents’ diverse intensity of engagement and commitment to diasporic activities. That is to say, some interviewees expressed profound commitment through devoting both their personal and working life to the Uyghur cause, organizing gatherings and demonstrations, and determining the advocacy strategies performed by other members. Others indicated to participate whenever called upon, and all participants referred to silent diasporic members who needed thorough persuasion to engage or refused to participate in diasporic matters.

Uyghur political activism was revealed to evolve around three main target audiences, namely by increasing internal, societal and institutional engagement. Consistent with diasporic advocacy strategies identified in the results section of the current study, Uyghur political activism mostly unfolds through information politics, and additionally through identity building and transnational lobbying and cultural brokerage (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Horst, 2008; Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Østengaard-Nielsen, 2003). These three strategies came to be understood as inherently intertwined with one another. That is to say, the Uyghur diaspora most commonly deploys the strategy of on- and offline information politics to create awareness for the Uyghur cause, to build a positive Uyghur identity, and to engage people and institutions on a transnational level. A similar intersection exists between on- and offline political activity (Tufekci, 2017), which was evidenced by the finding that social networking platform WhatsApp
is used to incite offline action and to establish both on- and offline social interaction. Similarly, the political oppression which Uyghur migrants initially aimed to flee from, through migrating to the Netherlands, has in fact continued through digital means.

The interview data revealed that an ambivalence exists towards the usability of social networking sites. On the one hand, participants perceive social media, especially Facebook, as their main source of information to stay as up to date as possible on the situation in their homeland. On the other hand, participants indicated to perceive social media sites as inherently unsafe and untrustworthy, and accordingly experienced decreased comfort because of the extent of information precarity (Wall et al., 2017). Accordingly, the analysis revealed that beneath this perception of unsafety lies a collective fear for Chinese retaliation on left behind family and, in some cases, on participants themselves, even though they have migrated to a country which they recognize as safe, democratic and just. Nevertheless, the interview data showed how diasporic Uyghurs in the Netherlands have been necessitated to develop strategies to circumvent Chinese surveillance over both digital and analogue means of communication. Additionally, the data shows how Uyghur forced migrants perceive international news sources as more credible then sources from their home country. This finding reinforces a study by Alencar and Deuze (2017) who identified a similar sentiment among Eastern European and Sub-Saharan migrants. This reveals how the Uyghur participants are likewise relying on foreign, international news agencies to overcome information precarity.

Additionally, it was found that social media are perceived as a particularly important measure for effectively creating societal and international awareness about the Uyghur cause, through liking and sharing factual information and personal testimonies. As opposed to the general scholarly assumptions on clicktivism, arguing that such online efforts are rather “easy” or “lazy” acts of resistance (see Halupka, 2014), the interview data showed that the act of liking and sharing on social networking sites can in fact come with high risks and costs depending on the context in which it is performed. This finding was interpreted through the ways in which participants articulated their own, and others’, feelings of reluctance about engaging with politics on social media in the light of fear for digital surveillance and potential repercussions. This finding further consolidates Tufekci’s (2017) argument that the on- and offline world are inherently interconnected.

This thesis has ultimately shown that Uyghur diasporans deploy their own cultural resources to symbolically resist the Chinese cultural, social and political oppression of Uyghur people. This further strengthens the concept of culture of resistance by Mitchel and Feagin (1995). This finding is for instance evidenced by the extent to which participants, whether they were
consciously aware of this or not, emphasized strongly valuing Uyghur language and culture like art, dance, music and food, as opposed to Chinese language and culture. That is to say, the positive valuation of Uyghur culture, language and identity are in fact powerfully shaped and reinforced by the oppressive measures that are instead targeted on elimination of such cultural expressions. These findings are significant because they reveal how attempts of silencing a group of people can in fact run counter.

Accordingly, the data revealed how Uyghur diasporans perceive the promotion of their cultural identity as essential for engaging Dutch citizens with the Uyghur cause. However, the results additionally showed that this focus on the own cultural identity and social group might harm effective integration since many Uyghur diasporans encircle themselves with other in-group members and accordingly experience difficulties in reaching out to the out-group. This negotiation reinforces Komito’s (2011) argument that social media can potentially harm the integration process into the host society because they afford migrants to further strengthen in-group social ties.

