Roma Cultural Influencers: Social Media for Identity Formation

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Abstract: In the 'Societies and Lifestyles' project, 2006-2009, 10 post-communist countries analysed values of so-called fringers: small ethnic groups living on the fringes of society. One of them, the Hungarian Roma appeared to have a rich cultural heritage that had been exploited without its integration into an authentic and empowering cultural presence. (Forray & Beck, 2008). Roma heritage, representing about 10 % of Hungarian population, is not exhibited permanently, rarely appear in social media and isn't recognised even by the socially challenged Roma community. Stakeholder meetings indicate that educational poverty is more threatening for youth than financial needs: it is cultural immersion is needed to build healthy identity. As part of the HORIZON2020 AMASS - Acting on the margins – Arts as social sculpture research project, we developed a training and mentoring program for aspiring Roma cultural influencers. We assumed that social media can be an agent to fight educational poverty and can be used as an arts-based intervention to promote the development of socially challenged youth. Influencers of the Roma community, predominantly male, focus on celebrities and scandals or raise their voice against negative prejudices. Their attitudes do not encourage majority youth to read their messages. Our young Roma girl influencers show cultural values of Roma heritage in witty, youthful voice that is convincing and popular. This paper presents their emergence and shows their unique voices. After two semesters of training in Roma culture, media skills, legal regulations, and online journalism, nineteen girls have successfully established themselves in social media. When disadvantaged minorities try to raise their voices, the response is often characterised as hostile and biased (Glucksman, 2017). We identified psychological traits needed for successful cultural media presence through pre- and post-course measurement. Our training program enhanced skills in all areas with digital competence showing the greatest improvement. The process-folios (documentation of growth during training, cf. Gardner, 1999) showed increased self-assurance and commitment to Roma roots. Those who opted out of the course were threatened by the aggressive tone of social media and / or found regular presence irreconcilable with daily duties (Kárpáti and Somogyi-Rohonczy, 2021). We analysed the social media iconography (Drainville, 2018) of the Roma on Instagram and TikTok in Hungary and on the international scene and identified the scarcity of authentic cultural content. Through cultural immersion, they appropriated ancient motives and symbols that often-assumed new meaning. Not hiding gloomy reality, their intention was to show beauty in their environment and highlight cultural achievements and personal growth against all the odds. The Hungarian Roma Cultural Influencers are not only content providers – they are role models also for their communities.

Keywords: cultural identity, Roma heritage, social media presence, Instagram, YouTube.

1. Training cultural influencers – a new form of representing Roma culture in Hungary

The Hungarian Roma, about 780,000 in number, the biggest majority in a country of less than ten million inhabitants. The Hungarian Roma belong to two major tribal groups that are different in culture, lifestyle and attitudes toward education. Members of the Romungro ('Hungarian', Vlach, 'Wallachian' or 'Olah') tribe have integrated in the culture of the majority Hungarians, do not speak their tribal language and do not adhere to ancient customs of the Roma community. The Boyash (or 'Beás') have retained an identity that is deeply rooted in their art (music, dance, crafts) and their language. Roma youth suffers from educational segregation in primary level education, where 'special' classes with lower attainment expectations are formed that become dead alleys as they do not prepare for secondary level studies. Currently there are more and more new programmes with textbooks in minority languages and support for the training and subsequent enrolment of Roma teachers. Only about 40 % of young Roma may continue their studies after the compulsory eight years of primary education. Vocational schools, however, often fail to provide them with qualifications that guarantee employment in a rapidly transforming economy. Too short or inappropriate education and unemployment are intricately related and the social distance between the Roma minority and the social majority constantly increases (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2011).

Roma culture (apart from music) is underrepresented in Hungary. Appropriation of the cultural heritage of a nation is a basic constituent of *national identity and self-esteem,* but it is difficult to attain there is no museum of Roma art (although several artists gain international reputation) and folk traditions are also underrepresented in regional museums. (Kárpáti et al., 2014). Perhaps the best educational initiative that integrates arts-based skills development and social integration is the Genuine Pearl Foundation (Oates and L. Ritoók, 2018). Communication skills of young Roma, mostly visualisers, while education is predominantly verbal, are often

underdeveloped and therefore most of them are unsuccessful at school (Kyuchukov et al., 2017). Visualisers may be, however, very successful in communication when they use social media platforms. Communication through media is a motivating platform for self-expression, and visual language may facilitate their conceptual development.

