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Social Media and Inclusive National Identity in Kazakhstan: A Case Study of *Unknown Kazak*

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Abstract

Social media's influence on the construction of national identity in Kazakhstan remains underexamined. Therefore, this study explores how social media users construct and contest the boundaries of inclusive national identity in Kazakhstan. Its main goal is to examine how social media users in Kazakhstan construct, negotiate, and contest the boundaries of national belonging, with particular attention to how inclusive and exclusive understandings of Kazakhstani national identity are articulated in online discussions. In doing so, it examines *Unknown Kazak* Instagram page with 177,000 followers that regularly posts content on the topics of Kazakh history, national identity, traditions, historical figures, and the language. In particular, the publications related to Kazakh national identity are analyzed using thematic analysis. The study also conducts a discourse analysis of the most-liked comments on four most-liked, widely discussed, and frequently shared posts. It was found that some users of digital media often advocate for an exclusive Kazakh identity, rooted in the conviction that being Kazakh is synonymous with being ethnically Kazakh. At the same time, another group of users tend to promote an inclusive Kazakh identity. Specifically, they seek to shape and contest the boundaries of national identity by emphasizing not ethnic origin, but a love for the culture and language, as well as unity among all citizens of Kazakhstan. It was also found that how people contest national identity in the comments appears to depend on the post's content.

Keywords: inclusive national identity, Kazakh identity, Instagram, Unknown Kazak, social media users

Introduction

There is a growing need to study how national identity in Kazakhstan is constructed and contested in recent years. It is important to explore whether the discussion of national identity in Kazakhstan follows the lines of inclusive national identity or whether they reinforce exclusive forms of national belonging based on ethnicity, language, or cultural background. Moran (2011) understands the inclusive national identity as dynamic, changing, post-ethnic, which has open dialogue among co-nationals. In this way inclusive national identity positively affects multiculturalism. According to Zhussipbek (2024), the inclusive national identity is one that embodies various identities in terms of culture, religion, gender and so on. In contrast, exclusive national identity stems from primordialism. Coakley (2018, p. 327) emphasizes that "primordialism, … stresses the deep historical and cultural roots of nations and nationalism and assumes their quasi-objective character". It means that it focuses on history and culture, while inclusive identity focuses on unity and friendship among people as Moran (2011) and Zhussipbek (2024) mentioned, respectively. Moreover, Bačová (1998) asserts that national identity through primordialist view is based on ethnicity, and it is defined through the common language and history. Also, Milošević-Đorđević (2007, p. 385) says that exclusive national identity is "unchangeable, unyielding and basic human category, given by birth and colored with irrational feelings". Hence, inclusive and exclusive national identities are opposites by definition.

Themes related to national identity can be discussed in public spheres such as social media, as the latter can serve as a platform to share, construct and contest the topics of national identity and belonging. It is argued that identity can be facilitated by social media (Diakiv et al., 2025). Moreover, social media may "recover knowledge systems and ways of being that colonial modernity sought to erase entirely" (Gallien, 2020, p. 34). According to Mihelj and Jimenez-Martinez (2020) digital media affect national identity construction in different ways such as fragmentation, commodification and commercialization. Also, Zhang (2020) has found that social media has an impact on shaping Chinese identity, while Heang (2024) believes that digital media facilitates nationalism.

This research focuses on exploring the extent to which social media contributes to the discussion of national identity and belonging in Kazakhstan. In particular, it explores the Instagram page named *Unknown Kazak* (Unknown Kazak, n.d.), since it regularly publishes posts on topics about history of Kazakhstan including genocide, colonization, independence, national identity, traditions, historical figures, and Kazakh language. These topics seem to facilitate discussions on de-Sovietization among users. This paper focuses on the following research question: How do social media users construct and contest the boundaries of national identity in Kazakhstan? The main goal of this research is to examine how social media users in Kazakhstan construct, negotiate, and contest the boundaries of national belonging, with particular attention to how inclusive and exclusive understandings of Kazakhstani national identity are articulated in online discussions.

This paper argues that there is no established understanding of national identity among social media users. Based on the example of the Instagram page *Unknown Kazak*, it can be observed that some digital media users seem to support an exclusive Kazakh identity. Along the lines of primordial nationalism, they argue that being Kazakh means being ethnically Kazakh. In contrast, some social media users tend to promote an inclusive Kazakh identity, as seen in their comments. In particular, they construct and contest its boundaries by focusing on love for culture and language, not ethnicity, and on unity among people in Kazakhstan.

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how social media users in Kazakhstan construct, negotiate, and contest the boundaries of national belonging. Drawing on qualitative thematic analysis and discourse analysis, it investigates how inclusive and exclusive understandings of Kazakhstani national identity are articulated in social media content and discussions among users. The empirical analysis focuses on publicly accessible posts and associated comment threads from selected social media accounts. The cases are selected purposively to capture different approaches to national identity, including those emphasizing Kazakh language and culture, civic belonging, and public debate on social and political issues. The analysis explores how national belonging is framed in relation to citizenship, ethnicity, language, cultural practices, and shared experiences, as well as how users reinforce or challenge boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through online interactions. The data are analyzed thematically and comparatively to identify recurring narratives of national belonging, points of contestation, and differences across the selected cases. By examining both the content of posts and audience responses, the study explores how understandings of Kazakhstani national identity are articulated and negotiated in digital spaces. The research does not seek to measure the causal effects of social media on individual attitudes; rather, it investigates the discursive processes through which national belonging is defined and contested online.

The article consists of introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, results and discussion sections. The conclusion presents the overview of the study and future avenues for research.

Literature review

The term national identity has no single, commonly accepted meaning; therefore, it can be interpreted differently. Since identity is not naturally created, it is constructed (Olivier, 2019). This term can also be viewed through a constructivist approach, meaning each person interprets national identity through their perceptions and knowledge. For example, according to Fukuyama, "national identity begins with a shared belief in the legitimacy of the country's political system… Identity can be embodied in formal laws and institutions that dictate, for example, which language or languages will be considered official ones or what schools will teach children about their country's past. But national identity also extends into the realm of culture and values. It consists of the stories that people tell about themselves: where they came from, what they celebrate, their shared historical memories, and their expectations about what it takes to become a genuine member of the community" (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 22). In turn, Isaacs (2026) challenges the traditional civic-ethnic dichotomy in nationalism. Instead, he proposes viewing it through Homi K. Bhabha's idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism, which allows a more fluid, hybrid understanding of identity. This view accepts cultural differences in everyday life. Moreover, Kudaibergen believes that "all identities are connected to lived experiences and, as such, are flexible, contextual, and constantly changing" (Putz, 2025).