5.1 Practical Implications

This study identified a tension between the collective desire for effective political activism on the one hand, and securing individual comfort and safety on the other. This tension is significant because it reveals how achieving justice and protecting one’s personal safety are perceived as incompatible with one another for many Uyghurs in the Netherlands. This thus demonstrates the urgency for revisiting Dutch policy on the protection of refugees, particularly of those people coming from China and other technologically advanced authoritarian regimes. Additionally, the findings of this report could consolidate the debate on how the Netherlands should position itself in the international debate on the increasing transnational digital surveillance of China.

This report has subsequently revealed the essential role which international media play in creating awareness for the Uyghur cause, and accordingly how media attention influences the well-being of refugees through either including or overlooking their precarious situation. Furthermore, many of the accounts shared by the interviewees exemplify the urgency for increased media coverage on both the Uyghur diaspora and the transnational interference of Chinese authorities in the lives of non-Chinese citizens. In this light, the findings of this report offer both Dutch and international media, NGOs and human rights groups the opportunity to further consolidate their campaigns for the Uyghur cause. Additionally, these parties can benefit from the interview data in their liaison with the Uyghur community.
5.2 Strengths & Limitations

The primary strength of this study is grounded in the personal contributions of the Uyghur participants, and accordingly, the researcher’s ability to reach out to a forced migrant population that is not especially visible in Dutch society. It is believed that the researcher was able to establish a relation with the community because of the carefully planned time frame prior to the main research phase in which a connection was built based on mutual trust and familiarity with initially three prominent members of the diaspora. Showing sincere interest in their stories and political activities has subsequently opened up opportunities to be redirected to other members willing to participate. The fact that the researcher attended, and thus was seen at, two relatively well-attended gatherings may have helped the community to become more familiar with her, even though initially from a distance.

Furthermore, being of Dutch nationality herself, may have benefitted the researcher in finding participants willing to be interviewed, since generally little attention is payed to this community by Dutch citizens, media or institutions. Given the researcher’s status as a member of the out-group, and the reassurance that their identities will be protected in the best way possible, Uyghur participants may have felt more at ease to be outspoken, critical, and objective in their discussion of Uyghur identity, political activism and perceived Chinese oppression than they might have been with a researcher from the in-group.

Moreover, the sample population is believed to reflect a balanced distribution of both gender and age, as well as level of education and to some extent the degree of activistic commitment. Therefore, the interview data is regarded as a proper reflection of the existing political practices and perceptions of the Dutch Uyghur community, apart from potential unique exceptions. The only voices which have not been heard in this study are naturally of those who are regarded as ‘silent members’. However, since these diasporic members are believed not to be politically active, this aspect is not regarded as a limitation to the findings but rather as a purposeful exclusion.

Naturally, this research indeed comes with certain limitations. The first main limitation is related to the language barrier which in certain interviews may have influenced the richness of the data. If needed, and where possible, the researcher has attempted to rephrase questions and concepts without compromising the underlying essence of the topic at hand. In two interviews the researcher was assisted by an interpreter, of which in one case the interpreter joined the meeting without prior notification to the researcher. Because the latter interpreter was unprepared and unfamiliar to both the topic and the researcher, this is believed to have disrupted the dynamic and mutual understanding during the conversation to some extent. However,
through applying the principle of *audi alteram partem* – referring to the legal practice of hearing both sides of a story – it is believed that the essence of the given statements was captured in the best way possible. That is to say, when unsure about the correctness or completeness of a translation given by the interpreter, the researcher attempted to double check the statements with the interviewee who did speak some Dutch.

A second limitation to this report is potentially the exploratory nature of the study, which has resulted in a relatively small number of participants whom, even though transnationally interconnected with other diasporans, move about in a single contextual setting, namely the Netherlands. Furthermore, it is believed that an expansion of the study with a content analysis of either Facebook posts or WhatsApp group communication could have provided further insights into the practices of the Uyghur diasporic community.

