

Where Are You From?

Kapleu Lemegne Dina Sintia

Research Fellow at Breach Builders

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ABSTRACT

In the middle of the African diaspora, identities relativise, and the notion of belonging takes another tone. What was concrete in these terms in the home country becomes abstract in the foreign land; however, caution! Either stereotypes or history of fact holds. The question “*Where are you from?*” translates in the home country in terms of ethnic differences takes the form of country belonging when asked in a foreign land. It embraces the idea of recognition, belonging and remembrance. Out of a banal and unconscious habitus, the land becomes the most robust expression of identity, which Merga Yonas Bula (2023) resumed in terms of “*nationality-based collective identity*” and “*ethnonational-based collective identity*”, which, of course, can either be any of these or both; out of which burnt the need of identity recognition and acceptance.

Social media platforms have become the drum of identity construction and transmission, simultaneously expressing fragmentation and participation. They have strengthened identity bonds for the African diaspora and have been used as advocacy platforms for social justice and as a safe space for discussing issues perceived as controversial. As Berna (2020) notes, social media provides an “immediacy of connection” across geographic and political borders. These social media bolster the visibility of the African community by bringing together both the diaspora and the nationals through diaspora advocacy pledges, change narratives, identity construction through African diaspora cultural events, and spotlighting their contributions in Germany. These platforms have created new public spheres, opportunities for social groupings and avenues for organising protests for the African communities in Germany.

Yet, a major barrier appears to be coming to terms with the overall effects of these digital interactions. In contrast to the United States, where demographic breakdowns specific to social media usage are routinely collected, Germany's strict data protection laws and lack of political will to collect disaggregated demographic information impose significant barriers to measuring and understanding diaspora social media engagement. This data gap hampers research efforts and limits the development of targeted policies for enhancing digital inclusion and representation of diaspora communities.

Keywords: African Diaspora, social media engagement, data shortage

INTRODUCTION

If Germany is open to a certain type of immigration because of its needs, how open is it to facilitating integration? This question drives debates from different angles on how diaspora communities, with their remarkable resilience, navigate systemic hardship, especially in the domain of media and communication. This systemic hardship is often built on the notion of differences and the idea of identity, quoting Sai on the idea of othering (Anderson et al., 2012). Therefore, this systemic hardship translated through the marginalisation and underrepresentation of diaspora communities into traditional German media led these diasporas to rely on new digital platforms, of which social media is the most robust expression. In this sense, the African Diaspora in Germany challenges conventional notions of identity, community, and activism by putting innovative uses to new digital platforms. These social media platforms also transmit the necessity of the African diaspora being seen simultaneously in their singularities and commonalities.

The question of diaspora communities' identities, belonging and representation has existed since time immemorial. These problems further grow more complex as they navigate stereotypes and historical narratives,

especially in foreign environments where cultural, ethnic, and racial differences are more pronounced. One of the central questions asked of diasporic individuals is, “Where are you from?” A question that speaks not only to geographical origin but also to a more profound sense of belonging and collective memories. More importantly, how is the question transmitted and transformed across space and sphere?

These diaspora communities, both in their commonalities and singularities, developed mechanisms for enhancing a structural system of communication through which they can advocate for issues affecting them, participate in developing a more cohesive society and share their cultures and backgrounds. Victoria Bernal(2021) conclusively argues that digital platforms have given diaspora communities an “*immediacy of connection*” that transcends geographic and political borders, fostering a powerful sense of community. In the case of the African diaspora in Germany, these platforms offer a means of communication and serve as spaces for advocacy and activism, where “taboo topics” that are purposely and consciously restricted in German traditional media and society are discussed.

The paper explores the historical transformation of the African diaspora in Germany from fragmentation to active participation organised through digital communication platforms, which have been used to construct unity, assert identity, and aid social change. The significant finding is the impossibility of measuring diaspora social media engagement comprehensively, which becomes apparent from onward analysis of both engagement and contributing characteristics limiting the analytical insights, given the limited statistical disaggregate of engagement data available. By examining identity formation, the role of social media, and the increasing activism within this community, this paper aims to shed light on the evolving landscape of diaspora communication and analyse how “Where are you from” is translated into these social media spaces.

IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE DIASPORA CONTEXT

Identity formation within diaspora communities is a complex, fluid, and multifaceted process, especially when individuals navigate the intersections between their home culture and the host society. For the African diaspora in Germany, identity formation involves an ongoing negotiation between past cultural heritage and the present experiences in a foreign land, as well as a conjunction of denial and acceptance or, in this case, approval. This process is not static; instead, it evolves as diaspora members continually reinterpret their relationship to both their homeland and the new environment.

A Culturally Identity or a Question of Belonging

Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity is one of the foundational frameworks for understanding how identity is constructed and negotiated in the diaspora. Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence that people carry with them from their homeland but is a dynamic and fluid process of “becoming”. This idea enshrined a process, not only of a construct but of relativity. This latter is embedded in a constant process of change and transformation, in which the diaspora community develop strategies to navigate what Hall conceptualised as hybridity. This hybridity is seen as a defining characteristic of diaspora identities.

On this note, many African immigrants in Germany face the question, “Where are you from?” constantly. This question, which may appear straightforward, carries more profound implications, intertwined with identity politics and prompting individuals to confront the complex facets of their identity. It underscores the tension between national identities, such as identifying as African or aligning with a particular nation and ethnic identity, which can further fragment into various ethnic subgroups. Therefore, African diaspora members must navigate these dual or even multiple identities, constructing what Bula(2023) framed as “nationality-based collective identity” and “ethnonational-based collective identity”.

The Othering

Edward Said’s theory of “othering” is also crucial for understanding how the African diaspora forms its identity in Germany. In his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), Said argues that Western societies tend to define themselves in opposition to the other, particularly the non-Western world. This process of “othering” often places diaspora communities, particularly those of African descent, in marginalised or exoticised positions within the host

society. This othering is forcefully translating the “us” and “they” strongly crystallised in the socio- and psycho-structural dominance of white supremacy as a ringtone of what can be called the white syndrome.

In Germany, African diaspora members are often “othered” based on their skin colour, accent, or cultural practices, making them hyper-visible and victims of stereotyping, discrimination, racism and xenophobia. This othering structurally enshrined in the national governance system expresses the difficulty of flexibility and openness of the system, clustering, and, therefore, Germany is the second most racist country in Europe (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023). In this context, social media is the most expressive tool leveraged by the African diaspora community to showcase their othering. This, of course, becomes a self- and community-awareness belt that crystallises social bonds within and across African diaspora communities.

Hybridity and Acculturation: The In-betweenness

Hybridity refers to the blending and merging of different cultural influences as individuals navigate life in the diaspora, leading to unique cultural forms (Hall, 2005, p. 14). Diasporic individuals continuously negotiate their identity between the culture of their homeland and the host country's culture. It is a process that involves living with and through difference rather than despite it, a constant production and reproduction of identity through transformation, and a result of the interplay between different cultural presences. Hybridity is a fusion of different races to create unique identities. However, beyond fusion, acculturation entails adopting the cultural elements of a new culture; more extensively, it is the process of adopting the dominant group's culture. It could be misleading to perceive diaspora identity just as a hybridity process when the culture of the dominant groups overpowered this hybridity in a cultural capital sense. This hybridity represents the diaspora subgroups, who, as Bulla highlighted, manifest the willingness to maintain a part of their culture.

On the other hand, acculturation tends to be more global because of its outstanding posture as the first window of interaction between two distinct cultural groups. It, therefore, involves adopting the host culture at the expense of one's original culture, often motivated by the need to leverage their cultural capital. The diaspora identity in this format of in-betweenness manoeuvre to set up itself as a community. Assimilation overthrew pure hybridisation because, instead of leveraging differences, it leverages subordination in a setting where negotiations are limited. For the African diaspora in Germany, the structurality of the system imposes a directional path, which means to take what is offered or leave it. The diaspora also uses contemporary social media platforms to communicate and advocate because of the problematic openness of the system. If on the general standpoint of theoretical frameworks, the concept of hybridity offers a critique of assimilation by suggesting that diaspora members should not have to choose between cultures but can instead construct a hybrid identity that reflects both their origins and their new realities, yet the openness of the host society define this hybridity. However, the necessity of cultural capital imposes itself. As Bourdieu argues, cultural capital is a non-financial social asset that promotes social mobility beyond economic means and also encapsulates the idea of resistance (Bourdieu, 1986). This resistance is enshrined in the idea of embodiment, through which diaspora members assert their cultural heritage more strongly as a form of resistance, thus shaping their identity around both the cultural capital they bring from home and the challenges they face in the host country.