When discussing national identity in Kazakhstan, it is important to distinguish between "Kazakh" and "Kazakhstani" nation concepts. The Kazakhstani nation is propagated by non indigenous people of Kazakhstan, especially Russians, who are the large minority, because "Kazakhstani" includes all ethnicities. The term Kazakh nation suggests that Kazakhstan belongs to Kazakhs (Aitymbetov et al., 2015). But Kudaibergen argues that "ethnicity is not rigid, Russianness is not rigid, at least not when it is lived and experienced in Kazakhstan, and I believe in Central Asia" (Putz, 2025). Another perspective by Insebayeva and Insebayeva (2022) affirms that national symbols and currency not only indicate the state's independence but also shape national identity, arguing that changes in the national anthem and banknote design reflect shifts in national narratives over the years of independence. Thus, symbols through visual representation have a great impact on the formation of Kazakh identity, and "symbols furthermore possess certain malleability and can be made to fit different goals and objectives to serve various purposes and interest groups. All these factors make symbols a particularly attractive and relatively inexpensive tool, available to political actors to pursue their political agendas" (Insebayeva & Insebayeva, 2022, p. 4).

Another study argues that the term "Kazakh nation" "has not become a unifying factor for a large part of the country's citizens" (Assyltayeva et al., 2024, p. 100), given the diversity of identities. Sharipova (2019) refers to Kazakhstan as a nationalizing state. The author cites the Soviet past as the reason for Kazakhstan being a nationalizing state, rather than current national symbols and regional, religious, and language factors. The concept of a "nationalizing state," coined by Brubaker, means that the state is trying to find its own path to nation-building, and the best option is to build an inclusive political nation that does not discriminate on the grounds of origin, language, or religion (Sharipova, 2019, pp. 17-18). Kaliyev (2023) argues that Kazakhstan is still searching for national identity, as history shapes the identity-formation process.

During Soviet rule, Kazakhs were part of a broader Soviet identity, during which Russification was carried out. Isaacs (2026) claims that to legitimize the regime and include all identities across the country, former Kazakh president Nazarbayev promoted ethnic and civic nationalism. Particularly, through the adoption of laws, historical reconstruction, and reinterpretation, Kazakhification was promoted. At the same time, the government sought to ensure peace and harmony among the country's 130 nationalities. Moreover, Isaacs (2026) highlights that several factors influence inclusive

national identity construction in Kazakhstan. Specifically, Soviet nationality policy facilitated differentiation among ethnic identities. In addition, the Russian language was considered a main language that everyone should know alongside their native language. Furthermore, individuals in urban areas, compared to rural areas, are more engaged in heterogeneous societies and interactions. At the same time, Kazakhstan is an urban country. The next factor is mobility and migration, which, because of Soviet sedentarization, Slavic migration, and the return of Kazakhs to their homeland, creates hybrid, translocal identities. The last factor is timing and location: Kazakhstan is located in Eurasia, where different groups interact. Besides, Kudaibergen mentions that the Soviet government imposed strict ethnic divisions on the population, which did not exist before against the notion of the fluidity of identities (Putz, 2025).

People adopted a Soviet identity, and "cultural sovereignty in Central Asia … constrained and enabled by Soviet legacies" (Rees, 2024, p. 90). The Soviet version imposed national costumes, dances, and literature to create a single identity (Tlostanova, 2020). It is important to note that recreating pre-Soviet identity was prohibited, as it led to repression against the local intelligentsia (Abashin, 2016). However, Soviet authority did not aim to destroy national identities but to transform them into Soviet ones. Thus, nationality became an important marker for categorizing the population, encouraging people to identify with the USSR and with their own state as part of it (Nezihoglu, 2017). Zhussipbek (2014) argues that, as a result, language and ethnicity became the main factors in classifying individuals. During the pre-Soviet period, these factors did not play a crucial role because former Khanates and tribes were defined less by ethnicity and more by mode of living and social order. Additionally, victory in the Second World War contributed to the development of Soviet identity, because it is natural to identify with the winning country; therefore, after the war, the brotherhood of the USSR was demonstrated (Koplatadze, 2019). According to Rees (2024, p. 88), "Soviet victory in the Second World War was a major element of the post-war Soviet identity-building mythmaking project".

Zhussipbek (2024) argues that an inclusive Kazakh identity is currently underway, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a turning point. This is because this large-scale conflict brought Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs together. The inclusive Kazakh identity "is open to accepting different perceptions of cultural, social, religious and gender identities and by extension inclusive models of nation-building. In other words, it is about constructing a human rights-friendly individual and group identity" (Zhussipbek, 2024, p. 164).

However, research conducted by Zhunisbay in the summer of 2024 found that people's views of the USSR differ depending on the language in which they receive news and communicate (Pannier, 2025). Thus, people were divided into four groups: elderly and young Kazakh speakers, and elderly and young Russian speakers, with all Kazakh speakers believing that the USSR conducted colonization. Meanwhile, young Russian-speaking people were also critical of the Soviet Union but highlighted famine, repressions, and loss of language during that time. Elderly Russian-speaking Kazakhs were the most vulnerable to contemporary Russian narratives and ideas about "beneficial" colonization. The researcher argues these results are linked to media consumption (Pannier, 2025). Young people, by not watching TV, do not receive a stream of propaganda from Russian channels. Older people, however, watch; if it is Kazakh language TV, Russian narratives do not reach them (Pannier, 2025). This highlights how people's views may be shaped by their exposure to media content from different sources.

Moreover, contemporary society relies on electronic media, which influences "cultural, social, economic and political life" (Olivier, 2019, p. 5). Consequently, social media is an effective tool to

affect people, including their culture, ethnicity, and traditions (Grishina et al., 2021). Even private social media is important in shaping group identity (Collins, 2016), because people of all ages use social media every day to express their opinions, whether positive or negative, on different issues (Sharipova et al., 2024). Particularly, social media can affect national identity construction (Mihelj & Jimenez-Martinez, 2020). Mihelj and Jimenez-Martinez (2020) argue that digital media has made it difficult for states to maintain dominant national identity narratives. Powerful actors can disseminate publications and make them popular quickly. Also, Mihelj and Jimenez-Martinez (2020) claim digital media can fragment nationalism as some promote inclusive national identity, while others emphasize an exclusive one. These authors argue that digital media influences the commodification and commercialization of nationalism. In particular, online companies see users as national communities and offer them suitable commodities. Heang (2024, p. 2) also argues that "digital media play a key role in promoting nationalism". For instance, people use online platforms to share information about their culture and history, while politicians can spread national narratives online, which in turn shape people's perceptions.