5.3 **Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the finding that there exists a difference in social media usage (for political activism) among the currently two Uyghur generations in the Netherlands, it could be worthwhile to conduct a more comprehensive comparative study on the intersection of political activism, nationalist perceptions and social media usage among younger and older diasporic Uyghurs. This, in order to better understand how online political practices are influenced and shaped by integration processes and digital politics. Further enriched with a comparison between Uyghurs and other diasporic communities could potentially reveal to what extent forced migrant communities are differently or similarly influenced by the digital politics and societal factors of the Netherlands as a host country.

Additionally, based on the results of the current study, further research on the interface of mental health, collective trauma and digital media, especially in regard to forced migrants coming from China, is considered to be urgent. The question to what extent digital media are either mitigating or instead reinforcing the agony of traumatized Chinese migrants is thus far believed to be underexposed. Most importantly in reference to the perceived transnational digital surveillance of Chinese authorities.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to conduct a study in which ‘silent members’ are included in a larger sample of Uyghur diasporons. This could potentially shed light on a more nuanced understanding of the perceptions on, and engagement in, political activism of silent members. Since these diasporons are relatively hard to find it would be advisable to further extent the preliminary research phase to build strong social ties with the community.
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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Informed Consent

**INFORMED CONSENT FORMULIER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naam van het onderzoeksproject</th>
<th>Masterscriptie Media, Culture &amp; Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doel van het onderzoek</td>
<td>Dit onderzoek wordt geleid door Michel Franken U bent van harte uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek. Het doel van dit onderzoek is om inzicht te krijgen in het gebruik van online media door de Oegi者ese gemeenschap in Nederland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang van zaken tijdens het onderzoek</td>
<td>U neemt deel aan een interview waarin aan je vragen zullen worden gesteld over uw media gebruik. Een voorbeeld van een typische vraag die u zal worden gesteld: <em>“Waar gebruik je social media vooral voor?”</em>. U dient tenminste 18 jaar te zijn om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek, daarnaast dient u van Oegi者ese afkomst te zijn. Van het interview zal een audio-opname worden gemaakt, zodat het gesprek later ad-verbum (woord voor woord) kan worden uitgewerkt. Dit transcript wordt vervolgens gebruikt in het verdere onderzoek, de audio-opname wordt vernietigd.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Potentiële risico's en ongemakken       | - Er zijn geen fysieke, juridische of economische risico's verbonden aan uw deelname aan deze studie. U hoeft geen vragen te beantwoorden die u niet wilt beantwoorden. Uw deelname is vrijwillig en u kunt uw deelname op elk gewenst moment stoppen.  
- Er is mogelijk ongemak verbonden aan uw deelname aan deze studie, vanwege de eventuele gevoelige aard van het onderwerp. U hoeft echter geen vragen te beantwoorden die u niet wilt beantwoorden. Uw deelname is vrijwillig en u kunt uw deelname op elk gewenst moment stoppen. |
| Vergoeding                              | U ontvangt voor deelname aan dit onderzoek geen vergoeding. |
| Vertrouwelijkheid van gegevens          | Uw privacy is en blijft maximaal beschermd. Er wordt op geen enkele wijze vertrouwelijke informatie of persoonsgegevens van of over u naar buiten gebracht, waardoor iemand u zal kunnen herkennen. Voordat onderzoeksgegevens naar buiten gebracht worden (in welke vorm dan ook), worden uw gegevens anoniem gemaakt. Bijvoorbeeld: |

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*Erasmus University Rotterdam*
- uw naam wordt vervangen door een anonieme, op zichzelf betekenisloze combinatie van getallen.


- uw woonplaats wordt niet gebruikt, maar eventueel de provincie waarin u woont.

Bij de start van dit onderzoek krijgt uw naam direct een pseudoniem; uw naam wordt gepseudonimiseerd ofwel 'versleuteld'. Op deze manier kan wel worden onderzocht wat u in het gesprek aangeeft, maar weten eventuele betrokkenen bij de verwerking van de onderzoeksgegevens niet dat u het bent.

