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Afghanistan's Digital Diaspora: Conflicted Constructions of Nation and Identity

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Abstract

Afghanistan's diaspora swelled after the Taliban took over the government in 2021 and initiated a nation-building project that marginalized some ethnic groups. Acts of discrimination were exposed online and discussed by users in the diaspora and in Afghanistan. Studies of non-mediated practices of Afghanistan's diaspora show separation along ethnic lines. How the ethnic divisions play out in the digital space where users from the diaspora and Afghanistan debate the future of the nation and whether digital affordances facilitate interactions across divisions, and how, have not been addressed. We connect the literature on digital diaspora and firestorms to elucidate the role of affect in interactions between "here and there." We conducted a netnography of X (Twitter) posts about events in Afghanistan between August 15, 2021, when the Taliban seized Kabul, and August 15, 2024. A thematic analysis of threads revealed three themes: essentialist displacement, the politics of labels, and language advocacy. The themes wove reciprocal defensive exclusionary discourses of place, group labels, and language erupting in affective surges animated by historical grievances and perceptions of marginalization evolved over centuries-long cohabitation in spaces that now constitute the state of Afghanistan. While heterogeneous and interacting across ethnic lines, the contributors spun essentialist discourses reflecting struggles over recognition, legitimacy, and ownership of the national narrative. The ethnic divisions were actively reshaped and expressed in digital spaces, producing *fragmented encapsulation*.

Keywords

Afghanistan's diaspora, digital diaspora, nation, identity, online firestorms

Introduction

When the Taliban assumed control of Afghanistan in 2021, its restrictions on girls' education and women's employment drew considerable attention in Western media. The persecution of ethnic groups and the systematic efforts to define Afghanistan in monoethnic terms received considerably less coverage. In contrast, ethnic exclusions are systematically called out by the diaspora, where members of Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, and other long-standing ethnic groups post information about exclusionary measures, engage in passionate discussions about the identity of the national project, and negotiate their relations, most prominently on X (formerly Twitter).

Modern Afghanistan was formed as a nation-state when the colonial powers drew borders that cut across ethnic groups' territories, resulting in fractious relations among them in the 19th century (Sadr, 2020). Studies of non-mediated diasporic practices show that the divisions continue in exile, where political, religious, and class differences, as well as histories of conflict, rivalry, persecution, and discrimination, shape the diasporic social life along ethnic lines separating the Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Pashtuns in various countries, including Australia (Abraham & Busbridge, 2014; Radford & Hetz, 2020; Rezaei et al., 2023), Denmark (Rytter & Nielsen, 2020), Germany and the United Kingdom (Fischer, 2017), and the United States (Naby, 2004). The studies show contestations of the label "Afghan" in favor of "Afghanistani" and a preference for ethnic labels instead of the national one (Abraham & Busbridge, 2014; Marsden, 2025). However, no studies address Afghanistan's digital diaspora. We thus ask how the various divisions and negotiations of relations with Afghanistan's national project play out in the digital diaspora, and whether digital affordances facilitate interactions across ethnic divisions. This is an important gap since digital diaspora scholars argue that digital media not only facilitate the formation of diasporic groups but also increase interactions among its members (Aghapouri, 2019;

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Ansar & Maitra, 2024; Bernal, 2006; Brunner, 2025; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018; Mpofu et al., 2022; NurMuhammad et al., 2016; Udenze & Ugoala, 2019). Most studies address interactions *within* ethnonational groupings, showing practices of encapsulation. This reveals another gap in light of calls for analytical attention to the heterogeneity of diasporic groups (Arkilic, 2020; Asal, 2012; Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Khosravi, 2018). Only a few studies address political and social fragmentation within diasporas (Asal, 2012; Bernal, 2006; Brunner, 2025; Madebo, 2024; Zeng & Fang, 2025). We contribute to this line of research by showing practices of *fragmented encapsulation* of Afghanistan's digital diaspora in relation to the evolving and exclusionary nation-building project in Afghanistan.

We show that X users based on the diaspora and Afghanistan interact, contest, and make visible the current efforts to define Afghanistan in monoethnic terms. Our digital ethnography of X reveals that rather than diversifying the national imagination, responses to posts about abuses by the current regime erupt in firestorms of reciprocal defensive exclusionary discourses of place, group labels, and language, resulting in fragmented encapsulation. We show how the circulation of affect in these discourses, particularly indignation and anger, facilitates contestations and exclusionary defensive digital ethnonationalism. We advance the understanding of digital diaspora by illuminating firestorms as short-term protests that form part of digital diaspora's ongoing social protest practices. In what follows, we first discuss research on the digital diaspora and then turn to the concept of digital firestorms. Next, we discuss the context of Afghanistan and prior studies on Afghanistan's diaspora. We then explain our methods, present the findings, and discuss their implications.