Meanwhile, Zhang (2020) explores social media's influence on Chinese identity. After analyzing more than 1000 publications, it was found that criticism of Western liberal elites because of Muslims and non-white immigrants facilitates the strengthening of Chinese ethnoracial identity. Hostility toward Western democracies, characterized as weak, also contributes to the development of Chinese political identity. In addition, Lu and Yu (2019, p. 705), through an analysis of World Values Survey responses, examine the Internet's influence on national identity. According to them, national identity consists of cognition, affection, and action. It was revealed that "national identity is eroded by information distribution but is strengthened by power distribution. Power distribution and freedom distribution work together to neutralize and regulate the effects of information distribution". In other words, they argue that Internet penetration may hinder national identity formation because various forms of information split national narratives. In contrast, online political participation positively affects national identity. Freedom of expression, however, has a mixed effect: it negatively affects the action component of national identity while positively influencing the other two components.

Previous research has examined the relationship between the Internet, social media, and national identity more broadly (Heang, 2024; Lu & Yu, 2019; Mihelj & Jimenez-Martinez, 2020; Zhang, 2020). However, it appears that these studies have generally not focused on the influence of specific social media tools and accounts on the discussion of national identity. Moreover, while existing research explores the relationship between social media and national identity, it pays insufficient attention to the distinction between exclusive and inclusive forms of national identity. This gap leaves the role of individual social media accounts in shaping inclusive national identity underexplored. To address this gap, this study examines how social media contributes to constructing and contesting inclusive Kazakh national identity. Kazakh identity is chosen as the focus of this study because limited research appears to have examined the influence of social media on the formation of an inclusive Kazakh identity.

Theoretical framework

The concept of boundary-making is suitable in discussing inclusive national identity. According to Lamont and Molnar (2002), boundaries help to differentiate between groups. They distinguish two types: symbolic and social boundaries. Concretely, Lamont and Molnar claim that "symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people,

practices, and even time and space" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 168). Social boundaries reflect differences in material and nonmaterial resources and opportunities. The point is that once symbolic boundaries are widely accepted, they translate into social ones. In this way, the authors argue that a nation, its territory, and its culture do not always coincide, and that national identity is a living, constantly evolving process rather than something rigid (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). It results from interactions between forces at the local and national levels.

Meanwhile, Wimmer also disagrees with "distinctions between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalisms and a range of similar typologies prominent in the field of nationalism studies because they are based on differences in cultural content rather than structural form" (Wimmer, 2008, p. 1030). Instead, he proposes five strategies of ethnic boundary-making. The first one is expansion, which makes boundaries more inclusive. For example, different groups of people are called Frenchmen. Meanwhile, boundary contraction makes identity more exclusive. This is because boundaries shrink as identity becomes more divided. For instance, Pakistani people in the United Kingdom do not want to be associated with Indian identity, but rather want to be differentiated. Besides, a transvaluation strategy can be divided into normative inversion and equalization. The first term means reversing the hierarchy in the ethnic system; the second aims for equality among all groups. Also, positional moves are one strategy implemented when all are satisfied with a hierarchy expected for one group. The last is blurring, which facilitates non ethnic principles and undermines ethnic categorization. In addition, Wimmer (2009, p. 254) asserts that "ethnic groups are seen as the result of a potentially reversible social process of boundary-making rather than as self-evident units of observation and analysis", meaning that ethnic groups are not fixed, but flexible. He also points out that ethnic groups emerge through interaction and distancing from other groups. Furthermore, Wimmer (2009) argues that three factors affect boundary-making. The first is institutional rules (laws, regime, structure), which determine which strategy is pursued. The next is power distribution, which refers to the distribution of political, economic, and cultural resources among various groups which affects who of them can gain recognition. In addition, networks matter since they impact whether social solidarity forms within ethnic boundaries or extends beyond them.

Methodology

Social media platforms are studied specifically because they are public spheres that provide space for discussion and debate (Roberts, 2014), which can be thought-provoking and drive social change through activism (Cammaerts, 2007). This study investigates the influence of an Instagram page called *Unknown Kazak* on the formation of an inclusive Kazakh identity. This is because the page regularly posts about Kazakhs, Kazakh culture, traditions, prominent figures, and historical events. The authors, Kameridanov Dias and Kameridanova Aygerim, claim they aim "to help people fall in love with the Kazakh Universe" (Unknown Kazak, n.d.). Under the pinned post on their page they assert that they also hope to serve as a bridge between Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking citizens of Kazakhstan. This Instagram account has existed since September 2018 and currently has 177, 000 followers (Unknown Kazak, n.d.). Specifically, Instagram is selected as a social media platform because it is used by 68% of the Kazakhstani population (NapoleonCat, n.d.), reflecting its widespread reach and potential to shape public discussions about national identity.

This research uses qualitative analysis, particularly thematic analysis of four posts from an *Unknown Kazak* Instagram account to understand how social media users construct and contest the boundaries of national identity, which is evidenced in the comment section. The four posts were selected on the basis of such parameters as most-liked, widely discussed, and frequently shared posts.

These selected posts were analyzed because they relate to Kazakh identity topic, which is relevant to address the research question. The comments on the selected posts (Table 1) provide data for understanding how users contest national identity, while other posts do not seem to provide meaningful data on people's opinions.

Table 1. *Information on the selected posts*

Post and publication date	**Topic**	**Number of likes**	**Number of comments**
Post 1 April 22, 2026	The evolution of *mankurt*: from enslaved person to in the desert to an official in a tie	15,500	932
Post 2 January 12, 2022	Discussion of a reaction from major Russian media outlets to the appointment of a Minister of Communications	13,200	712
Post 3 November 18, 2021	Bauyrzhan Momyshuly about the laziness of the Kazakhs	15,200	588
Post 4 November 28, 2024	Nadezhda Lushnikova is a Russian muse of the Kazakhs	44,400	1040

Note: Compiled by the author

Because of the large number of comments, only the most popular comments on these posts were analyzed using discourse analysis. In total, due to the limited size of this research, four posts and ten comments were analyzed.

