E-Folklore and cyber-communication among Emirati youth

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Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Department of Sociology, the United Arab Emirates University

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to explain the emergence of a new mediated heritage-social sphere and the articulation of a contemporary Emirati identity that transforms traditional oral heritage into an innovative form of electronic folk heritage. The literature addressing changes in folk heritage caused by the flourishing of new media, as well as off- and on-line social networking in the UAE, is scant. This research seeks to fill that gap by showing how Emirati nationals have succeeded in assimilating outside influences without deserting their heritage, and how global and local forms of communication have generated unique cultural patterns that help Emirati people maintain their identity, authenticity and social connectivity in a globally changing world. The study shows that the Internet provides information zones, enhancing people's knowledge, and interaction zones, strengthening people's social relationships. To understand these two domains, this inquiry addresses online heritage and cyber-communication as used by both the UAE government (formal network) and ordinary people (informal network). For the purpose of theorising e-folklore, this research proposes a paradigm dealing with the content and form of heritage by bridging traditional/oral and technical/textual forms of communication. For Emirati young people, focusing on content allows for unusual engagement with the past through technologies that have the potential to shape and influence their future heritage. Emirati folk heritage has undergone a sort of 'cyber-communication' or 'internetisation', which means a process through which core elements of folk heritage are mediated by the Internet, reaching diverse audiences and allowing for broad public participation.

Keywords

e-Folklore; Emirates folk tradition; online heritage; cyber-communication; 'internetisation'; mobile phones; short message service (SMS).

This timely research concerns a topic of novel transformation dealing with recent forms of cyber and electronic communication such as e-mail, SMS (short message service), and other sorts of Internet-related contacts (such as websites and blogs) as used by Emirati youth, their friends, and families. The inquiry is not concerned with Emiratis' general usage of online sites and electronic communication and information, but rather with their understandings and practices concerning virtual heritage.[1] It addresses both tangible and intangible aspects of folk tradition, however, the main focus is on the examination of intangible heritage including folk genres such as greetings, proverbs and stories, among other forms of folk expressions, that are frequently circulated through devices of electronic communication (el-Aswad; 2014a). Furthermore, information, computer technologies, electronically-mediated heritage or e-folklore and Internet connections are examined within the socio-political context of the UAE.

This inquiry is interdisciplinary in nature and contributes to the disciplines of folklore, anthropology and new media among others. It discusses the impact of technology on the transformation of social relations as well as the impact of social relations on the way technology is used or applied by Emirati youth. Online social networks are crucial intermediary variables in behavioural and sociological analyses, and an abundance of studies dealing with modern electronic communications (Boneva and Kraut; 2003: Clarke; 2009: Escobar; 1994: Hepp; 2012: Levinson; 2004), have been published. However, the relationship between traditional folkloric genres in Arab Gulf societies in general, and in the UAE in particular and these modern electronic communications, including e-mail messages and SMS texts, has not been fully addressed. The essential problem is that certain authors claim that, *young Emiratis avoid talking about their pre-oil past* because *it is devoid of any relevance to their lives* (Bristol-Rhys; 2009, p.116). This study, refuting such unproven claims, asserts that the younger generation's views of the past have not been adequately and critically examined.

The fairly stable economic and political conditions of the UAE, in comparison with Arab countries undergoing the unprecedented phenomenon of the 'Arab Spring' in which the Internet plays a crucial role, have encouraged the Emirati younger generation to use the Internet and other forms of electronic communication for promoting, sustaining and perpetuating their culture and heritage. This research, therefore, aspires to investigate relevant material about the awareness and appreciation that young Emiratis have of their heritage. Further, this inquiry tackles the premise that the content of significant e-mail and SMS text messages is related to the content of traditional communication, thus generating a new form of cyber-traditional culture.