Digital Diaspora

As a traveling and troubled concept (Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022), diaspora has been challenged by and challenges us to confront urgent questions about the forms of belonging, identity, and connections to imagined communities and territories that are fashioned in dispersion. One of the oldest formations, diasporas have been multiply reconfigured through digital media that amplify their fluidities, heterogeneities, and intensities, thereby (holding out a promise of) creating a postnational space of potentiality, belonging, and new subjectivities (Bernal, 2014, 2020; Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Ponzanesi, 2020; Witteborn, 2019). Digital media afford the creation of "new public spheres, forms of protest, social groupings, and spaces of imagination" (Bernal, 2020, p. 4). Digital media, in particular X and Facebook, share affordances that enhance visibility, connectivity, and user interaction, as they facilitate the circulation of information, activism, and expressions of thoughts and emotions that allow community building (Ansar & Maitra, 2024; Bucholtz & Sūna, 2019; NurMuhammad et al., 2016; Oiarzabal, 2012; Udenze & Ugoala, 2019). X and Facebook offer an alternative counter-public sphere of resistance or discontent against the hegemonic narratives disseminated by mainstream media and/or governments (Aghapouri, 2019; Bernal, 2006; Miconi, 2020; Mpofu et al., 2022; Zeng & Fang, 2025). As Bernal early observed, "the Internet is the quintessential diasporic medium" that decentralizes while simultaneously offering public spheres that hold groups together despite distance and significant political differences (Bernal, 2006, p. 175). Tensions and complexities are amplified by digital media affordances, while displacement, loss, and trans/national power relations remain central to the concept's explanatory potency (Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Witteborn, 2019). Diasporic digital media practices take forms of encapsulation and/or cosmopolitanism shaped by power relations and various exigencies developing at "home" and in exile. Encapsulation, a pulling toward culturally and nationally essentialist identities and politics at a distance, can coexist with cosmopolitan practices that burst open singular categories of identity bounded by roots and territory (Candidatu et al., 2019; Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Christensen & Jansson, 2015; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018).

While scholars contend that diasporas must be approached as intersectional, historically contingent, and socially dynamic relational formations (Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022, p. 262) without presuming ethnonational bonds (Witteborn, 2019), most digital diaspora studies tend to focus on practices of a single ethnonational group resisting persecutions "back home" and providing collective support to their members that result in encapsulation (Aghapouri, 2019; Ansar & Maitra, 2024; Bernal, 2006; NurMuhammad et al., 2016). These groups use digital media for deliberation, reconstruction, and reassertion of national and/or ethnic identity (Aghapouri, 2019; Bernal, 2014; Mpofu et al., 2022; NurMuhammad et al., 2016). Extensive research has shown that Kurdish, Eritrean, Rohingya, Tibetan, and Uyghur diasporas engage in forms of networked nationalism – often revolving in echo chambers – as they struggle over group identities, national imaginaries, and political engagement mobilized around loss, longing, opposition to repression at home, and/or activism (Aghapouri, 2019; Ansar & Maitra, 2024; Bernal, 2006, 2014; Brunner, 2025; NurMuhammad et al., 2016). These diasporas reimagine national communities through language promotion, reproduction of national myths, symbols, and cultural products using various affordances that include flag emojis, hashtags, and text (e.g. Aghapouri, 2019; Madebo, 2024; Zeng & Fang, 2025). Their widespread access to social media facilitates the construction of competing national imaginations.

Some studies show political and social divisions in digital diasporas (Asal, 2012; Bernal, 2006; Brunner, 2025; Madebo, 2024; Zeng & Fang, 2025). While fragmented politically, Lebanese, Eritrean, Kurdish, Tibetan, and Uyghur diasporas are nevertheless connected around shared national commitments (Aghapouri, 2019; Asal, 2012; Bernal, 2006;

NurMuhammad et al., 2016) and even reproduce traditional hierarchies (Brunner, 2025). The Chinese digital diaspora on X consists of different polarized "issue publics," including activists, nationalists, and propagandists promoting varying narratives and agendas, although they engage with shared sociopolitical concerns about their homeland (Zeng & Fang, 2025). Members of the Ethiopian youth diaspora manifested their ethnic identities with "national emojis," although posters attenuated those differences and maintained common national claims (Madebo, 2024). Thus, although studies demonstrate that diasporas fragment and separate along sociopolitical lines, groups either establish separate ethnic niches or attenuate ethnic differences in favor of national unity.

Taliban's return to power and its persecution of some ethnic groups created a sense of crisis, which linked groups in Afghanistan and in the diaspora. This created a distinct dynamic we observed on X over several months, whereby posts about various abuses garnered highly emotional rapid responses and reposts. These dynamics were distinct from the sustained and coordinated digital organizing shown by digital diaspora studies discussed above. We thus turn to the concept of digital firestorms for further insights into the fragmentation and exclusionary discourses during a time of crisis.