De onderzoeksgegevens worden indien nodig (bijvoorbeeld voor een controle op wetenschappelijke integriteit) en alleen in anonieme vorm ter beschikking gesteld aan personen anders dan de onderzoeker zelf (bijvoorbeeld een docent of onderzoekscommissie).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vrijwilligheid</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deelname aan dit onderzoek is geheel vrijwillig. Je kunt als deelnemer jouw medewerking aan het onderzoek te allen tijde stoppen, of weigeren dat jouw gegevens voor het onderzoek mogen worden gebruikt, zonder opgave van redenen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dit betekent dat als je voorafgaand aan het onderzoek besluit om af te zien van deelname aan dit onderzoek, dit op geen enkele wijze gevolgen voor jou zal hebben. Tevens kun je tot 5 werkdagen (bedenktijd) na het interview alsnog de toestemming intrekken die je hebt gegeven om gebruik te maken van jouw gegevens.

In deze gevallen zullen jouw gegevens worden verwijderd en vernietigd.

Als u besluit om te stoppen met deelname aan het onderzoek, of als u vragen of klachten heeft, of uw bezorgdheid kenbaar wilt maken, of een vorm van schade of ongemak vanwege het onderzoek, neemt u dan aub contact op met de onderzoeker.
Toestemmingsverklaring

Met uw ondertekening van dit document geeft aan dat u minstens 18 jaar oud bent; dat u goed bent geïnformeerd over het onderzoek, de manier waarop de onderzoeksggegevens worden verzameld, gebruikt en behandeld en welke eventuele risico’s u zou kunnen lopen door te participeren in dit onderzoek.

Indien u vragen had, geeft u bij ondertekening aan dat u deze vragen heeft kunnen stellen en dat deze vragen helder en duidelijk zijn beantwoord. U geeft aan dat u vrijwillig akkoord gaat met uw deelname aan dit onderzoek. U ontvangt een kopie van dit ondertekende toestemmingsformulier.

Ik ga akkoord met deelname aan een onderzoeksproject geleid door Michel Franken. Het doel van dit document is om de voorwaarden van mijn deelname aan het project vast te leggen.

1. Ik kreeg voldoende informatie over dit onderzoek. Het doel van mijn deelname als geïnterviewde is voor mij helder uitgelegd en ik weet wat dit voor mij betekent.

2. Mijn deelname als geïnterviewde in dit project is vrijwillig. Er is geen expliciete of impliciete dwang voor mij om aan dit onderzoek deel te nemen.

3. Mijn deelname houdt in dat ik wordt geïnterviewd door Michel Franken. Het interview zal 45 tot 60 minuten duren. Ik geef de onderzoeker toestemming om tijdens het interview geluidsopnames te maken en schriftelijke notities te nemen. Het is mij duidelijk dat, als ik toch bezwaar heb met een of meer punten zoals hierboven be- noemd, ik op elk moment mijn deelname, zonder opgave van reden, kan stoppen.

4. Ik heb het recht om vragen niet te beantwoorden. Als ik me tijdens het interview ongemakkelijk voel, heb ik het recht om mijn deelname te stoppen.

5. Ik heb van de onderzoeksleider de uitdrukkelijke garantie gekregen dat de onderzoeksleider er zorg voor draagt dat ik niet ben te identificeren in door het onderzoek naar buiten gebrachte gegevens, rapporten of artikelen. Mijn privacy is gewaarborgd als deelnemer aan dit onderzoek.


7. Ik heb een kopie ontvangen van dit toestemmingsformulier dat ook ondertekend is door de interviewer.

| Handtekening  
| Handtekening |
| Datum  
| Datum |

Erasmus University Rotterdam
Appendix B: Descriptive Participant List

Alim | Alim is a young man in his early thirties who has been living in the Netherlands for 2 years. Alim has been living in both Turkey and the Netherlands in the past years. After following a prestigious master study (MSc) in the Netherlands, he is currently awaiting his residence permit while volunteering for various Uyghur political diasporic organisations.