This study seeks to answer these questions. To what extent are the contents of cyber-communication similar to those of traditional communication? To what extent have different forms of electronic communication been incorporated into Emirati culture? How do Emirati people, in general, and young people in particular, view certain means of e-communication and social networking such as e-mail messages and SMS texts as containing genres of folk culture? What are the most widespread traditional genres used by Emirati youth in their cyber-communication? How and in what way do traditional genres change when used in the new medium of electronic communication (e-mail and SMS texts)? How have mobile phones changed from being symbols of prestige to being widespread practical products conveying both global and local-traditional cultures? To what extent have forms of cyber-communication transformed certain aspects of Emirati traditions in such novel ways as to incorporate electronic heritage or e-folklore?

Methodology

The majority of Emirati young people use online sites, mobile phones, e-mail systems, and short message service (SMS) devices.[2] In so far as certain parts of websites and electronic messages are closely related to certain kinds of heritage, they can be investigated and interpreted as a new vernacular medium of traditional culture.

This research applied both quantitative and qualitative methods for gathering data, such as questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documents. Questionnaires were designed and sent to 395 undergraduate Emirati students at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) (257 female students [65%] and 138 male students [35%]) concerning their views and activities related to online heritage and electronic communication. The proportion

of female and male participants was close to that of the overall student population of the UAEU.[3] Their ages ranged between 18 and 29 years old. The students come from all seven of the emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharja [Ash-Shariqah], Ras Al-Khaimah, Ajman, Fujairah). They shared common views related to the significance of electronic communication in allowing them to maintain their social and traditional relationships with family members and friends, especially those who were far away. All of the male and female respondents replied that for social-religious occasions they employed traditional phrases, including folk genres, when using e-mail messages, mobile phones and SMS texting. However, more than 97% of the female respondents and almost 96% of the male respondents showed significant interest in surfing online heritage, while 2.6% of the female respondents and 3.8% of the male respondents only occasionally visited online heritage sites.

The researcher also used anthropological-ethnographic qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, engaging with students in their cyberspace activities and online discussions. I interviewed 32 students (19 females and 13 males) and also held interviews with 5 Emirati faculty members of the UAEU, as well as with 6 government officials working in heritage authorities and the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Community Development Department. Such qualitative methods are effective in grasping other nuanced aspects of people's behaviour and views that might be difficult to express using only quantitative methods.

Theorising virtual heritage and electronic communication

Traditional culture is informally learned, socially circulated, passed down from generation to generation. Folk culture can be viewed within differing but interrelated perspectives, including people's lifestyle, language, social memory, artefacts, common historical events, and religious or spiritual values (el-Aswad; 2006: Eisenstadt; 1973). Modes of communication, or exchange of ideas between two or more individuals or groups, and social networking, whether verbal, written or electronic, are essential in all aspects of culture (el-Aswad; 2011: Lizardo; 2006). Electronic communication and websites provide information zones, enhancing people's knowledge, and interaction zones, strengthening people's relationships (Alvstad; 2010, p.74: el-Aswad; 2012). Cyber-communication or social networking, implying a type of online community that depends on a computer-based simulated circulatory milieu through which the participants interact with one another, is increasingly used among Emirati youth. Mobile phones and the Internet are used not only for information and educational purposes, but also for entertainment and online exchanges of personal and social views.[4] This type of immediate social reaction to new phenomena has created a special pattern of written visual contacts of a global form with local content where both the English and Arabic languages (with various colloquial dialects) are used in e-communication in the Emirates (el-Aswad; 2009a).

Theoretically, several studies have addressed how young people use electronic devices such as mobile phones and computers to manage their freedom and maintain connections with each other by 'texting' and/or 'e-mailing' messages (Gow and Smith; 2006: Jones; 1997: Ling; 2004: Nyíri; 2003: Omidyar; 2003; Foley; 2012). However, since cyber-communication is a strong global medium of social change, it is assumed that grassroots information and folk culture, based on traditional circulation (*tadāwul*), will disappear. For instance, Fischer (2007, p. 32) argues that the *...Internet, networked data banks, visual icons, video clips, film, animation, streams, and repetition of information flows are repositioning and enveloping older cultural media (orality, literacy), reshaping the public sphere.* This research asserts that the claim that the shift from oral to literary or print forms of communication is equivalent to the change from traditional to modern culture undermines the complexity of the responses of traditional cultures to cyber-communication and globalisation. Rather than reflecting an opposition between the traditional and the modern, the relationships between tradition and modernity are intricate and can be looked at as existing in a continuum.