"Digital firestorms," also labeled as "outrage," "outcries," or "shitstorms," refer to the rapid eruption of collective moral indignation on social media in intensely affectively loaded messages. It is a "sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative word-of-mouth and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 2). X's brevity accelerates the spread of these messages through emotion-driven bursts (Pfeffer et al., 2014), which function as "co-participative degradation" ceremonies, wherein users collaboratively enact moral denigration against perceived elites abusing power (Arancibia & Montecino, 2017, p. 597). Others argue that participation in firestorms is fueled by a "moral compass," animated by a sense that outrage is socially appropriate, and a desire for social recognition, creating eruptive yet consensual bursts of hostility and aggression (Johnen et al., 2018). Breeze (2020) further showed that groups and individuals, such as political actors, instrumentalize anger on X – an emotion of negative valence but high agency – to mobilize support, channel frustration, and legitimize aggressive identity politics. These actors justify expressions of anger toward outsiders while reinforcing the identity and rights of the in-group, thus creating a negative polarity (Arancibia & Montecino, 2017). Most studies show that toxic and unpleasant comments are hurled at perceived offenders without deep consideration of the offending event; however, digital firestorms can also take the form of social protests that erupt within long-term sustained digital activism (Matook et al., 2022). The Taliban regime's return to power and its series of restrictive and/or abusive actions signaled on X were met with outcries from members of the long-active digital diaspora. Most studies address factors driving firestorms; however, few focus on the comments themselves. Such comments are not monolithic and offer insights into the discursive formation of groups and otherness (Arancibia & Montecino, 2017; Matook et al., 2022). We extend this line of research by examining the firestorm comments for insight they offer about the formation of the Afghanistan digital diaspora. First, we briefly describe the context of Afghanistan and its diaspora.

Afghanistan: A Home to Many

The ethnic diversity of Afghanistan stems from centuries of migration, conquest, and changing borders that were only set in the 19th century by colonial powers, notably the British and Russians. The *Durand* line, drawn by the British across the Pashtun territory in 1893, placed more Pashtuns in Pakistan than in Afghanistan (Saikal, 2010). The Northern border drawn along the *Amu Darya* by Anglo-Russian agreements cut across Uzbeks', Tajiks', and Turkmens' historical territories, separating the kin populations. Historically, relations among these groups wavered between cooperation and conflict, often influenced by external rulers and powers. The Tajiks and Pashtuns, for instance, competed for dominance, while Hazaras and Uzbeks faced marginalization under various regimes. The 20th century saw ethnic tensions escalate, resulting in the 1990s civil war between various factions, notably the Tajik-led Northern Alliance and the Pashtun-dominated Taliban. In recent decades, governments struggled to balance ethnic interests. The 2004 constitution aimed for a centralized state, but power-sharing remained contentious. The Taliban's 2021 return, predominantly led by Pashtuns, heightened fears of exclusion among Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, with ethnic divisions continuing to challenge national unity and negotiations for inclusive rule.

Afghanistan's Diaspora

Afghanistan's diaspora is segmented and fractured by family ties, class backgrounds, ethnic bonds, political affiliations, religious beliefs, and war experiences while contingently and precariously connected by displacement and connection to Afghanistan as the homeland (Abraham & Busbridge, 2014; Fischer, 2017; Naby, 2004; Radford & Hetz, 2020; Rezaei et al., 2023; Rytter & Nielsen, 2020). The Hazaras, Tajiks, and Pashtuns form organizations and sub-groups based on ethnic identity and are closed to others (Fischer, 2017; Rezaei et al., 2023). For Hazaras, experiences of ethnic and religious persecution and discrimination have weakened their sense of belonging and increased ethnic consciousness and affiliation (Radford & Hetz, 2020; Rezaei et al., 2023), and deteriorated their social relations with Pashtuns in the diaspora (Abraham & Busbridge, 2014). In an Australian setting, Hazaras were shown to negotiate multiple identity labels, including Hazara, Afghan, Shia Muslim, Aussie, and refugee (Radford & Hetz, 2020). For many, "the word 'Afghan' meant 'Pashtun' and

'Afghanistan' therefore meant the 'Land of the Pashtuns', the land of their 'oppressors'" (Radford & Hetz, 2020, p. 6). Relations between Pashtuns and Tajiks have been contentious due to historical "claims of social supremacy on ethnic descent" (Fischer, 2017, p. 24), the recent imposition of Pashto vis-à-vis Farsi/Dari that has been the *lingua franca* of Afghanistan, and experiences of civil war and fight for power in the 1990s (Rytter & Nielsen, 2020). The only study on Afghanistan's digital diaspora examined its search for support for the reconstruction of Afghanistan following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001 (Brinkerhoff, 2004). To our knowledge, no studies have addressed digital diaspora practices following the recent return of the Taliban regime.