Aygul | Aygul is a woman in her later thirties who has been living in the Netherlands for 9 years. She is mother of two and loves cooking and baking Uyghur delicacies, with which she hopes to eventually engage Dutch people with Uyghur culture through her own catering business. After losing her job, she is currently a stay at home mom and an active figure in the Uyghur women’s group through which she tries to engage inactive diasporans to participate in political activism.

Ehmet | Ehmet is a man in his late thirties who has been living in the Netherlands for 12 years. He is a father of two and an active member of the Uyghur community. He works full time in the scientific industry and dedicated all his free time on demonstrating for the Uyghur cause. Ehmet is a very visible and outspoken activist, both on- and offline.

Ilham | Ilham is a woman in her late thirties who has been living in the Netherlands with her husband and three children for 12 years. She is currently finishing up her bachelor’s degree (HBO) to work in health care. As an active member of the community, especially within the women’s group, she is dedicated to use her medical knowledge to improve the well-being of Uyghurs in both the diaspora and back home if it will become possible to return to her homeland. Besides her study and busy family life, she is an anonymous moderator of several accounts on various social media platforms.

Madina | Madina is a young woman in her late teens who has been living in the Netherlands for 5 years with her parents and siblings. Madina is currently a student and voluntarily teaches the Uyghur language to Uyghur children during the weekend. Before coming to the Netherlands, Madina and her family lived in Turkey. Madina uses social media mostly for maintaining social connections with her friends in both Turkey and the Netherlands, with whom she exchanges news on the situation in her home town.
Mehmut | Mehmut is a man in his late thirties who has been living in the Netherlands for 15 years with his wife (Patime). His two children were born in the Netherlands after a period in which Mehmut had a hard time to integrate and find work because of his lower education. He currently works as a truck driver and donates part of his income to the Uyghur political campaign.

Patime | Patime is a woman in her late thirties and came to the Netherlands with her husband (Mehmut) 15 years ago. She is an active participant of protests and engages in the women’s group. She is especially concerned about the well-being of Uyghur children in both the diaspora and back home, which is the most important reason for her to contribute to the Uyghur campaign both financially and through participation.

Reyhangul | Reyhangul is a woman in her late thirties who has been living in the Netherlands with her husband and small children for 5 years. She is currently enrolled in a study related to health care and is an active member of the women’s group. Together with other women she organizes cultural and political events with the aim to involve those diasporans who are not participating in the campaign yet. She is especially concerned about the effect of (online) media on the mental health of the diaspora and the lack of trustworthy news.

Turghun | Turghun is a man in his fifties and is considered a respected member of the Uyghur diaspora. He and his wife have been living in the Netherlands for 18 years. Turghun has a relatively large network in Dutch social and political organizations, with whom he tries to cooperate to engage Dutch people with the Uyghur cause. He works in the hospitality industry through which he aims to engage Dutch citizens with Uyghur food and culture.

Yusuf | Yusuf is a young man in his late teens who has been living in the Netherlands with his parents and siblings for 8 years, with a short break when he and his family temporarily moved to Turkey. He speaks the Dutch language nearly fluent and has a large social network outside of the Uyghur community. He is currently moderately engaged with the Uyghur cause because of his busy study, work and social live, but is determined to eventually contribute to the community. He nevertheless uses his social media accounts almost exclusively to create awareness for the Uyghur cause.
Zordun | Zordun is a man in his later forties who has been living in the Netherlands for 11 years with his wife and nearly grown up children. Zordun is a well-known and respected member of the Uyghur diaspora, both in the Netherlands and internationally. Through his work in the media industry he dedicates both his work and free time to the Uyghur cause by advocating for independent and truthful reporting on the Uyghur issue.
Appendix C: Topic List / Interview Guide

The following is the English version of the interview guide, in 9 out of the 10 interviews a Dutch version was used.