For the purpose of theorising online folk heritage and cyber-communication, this study develops a paradigm that deals with the content and form of circulation through bridging traditional (oral or verbal) and technical or written forms of communication. According to the recent theory of information there are two types of communication - natural and technical. Natural communication is characterised as being spontaneous, verbal, intimate, reciprocal, simple and modifiable, while

technical communication is considered as fixed, textual and written, as is the case of printed materials such as books. One of the greatest advantages of modern info-communication devices is that they provide relatively simple and easily accessible means of composing, modifying and forwarding texts. This method of creating, altering and forwarding messages renders e-mail and SMS closer to the style of oral tradition than to technical practice (Domokos; 2007: Blank; 2009).

To elaborate further, as with e-mail correspondence, the short message sending service (SMS) is a popular form of electronic literacy in contemporary practice. The immediate social reaction to these new electronic communication phenomena has facilitated a special kind of written, oral and visual folklore of a global character, which can be termed 'e-folklore' (Krawczyk-Waslewska; 2006, p.248). Since parts of electronic messages are closely related to certain kinds of traditional folklore genres, e-mail messages or SMS can be interpreted as a medium of folklore. Further, e-mail implying folkloric items or SMS folklore is often referred to from a linguistic point of view as 'written oral language' (Domokos; 2007, pp.50-52). Within this context, cyber-circulation and digital visual language can be used to disseminate folk heritage as well as to extend traditional verbal and written communication. These forms of modern technology are vehicles through which young Emirati people use tradition or heritage to make connections with one another.

The Internet has formally and informally revolutionised heritage by creating online folk culture or e-folklore that disseminates offline traditions. The Internet provides an easily accessible arena for communication through which individuals can interact with each other, engage in dialogue and debate, and establish mutual understanding (el-Aswad; 2007). Emirati youth actively access virtual-vernacular websites and engage in both information and interactive domains. In order to address these two domains the paper is divided into the following sections:

1. The role played by the UAE government institutions in preserving local folk culture in the form of virtual heritage through the Internet and other electronic channels.
2. The role played by individuals in obtaining information concerning heritage as well as in using folk genres in their Internet or cyberspace interactions.

Government institutions

A government's organisational capacity is crucially affected by its ability to use the Internet and related technologies internally and to interact with citizens, firms, voluntary organisations and other governments, in what is now widely known as 'e-Government'. The intertwining of the Internet with government authority leads to a reshaping of state-citizen relationships (Margetts; 2009). A prominent Emirati government official working in a national institute of heritage, said:

...it is not merely the economy or wealth that the government is interested in; it is also the culture and heritage or people's roots that maintain the Emirati identity, particularly the youth (shabāb) *who, if left alone without guidance, may go astray. The government uses this futuristic tool of the Internet to help the youth hold* (yatamassakun) *our tradition. The late Shaikh Zayed said, 'whoever has no past has neither present nor future.'*

The Internet is rapidly transforming the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge and information in the UAE. According to a World Economic Forum report, the UAE leads the Arab world in the adoption of information and communication technology (ICT); it spent about $3.3 billion on information technology and communications hardware for schools, hospitals and other civil projects between 2008 and 2011 (el-Aswad; 2011). Meanwhile, the *Global Information Technology Report,* issued by the World Economic Forum in 2012, stated that the United Arab Emirates has developed an ICT-related infrastructure and a favourable framework for business and innovation that has resulted in positive rates of innovation (Dutta and Bilbao-Osorio; 2012).