Media in Afghanistan

After the Taliban were toppled from power in 2001, independent media flourished, access to the internet and smartphones was widespread, and freedom of expression was guaranteed by the constitution (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA], 2024). Afghanistan's Right to Information Act was ranked the best in the world. Within a month of their return to power in 2021, the Taliban closed 70% of media outlets, imposed censorship banning media content considered anti-Islam, Afghan culture, and national interest, and imprisoned journalists for violations (Abbasi, 2024; Kawa, 2025; Mehran, 2022; Reporters Without Borders, n.d.; Siddique, 2024; UNAMA, 2024). In total, 84% of women working in the media lost their jobs, female presenters must wear hijab or cover their faces while on air, entertainment programs showcasing women were discontinued, and women's voices were banned from the media in some provinces (Afghanistan Journalists Center, 2025; Mehran, 2022; Siddique, 2024; UNAMA, 2024). Most recently, the regime banned the publication of images of living beings in some provinces (Kawa, 2025). Afghanistan ranks 178th out of a total of 180 in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index (Abbasi, 2024). Although the Taliban and their supporters extensively use digital media, including X and Facebook, to promote their regime (Bahar, 2020; Mehran, 2022), private users' social media use is closely monitored (Reporters Without Borders, n.d.). The Taliban banned TikTok in 2022, although the planned ban of Facebook never happened (Marzban & Scollon, 2024). Those inside the country seek refuge on digital platforms such as X that facilitate anonymous commentary and become venues of resistance (Mehran, 2022). Diasporic media, including TV networks and newspapers, are independent sources of news (Abbasi, 2024; UNAMA, 2024).

Method

We conducted a netnography to understand the "active intellectual and emotional engagement" (Kozinets, 2019, p. 136) of diasporic users on X, whose distinct affordance is its focus on rapid, affective sharing through reposting, which amplifies specific forms of visibility and diversity (Geboers & Van De Wiele, 2020; Zeng & Fang, 2025). Netnography allowed the first author to observe diaspora practices on several social media sites including X, Facebook, and WhatsApp for a month. X emerged as the most active platform for intense exchanges in Pashto, Farsi, and English. The interactions on X were examined for several months, leading to the identification of distinct outbursts in response to posts about transgressions under the current regime. The relevant threads were identified through a search for keywords Afghanistan, Afghan, Hazara, Tajik, and Pashtun in English, Farsi (Dari), and Pashto within the time frame from August 15, 2021, when the Taliban seized Kabul, to August 15, 2024, the regime's third consecutive year in power. Since X cut off free access to its Academic API, posts and replies were collected manually and recorded via screenshots (Martin, 2019). We selected 13 X threads with a minimum of 49 replies each for a total of more than 4533 replies, 14,553 reposts, and 51,213 likes and viewed close to one million times (Hussen, 2020). We chose 368 replies for analysis, eliminating replies that included offensive and graphic language, were irrelevant or repetitive, and were probable spam. Two threads that included links to reports were posted by SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) and "Amnesty International South Asia." "Afghanistan in Geneva" (Embassy and Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the UN) reposted SIGAR's report about forced evictions of various ethnic groups under the Taliban rule, and "Amnesty International South Asia" posted about the Taliban's war crimes in Panjshir, a Tajik-dominated province. Other posts included a report about discrimination of the Farsi/Dari language, arbitrary arrests of women for wearing a "bad hijab," claims to Tajik majority status, persecution of the Hazara community, and calls for unity against the Taliban and other events. Of the 13 posts, 11 were written by individuals in the diaspora, including former members of the Parliament of Afghanistan, activists, journalists, and former government employees. The replies that formed the outbursts were posted by users in the diaspora and in Afghanistan. The posts and replies that were made in Farsi or Pashto were translated to English by the first author, who recently left Afghanistan for the diaspora.

We conducted a thematic analysis following the iterative, multi-stage inductive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lawless & Chen, 2018). We began by repeatedly reading the dataset to achieve familiarity. We then coded the comments and generated an initial set of descriptive codes. We conducted rounds of coding both within the thread and across them to understand the similarities and differences. Then, we grouped initial codes into broader thematic categories. Some categories were merged, others were discarded, and definitions were refined as our understanding of the discourses within the threads evolved. Finally, we synthesized the refined categories into the three particular themes analyzed

in this article. The paper and pencil coding and categorizing process was followed by coding within NVivo, where we applied the themes and subthemes but also looked for any potential new themes that had not been captured. This allowed us to confirm the themes and ensure they accurately represented the data.

We followed ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020) and the research ethics process flowchart of netnography (see Kozinets, 2019, p. 179). Since the study addresses vulnerable groups, bringing their plight to attention serves the cause of social justice. To protect them, user initials, profiles, and other unique identifiers are not included, and no posts are directly quoted to maintain rigorous anonymization and minimize the risk of tracing posts to specific users (Franzke et al., 2020; Hussen, 2020; Kozinets, 2019; Martin, 2019). We also removed one thread that was initially included in the data set, because the account was suspended by X for unknown reasons, which prompted our concerns about potential ethical problems. It is also important to acknowledge that X, as a non-regulated for-profit privately owned platform, operates with non-transparent algorithms and opaque artificial intelligence (AI)-powered recommender systems (Corsi, 2024). While the data collected from X represents the publicly visible and algorithmically prioritized discourse, not the totality of the diaspora's interactions, it is nevertheless still useful for understanding digital diaspora practices (Ozduzen et al., 2021; Zeng & Fang, 2025).