[Request to record the conversation and start the recorder]

General introduction

- Introducing myself as a researcher.
- Explaining the aim of the study and interview to the participant.
- Informing the participant about the duration of the interview (45 to 60 minutes).
- Handing over the Informed Consent Form and going over the contents together.
- Asking the participant to either sign or give oral consent.

1. Introductory questions

- Can you tell me who you are?
- How long have you been living in the Netherlands?
- What was your occupation back in East-Turkestan?
- What is your occupation (or main activity) in the Netherlands?

2. Individual (online) political engagement

- Are you currently active on social media?
- If yes, which platform(s) do you prefer to use? Why is that?
- If no, why is that?
- For what purpose do you mainly use social media?
- What kind of content do you think is important to share? Why is that?
- What language do you generally use online? Why is that?
- How are social media important to you?
- If not mentioned to this point:
  Do you engage with political discussions on social media?
  In what way? / Why not?
  Do you feel like your online contribution is meaningful?
  Do you consider your online engagement to be effective? In what way?
3. **Collective diasporic action & community**
   - Is it important for you that the Uyghurs in the Netherlands raise awareness about the situation in East Turkestan?
   - In what way are social media important for the Uyghur community?
   - Do you think the Dutch Uyghur community is active enough?
   - Have you heard of Uyghurs who do not want to participate?
   - How do you feel about that?
   - Have you tried to convince people to join, or do you know of such activities?
   - What is in your opinion most important goal to reach as a community?
   - How can this be achieved?

4. **Chinese surveillance**
   4.1 **Online surveillance**
   - I have read and heard about suspicion that the Chinese authorities are using social media for surveillance of the diaspora, is this a concern that is bothering you when you’re using social media?
   - How does this influence your use of social media?
   - Do you feel safe to express yourself critically online?
   - Do you use your own name and photo on your social media accounts? Why (not)?
   - Can you say everything online?

   4.2 **Offline surveillance**
   - Do you attend gatherings and protests?
   - Do you feel safe to express yourself critically during such events? Why (not)?
   - Do you feel like enough people are joining these events?
   - Everything is recorded, how do you feel about that?
   - Are you okay with being filmed or photographed yourself?
   - How important is it that such events are recorded and shared online?
   - Which strategy do you consider to be most effective: online sharing or offline events?

5. **In-group vs. out-group networks**
   - Do you have contact with Dutch people about the situation in East Turkestan?
   - If yes, is this mostly via online media or does this mostly occur in the offline space?
   - Is it important for you to engage Dutch citizens with your community? Why?
▪ How do you personally reach out to them?
▪ How about contact with Chinese Dutch people?
▪ How is it for you to be in contact with Chinese Dutch?
▪ Have you had any negative experiences with Chinese people in the Netherlands, either online or offline?
▪ Have you had any positive experiences with Chinese people in the Netherlands, either online or offline?

**Ending the interview**

▪ Do you have any last comments related to Uyghurs and social media that we have not discussed yet?
▪ Do you have any questions for me concerning the aim of the research or about the interview?

