18 Cultural empowerment through social media

The Roma Cultural Influencer Project

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Research theme and objectives

The cultural heritage of the Hungarian Roma minority, representing about 10% of the population of our country, is not exhibited permanently in a dedicated museum, not integrated into the school curriculum, and consequently, it is not recognised even by the members of this social group. A literature review of remedial and support programmes for the Roma community revealed that the programmes targeted mainly children and focused on social and learning to learn skills. In the framework of the AMASS project, we wanted to support young women, a community with multiple challenges: unfinished or insufficient education due to poverty of their family, resulting lack of workplace skills, joblessness and early parenthood. In real life and social media, they seem to lack inspiration and support for changing their fate. The major objective of the Roma Cultural Influencer training programme was to empower members of this social group to represent their cultural heritage and provide successful, empowering life stories on social media. The training programme involved verbal, visual and digital communication skills development that we considered useful for young Roma girls and women, whether at school or in search of employment. As a result of the training, 18 young Roma women established themselves on social media and successfully introduced positive communication in the unilateral and biased media landscape.

Target population: Hungarian Roma girls

The Hungarian Roma, about 780,000 in number, is the biggest majority in a country of less than ten million inhabitants. The Lovari, Romungro and Beash constitute the "Romano Rodó", the Roma nation. Large family unit regulates everyday life – the Roma are a responsible community with *a high level of social consciousness and strong national identity* (Kemény and Janky 2005). Language is a cultural feature that constitutes an important part of Roma identity and adherence to traditions and family roots. Roma stakeholders seem to agree that acquisition of the language of their social group, and through this, *appropriation of their native culture* (oral history, dances, songs and instrumental music, visual arts and crafts) is of utmost importance in the enhancement of their social prospects (Policysolutions 2019). However, the Roma tribes have deeply different attitudes towards heritage reservation versus assimilation. Members of the Romungro tribe are integrated in the culture of the majority Hungarians; they do not speak their tribal language, neither do they adhere to ancient customs of the Roma community. The Boyash (or "Beás") have retained their art forms (music, dance, crafts) and their language as well (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9 Roma Cultural Influencers meet a role model: Erika Varga explains how she uses traditional Roma folk motives in her fashion design at an exhibition of the Romani Design fashion house. Photo: Zsófia Somogyi-Rohonczy.

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. In recent years, more and more new programmes with textbooks in minority languages have been published and support for the training and subsequent enrolment of Roma teachers is available, but the elimination of damages caused by segregation will need decades of hard work on all educational and social fronts. Only about 40% of young Roma continue their studies on secondary level, and vocational schools 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 and Kézdi 2011).

Roma culture (apart from music) is underrepresented in Hungary. Appropriation of the cultural heritage is difficult, as there is no dedicated museum of Roma art (although several artists gain international reputation) and folk traditions are also underrepresented in regional museums (Kárpáti et al. 2014). An example of success in social and cultural enhancement of young Roma is the Real Pearl Foundation, a private initiative led by Nóra L. Ritoók, art educator (for an English language overview, cf. Oates and Ritók (2018), but see also https://igazgyongyalapitvany.hu/en/home/ with reports and striking child art).

As the major information source for young people, social media have a biased and gloomy picture on Roma life and culture. An Instagram survey to identify related content on Hungarian and international sites (Rétvári et al. 2022) revealed that the #*cigány* (Gypsy) hashtag included entries about the misbehaviour of Roma people in urban areas

Figure 4.10 Collage of positive images of the Roma on social media by Márton Rétvári.

(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), two-thirds of these posts represented images and names of musicians, and only one-third contained negative comments about venues where Gypsy music was played. Posts tagged # *cigányság* (Gypsy community) were rare and contained historic information (Figure 4.10).

The researchers found two accounts only that included posts with the hashtag *#romakultura* (Roma culture): a fashion studio run by the Roma designer Erika Varga that produces highly acclaimed garments with Roma motives (see the exhibition of Romani Design in Figure 4.9) and Salföldi Oldal ("A Page about Salföld" – a Hungarian region) that highlights a music festival organised there, but also adds related cultural context. The international Instagram sites showed a much brighter and more sophisticated interpretation of the Roma heritage. These pages indicated how much social media channels may contribute to cultural appropriation, empowerment and recognition. Through our training programme on social media for Roma girls, we hoped to catalyse similar positive changes.