Table 2. *Information on the selected comments*

Posts	**Comments**	**Number of likes**
Post 1	Comment 1	991
	Comment 2	846
	Comment 3	395
	Comment 4	232
Post 2	Comment 1	612
Post 3	Comment 1	364
	Comment 2	360
Post 4	Comment 1	908
	Comment 2	207
	Comment 3	286

Note: Compiled by the author

However, there are some limitations of this study. First, comments from four posts do not produce generalizable conclusions that reflect the perspectives of the Kazakhstani population. Secondly, only people interested in national identity topics may have written the comments. Third, the analysis involved the author's interpretation of social media posts and comments, which may be

subject to researcher subjectivity, as another researcher might interpret the same data differently.

Results

The first post published on 22 April 2026 on Kazakh identity traces the evolution of the *mankurt*[1]: from an enslaved person in the desert to an official in a tie (Appendix A). It has 15,500 likes and more than 900 comments. The authors write about reflections on *mankurt* by Chingiz Aitmatov and Mukhtar Shakhanov. Chingiz Aitmatov recounts the term *mankurt*, a captive upon whose head a piece of fresh camel hide was placed. As the hide dried under the scorching sun, it would constrict the skull, stripping the individual of their memory. Forgetting their mother and their homeland, the person would be transformed into an ideal, submissive slave. But Shakhanov extended this term to "spiritual *mankurt*", produced by the USSR without any camel hides. Shakhanov provides a precise political definition of this process: *"tamyrsyzdyk indeti"*[2]. As an antidote to this epidemic, Shakhanov claims that, in addition to one's biological mother, a person is shaped by their native land, language, traditions, and history. Abandoning even one of these inevitably leads to becoming a *mankurt*.

The most popular comment under this post has 991 likes (Appendix B. Picture 1), which may mean that many people support the opinion of the person who wrote that comment. Here, a woman suggested adding to the post religious *mankurts.* This term refers to people who identify with religion rather than the nation. As mentioned before, inclusive national identity encompasses various identities in terms of culture and religion. Thus, these people view national identity as exclusive rather than inclusive, since they think only Kazakhs can represent Kazakh identity. The next popular comment got 846 likes (Appendix B. Picture 2), where the woman wonders why someone who does not know the language is a traitor to their homeland, or not Kazakh. She asks: does a term exist for Kazakhs who speak Russian? Why is there no term for Kazakhs who speak Kazakh but are corrupted? She argues that national identity is not just about the language. In other words, this commentator does not agree that Kazakh identity is performed only by Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs, because, given Kazakhstan's history, not everyone knows Kazakh perfectly. Also, one view, which gained 395 likes (Appendix B. Picture 3), was written by a woman who shared her experience of seeing Chingiz Aitmatov and Mukhtar Shakhanov at the book launch ceremony. She said that after this meeting, she felt happy and spiritually strengthened. Thus, social media users who liked this comment probably shared her happiness. The next person's comment has 232 likes (Appendix B. Picture 4). The comment reads that Kazakh "affiliation is bestowed at birth and cannot be altered, unlike one's command of a language". The comment suggested that division of Kazakhs into *mankurts* and real Kazakhs was wrong. Still, it assumed that only ethnic Kazakhs could possess Kazakh identity, which can be referred to an exclusive national identity.

The second post dated January 12, 2022 discusses a strong and negative reaction from major Russian media outlets to the appointment of Askar Umarov as Minister of Communications (Appendix A. The post 2). It has around 13,200 likes and 712 comments. The authors say this reaction stems from the term nationalism, defined as an ideology and political orientation that places the nation as the highest value. Nationalism seeks to establish a state that encompasses the nation's territory and upholds its interests. By nation, the authors refer to the Kazakhs, including all diasporas living in

1 *Mankurt* (мәңгүрт) is a character from Chingiz Aitmatov's novel "The day lasts more than a hundred years", transformed into a the-will-less slave who has forgotten his past, his name, his kin, and his language.

2 *Tamyrsyzdyk indeti* (тамырсыздық індеті) means an epidemic of rootlessness.

Kazakhstan, that is, the citizens of Kazakhstan. Thus, as the authors argue, a person with nationalist views will work for the good of our country. He will raise the standard of Kazakh national media, finally making them competitive. He will fight to protect Kazakh citizens' minds from foreign propaganda. Naturally, such a person is not in neighbors' interests. Also, the authors claim that national ideology is needed, which would make Kazakhstan strong.

Here is one comment that gained a large number of likes - 612, to be exact (Appendix B. Picture 5). The user says that the definition of nationalism differs in Western and Soviet sources. The user goes on to say that Western sources emphasize unity of people, whereas Soviet ones highlight national superiority, which can actually mean nazism. From the comment, it can be concluded that people appear to condemn the Soviet definition of nationalism and support the Western one.

The third post is about Bauyrzhan Momyshuly's opinion on the laziness of Kazakhs, which was published on November 18, 2021. It has 15,200 likes and 588 comments (Appendix A. The post 3). Specifically, the authors quote the answers of Bauyrzhan Momyshuly. It was written that he believed Kazakhs were unfairly branded with two terms: "nomad" and "sloth." Both are archaic labels. Kazakhs were never nomads; they led a settled way of life. Instead, they moved within their own territory, grazing their livestock on *zhailau*[3] in summer and on *kystau*[4] in winter. So, Kazakhs needed to approach the animals and select summer, autumn, and winter pastures and the routes to follow; this is a science not accessible to everyone. Studying it requires intelligence, experience, and constant creative searching by very hardworking people. Thus, the post highlights the idea that Kazakhs were nomads and sloth was rejected by Bauyrzhan Momyshuly.

This post generated two comments with the most likes - 364 and 360. The authors of the Instagram page also pinned them. In the first comment, the user does not understand why we should justify the nomadic culture, which helped Kazakh ancestors conquer vast territories (Appendix B. Picture 6). The comment asserts that being nomadic does not mean being foolish and lazy. The user suggests not to reject Kazakh's nomadic culture, as it is part of Kazakh identity. The second comment adds that such negative slogans discourage people from constructing a national identity and from taking an interest in learning about their own origins (Appendix B. Picture 7). Subsequently, it is necessary to reject such slogans and explain the truth. To put it differently, people agree that Kazakh identity should be developed to bring people together.