▪ Thank the participant for their cooperation.
# Appendix D: Coding Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing oppression via digital technology</td>
<td>1. Online misinformation and fake news</td>
<td>Being negatively affected by the online spread of fake news regarding the situation in Xinjiang, Uyghur identity and culture, e.g. through discrimination and disbelief.</td>
<td>&quot;[...] Chinese people do not really know about the actual situation, because they just learn it from the government. And what the government is telling them is Uyghurs are [...] radicals, they are extremists. [...] And they think the Chinese government is doing a really good deed to us, and that we are refusing these good deeds and are rebelling against the government. It’s not, actually.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Surveillance of (online) communication</td>
<td>Experiencing that communication is being controlled by Chinese authorities, which affects both on- and offline behaviors.</td>
<td>&quot;I am able to contact them once every month. But, my father always communicates non-verbally. Like this, [holds finger in front of mouth], because they have placed microphones inside their home.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Left behind family as oppressive measure</td>
<td>Experiences with Chinese authorities conveying threats and pressure via family living in Xinjiang.</td>
<td>&quot;My parents normally said you should not do this, this, this, you have to send us your study address, your home address, you really have to send this to us. If you do not send this to us, we will be in trouble.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Espionage in the Netherlands</td>
<td>Suspicions of both Chinese (Dutch) and Uyghurs spying for the Chinese authorities.</td>
<td>&quot;If we will protest, they are waiting for us and make pictures. And immediately in my own country, in the capitol, they will know who is there and what they are doing. And some Uyghur people also work for them, and point out like, oh that is he, that is she.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of social media</td>
<td>1. As unsafe and untrustworthy</td>
<td>Adjusting online behaviors (e.g. using aliases) because of threats, misinformation, and anxiety about published content insinuating retaliation on family.</td>
<td>&quot;I say everything I can right now. But I cannot reveal my real identity online. Eh, because the Chinese [...] they just cannot. [...] I just have to hide that. Otherwise they are just going to focus on, much more, on me than they already do.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. As main information source</td>
<td>Using social media (esp. Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp) as the main tool for news collection.</td>
<td>&quot;Yes, I look at it every day, Facebook. I collect a lot of information there, about the news, about news on my own country.&quot;</td>
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<td>3. As effective and important</td>
<td>Perceiving social media to be the most important, convenient and effective measure in relation to political activism.</td>
<td>&quot;At this moment, we can’t really go without social media. And via social media we can really involve many people. [...] I think because of our busy lives, we can quickly come into contact via social media. And especially regarding to our situation, [...] via social media we can make our voice heard to many people.&quot;</td>
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<td>4. In-group online networks</td>
<td>Constructing, and being part of, online (international) networks exclusively consisting of Uyghurs, through which the majority of one’s social life takes place.</td>
<td>&quot;On Whatsapp here we have like, eh, 6 or 7 groups, all on different topics. One is about health care, one for sharing free stuff, eh, a women’s group, one for men, eh, one on car reparations... And politics of course, demonstrations...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on community</td>
<td>1. Internal differences</td>
<td>Experiencing internal mistrust and differences in political and activistic beliefs, actions and goals within the Dutch Uyghur diasporic community.</td>
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<td>&quot;You don’t have any worries here, and still you don’t want to do anything, but I think that is shameful, I think that is not okay. [...] You are obliged. If you don’t want to do that, then, yes, you can’t say you’re Uyghur.&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>2. Collective over individual (Self-sacrificing)</strong> Valuing the group’s interest as superior to the personal interest.</td>
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<td>&quot;If I would have been in my own country now, I would have been in concentration camp. Jailed, perhaps dead. Yea. No one knows. God saved me from the genocide, yea... That is why I need to, for my nation, for my people, I need to do something, no matter what.&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>3. Oppositional consciousness</strong> Emphasizing the importance and high value of Uyghur identity, culture and language in response to the Chinese oppression.</td>
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|                     |                         | "Who can do such bad things to others? To another ethnicity? Who is the boss? I think... [cries] God is the boss... [Inaudible] Why are they doing this?"
|                     |                         | "I don’t want to lose my own language. Because, in China now, we are not allowed to speak Uyghur, only Chinese. [...] So here, we must keep our language safe. I don’t want to lose. That is why Uyghur is a really important language. [...] That is why, here I teach the Uyghur language, alphabet to children." |
|                     |                         | **4. Decreased mental health** Experiencing deeply negative emotions like anxiety, despair and frustration, and expressing concern for the collective state of mind. |
|                     |                         | "I am very afraid that, eh, many Uyghur people have eh, psychological damage because of the Chinese government. [...] If a person only hears bad news, of this kind, this really will.. mentally destroyed..."