Imagined Communities and the Role of Digital Media

The challenge of having a fixed or universal definition of the diaspora makes it to be visualised or categorised as imagined communities. This concept, developed by Anderson, argues that nations are imagined because their members will never know most of their fellow citizens (Anderson et al., 2012). Yet, they still feel a deep sense of connectedness through shared symbols, narratives and experiences (Mambrol, 2019). For diaspora communities, this connectedness is often translated by *Where are you from*, a banal question, which, in this case, transcends home-based structural barriers related to ethnicity or religion. Thus, in the context of black diaspora communities, a question of colour and race creates a strong sense of belonging, association, and community. In a cross-cultural approach, this question asked within and across diaspora community members marked off the idea of national attachment, but when asked in the home countries or members of similar countries market off the idea of ethnicity.

AFRICAN DIASPORA AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION PLATFORMS

In the context of the African diaspora communities, social media has emerged as a powerful platform for communication, identity formation, and activism. For the African diaspora, digital platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube not only serve as modern public spheres but also function as community-communication networks. These networks facilitate the movement of ideas (Cooper, 2023), advocacy, and social justice efforts across the African diaspora, creating a transnational flow of information and connections. Furthermore, social media platforms have emerged as crucial alternative public spheres for Germany's African diaspora in response to their exclusion, marginalisation and constant pejorative narratives in the German traditional media. These digital spaces align with Fraser's (1990) concept of counter-publics, parallel discursive arenas where marginalised groups can articulate their interests, needs, and aspirations. Aikins et al. (2021), in the first comprehensive study of Black, African and Afrodiasporic people in Germany, highlighted that respondents reported experiencing racism in social media. This study highlights the severity of exclusion and misrepresentation in traditional media spaces. This systemic exclusion is particularly evident in German newsrooms, where the New German Media Makers (Neue Deutsche Medienmacherinnen) diversity study reveals a severe underrepresentation of journalists of African descent (Medienmacherinnen, 2020). This exclusion also manifests in cinema and narrative framing. As media scholar John A. Kantara pinpointed that the roles for Black actors in German media are often limited to stereotypical portrayals that reinforce existing prejudices rather than reflecting the diverse reality of African diaspora lives in Germany as he says:

“They can be singers or dancers or rather prostitutes, pimps or drug dealers because that is the cliché about Black people. But where are the black judges and police officers? Where are the Black inspectors who are intelligent and in charge and who manage to solve their cases without being the sidekick or sub-worker? I do not think that such parts are not even written with a Black person in mind.” (Kantara, 2012). Hence, the rare exceptions, such as Liz Baffoe's role in the TV Show Lindenstraße, serve to highlight the broader pattern of exclusion rather than indicate systematic change. This pattern leads to questionable media integration in Germany.

Furthermore, when I attended this conference at the University of Leipzig, I asked the audience how many black actors and/or journalists they knew in traditional German media, like TV shows. The hall's silence was enough to further strengthen the problem of black representativity on media platforms. The structural barriers in traditional media catalyse what Ponzanesi (2018) calls “digital diaspora formations”, referring to the use of digital platforms out of necessity to provide alternative spaces for representation, communication, and community building and mobilise collective actions for the betterment of African diaspora communities situations in Germany, where traditional media platforms refuse willingly or not to integrate them. In other words, this transnational connectivity strengthens bonds within the diaspora and allows for disseminating ideas that may otherwise be suppressed in traditional media. Social media networks empower diaspora members to discuss issues such as racism, xenophobia, and migration policies, which are often underrepresented in mainstream German media. How can we tangibly identify media consumption patterns in Germany across and within diaspora communities?