Meanwhile, the fourth and one of the most popular posts is about Nadezhda Lushnikova published on November 28, 2024 This post under study has 840,000 views, 44,400 likes, 13,700 shares, and thousands of comments (Appendix A. The post 4). The post provides a background on Lushnikova, stating that she is a Russian muse of the Kazakhs, an *aitys*[5] performer, poet, and educator who helped revive *aitys* in the 1960s and 1970s. It goes on to say that she attended a Kazakh school, where her love for the language began. Then, she taught Kazakh language and literature at schools and colleges. It is argued that Mukhtar Auezov also called her a "Russian swallow" who had built a little nest in the bosom of Kazakh poetry. In response, Nadezhda replied, "I am a daughter of the Kazakh people, too." She also performed the Hajj, visiting the cities of Mecca and Medina, sacred sites for Muslims, in 2012. In addition, the authors say that Nadezhda *Apai*[6] remains a shining symbol and example of friendship and unity, proving that a love for culture and language knows no boundaries. By saying these words, the authors seek to promote an inclusive Kazakh identity that includes not only

3 *Zhailau* (жайлау) means summer pastures.

4 *Kystau* (қыстау) means winter pastures.

5 *Aitys* (айтыс) is a contest between two individuals in the poetic art of improvisation in Kazakh culture.

6 *Apai* (апай) is a respectful form of address to a woman in Kazakh language.

ethnic Kazakhs but also other groups of people.

Three comments that are supported by 908, 207 and 286 people are worth highlighting. In the first comment, people wonder whether a street is named after her, because she is a worthy daughter of the Kazakh land (Appendix B. Picture 8). Therefore, people seem to respect her achievements and consider her a national treasure. Meanwhile, the second comment also confirms that Lushnikova is a treasure and kindred spirit (Appendix B. Picture 9). Another comment emphasizes that there is no need to divide people by nationality since love for the world and culture does not have nationality (Appendix B. Picture 10). In this way, she is considered as a daughter of the Kazakh people and Kazakh land.

Discussion

It can be argued that the publications which promoted inclusive identity were supported by a large number of users. The most popular post among those analyzed is about Nadezhda Lushnikova. The authors of the page write that she symbolizes unity and friendship, showing that love for culture, world and language is boundless. Furthermore, people in the comments praise her, calling her a national treasure and a daughter of the Kazakh people and land. Moreover, users say that love for people and the world does not know nationality, and respecting the culture of one's native land should be in the spirit of every Kazakhstani.

It means that Instagram users in this case also stand for inclusive Kazakh identity, since they welcome knowledge of the Kazakh language and culture by other ethnicities that live in Kazakhstan. The similar pattern is observed in another post about Russian criticism of the appointment of the new minister. The authors postulate that a national ideology needs to be developed to inspire all citizens of Kazakhstan to build a strong state. Thus, they do not assume that national ideology equals Kazakh ideology; rather, it applies to all citizens. Furthermore, the most popular comment explains the distinction between Western and Soviet definitions of nationalism. From this comment, it can be concluded that the person argues the Western definition is inclusive because it focuses on social unity. The Soviet definition is exclusive because it emphasizes national superiority. The large number of likes may suggest that many people share this view and see the Soviet definition as wrong. In this way, these two posts demonstrate that inclusive Kazakh identity is supported through criticism of Soviet definition and the adoption of Kazakh culture by Lushnikova which makes her represent Kazakh identity.

However, the other two posts and comments still assume that national identity is based on ethnicity along the lines of primordialism. Based on comments under the third post, users agree that Kazakhs should live in unity together and Kazakh identity should be developed, and that its construction depends on people themselves. These comments assume that people support an exclusive Kazakh identity, because being a representative of Kazakhs is seen by people as being of Kazakh ethnicity. In addition, some users support the *mankurt* term. This is because one user asserts that even religious *mankurts* should be differentiated too, which also assumes an exclusive national identity. For these people, Kazakh identity can be possessed only by those who speak Kazakh, know Kazakh history and traditions, and are not religious. Another comment, which has received many likes, expresses the opposite view, but still in the framework of exclusive Kazakh identity. Hence, this person expands the Kazakh identity understanding by arguing that Russian and Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs represent Kazakh identity. But from these words, it is clear that when the user talks about Kazakh identity, they mean only Kazakhs. This comment, which received 846 likes, represents an exclusive understanding of Kazakh national identity. This view is supported by another comment,

where a person argues that being Kazakh is a matter of bloodline, not language. Subsequently, users speaking about Kazakh identity refer to an exclusive one.

An analysis of posts and comments on the *Unknown Kazak* Instagram page suggests that different opinions exist in Kazakhstani society. Moreover, depending on the content of the publication some views become more prominent. Particularly, if the publication proposes inclusive identity, in the comments section individuals tend to stand for inclusive identity too. Some of the most-liked comments reject the division between Russian-speaking and Kazakh speaking Kazakhs, while others endorse the *mankurt* label. This again indicates the existence of an exclusive Kazakh identity promotion efforts. But it still shows that Kazakh identity is not divided into Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking groups, which presents an expansion of boundaries of Kazakh identity among people. At the same time, two publications with the most liked comments show Instagram users' commitment to an inclusive national identity. Particularly, these publications include the post about Nadezhda Lushnikova and the new minister. People under these posts highlight a national unity that respects language and culture and has no boundaries, rejecting the Soviet definition of nationalism in favor of Western one. Therefore, based on an analysis of four posts, it can be concluded that social media users' understanding of Kazakh identity differs, as some view it as inclusive while others as an exclusive one.

These results are confirmed by Karatay and Tyulebekova, who claim that "... digital nationalism in Kazakhstan is not uniform and includes both exclusionary and inclusive tendencies" (Karatay & Tyulbekova, 2026, pp. 13-14). Overall, users unite around the idea that they want to facilitate Kazakh identity formation, but in what way specifically inclusive or exclusive differs. In this way, users construct and contest the boundaries of inclusive national identity by extending the language boundary but keeping the ethnic boundary intact.

Kazakh identity has already expanded by incorporating Russian-speaking Kazakhs, which may be a step toward a more inclusive identity, considering that some online users of *Unknown Kazak* support this direction. Moreover, Isaacs (2026, p. 696) believes that Kazakhstan has all requirements to move from ethnic-civic categorization toward "the fluid, plural and multivocal nature of nationhood". Additionally, Lamont and Molnar (2002) argue that national identity formation is a flexible process that can change over time, while Wimmer (2008) says boundaries can be expanded.

Hence, this research offers the analysis of how users of the Instagram account *Unknown Kazak* discuss Kazakh identity, contest it, and construct the boundaries of national belonging. In addition, authors of digital media accounts could use these findings to understand how their content influences discussions about national identity and how to facilitate contributions to an inclusive national identity.