Places, Labels, and Language

The analysis revealed that contributors to Afghanistan's digital diaspora (hereafter CADD) on X engaged in an uncivil discourse erupting in firestorms in response to posts signaling various abuses of ethnic groups by the Taliban regime. Across these posts and responses, CADD reconstructed ethnic identities, asserted their own rights to national belonging, challenged the belonging of others, and battled over the legitimacy of the current regime. Three themes emerged across the posts and responses: essentialist displacement, the politics of labels, and language advocacy. While distinct, these themes are connected through their ethnic and place essentialism and give expression to power struggles over the national belonging of groups whose presence in the territory long predates the state of Afghanistan. Only a few CADD expressed support for unity among all ethnic groups. A notable characteristic is that the comments within the firestorm threads were wide-ranging; many were not simple condemnatory or supportive replies but brought up other issues perceived as relevant, creating rich themes.

Essentialist Displacement

The CADD contested each other's claims to Afghanistan by emplacing each other's ethnic/tribal groups in sites of historical, ancestral, or mythic origins on the margins or outside of the country's territory. The narratives of origins of the main ethnic groups who have established a centuries-long presence in the territory have all been contested and are a highly sensitive issue. CADD spun a conflictual (inward-contractive) spatial discourse, as opposed to cooperative (outward-extensive) spatial discourse (Ma & Wen, 2023), which produced an essentialist displacement of the groups from the national territory as a whole and worked to sever their connections and claims to Afghanistan as their country. This, in turn, affirmed the poster's own group's rightful belonging and claims to the nation-state. The posts were animated by offensive language, ethnic slurs, and stereotypes discharged through rapid outbursts in response to several different initial posts.

Internal Displacement. In comments challenging the Taliban regime, some CADD emplaced "Pashtuns" in the "Sulaiman Mountains" as their ancestral place of origin that essentially defines their character as "uncultured" and "uneducated" "nomads." The Sulaiman Mountains stretch along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan; the Durand line was demarcated by the British Empire to divide what was then British India (Saikal, 2010). The line divided the Pashtun ancestral tribal territory, placing the mountains' much greater portion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan states in Pakistan. Some CADD invoked this historical fact in an inward-contractive spatial discourse that claimed that "Pashtuns" were a minority, circulated stereotypes of the region as "uncultured" and "uneducated," and asserted that Pashtuns' presence in Afghanistan was shorter than that of "Tajiks or Parsis." The two groups have competed over power, each claiming the status of the largest group. Historians offer several possible origins for Pashtuns, including being native to the region, descent from the lost tribes of Israel, or ancient Indo-Iranians based on the Pashto language, which is classified in the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.; Schetter, 2005). In any case, the displacement of "Pashtuns" negated their belonging to the territory to delegitimize the Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime in an essentialist discourse that excluded all Pashtuns, including those who oppose the regime, thus undermining possible alliances across ethnic group boundaries.

External Displacement. Some posts created a contractive discourse that positioned Pashtuns at the spatial center of Afghanistan, while simultaneously displacing Hazaras and Tajiks to their supposed ancestral origins in Mongolia and Tajikistan, respectively. This contested their belonging and rights to the country. Posts that were affectively loaded with contempt for the "Hazaras" invoked long-circulated narratives about their supposed phenotypical similarity to Mongolians and descent from Genghis Khan invaders who took over the Khwarazmian Empire, which stretched along Central Asia, Iran, and the current-day Afghanistan, in the 13th century (Mousavi, 1998). The posts called on the Hazaras to

"go to Mongolia," labeling them "Moghol/Mongol migrants," "immigrants," and "a filthy generation of Genghis Khan." Scientists also offer other possible origins of Hazaras, including being native to Hazarajat, a territory within Afghanistan's interior, and/or mixed descent from Turks, Moghols, Persians, and Afghans/Pashtuns (Hyman, 2002; Mousavi, 1998; Schetter, 2005). Regardless of the actual Hazara origins, these posts erase their centuries-long presence in the territory.

A contractive discourse directed by posts at "Tajiks," as an outgroup in relation to Pashtuns, displaced the former to their supposed ancestral origins in Tajikistan, labeling them as "Kolabi" (from *Kolab* in reference to Tajikistan's city Kolab/Kulob) or as "immigrants" in posts in several threads. While some scholars argue that Tajiks have "no common ancestral mythology" (Schetter, 2005), others consider them eastern Iranian people (Sadr, 2020). The X posts denied their belonging to Afghanistan, erasing their historical presence in the territory that traces back centuries. Most of the posts displaced Tajiks in relation to Pashtuns as the rightful "rulers" of Afghanistan. For example, one thread was initiated by a post about the detention of Tajik and Hazara young women by the Taliban for not wearing the proper hijab. Many responses rejected the claims of abuse and instead justified the detentions, questioning Tajiks' morality and claiming that the detained women engaged in prostitution and describing Tajiks as *Kolabi* foreigners who cannot preserve their honor. Disdain and contempt permeated these posts, presenting Tajiks as unable to protect their honor by a cultural discourse that defines a man's honor in his ability to control the chastity of women. That cultural discourse was identified as proper to Afghanistan and thus signaled Tajiks' supposed exteriority. Another thread was initiated with a post claiming Tajik's majority status based on a supposed census from the "Passport Directorate," but it was most likely not factual. Some CADD not just denied Tajik majority claims but also dismissed them as migrants from Tajikistan. Censuses have been historically used in claims and counterclaims to the ethnic majoritarian status of the main group, in power struggles, and as a tool to dehumanize and marginalize some groups by justifying discriminatory policies (Sadr, 2020). The last census that was carried out in Afghanistan was in 1975 (Sadr, 2020). Sadr (2020) notes that it is widely believed that all estimates and surveys have always been manipulated, with the proportion of Pashtuns exaggerated to reinforce their political dominance.