Methodology and procedure

Communication skills of young Roma, who are 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, when communicating on media platforms. In these popular arenas of self-expression, using visual language may facilitate their conceptual development, too. Authentic media personalities represent more than their individual interests and value system but stand up for their community. Representing a 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 (Nandagiri 2018).

With the objective of making the rich and authentic cultural heritage of the Roma visible and inspiring for young members of this community and Hungarian majority youth as well, the Visual Culture Research Group at Corvinus University of Budapest decided to train a new type of media personality: a Cultural Influencer. Our hypothesis was that *using social media channels will be more effective for raising awareness about the positive aspects of Roma life*: cultural heritage as well as current achievements in arts and science, *than traditional ways of cultural communication*. The training involved two consecutive media skills development programmes of 120 lesson hours in total, followed by five months of mentoring by a trained journalist and coach. 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 colonialisation – a practice that filters authentic content to suit majority ideologies (Figure 4.11).

Our arts-based intervention used the Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube platforms as a creative environment to mentor young Roma girls in social media use. Personal 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. We found two methods

Figure 4.11 Participants of the Roma Cultural Influencer Course in the media room. Photo: Lajos Kovács.

especially useful for teaching future Cultural Influencers about the choice of relevant topic, authentic visualisation, striking image and emotionally charged, still accurate text:

- *Photovoice*, a participatory methodology of working on the boundaries of art, anthropology, sociology and politics (Latz et al. 2016; Photovoice Ethical Photography n.d.).
- *Visual Storytelling*, a method of filmmaking and photography that uses objects and life events as sources of inspirations (cf. Hsu et al. 2020).

The final work of our course participants was to create a media piece all on their own. They undertook organisational tasks, filmed and edited interviews 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.

Influencer personality research shows the necessity to integrated netiquette, internet law and personality assertion training in a developmental programme (Szczurski 2018). In the second phase of the programme, we employed a psychologist-coach also active as a journalist and is aware of media regulations. Mentoring was organised individually or in small groups online and face-to-face, on a weekly basis.

Our course participants represented the whole cultural spectrum of the young Roma community from the 18-year-old young mother to the doctoral student in her twenties to the experienced social worker in her thirties. Their training needed to be personalised and responsive. We motivated them to explore and represent their cultural heritage integrating it with contemporary social issues concerning Hungarian Roma and utilise their life experiences. We enhanced their communication skills in primarily digital media, but we intended to provide a wide spectrum of other creative opportunities. Combining digital technologies with traditional means of expression like drawing, writing, singing, playing music or engaging in creative drama showed new genres and styles for the work of our Cultural Influencers. (For an illustrated description of the course programme, cf. Kárpáti and Somogyi-Rohonczy 2021.)

Assessment methods and outcomes

The training programme was accompanied by mentoring, participatory observation and portfolio assessment study to reveal the development of the participants and the usability of the training programme for similar future interventions.

Mentoring

The future influencers received support from an experienced journalist and coach, Julianna Nyári. She based her consultations on an online survey followed by personality tests and interviews. The girls described their short- and long-term achievement goals, expectations about the training programme, professional skills and personal characteristics they needed to develop. They also revealed their perceived strengths: a likable media personality, special technical skills, community network, previous experiences with the arts and media. The mentor, experienced both in coaching and in journalism, established personal developmental plans, discussed them with the course participants and also offered reviews of their media works. Reactions by the audience were also discussed and response strategies developed. The developmental plans were adjusted several times

during the programme to include new objectives resulting from creative experiences and feedback from tutors and peers. Problems concerning the workload of producing media content were a significant obstacle to face, but in most cases, it was overcome through coaching in time management. At the end of the training programme, the mentor gave a detailed feedback to all participants about their development of personality characteristics important for the role of influencer (self-assertion, goal setting, resilience in accepting and responding to or ignoring comments) and evaluated their media pieces as well. Eleven of the eighteen participants manifested significant development and were ready to realise their professional goals; seven needed more training and coaching.