Conclusion

This research examined how social media users of *Unknown Kazak* Instagram page constructed boundaries of national identity in Kazakhstan, particularly inclusive and exclusive understandings. The study used qualitative analysis of four posts related to Kazakh identity and their most popular comments, measured by the number of likes. According to thematic and discourse analysis of posts and comments, it was revealed that most online users expanded boundaries of understanding of Kazakh national identity. However, some posts still refer to the ideas of exclusive Kazakh identity. At the same time, the fourth post on the Russian muse of the Kazakhs and the second post about the appointment of a minister with allegedly nationalist views in Kazakhstan prompted users to express views that align with an inclusive Kazakh identity. Thus, people noted that the superiority of one nation, promoted by the Soviet government, was not nationalism. Rather, it is harmony and unity

among individuals who respect culture and language. It means that there is no one established view of Kazakh identity, some people see it as inclusive, while others as exclusive. But as it was noted previously, national identity is not rigid; it can be modified, as the boundary-making concept proposes.

Also, limitations of this study should be taken into consideration. First, the limited number of comments on the selected four publications do not allow broad conclusions about the situation among the general population of Kazakhstan. Second, the comments may have been left only by individuals interested in the topic of national identity. Third, since it is the discourse analysis that involved the author's subjective interpretation, the findings might have differed if the same data had been analyzed by another researcher.

Future research on this topic could focus on a comparative study. Specifically, users' comments on other social media accounts can be analyzed to see how users negotiate the boundaries of national identity in that digital media. Afterward, results can be compared with the existing relevant studies. In particular, users' comments can be analyzed over time to see whether the posts affect people's understanding of identity in the long run.

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**All the translations from Kazakh and Russian were conducted by the author.*

Appendices

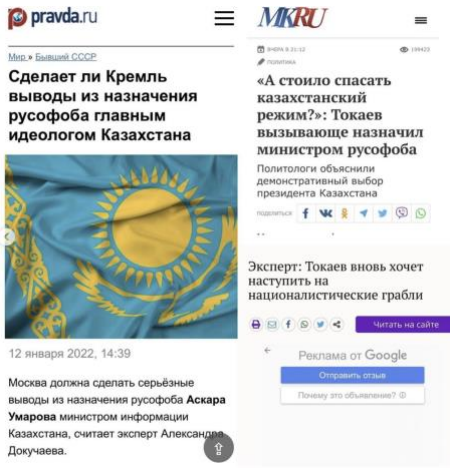
Appendix A. The selected posts by Unknown Kazak

Post 1 (22 April 2026)



The publication consists of a carousel containing seven posters and the cover image. The title of the post reads: "The evolution of *mankurt*: from enslaved person to in the desert to an official in a tie".

Post 2 (12 January 2022)



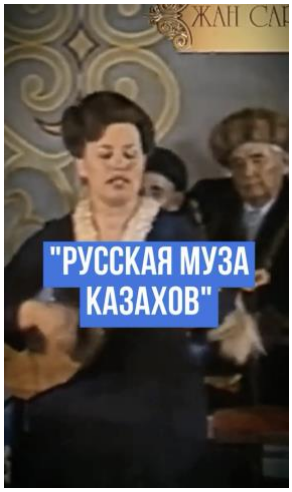
This is the third photo in the post. It shows two Russian news outlets, which claim that an allegedly Russophobe official was appointed as a minister.

Post 3 (18 November 2021)



Translation of the title of the post: “Bauyrzhan Momyshuly about the laziness of the Kazakhs”. The text under publication claims that Bauyrzhan Momyshuly rejects the idea that Kazakhs were lazy and nomadic and provides reasons for this.

Post 4 (28 November 2024)

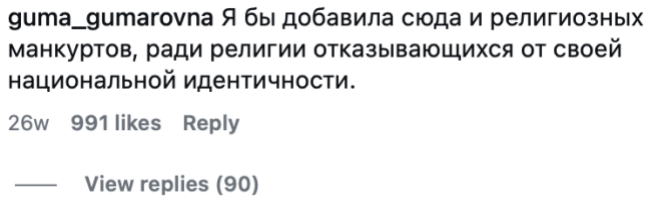


Translation of the caption: Russian muse of the Kazakhs

This is a video post where a biography of Nadezhda Lushnikova is written

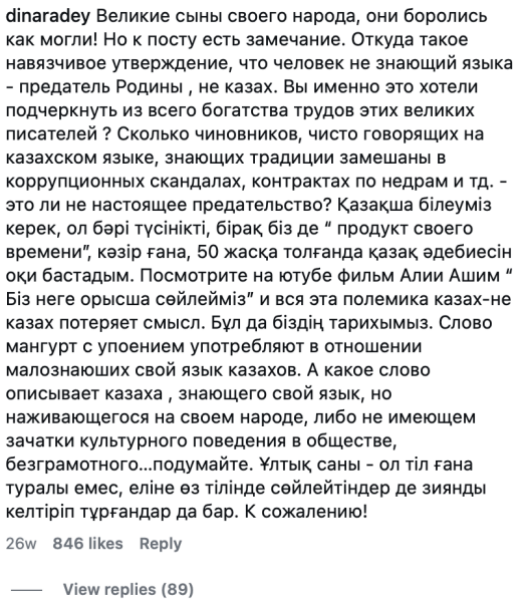
Appendix B. Most-liked comments on the posts shown above

Picture 1. The comment on Post 1



Translation: I would also include here those religious *mankurts* - people who, for the sake of religion, renounce their own national identity.