The traceability and availability of social media data users.

Examining social media consumption patterns in Germany comes with its own challenges, mainly disentangling diaspora engagement patterns. Contrary to the United States, platforms and research institutions routinely gather and publish disaggregated data by race or ethnicity, but in contrast, Germany has a very different approach to such data collection.

The following quote is based on the digital report 2023, presenting the German social media landscape by active users: WhatsApp: 83.8% internet users, YouTube: 81.9%, Facebook: 63.2%, Instagram: 57.6%, TikTok: 41.2%, Snapchat: 35.8% and Twitter/X: 28.9%. (Maddalena, 2023). These are overall aggregate statistics data considering Internet users in Germany; however, it is challenging to quantify and qualify any diaspora-related difference in platform usage among particular diaspora groups. The non-existence of such disaggregated data in Germany makes it difficult to engage with diaspora communities meaningfully and present their impact on the society landscape and their representations in media platforms. This linear approach to data collection and

protection, further reinforced by Germany's Federal Data Protection Act, although fostering privacy and individual protection, cripples the understanding of the dynamics of societal landscapes in relation to media usage patterns and consequently impacts measuring efficiently the means of resistance developed by diaspora communities via media platforms. This law restricts the collection and processing of personal data, especially those placed under “special data categories” (Federal Ministry of Justice & Federal Office of Justice, 2021, Sections 22 & 46). Likewise, German popular messenger apps display a strong usage of WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, Skype, and Snapchat, among others, highlighting comprehensive usage statistics. Yet, they have difficulty communicating specific demographic usage and potential reasons explaining the variations.

The stark contrast between Germany's data collection approaches and the United States' disseminating data tracking becomes evident when examining recent PEW Research Center data(2023). The research report of PEW brings to light explanatory patterns of media consumption and engagement in the US, especially in black communities, often pinpointing the type of narrative often displayed across these social media(Pew Research Center, 2023, p. 4). Such narratives, perceptions, and proliferating negative media images strongly influence social media dynamics and how minority groups relate and interact with them. Based on these concrete differences, the US data approach offers detailed demographic tracking of social media consumption patterns, comprehensive statistics on platform preferences by demographic groups, and clear patterns across different media platforms.

Despite the development of tangible measurement mechanisms in the US, both countries have similar pathology. These pathologies are primarily expressed in terms of representation in traditional media and media coverage, the constant downgrading and negative narratives often narrated across media platforms. This situation leads to social media taking precedence over traditional media, offering substantial means of counternarrative, cultural expression and positive representation.

Social Media as a Modern Public Sphere

The public sphere theory developed by Habermas suggests that the public sphere is a space where individuals can come together to discuss and debate societal issues free from governmental or corporate influence(Kellner, 2024). Traditionally, this was limited to physical spaces such as village squares, coffeehouses, or public forums. However, the growth and influence of the internet, particularly social media, have transformed the nature of the public sphere. Social media platforms for the African diaspora in Germany have become the new public sphere where discussions unfold.

African diaspora voices have often been marginalised in the traditional media space with little representation in mainstream German media. However, the digital platform has allowed the diaspora to leap over these gatekeepers of diaspora discursive space and establish their own venues for dialogue and self-representation. These diasporic outlets have thus become crucial lifeworlds of communication and community-building. They often answer the question, what is happening in the African diaspora communities? Indeed, the interest of this question lies not only internally, that is, within the diaspora, but also externally, for people outside of the diaspora. Afronews.de, Courier d’Afrique, and Radio R FM have been instrumental in raising awareness about issues that are often neglected by the mainstream German media, such as skills downgrading, labour market disparities and marginalisation. Since 2021, Afronews.de has initiated the African Community Awards(Afronews, 2021), aimed at celebrating and recognising the outstanding achievements of Africans in different fields in Germany. This initiative hopes to break down the underlying biases in and outside the African diaspora and showcase their brilliance across different fields. Also, social media influencers are crucial in recognising the contribution of the African diaspora, changing narratives and creating a bridge of connection. These influencers have raised their voices for the communities of the African diaspora on plural issues, mainly through Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

In this dynamic, the notion of community trust comes into play. People tend to trust more information shared by people they can relate to. In this context, this relation is translated in terms of cultures, race, colour and experiences. YouTube platforms are a sphere used to share tips on navigating the intricacies and hardships of the system to succeed and successfully integrate into society. Youtubers like Philly Yambo Makora, with her YouTube channel Tales of Yambo, and Nyima Jadama, with her Nyima’s Bantaba Talk Show, are examples of

influencers who are enhancing diaspora visibility through continuous social media engagement.