The government of the UAE uses the capacities of online information technology to conserve heritage content, to mobilise young people and to enact traditional practices.[5] The e-Government online information, comprising diverse sites, provides folk heritage content to broad receivers. In addition to providing information, these institutional websites encourage receivers to be active in feedback, interaction and dialogue. Visual and audio resources, and textual references about Emirati heritage are presented in these websites.[6] Put simply, institutional websites concerned with folk culture and social values provide both information and more interactive spaces where various topics of heritage can be lived and negotiated.

Universities and institutions of higher education are microcosms of society at large where issues of justice, ethics and social values are addressed and learned (Scisney-Matlock & Matlock; 2001: Morey; 2000). This is evident in the Emirates, particularly in the connections between higher education networking, collective identity and state governance where policy makers in higher education have to train the country's youth to be self-sufficient in a global market while not alienating traditionalist elements of society (Findlow; 2005). In the UAE, education is viewed as a long-term project that maintains a commitment to localisation while benefiting from globalisation. Universities in the Emirates have incorporated the Internet into their curricula while considering the UAE's history, culture, social and religious traditions. For instance, courses dealing with folk heritage and oral literature such as 'Folk Heritage of the Emirates' (*al-turāth al-sha'bi li-mujtama' al-imārāt*) and 'Folklore' are offered by the UAEU in Arabic and English, respectively. These courses describe practical uses of folklore in various domains, such as public fairs and festivals, tourism, leisure, recreation, mass media and sports (such as camel racing, falconry, horse racing, and sailing). Students visit heritage villages and museums, create ethnographic documentaries, participate in writing reports and carry out online folk projects for presentations in the class (el-Aswad; 2009c). A female Emirati professor stated: *...students are creative, especially if they are given the chance to express their culture and traditions in a practical manner whether online or offline. They use the multimedia to portray mythical and imaginative characters of local folk tales.*

Emirati students have explained that their traditional beliefs and values are not challenged by the application of modern technology. They have confirmed that the best environment for maintaining the heritage of their society in contemporary multicultural contexts is the university. To celebrate the 41st National Day of the UAE, the UAEU organised a three-day festival in which folk culture was presented both offline and online. On the UAEU website, there were images of male and female Emirati students wearing traditional dress, announcing -*The UAEU concludes Culture and Heritage Festival with Poetry Night Celebrating the 41st National Day.*[7]

Among other institutions that aim to conserve and promote the heritage of the UAE is the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH)[8], established in October 2005.[9] In early 2012, the Abu Dhabi Authority for Tourism and Culture (ADTCA)[10], whose mission is to preserve, protect and manage the cultural heritage of the emirate, along with promoting the development of tourism, was established, incorporating the ADACH and the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority (ADTA). However, the homepage of the ADACH remains active. [Plate 1]

The ADACH organised the Fourth International Heritage Symposium (March 28-April 1, 2010) under the title, *Heritage and Education: A Future Vision,* to discuss the means by which local heritage can be incorporated into educational curricula. The participants addressed the topic of the impact of heritage and education in promoting social values among young people. They recommended that the local heritage of the Emirates



Plate 1
Members of the Abu Dhabi Authority of Culture and Heritage (ADACH) conducting a workshop on Intangible Heritage as part of International Heritage Day.
Photo: Author

should be included in the educational curriculum at all stages. The symposium stressed the complementarities between educational institutions and heritage institutions where education cannot achieve its objectives of strengthening values and morals in future generations without reference to the inherent heritage. [11]

There are various additional websites that are oriented towards attracting interest to, and transmitting information about Emirati folk culture. For instance, in September 2009 the Intangible Heritage Department at the ADACH published the first issue of a new online magazine entitled *Intangible Heritage (majalt al-turāth al-ma'nawī)*.[12] Further, the Emirates Heritage Club, founded on September 5th, 1993, established the Heritage Village (*al-qariya al-turāthiyya*) in Abu Dhabi that is concerned with the material folk culture of the Emirates. The Club has a very active website using both Arabic and English[13] that offers a 360-degree virtual tour of the Village.[14] The Club has also issued a magazine entitled *Turāth* (Heritage) to address and conserve local folklore.