Picture 2. The comment on Post 1



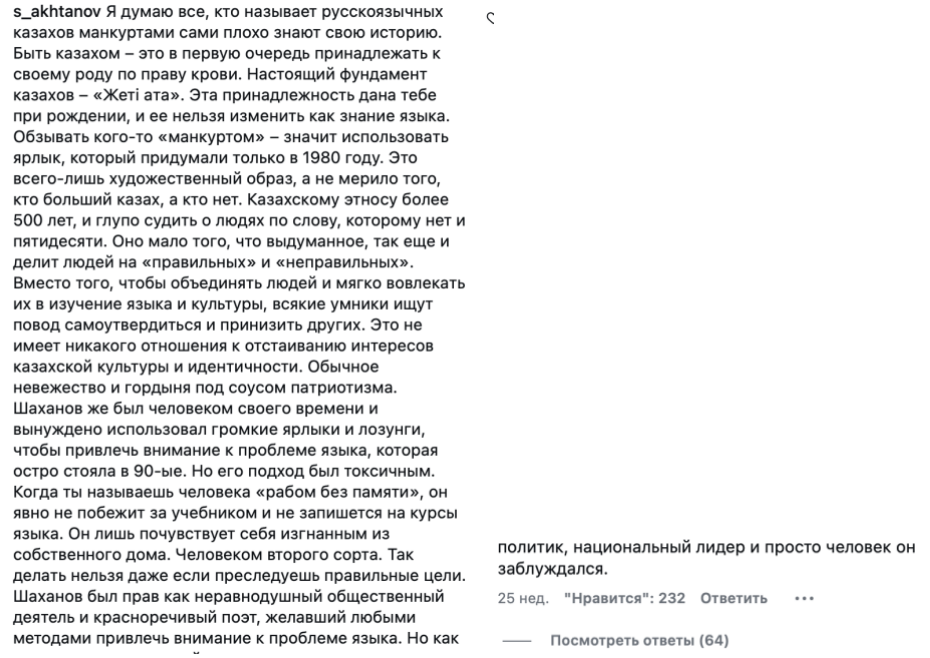
Translation: They were great sons of their people, and they fought in whatever ways they could! However, I have a concern about this post. Where does this persistent insistence come from that a person who does not know the language is a traitor to their homeland and is not Kazakh? Is this really what you wanted to emphasize from the rich legacy of these great writers? How many officials who speak Kazakh fluently and know our traditions have been involved in corruption scandals, shady contracts involving natural resources, and so on? Is that not true betrayal? We need to know the Kazakh language, of course; that much is clear. But we are also products of our time. I have only recently, at the age of 50, begun reading Kazakh literature. Watch Aliya Ashim's film on YouTube, "Why Do We Speak Russian?", and this whole debate about who is Kazakh and who is not will lose its meaning. This, too, is part of our history. People enthusiastically use the word *mankurt* to describe Kazakhs who know little of their own language. But what word describes a Kazakh who knows their language yet exploits their own people for personal gain, or who lacks even the most basic cultural manners in public, or is simply uneducated? Think about that. National identity is not just about language. There are people who speak their native language yet still do harm to their own country and people. Unfortunately, that is the reality!

Picture 3. The comment on Post 1



Translation: I was present at the book lauch ceremony at the Palace of the Republic in 1996. Seeing the two great figures with my own eyes and listening attentively to their speeches filled me with spiritual strength, and I was absolutely overjoyed. This, too, is a form of happiness. Thanks be to God! The book I bought at that time is still kept at my home…

Picture 4. The comment on Post 1

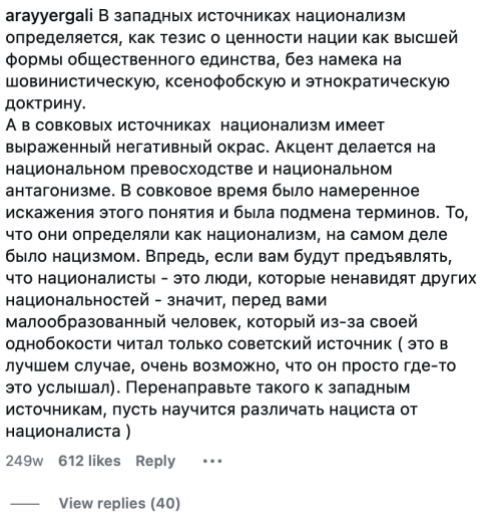


Translation: I believe that anyone who labels Russian-speaking Kazakhs as *mankurts* is, in fact, poorly versed in their own history. Being Kazakh is, first and foremost, a matter of belonging to one's clan by right of blood, the true foundation of the Kazakh people, known as the *jeti ata*[7]. This affiliation is bestowed at birth and cannot be altered, unlike one's command of a language. To call someone a *mankurt* is to use a label that was only coined in 1980; it is merely a literary device, not a yardstick for determining who is "more" or "less" of a Kazakh. The Kazakh ethnos has existed for over 500 years; it is foolish to judge people based on a term that is not even fifty years old. Not only is the term a fabrication, but it also serves to divide people into the "right" kind and the "wrong" kind. Instead of bringing people together and gently encouraging them to engage with their language and culture, certain self-proclaimed "experts" use it as an excuse to assert their own superiority and belittle others. This has nothing to do with defending the interests of Kazakh culture or identity, it is simply ignorance and arrogance masquerading as patriotism. Shakhanov, a man of his time, felt compelled to use provocative labels and slogans to draw attention to the language issue, which was a critical

[7] *Jeti ata* (жеті ата) is a traditional custom and genealogical system in Kazakh cultures that requires every Kazakh to know their direct male-line ancestors back seven generations.

concern in the 1990s. Yet, his approach was toxic. If you call someone a “slave without a memory”, they are hardly going to rush out to buy a textbook or sign up for language classes; instead, they will feel like an outcast in their own home, a second-class citizen. Such tactics are unacceptable, even when the underlying goals are noble. While Shakhanov was right to act as a concerned public figure and an eloquent poet, striving by any means necessary to highlight the language issue, he was misguided in his role as a politician, a national leader, and, quite simply, as an individual.

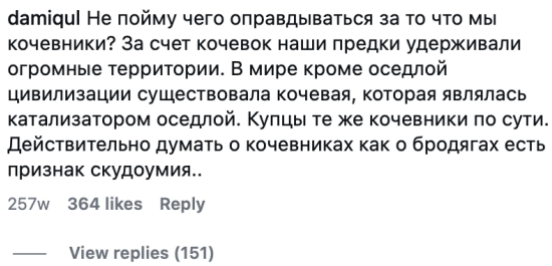
Picture 5. The comment on Post 2



Translation: In Western sources, nationalism is defined as the proposition that the nation is the highest form of social unity, a definition that carries no implication of a chauvinistic, xenophobic, or ethnocratic doctrine.

In Soviet-era sources, however, nationalism carries a distinctly negative connotation. The emphasis is placed on national superiority and inter-ethnic antagonism. During the Soviet period, there was a deliberate distortion of the concept and a substitution of terms; what they labeled as “nationalism” was, in reality, Nazism. Consequently, if someone claims that nationalists are people who hate other nationalities, you are dealing with an ill-informed individual – someone whose narrow perspective has led them to rely solely on Soviet-era sources (or, more likely, they have simply picked up this idea from hearsay). Direct such a person to Western sources so that they might learn to distinguish a Nazi from a nationalist.