Through a European project entitled "Acting on the Margins – Arts as Social Sculpture" (AMASS), we decided to train Roma cultural influencers and prepare them to use their media channels for raising awareness about the positive aspects of Roma life: cultural heritage as well as current achievements in arts and science. The traditional ways of popularising a culture: museum exhibitions, books, cultural events, or research conferences may be beneficial for reaching small part of the adult population that frequents these venues. However, traditional means of cultural appropriation do not come up on the radar of a young audience. The AMASS project focuses on communities on the margin, and women are considered especially vulnerable members of disadvantaged groups. Therefore, we decided to train young Roma girls to formulate powerful cultural messages on social media.

Our arts-based intervention used the Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube platforms as creative environment to mentor young Roma girls in social media use. mentoring was necessary, as the girls encountered harassment through comments by those who have general, negative attitudes towards the Roma population and criticism from family members for stepping in the limelight. Every fourth participant left the course because they could not face criticism. problems concerning the workload of producing media content was another obstacle to face, but it could be overcome through coaching time management.

The stakeholder community around our training team included local municipal decision makers, educational politicians, and community members from cultural and political associations of Hungarian Roma who reflect on course content and mentor participants. This way, we hoped to avoid cultural colonialization – a practice that filters authentic content to suit majority ideologies. Before describing our training program through the introduction of a characteristic method, we summarise the current Roma social media landscape in Hungary.

2. Roma culture as represented on social media – a brief overview

2.1 Roma – or rather, Gypsy – imagery on Hungarian Instagram channels

When you search information about the Hungarian Roma on Instagram, the first obstacle is to find authentic content. On 20 December 2021, we did a thorough Instagram survey to identify related content on Hungarian and international sites. The *#cigány* (Gypsy) hashtag included entries about the misbehaviour of Roma people in urban areas (80 %) and news about events (20 %). Content tagged *#cigány* was predominantly pejorative that reinforced prejudices among majority Hungarians. When other hashtags were used in conjunction with #cigány, for example*, #cigányzene* (Gypsy music), and *#cigánytánc* (Gypsy dance), comments were less harsh. Two third of these posts represented images and names of musicians, and only one third contained negative comments about venues where Gypsy music was played. These event posts predominantly targeted the Roma population who were likely to participate, and, evidently, they were neutral or positive in nature. Posts tagged *# cigányság* (Gypsy community) were rare and contained historic information. We found two accounts only that included posts with the hashtag *#romakultura* (Roma culture). One of them, Romani Design, established in 2010, is a fashion studio run by the Roma designer Erika Varga and produces highly acclaimed garments with Roma motives. The other Instagram account entitled Salföldi Oldal ("A Page about Salföld" – a Hungarian region), contained information not only about a music festival organised there, but also added related cultural context. Apparently, the only positive aspect of Roma culture that was visible on Hungarian Instagram pages (except for the two channels mentioned above), was "Gypsy music", a mixture of Roma folk music, songs from operettas and films. "Gypsy music", a popular entertainment style played in restaurants worldwide has little or no connections with musical heritage of the Roma. (Bands playing world music, however, draw inspiration from authentic sources – but their work is far less wide-spread and practically invisible on social media in Hungary).

We also surveyed international Instagram sites, and found a much brighter and more sophisticated interpretation of the Roma heritage. Here, the image of Roma is associated with a richly contextualised visual style, mostly with the hashtag #Gypsy" or even "#gypsy", that was not meant or perceived as an insult. Although some older people who identify themselves as ethnically Roma (Romani or Romany) are still offended by being called "Gypsy" and standard dictionaries also avoid this term, more and more community members – including all the Hungarian Roma we encountered during trainings and stakeholder meetings - even embrace the term.

As indicated before, "Roma" is associated with "Romungro", the assimilated Hungarian tribe, while Boyash and Olah communities prefer to call themselves Gypsy. On the international Instagram scene, negative hashtags like "#gypsy is a slur" are still found, but #Gypsy is a predominantly positive term. With about 7.5 million images representing Roma culture in a variety of settings, from traditional crafts through the influence of their dresses and objects on fashion and fine arts, this hashtag yielded images that elevated and praised this culture. The #romani hashtag was found under only 198 thousand images, while #gypsystyle identified 1,3 million, *#gypsysoul* 2,7 million, and *#gypsylife* 896 thousand posts. Interestingly, we found only 24 thousand posts for #gypsymusic and 18 thousand for #gipsymusic and only 870 posts tagged *#Romanimusic*. This genre, diluted as entertainment, does not seem to attract international content creators on Instagram, – who are, however, fascinated by visual aspects of Roma culture.