In summary, places were strategically and symbolically invoked in a spatial inward-contractive discourse that placed one group in the spatial center while displacing other groups to the margins or the exteriority, thus constructing Afghanistan as an ethnically homogeneous space (Ma & Wen, 2023). This antagonistic discourse is a site for staking ethnic and national claims and denying belonging to others. Some CADD constructed a narrow and rigid territorial imaginary that reconfigured the boundaries of national identity in digital space by contracting the symbolic national space inward to their ethnic group, thus perpetuating historical exclusions. The digital platform of X became an arena of symbolic territorial control, a symbolic battleground where "real" and "authentic" belonging was debated. The physical distance among CADD did not dissolve place-based nationalism but amplified it through contests of who has the right to the national territory.

The Politics of Labels

Names and labels carry political and social weight as conscious political acts (Safran, 2008). CADD deployed "Afghan," "Afghanistani," "Khorasani," and "Hazaristani" labels to contest or assert the ethnic definition of the nation, the current regime's legitimacy, and their own group's identity and belonging. Deployed in outbursts in response to posts about abuses of groups, these ethnonyms served as a "rallying cry" to unite the people for political purposes, such as advocating for their ethnic group's interests and revealing tensions with regard to their imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). The labels "Afghanistan" and "Afghan" were disputed on the grounds that the latter has been historically applied to Pashtuns. Prior research showed the rejection of "Afghan" in favor of "Afghanistani" for the diaspora in non-mediated discourse (Abraham & Busbridge, 2014; Marsden, 2025). We show that CADD contested the label for the nation-state itself, proposing instead "Khorasan," while others denigrated and rejected those labels.

Some CADD favored naming the country "Khorasan" and its inhabitants "Khorasani." They accused "Pashtuns" of having invaded Khorasan and thus not being indigenous to the land, in contrast to Tajiks as the true indigenous people of "Khorasan" or "Afghanistan/Khorasan." "Khorasan," also spelled as "Khurasan," means "the land of the sun" and refers to the historical kingdom that encompassed what is now northern and western Afghanistan and eastern Iran (Schetter, 2005), where Afghanistan referred to one of its regions (Mousavi, 1998; Rahimi, 2017). The term "Afghan" was applied to the people of Afghanistan for the first time in the 1923 constitution (Ibrahimi, 2023; Sadr, 2020). Some Tajiks adopted the "ancient Khorasan" as an imagined ethnoscape comprising Afghanistan, eastern Iran, and the Central Asian countries to construct a Tajik ancestry as a strategic attempt to reclaim historical dignity, visibility, and political legitimacy in light of perceptions that they lacked a traceable lineage (Schetter, 2005). In some posts, "Khorasan" was collocated with "indigenous" in opposition to Pashtuns nominated as "invaders." Some CADD expressed hope for unity among indigenous inhabitants of Khorasan as a way to challenge the current power structures.

Other CADD rejected "Khorasan" as a name for the country on the grounds of the Tajiks' minority status. The posts

described Tajiks as "identity-less people" in contrast to Pashtuns, Hazaras, and Uzbeks who rightfully belong to Afghanistan. They rejected Farsi and mocked the label "Khorasan" by misspelling it as "Kharistan," which means "the land of donkey" in Farsi. Others claimed that "Afghan" is the only internationally recognized label for people from Afghanistan.

Some CADD contested the label Afghan to denote all people living in Afghanistan by either distorting it, thereby turning it into an ethnic slur, and/or by conflating "Afghan," "Pashtun," and "Taliban." Scholars have noted that the term "Afghan" serves as a key marker of exclusion against non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan (Abraham & Busbridge, 2014; Rezaei et al., 2023; Sadr, 2020). Some CADD engaged in debates about whether the substitute label "Afghanistani" is inclusive. Some distorted the label Afghan as "Awghan," which some Pashtuns find insulting, especially when used by outgroups. Other posts equated "the Taliban" and "Pashtuns," thus erasing the presence of other groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks among the Taliban. For Pashtuns who oppose the Taliban and have been advocating against their regime, equating Pashtuns with the Taliban is unacceptable and disappointing. They brought up Taliban abuses against Pashtuns, such as reports of killings, torture, and displacement of the Pashtun "Achakzai" tribe in Kandahar by the Taliban forces. Equating Pashtuns to the Taliban conceals the Taliban's atrocities against Pashtuns and hampers the efforts of Pashtuns who really advocate against the current oppressive regime.