|                     |                         | "I used to be scared as well. But now... there is happening too much. The oppression has become worse, I think, I need to do something, even though these people will know who have shared these things online." |
|                     |                         | **5. Increased (collective) commitment to political activism, generally powered by increased sentiments of resentment** |
|                     |                         | "I believe eh, spreading true culture, dance, music, food. [...] Eh, then perhaps many people will come every time, we can give them flyers, explain things, we have so much to share. [...] Perhaps many Dutch people will be interested and we can show, also our website, we can give it to them, if people still want to know more." |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diasporic advocacy strategies</th>
<th>1. Identity politics</th>
<th>Acts of peaceful (individual) activism through integration, cultural exchange, and dialogue to create external awareness.</th>
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<td>&quot;We’re fighting a social media war. [...] We cannot do anything with our hands, or with pistols, things like that. [...] Normal practices, like sharing true information via social media. And eh, make war with the Chinese government in this way.&quot;</td>
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<td><strong>2. Information politics</strong> Increasing both internal and external awareness through online distribution of news, and giving personal testimony to increase credibility.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>1. Internal differences</strong> Experiencing internal mistrust and differences in political and activistic beliefs, actions and goals within the Dutch Uyghur diasporic community.</td>
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### Future of Uyghur activism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Issues of integration</th>
<th>Emphasizing the importance of successful integration in order to effectively contribute to political activism and having high expectations for the second generation.</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;He says, those Uyghurs who do not come to demonstrations, we can’t look at them angrily. But, we should be happy, that they are now living in the Netherlands and that they are raising their children in a Dutch way, emerged in Dutch society. In the future, we will have a Uyghur community within the Netherlands who is capable of truly make a change...&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<th>2. Increasing Chinese power as global issue</th>
<th>Expressing worries about the future of both Uyghurs, Muslims and the world as a whole, in regard to the perceived increased power of China.</th>
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<td>&quot;It is not only problem of Uyghur people. The western countries now should take it very, very seriously actually. From my point of view. Because after they become stronger than now, we are going to pay even heavier price to stop the whole power actually. [...] Uyghur is only the first obstacle on their way.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<th>3. Decreasing safety in the Netherlands</th>
<th>Experiencing decreased safety in the Netherlands and emphasizing the importance of (international) political support and alliances.</th>
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<td>&quot;A lot of people, afraid that eh, if something happens to them out here, the Dutch government may find it a kind of troublesome to stand up for eh, a refugee. They might get bad with China, and they will pay an economic or political price for protecting their eh, refugee citizens.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<th>4. Future driven</th>
<th>Being motivated and determined to improve diasporic activism and positively contribute to the lives of Uyghurs and other oppressed minorities, generally with the aim of independence of East Turkestan</th>
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<tr>
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<td>&quot;I will keep the white sheets [with supportive messages]. This is very important, to see what I have done here. Genocide in China, what I have done against it. This is proof, also for future. Also for my kids. In future I see my children will grow, I can say I have done this and this, and you also have to do something for your people. This is good proof. If in the future my land will be free, I it give to our museum. That is why I will save this.&quot;</td>
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### 3. Collective action

- Organizing and participating in demonstrations, (online) petitions, collectively filing police reports, and emphasizing the importance of numbers.
- "Based on my information, there are at least 2500 Uyghurs in Netherland, but eh, you hardly see more than one hundred people, or two hundred people in a gathering. [...] To my sister I said, go with your husband and your kids. And just wear a, a glass. But you have to be there. Because if we, us, are not, take it serious, then they are not going to believe us, that we are con- eh, genocide."

### 4. Transnational action

- Emphasizing the importance of a multilingual approach, and acts of political action in correspondence with diasporic members in other countries.
- "As Uyghur women, from each country, for example, Italy, Belgium, Germany, we have eh, together discussed it on Whatsapp.. And on the same day, in every country, we all went to the parliament of that country. And eh like, demonstration there."

### 5. Financial contributions

- Contributing to diasporic activism through financial contributions, e.g. by donations or having dedicated one’s working life exclusively to the Uyghur cause.
- "What I want to do now is, I want to sell shoes here. And import it from Turkey. And use the- the generated profit for the Uy-Uyghur cause. For example as promotion of the Uyghur situation, and then financially helping the Uyghurs in eh, Central Asia and Turkey. [...] It should be something, eh-eh, like, a sustainable mechanism..."