On the international scene, the vast majority of Instagram images are positive – in contrast to Hungarian postings, that are overwhelmingly negative in nature and lack cultural content. (Exceptions are event advertisements – 20 % of the posts - two cultural channels, and four channels created by two Roma intellectuals and two researchers studying Roma culture). Culture as hashtag is not used frequently under international Instagram posts either (we found 241 mentions of *#gypsyculture* and 870 of *#romaniculture*) but the millions of images with a Gypsy hashtag show a lot of cultural content. These include examples of contemporary visual art and crafts, fashion inspirations, picturesque village scenes, folk art events, etc. This positive tone and varied, attractive content is what we hope to see, besides messages about social issues without negative assumptions, in the channels of the girls admitted to our Roma Cultural Influencer Course.

2.2 Gypsy imagery on TikTok

We evaluated TikTok content related to the Roma minority in Hungary and abroad on 20 December 2021. In Hungary, *#cigány* is forbidden here, because of the hate speech even the music posts with the hashtag involved. Of course, there are permutations of the word that are allowed: images with the hashtag *#cigányok* (Gypsies) reached 2,6 million views, and *#ciganyokvagyunk* (we are Gypsies) 2 million. Dance is the dominant genre, as it suits the environment so well. We found 9,4 million views for posts tagged *#ciganytanc* (Gypsy dance) and 9,4 million for the same word with correct Hungarian spelling, *#cigánytánc*. The next favourite genre on TikTok was *#cigányzene* (Gypsy music) with 7,3 million views, and another spelling of the same word, *#ciganyzenek* with 3,4 million views. Only with this genre did we find the hashtag *#romazene* (Roma music), with 3,1 million views. This term may be more acceptable for researchers, but, as we indicated before, not particularly preferred by the community it intends to describe. For art, crafts and dance posts it is practically never used, but for music, Roma is there in social media. The hashtags *#romakultúra* and *#cigánykultúra* (and the more sophisticated content they are associated with on Instagram) were not yet present on TikTok last December.

3. Photovoice and Visual Storytelling: central methodological models for training Roma influencers

Finding your voice means also finding your scaffolding structures that help you find the right response. Cultural influencers represent more than their individual interests and value system: they have to stand up for a community. Representing culture means to deeply understand, process and reveal cultural values that may be important for followers (Poulopoulos et al., 2018). The effects of influencers go far beyond raising awareness for a product or idea. They call to action, change life(styles) and deeply influence the way their fans think about themselves and their communities. Credibility is key (Nandagiri, 2018).

Keeping the results of influencer personality research in mind, we integrated netiquette, internet law and personality assertion training in por program. In the second phase of the program, we employed a psychologist-coach also active as journalist. Mentoring was organised in small groups and also individually, online and face-to-face, on a weekly basis. After the end of the training program in December 2021, further mentoring sessions will be offered on a voluntary basis, to follow our graduates in the first phases of building their channels.

Combining digital technologies with traditional means of expression like drawing, writing, singing, playing music or engaging in creative drama may all be integrated in the work of a cultural influencer. Although our program was media-based, we intended to provide a wide spectrum of creative opportunities. (For an illustrated description of our methods, cf. Kárpáti and Somogyi-Rohonczy, 2021). We found two methods especially useful for teaching future cultural influencers about the choice of relevant topic, authentic visualisation, striking image and emotionally charged, still accurate text: Photovoice and Visual Storytelling.

3.1 Photovoice

Photovoice as a method of imaging invites to work on the boundaries of art, anthropology, sociology and politics. It encourages in-depth acquaintance with the social (cultural, personal, economic, etc.) issues that will be represented in a sequence of photographs: field work and library research, interviews, and personal experiences (Latz et al., 2016). Participatory photography means the involvement of the creator of images in the life of a community – as a collaborator, not as an observer. "… our approach brings together creative expression, media, development, campaigning, and social change to deliver projects that encourage voice, build skills, deliver advocacy and work towards sustainable change." (Photovoice, n. d.) The technological and aesthetic aspects of photography are acquired as means to an end: capturing a culture, a lifestyle, a conflict, or a social space worth presenting.

3.2 Visual Storytelling

When you tell a story through images, you may have a wide variety of inspirations – just think of the pastry called madeleine that provokes involuntary memory: a long train of thoughts and experiences revived that create the substance of "In Search of Lost Time" (1913) by the French author, Marcel Proust. In Visual Storytelling, the starting point is also an object of special significance. Holding it in hand after a long time, they have the power of calling forth a rich and vivid imagery. One picture leads to the other – and the visual story slowly unfolds (Hsu et al., 2020). Here are a few examples of works by participants of the Roma Cultural Influencer Training at Corvinus University Budapest, realised from September till December 2021.