Individual interactions and the cyber-circulation of heritage

Young people, particularly those under 30 years old, are the predominant Internet users in the Arab world (Abdulla; 2007). Emirati young people who adhere to their local or traditional cultures tend to accept technology and modern means of information and communication that, from their own points of view, do not represent a threat to their cultures. Heritage is a conscious model of past lifestyles that people use in the construction of their identity (Linnekin; 1983, p.241). The younger generations of Emiratis have expressed their pride in their ability to combine both local culture and the modern, global ways of life. They speak Arabic with Emirates dialects, eat indigenous food, use incense and wear traditional costumes (including veils for women) so as to symbolically identify themselves with their traditional society, but at the same time, they speak English, use computers, eat western fast food, consume expensive perfumes and drive expensive four wheel-drive cars – all symbols of global (western) modernity (el-Aswad; 2009b). However, it can be argued that symbols of modernity do not necessarily alter *people's beliefs, values, or behavior. In principle, an individual could wear jeans and running shoes, eat hamburgers, even watch a Disney cartoon, and remain fully embedded in this or that traditional culture.* (Berger; 2002, p.7)

Unlike other forms of media and communication - such as radio and television in which viewers do not play an active role in the received information - cyber media gives the participants the opportunity to play collectively and individually active roles in creating information and news (el-Aswad 2014b). Put differently, the two-way communications of the Internet and cyber network encourage social and cultural engagement and allow for mutual feedback (el-Aswad; 2007). A young Emirati man, expressing his view of his online folk group, recounted: *I have a list of friends that I consider as my intimate folk group with whom I circulate information and send messages just by clicking my computer's mouse or touchpad.*

Certain forms of websites and online grassroots cyber-circulation have become effective means of obtaining, maintaining and exchanging significant elements of traditional culture. Folk groups can be easily identified on the Internet, as evidenced by chat rooms, online discussions and vernacular websites (Blank; 2009). Such online sites are characterised by non-hierarchical communication that draws on various interactive applications of electronic communication some of which include public forums and blogs that allow many people to engage in debating and negotiating their tradition or folk culture. A blog, typically created by a single or anonymous person, is a personal website that comprises news or information in the form of a diary. Bloggers manage information and social communications autonomously, allowing the user substantial freedom to partake in cultural activities. Such forms of cyber-communication have increasingly become spectacularly popular channels of social interaction among the Emirati youth.

Both male and female Emiratis have positive perceptions of e-communication, but it seems that males are more engaged in online activities than females, especially in the domains of economic-scientific information and social connections with relatives and friends. Also, men spend more time than women in using social networks. As opposed to Emirati women in the 1990s and early 2000s who did not often use the Internet and mobile (cell) phones for fear of being accused of misconduct, young women a decade later are



Plate 2
A male student (UAEU) showing a hard copy of an online article on Emirati folk heritage. Photo: Author

frequent users of both. They enjoy owning more than one computer or cell phone. Eighty-one percent of female respondents were attracted to websites and online forums (*muntadayāt*)[15] that provide information about traditional food, incense (*bukhūr or dukhūn*) perfumes or fragrances, henna, marriage ceremonies, local costumes, artefacts made by women, and folk medicine. 79% of male respondents showed that Emirati young men frequently browse the online sites and forums concerned with folk performances such as *al-ʿaiyyāla*,[16] *al-rizfa*,[17] *al-arbiyya, al-adba*[18] and *al-mālid* (in which performers praise the prophet Muhammad), camel racing (*sibāqāt al-hijin*), falconry (*ṣayd al-ṣuqūr*), traditional sailing (*dāw*) and folk poetry (*nabaṭī*). [Plate 2] Twenty-one percent of young men showed a considerable interest in websites displaying folk architecture and traditional industries making such items as male costumes, daggers and swords. Young women (or 19% of females) also showed an interest in visiting online sites displaying folk performances. Only 4% of females visited websites showing camel racing.