Picture 6. The comment on Post 3



Translation: Why should we feel the need to justify the fact that we are nomads? Through their nomadic way of life, our ancestors held onto vast territories. Alongside sedentary civilization, there existed a nomadic one, a force that served as a catalyst for the sedentary world. In essence, even

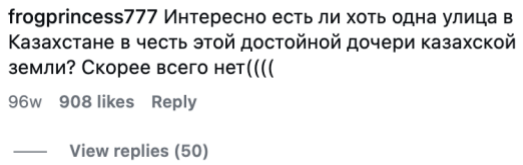
merchants are nomads. To think of nomads as mere vagrants is, quite frankly, a sign of a narrow mind…

Picture 7. The comment Post 3



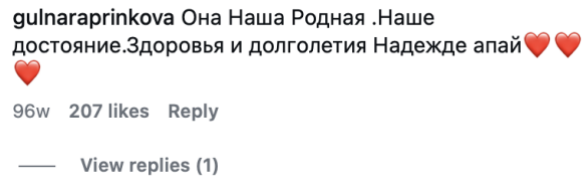
Translation: For some reason, slogans are often promoted among us that discourage people from seeking a national identity or taking an interest in their own roots. Claims, for instance, that we are an envious and lazy nation. In my view, the worst such slogan is "a Kazakh's enemy is another Kazakh," which undermines any effort to unite the people around a single national ideology. Regrettably, Kazakhs themselves often endorse this notion. This needs to be countered; we must clarify things by citing examples, much as Bauyrzhan Momyshuly did. But who is it that spreads such ideas among the public? That is something worth reflecting on.

Picture 8. The comment on Post 4



Translation: I wonder if there is even a single street in Kazakhstan named after this worthy daughter of the Kazakh land? Most likely not

Picture 9. The comment on Post 4



Translation: She is one of our own. A true treasure to us. Wishing health and a long life to Nadezhda *apai*

Picture 10. The comment on Post 4



Art, love for people and the world have no nationality! Enough with dividing people into Russians, Kazakhs, and so on. Respecting the culture of the land we call home should not be an act of heroism; it should be something deeply rooted in every citizen of Kazakhstan. Since school, we have been familiar with Kazakh songs and love singing them, just as we love Ukrainian and Russian folk songs. All of this is a part of our shared cultural wealth.

ҒТАМР: 19.31

Әлеуметтік желілер және инклюзивті ұлттық бірегейлік: *Unknown Kazak* парақшасы мысалында

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Аңдатпа

Әлеуметтік желілердің Қазақстандағы ұлттық бірегейліктің қалыптасуына әсері әлі де толық зерттелмеген. Сондықтан, бұл зерттеу әлеуметтік медиа пайдаланушыларының Қазақстандағы инклюзивті ұлттық бірегейліктің шекараларын қалай құратынын және оларды қалай талқылайтынын зерттеуге бағытталған. Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік желі пайдаланушыларының ұлттық бірегейлік шекараларын қалай қалыптастыратынын, талқылайтынын және оған қатысты пікірталастарға қалай қатысатынын талдау. Бұл ретте онлайн-пікірталастарда қазақстандық ұлттық бірегейлікті инклюзивті және эксклюзивті тұрғыдан түсінудің қалай көрініс табатынына ерекше назар аударылады. Зерттеу аясында 177 мың жазылушысы бар *Unknown Kazak* Instagram парақшасы қарастырылады. Бұл парақшада Қазақстан тарихына, ұлттық бірегейлікке, дәстүрлерге, тарихи тұлғаларға және тілге қатысты материалдар тұрақты түрде жарияланады. Атап айтқанда, қазақтың ұлттық бірегейлігі мәселелерін қозғайтын жарияланымдар тақырыптық талдау әдісі арқылы зерттелді. Сонымен қатар ең көп “ұнату” белгісін жинаған, кеңінен талқыланған және пайдаланушылар арасында жиі таратылған төрт жарияланымға жазылған танымал пікірлерге дискурс-талдау жүргізілді. Зерттеу нәтижелері әлеуметтік желі пайдаланушыларының бір бөлігі қазақ бірегейлігін эксклюзивті тұрғыдан түсінуді қолдайтынын көрсетті. Олардың пікірінше, қазақ ұлтына тиесілілік этникалық текке тікелей байланысты. Ал пайдаланушылардың екінші тобы инклюзивті ұлттық бірегейлік идеясын қолдайды. Атап айтқанда, олар ұлттық бірегейліктің шекараларын қалыптастыру және қайта қарау барысында этникалық тегіне емес, мәдениет пен тілге деген сүйіспеншілікке, сондай-ақ Қазақстанның барлық азаматтарының бірлігіне басымдық береді. Сонымен қатар, ұлттық бірегейлікке қатысты пікірталастардың сипаты көбіне жарияланымның мазмұнына байланысты екені анықталды.

Кілт сөздер: инклюзивті ұлттық бірегейлік, қазақ бірегейлігі, Instagram, Unknown Kazak, әлеуметтік желі пайдаланушылары

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Социальные сети и инклюзивная национальная идентичность в Казахстане: на примере аккаунта *Unknown Kazak*

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Аннотация

Влияние социальных сетей на формирование национальной идентичности в Казахстане остается недостаточно изученным. В связи с этим настоящее исследование направлено на изучение того, как пользователи социальных сетей конструируют и оспаривают границы инклюзивной национальной идентичности в Казахстане. Основная цель исследования заключается в анализе того, как пользователи социальных сетей в Казахстане формируют, обсуждают и оспаривают границы национальной принадлежности, уделяя особое внимание тому, как в онлайн-дискуссиях выражаются инклюзивные и эксклюзивные подходы к пониманию казахстанской национальной идентичности. В работе рассматривается Instagram-страница *Unknown Kazak*, насчитывающая 177 тысяч подписчиков, где регулярно публикуются материалы, посвященные истории Казахстана, национальной идентичности, традициям, историческим личностям и языку. В частности, публикации, затрагивающие вопросы казахской национальной идентичности, анализируются с помощью тематического анализа. Кроме того, проведен дискурс-анализ наиболее популярных комментариев к четырем публикациям, которые набрали наибольшее количество отметок “нравится”, вызвали широкое обсуждение и часто распространялись пользователями. Результаты исследования показали, что некоторые пользователи социальных сетей выступают за эксклюзивное понимание казахской идентичности, основанное на убеждении, что принадлежность к казахской нации неразрывно связана с казахским этническим происхождением. В то же время другая группа пользователей продвигает инклюзивную национальную идентичность. В частности, эти пользователи стремятся формировать и оспаривать границы национальной идентичности, подчёркивая не этническое происхождение, а любовь к культуре и языку, а также единство всех граждан Казахстана. Также было установлено, что характер дискуссий вокруг национальной идентичности в комментариях во многом зависит от содержания самой публикации.

Ключевые слова: инклюзивная национальная идентичность, казахская идентичность, Instagram, Unknown Kazak, пользователи социальных сетей

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