Anette was born in a small village in the Mátra mountains of Northern Hungary. Her source of inspiration is her grandfather, from whom she inherited a bicycle and a fancy pair of ballroom shoes. When creating her Visual Storytelling vide, she explained why these objects have a cultural significance. The old man was proud of his possessions and kept them in such good shape that the granddaughter can use them even today. His active working life (supported by the bicycle) and love of Gypsy dance and music (where he put the ballroom shoes to good use) represent diligence and joy of life for Anette. She is a social worker at a state institution for the support of disadvantaged youth, where she helps girls with a troubled past to continue education, find a job or a place to live, enter the health care system etc. She has created a podcast channel with where she gives voice to everyday social problems of her community, rarely heard about even in public media, and interviews experts who can offer solutions. She also uses TikTok to popularise ideas that come up in podcasts. The two channels mutually support each-other, as potential podcast audience is informed from TikTok about themes of interest, and those who listen to an interview register for her TikTok channel to keep updated.

Bettina has been working at cultural centres facilitating the appropriation of Roma culture by majority Hungarian youth. Her job involves constant confrontation with prejudices against her community, therefore she selected a penknife as her centrepiece for Visual Storytelling. A dangerous weapon in a fight, and a symbol of Roma violence, and a simple household utensil used for eating or carving beautiful wooden objects – Bettina emphasized the twofold meaning of this heirloom piece that belonged to her grandfather and asked for benevolence and openness towards new interpretations.

Hajnalka defines herself as a wife and mother and wants to reinforce the existence of these values in her community. As her husband is a musician and host of television programs about music, she considers it er mission to showcase the authentic music culture of the Hungarian Roma community. She also posts on Instagram and TikTok about the presentation of Roma in films, emphasizing her major messages: "Dare to dream, step forward, become a role model!"

Vanda comes from a Romungro family that does not connect to the Roma community. In the last two years, she has been searching for her roots and joining the cultural influencer course was part of this process. The object she selected for her Visual Storytelling video was a guitar, that she presented as a work of art – a beautiful object to admire – and as a musical instrument associated with the traveller lifestyle of the Roma. A talented painter, she enriches her posts on Instagram and TikTok with her works. Her major message is that association with a community is not a matter of looks (her features do not show her Roma origin), but a matter of choice.

Mira was born in a small village in Borsod county, one of the poorest areas in Hungary. She belongs to a Roma community that does not adhere to traditions. Maybe therefor e, she has chosen to tell stories through garments and spaces. Her series, "Your other face", shows young Roma women, fashionably dressed, in shabby, still striking village spaces. This juxtaposition of model and surroundings has given rise to vehement discussions on

Instagram about the attachment to the place of birth and intentions to break out, fight prejudices and show "the other face".

Szabina came to the course as one of he most famous Roma influencers, and anchor at Dikh TV, the television channel of the Hungarian Roma community. Her Facebook and Instagram pages attract hundreds of thousands of followers. As a result of her studies with us, her messages became less glamorous and are now targeting life choices for Roma women: the importance of realising potentials on the job, having the courage to negotiate traditional female roles in the Roma community and the problems and joys of being a divorced mother of a small child.

4. In conclusion

The main aim of the project briefly reported here was to empower young Roma girls and women to *effectively express their cultural heritage, contemporary, social issues and achievements* through social media and thus disseminate knowledge and change negative attitudes about the Roma minority. Some communication skills are essential in this mission: creation of oral and written media pieces, photos and videos and different genres in journalism.

The target group of the project was disadvantaged on multiple levels: the Hungarian Roma are a socially undervalued, economically disadvantaged minority. Moreover, in Roma culture, the women - especially young girls- have even more limited life perspectives and possibilities to decide about their future. The expected attitude in this community is to prefer motherhood over further education and professional career. This attitude is more stressed in the countryside, where the scarcity of jobs forces women to give birth and support their families through childcare allowance. Despite these factors, strong-willed Romani women are often the catalysts for change and the driving force in the families. Through an effective and authentic representation of Romani culture in social media, the new cultural influencers may build a cultural bridge between minority (Roma) and majority members of the Hungarian society.

How can we contribute to the solution of social problems of an oppressed minority through developing digital literacy skills and media expertise of a small group of young women? Educational empowerment may lead to the formation of a native group of media professionals who may represent the interests of Roma more effectively.

Through social media, our course participants may disseminate knowledge and change negative attitudes about the Roma minority. The aspiring cultural influencers have launched their channels and started creating relevant, inspiring, and educating media pieces for their own community and for the Hungarian public as well. The final work of our course participants was to create a media piece all on their own, from organising the interview to filming and editing it for a social media channel of their choice, adding text and images where necessary. Through this task, they represented nationally acknowledged Roma artists, designers, teachers, social workers etc., who may serve both as role models and as sources of cultural identity. As there is very little positive media representation of Hungarian Roma, and their cultural heritage is practically unknown to young audiences, our training program may contribute to changing the gloomy media landscape.

Acknowledgement

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