Participatory observation

The media tutors observed the work of the girls in the media lab of the university and at the end of a study module, gave feedback on their development and technical skill to acquire or develop. During the tutoring process, the girls selected media genres they felt most comfortable about. One of them opened a podcast channel with interviews about contradictor issues of supporting young Roma; another dedicated her Instagram channel to striking images about the contrasts of Roma life. A third girl decided to focus on the importance of family life, a core value in the Roma community, and shared her experiences as a working mother both on Facebook and on Instagram. There were five girls who realised that the constant need for posting to keep a social media channel alive is more than they can undertake and opted for becoming irregular participants of channels of others. Eight participants left the course because they could not face aggressive criticism.

Portfolio assessment

Complete with tutoring and mentoring reports, the collection of photographs, newspaper articles, blog entries, television appearances and posts, the portfolios showed the developmental phases of beginning social media workers. With increasing professionalism, they learnt how to co-ordinate text and images, how to apply the rules of media law and ethics and how to remedy a problematic situation concerning an ambiguous post or harsh comment. Their development is continuous and so is their mentoring need – therefore, we added a third semester of individual support to ease the tensions of becoming a minority voice in a biased, male-dominated social media environment. 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 video, she explained the personal and cultural significance of these objects. 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 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, a symbol of Roma violence and a simple household utensil used for eating or carving beautiful wooden objects – Bettina emphasised 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 programmes about music, she considers it her 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, emphasising 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 (Figure 4.12).

Mira (*Maria*) 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 therefore, 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

Figure 4.12 A Roma guitar. Photo from the Visual Storytelling sequence by Vanda Pintér.

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". (See her photograph on Figure 4.10.)

Szabina came to the course as one of the 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.

Policy implications

The Roma nation (estimated for seven to nine million) is the *largest minority in Europe*, and 80% of this population lives in Central and Eastern Europe. Despite decades of political efforts, their social situation does not seem to get any better, while their proportion in the population is on the increase (Policy solutions 2019). The European Roma Strategy calls for integration through long-term, sustainable strategies that enjoy the support of the majority population. At the core of these strategies, educational interventions should enhance the cohesion of the Roma community and facilitate the reattachment of rootless Roma youth with their cultural traditions and values (2020-2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020).

Stakeholder meetings organised by the Hungarian research team also reinforced the central role of linguistic and cultural appropriation. Representatives of the municipality of the large and extremely diverse district 9 in Budapest, where a huge cultural centre borders on an equally substantial "Roma ghetto" of miserable social housing, discussed the problems of Roma integration with teachers and school principals, educational researchers and NGOs. Key players in the cultural and political lives of the Roma community such as artists, journalists and politicians were also involved. Their suggestions were incorporated in the Roma Cultural Influencer Project and the other experiments of the Hungarian AMASS team (cf. the chapters by Anna Eplényi, Erika Kugler and Andrea Kárpáti, Zsófia Albrecht and Zsófia Somogyi-Rohonczy in this volume).

An often repeated, key requirement in the discussions about the situation of Roma was *strengthening Roma culture and self-esteem of the community*. Introducing the Roma language and traditions to Roma youth in an inspiring way was found essential to establish a strong Roma identity. Transparency and communication about the work of the different actors were also found essential. Besides regular roundtables, open forums and other policy-related events, the Roma Cultural Influencers substantially contribute to popularising cultural events, revealing hidden treasures of tangible and intangible heritage and inspiring Roma youth for learning about and developing their language and culture. The channels of the influencer girls may raise interest and appreciation of Hungarian majority youth as well. Ideas and ideals – the posts project both in a captivating and authentic way.

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, educationally and 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.

Educational empowerment may lead to the formation of a native group of media professionals who may represent the interests of Roma more effectively. The Cultural Influencers have launched new channels and started creating relevant, inspiring and educating media pieces for their own community and for the Hungarian public as well.

After two semesters of training in Roma culture, media skills, legal regulations and online journalism, 18 girls have successfully established themselves on social media. When disadvantaged minorities try to raise their voices, the response is often characterised as hostile and biased (Glucksman 2017). 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. Our course participants appropriated and successfully presented their heritage and contemporary culture. Not hiding gloomy reality, their intention was to show achievements and personal growth against all the odds. The Hungarian Roma Cultural Influencers are more than content providers – they are role models for their peers.

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