Thus, social media platforms are used as a bridge between diaspora communities and German nationals to deconstruct biases and signal their presence as human and moral entities. In this sense, these social media platforms became a digital awareness platform through which the diaspora intensifies social mobilisation by creating an alert system for political, social, and civic engagement representation and acceptance. For instance, diaspora members often use WhatsApp as a private platform to discuss sensitive or taboo topics that are not covered or are silenced in mainstream German media. Topics such as racism, skills downgrading, forced reskilling, labour marginalisation and exclusion are discussed in these digital spaces. Bernal argues that social media provides an *“immediacy of connection to people and institutions, to act and communicate across geographic and political borders”* (Bernal, 2021, p. 45) that allows diaspora communities to communicate. In paraphrasing Ponzanesi, social media allows the diaspora to reinforce their identities, share opportunities, spread their culture and influence policies (Ponzanesi, 2021). Under the label of diasporic media, Ponzanesi describes a set of multiple media used by diaspora communities to strengthen their connections like E-diaspora, Net-Diaspora and Web-diasporas.

Social Media as a Tool for Advocacy and Activism

Social media has become a key tool for advocacy and activism within the African diaspora. Multimedia platforms allow diaspora members to organise protests, share information about social justice issues, and amplify their voices in the fight against systemic racism and discrimination. This voice has had a substantial increase with the release of the European survey on anti-racism, ranking Germany as the most racist country in Europe. The unveiling of this reality, hidden in the structural system, aside from showcasing the internal structural struggles and symbolic violence faced by the diaspora, stresses the necessity of the growing mobilisation of the diaspora because of their positive impact and contribution to German society. The need and necessity for media representation and change in social perceptions and narratives increased the need for the African diaspora to mobilise via social media platforms. Crozier (Zald 1982) further describes this approach when he argues that actors always develop means of skirting the system by creating alternative strategies outside of the primary system. In this context, social media acts as a regulatory mechanism. This regulatory mechanism entails confronting and influencing the structures of power that often marginalise diaspora communities. In Crozier’s framework, actors within any social system are not powerless but rather have the capacity to influence, negotiate, and regulate power through strategic actions (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980). Social media enable these members of the African diaspora to step in as regulators of structural power, acting as a check on the social, political, and media systems that often erase them as people or silenced them.

When African diaspora members establish their networks and platforms, they are able to circulate information, influence public opinion and counter the narratives that sustain their marginalisation. The ability to produce and contain their own narratives, such as hashtags #JusticeForBlack and online campaigns against racism, shows how structural power is challenged through the regulatory role of social media. This aligns with social movement theory (Manuel Castells 2012) and his idea of networked movements, as social media allows people to connect, organise and mobilise action.

One prominent example is the murder of Cameroonian William Chedjou in Berlin in July 2024, the attack against a man from Ghana and his daughter in June 2024, and the attack against a Cameroonian pastor, among others. Social media was used, to a great extent, to spread information about the case, raise awareness, and denounce the insecurity black people face in Germany. On various social media platforms, #JusticeForBlack attracted attention to the racial violence experienced by members of the African diaspora. Beyond linking different movements, this type of digital activism not only translated into protests on the ground but also spotlighted the systemic racism that the Black community in Germany experienced as they galvanised and rallied the diaspora and allies around the world to join them in their collective search for justice.

Similarly, the United States-born #BlackLivesMatter movement received enormous support in the Federal Republic, particularly from the African diaspora. In some German cities, massive protests against police realpolitik, racial profiling and xenophobia were being organised, primarily via social media channels. Hashtags such as #BLMDeutschland and #SayTheirNames were used to highlight cases of police violence against Black

individuals in Germany, showing the global reach of the movement and the role of social media in facilitating cross-border solidarity.