Some CADD used "Hazaristan" and "Hazaristani" as pejorative labels for Hazaras who claim ethnic discrimination, advocate separation, and/or assert their ethnic identity. These "bad" "separatist, abusive Hazaristani" were symbolically expelled in favor of the "respectful" Hazaras who conform to the current national project. While used pejoratively, "Hazaristan" and the traditional term "Hazarajat," previously Gharjistan (Mousavi, 1998), denote the areas in central Afghanistan that are historically inhabited by the Hazaras. The Hazara population was violently reduced through campaigns of ethnic cleansing by the Pashtun King Abdur Rahman Khan between 1888 and 1893 in an effort to homogenize the nation and consolidate his authority nationwide. "Hazarajat" persisted as their main ethnoscape in central Afghanistan (Schetter, 2005) and finds its expression in the term "Hazaristan," which means land of the Hazara. Schetter (2005) further notes that for Hazaras, "Hazaristan" is an attempt to articulate a statement for political autonomy. The term invokes the historical consciousness of ancestral territory, memories of past violence, and present discrimination when used by Hazaras. When used by non-Hazara CADD, the term is loaded with negative affect about Hazaras' supposed desires for separation and disidentification with Afghanistan. In some posts, "Khurasani" and "Hazaristani" are collocated to signify Tajiks' and Hazaras' inferiority and enact exclusion.

National Language

CADD brought attention to and contested efforts to sideline Farsi/Dari, spoken by the majority of the population, in favor of Pashto and thus exclude Tajiks and Hazaras. In the discussions, Tajiks were centered as the Farsi-speaking group, thus bolstering their claims to dominance versus Pashtuns. This marginalized multiple groups that also speak Farsi Dari, most notably Hazaras and Aimaqs. CADD sparred over whether Pashto or Farsi better reflects the everyday language use, culture, and national identity of Afghanistan, and whether just one or both should be recognized as national languages. The issue of language appeared across many threads; however, two threads were initiated by posts specifically about language discrimination. The first one, created by a former member of the Parliament in exile, called attention to Farsi missing from a multilingual banner informing about the resumption of flights between Kabul and Urumqi (China) that had been suspended during COVID. The banner was displayed at an event hosted by the Ministry of Transport and Aviation under the Taliban and the Chinese Embassy in Kabul. The other language post shared a video of a Taliban member forcing a shopkeeper to write in Pashto, thus calling out the Taliban's discrimination of Farsi. The responses were affectively loaded with derogatory terminology and ethnic slurs that CADD from different groups directed at each other, including misogyny and gendered insults. Some CADD defended Pashto as the official language of the country that is, or should be, spoken by the majority, and the ability to speak it as a condition for living in Afghanistan. They described Farsi as a "foreign" language because it is widely spoken in Iran. Others argued that Farsi is a "rich" and "immortal" language with a long history as the lingua franca of the country. Those CADD derogated Pashto as a "primitive" language of a group, the Pashtuns, who commit violence and terrorism. Defending or dismissing one of the languages also dismissed those language speakers' legitimacy and belonging in the country.

Multiple languages have been historically spoken in Afghanistan's territory; "based on Ethnologue, there are 41 living languages in Afghanistan used as a first language, out of which 40 are indigenous" (Sadr, 2020, p. 116). Dari (Farsi) and Pashto are presently the two official languages of Afghanistan, with Farsi being the *lingua franca* of the country, spoken by the majority of the speakers (Rahimi, 2017; Sadr, 2020). For instance, Hazaras speak the dialect "Hazaragi" of Dari as their mother tongue. Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and others also commonly communicate in Dari. The terms "Farsi" and "Dari" have denoted the same language, though with regional differences, for centuries.

Historically, the word "Farsi" was common in Afghanistan; however, in a systematic effort to marginalize the language and to differentiate Afghanistan's Farsi from Iran's Farsi, Afghan nationalists forced the use of the label "Dari" instead of "Farsi" in the 1964 constitution, official documents, and schoolbooks, although people commonly continued to use both labels (Sadr, 2020). Some CADD contested the usage of the label "Dari" instead of "Farsi." They argued that the label "Dari" was imposed as a means of marginalizing and disconnecting Tajiks from their historical identity. This, in turn, neglected groups such as Hazaras, Aimaqs, and others who speak Farsi and emboldened Tajiks as the "primary" speakers of the language. For instance, some CADD dismissed Hazara's language as "Mongolian" in an effort to disconnect them from Farsi.

While CADD called attention to efforts to sideline Farsi/Dari, the interactive affordances of X facilitated their contestation of each other's claims to belonging based on the language they speak. Perhaps the firestorm nature of the responses to urgent posts encouraged the use of ethnic slurs and other offensive terms that turned the posts into verbal assaults on both languages, undermining Afghanistan's historical multilingualism. These language disputes animated the ethnic fractures among the CADD, highlighting another dimension of the contested character of the nation-building project in Afghanistan.