Social media also allows the African diaspora to engage in advocacy that extends beyond the scope of race and discrimination. For instance, platforms like Facebook and YouTube are used to promote economic empowerment within the diaspora, highlighting African-owned businesses, entrepreneurs, and cultural events in Germany. This form of digital advocacy helps strengthen the African diaspora's economic position, providing a platform for businesses to reach new customers and for diaspora members to support one another financially.

Furthermore, the continuous rise of right-wing populism in Germany and Europe calls for a diaspora collective action, upon which social media as a public sphere is the emblem of this mobilisation. Never said enough, this rise represents a fundamental threat to diaspora communities, especially with their agenda on migration policies. Could this movement, labelled "*Auslandermussraus*", depict constant misinformation or non-information about what diaspora communities contribute to German societies? Therefore, social media also aimed to increase diaspora communities' efforts to showcase their achievements and contributions to German society. If migration transports an atom of fear and xenophobia today, especially among young people, it is also because structural policies and media have failed to brighten the contribution of the different diaspora communities in the development and advancement of the host country. Therefore, if the #Saytheirnames advocated for more human rights consideration and respect, it also undoubtedly requested the recognition of diaspora individuals' achievements and contributions to the host society.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the African diaspora in Germany from a fragmented state to one of active participation represents a significant transformation in how diaspora communities navigate and challenge systemic barriers through digital platforms. The seemingly simple question "Where are you from?" explains their struggles with identity, belonging and representation vis-a-vis the host society. As traditional German media persist in nearly excluding African diaspora voices from its coverage, emerging forms on social media are increasingly becoming powerful alternative public spheres through which diaspora communities articulate their experiences, share their culture, and mobilise for social change.

One of the most telling points from this research is that Germany's data collection and privacy method is a tough trail to tackle. Unlike countries like the United States, which routinely collect and analyse disaggregated data about social media usage by race and ethnicity, Germany has to contend with incredibly restrictive data paragraphs and a reluctance to gather specific and targeted demographic information. This shy attitude surely represents a huge barrier to understanding and measuring the reel effect of diaspora engagement in social media. The absence of this data hampers research and inhibits the development of informed policies and initiatives that could improve the quality and inclusion of diaspora communities in the digital sphere and increase their representation in decision-making. The difference between the aggregate-only approach employed by Germany and disaggregated demographic data tracking in the United States points to an area worth reforming for those trying to influence policy.

The evolution of social media into present-day public spheres has given the African diaspora integrated elements of resistance against damaging narratives, systemic inequities, and the absence of community building. These digital platforms are not just mere spaces for communication but also vehicles for advocacy, activism and cultural preservation. Members of the diaspora have created counter-publics across social media platforms to talk about issues that are rarely addressed in mainstream German media, such as systemic racism and professional discrimination, while at the same time praising their successes and contributions to German society.

In this paper, I have argued that the interstice between identity formation, digital mediation, and social activism marginalisation of African diaspora engagement with systematic challenges posed in Germany. Instead of becoming content with what mainstream public spaces have made available to them, Diaspora communities have taken social media and turned it around by creating their own narrative, building networks and creating dialogue. This digital engagement has been especially critical in challenging an ascendant right-wing populism and entrenched systemic barriers.

Conclusively, the role of social media in empowering diaspora communities will likely continue to evolve and expand. However, it is worth highlighting that with systematic data collection and analysis of diaspora-specific social media engagement patterns, our understanding of these digital movements and their impact will be complete in Germany. This research stresses the need for developing a more nuanced approach to data collection, which considers the need to protect the privacy of diaspora communities while allowing organisations to stand and support their digital engagement. Such data would be highly useful for policymakers, researchers, and community organisations trying to address digital inequality and work towards a more equitable media landscape. When it became apparent that digital platforms were where many in the African diaspora were congregating, the fragmentation that had occurred for centuries began to mitigate, and suddenly, and to the astonishment of many, members were able to unite by participating as active and engaged consumers.

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