Conclusions

The analysis demonstrated that CADD spun reciprocal defensive exclusionary discourses of place, group labels, and language that produced fragmented encapsulation through ethnically inward contracting discourses. Their interactions across ethnic lines revolved around posts signaling various ethnic abuses and marginalization. Responses to posts erupted in firestorms that were more than temporary moments of anger; rather, X (Twitter) became a public sphere where collective identities were reconfigured, moral hierarchies were negotiated, and transnational political agency was asserted. Anger and indignation were resources through which the CADD claimed moral high ground, reinforced in-group solidarity, and challenged dominant narratives originating from the homeland. While interacting across ethnic lines, CADD simultaneously separated and encapsulated within ethnonational groups. Thus, this was not encapsulation on separate platforms, separate pages, or in virtual groups. Instead, it was an interactive defensive encapsulation. At a time when the ruling regime attempts to redefine the nation in monoethnic terms, CADD spun conflictual and inward-contractive discourses about place belonging, labels, and language, claiming dominance of one ethnic group over others and thus competing for exclusivity of national belonging. These discourses were animated by historical grievances and perceptions of marginalization that evolved over centuries of long cohabitation in spaces that now constitute the state of Afghanistan. They also reflected bigger struggles over recognition, legitimacy, and ownership of the national narrative. The divisions were actively reshaped and expressed in digital spaces where contributors resisted, reasserted, or reframed their identities. The divisions suggest that digital spaces not only reflect but also possibly intensify existing tensions. Unlike some diasporas where cohesion is emphasized in the host country (Ansar & Maitra, 2024; NurMuhammad et al., 2016), Afghanistan's case shows that diaspora can be a fragmented and dynamic space shaped by ongoing negotiations and rivalries that make it visible how the homeland is reimagined and contested far beyond its borders. Our analysis highlights the importance of using broader lenses beyond ethnonational ones to capture the dynamics of heterogeneity and account for internal contestation and competing narratives of identity and belonging.

By integrating the literature on digital firestorms with theories of digital diaspora, we advance the understanding of digital diasporas by highlighting how affective intensities, moral discourses, and participatory dynamics deepen fractures even as digital platforms afford interactions across ethnic lines. Despite physical dispersion and global connectivity, CADD deployed spatial essentialism to draw rigid ethnoterritorial boundaries that referenced specific places. Some contributors attempted to delegitimize co-nationals by framing their ethnic origin as external to Afghanistan by deploying historical or mythologized geography. In doing so, they recreated the nationalist spatial hierarchy of the homeland in interactions that momentarily connected those in exile and those in Afghanistan. Their digital interactions redrew maps of belonging to exclude, rather than pluralize, the national identity. This demonstrates a paradox of reterritorialization in digital spaces where CADD inside and outside of Afghanistan digitally reconstruct a bounded homeland as ethnically pure and historically fixed.

While most studies show interactions within ethnic or ethnonational groups, we showed Afghanistan's diaspora as heterogeneous and interacting across ethnic lines as facilitated by the digital affordances of X. X functioned as an alternative sphere for the groups whose interests are disregarded by mainstream media that are controlled and censored under the Taliban. Afghanistan's diasporic community is multiethnic and includes Taliban supporters. Social media allowed interactions across ethnic lines by providing a shared public stage for interactions animated by X affordances that make posts visible, searchable, and replyable to all CADD outside and inside Afghanistan. In contrast to offline spaces, where groups are often more fixed and communities tend to stay separate, platforms like X created a shared space where CADD could instantaneously engage with each other on trending topics and news. These exchanges were predominantly hostile, revealing contestations over belonging and the exclusionary nation-building project in Afghanistan.

While the posts brought CADD together for debate, the quality of the debate was low and consisted of reciprocal essentialist discourses and offensive terminology.

We connect the concepts of digital diaspora and firestorms to extend the understanding of digital diasporic practices. Previous studies showed organized and sustained practices of diasporic activism and social protest. We demonstrate that diasporic protests against abuses also take the form of short-lived digital firestorms that form part of the ongoing diasporic digital practices. Our content analysis of the comments reveals that they were not limited to direct responses (Arancibia & Montecino, 2017; Matook et al., 2022) but instead recirculated substantive issues that were given renewed relevance in relationship to transgressions signaled in the original posts. This points to digital firestorms being important means of ongoing negotiations of diasporic relations to the reshaping of Afghanistan's national project under the current regime. The concept of firestorms helps explain the emotional and moral dynamics of digital participation, showing how circulation of affect is central to the digital diaspora's identity expression and group positioning during times of national disorder. We thus argue for attention to the role of firestorms in digital diasporic social protest practices. In the context of Afghanistan's digital diaspora, these intense and emotionally charged bursts of digital activity emerged during the time of political crisis, punctuated by reports of perceived injustice.

Finally, while the 2021 Taliban takeover forced many people to seek refuge abroad, this study is, to our knowledge, the first to analyze the dynamics of Afghanistan's digital diaspora. The previous scholarship explored diasporic non-mediated life in various host countries, focusing largely on political integration, identity negotiation, or transnational engagement. However, little to no attention has been given to how digital platforms, such as X, mediate the ways those who left Afghanistan engage with each other and with homeland politics in times of national crisis. By analyzing these interactions, the analysis shows that the digital diaspora is an active space of negotiation, resistance, and connection. It is shaped by affective responses to political upheaval, cross-ethnic contestations over labels and languages, and shared memories of loss and hope.

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