In addition, a female student wrote about the significance of incense in her mother's life and how the Internet helped her mother in this matter.[19] She said:

Because my mother loves to use incense (bukhūr) *every day, she decided to make her own bukhūr. Although my mother knows the traditional way of producing or manufacturing incense, she decided to use the Internet to obtain more information. She asked me to help her in browsing and searching for the necessary information. In her first attempt of making the substance of bukhūr, my mother failed, but never gave up. Then she tried again and succeeded in producing the fine material of incense she hoped for. She managed to produce high quality traditional bukhūr with different colours. My mother was so excited that she decided to start a business making and selling incense. The entire family, including my father, supported my mother's idea. My mother's traditional bukhūr business started slowly inside the house. But, with the help of both traditional and new means of communication, my mother now receives significant orders for her bukhūr making AED 12,500* [$3.400] *a month, while staying at home. I am really proud of my mother because she is doing something good that relates to our heritage. I will, insha'allah (God willing), join her beautiful business after graduating from the UAE University.*

Another student commented on how the technology might result in unwelcome consequences. She described how a mobile phone with a camera might threaten a person's reputation, especially a lady, if misused by a dishonourable person. She also described an event in which she lost her beloved camel because of a photo taken by a cell phone. She said:

I have a she camel whom I named Beyoncé, after the name of the American artist Beyoncé Giselle Knowles. My camel gave birth to a beautiful and strong male camel that I named Jabbar (giant). *My father likes to use his*

mobile phone to take photos of camels especially those on our farm (mazra'a). *It happened that the picture of Jabbar was among the pictures saved in my father's mobile phone. One day, he showed one of his friends some pictures he had. His friend, however, admired the photo of my newly-born camel, Jabbar. My father, following our traditions of hospitality, gave Jabbar to his friend as a gift. I did not know about this event till I found Beyoncé was standing alone and crying on the farm. I was sad and angry but couldn't do anything except for hugging and talking to her, I mean the camel. While feeding Beyoncé dates to comfort her I started crying. My mother was watching me from afar laughing at me, but when she came near, she started crying with me. We treat camels as if they were members of our families. If my father had not taken pictures of camels with his cell phone, the dear and beloved camel, Jabbar, would not have been given away.*

The expansion of electronic technology has caused a growth in interpersonal contacts among young Emirati nationals due to the low cost and availability of e-mailing, online chatting, mobile phoning and SMS messaging. This study focuses on the Emirati folkloric messages forwarded by Internet or e-mail and cell phones. Certain studies unjustifiably claim that as communication media such as mobile phones become globally available, they transfer the ideas of the market economy to traditional cultures; these same media can introduce the ethos of individualism, prevalent in the West, to a traditional society like the Emirates. On the contrary, the new forms of communication media strengthen the ethos of collectivity among the Emirati nations which still value kinship and social ties. This section addresses the way individuals informally use folk genres in their face-to-face relationships and Internet interactions. In their daily interaction Emirati nationals like to use traditional or colloquial words when they talk (*yarmisun or yasulfun*) on their mobile phone. A female student explained: *In the Emirates we like to talk* (nirmis) *to each other regardless of the way, face to face or by the mobile phone.*

With regard to the use of e-mail and text messages, although young people use computers for sending e-mail messages, they prefer texting through their personal mobile phones. Cell phones have a great advantage in that SMS can be sent nearly everywhere at any time and this is why young people develop an emotional affection for them. It is this affection that confers a private sense to text messaging and results in the popularity of SMS greetings. A young man recounts: *I hold my mobile talking and sending or receiving messages wherever I go, I do not have to wait till I go home and check my laptop for any e-mail messages.* In the meantime, a young woman states that she decorates her mobile phone because of a *love relationship, but from one side.*

From a folkloristic point of view, the function and the use of folkloric phenomena convey relevant information that enhances effective communication. For example, if the occasion is of a social or religious character, the messages reflect its significance. Some traditional genres, including greetings and proverbs among other forms of folk expressions, are propagated over the Internet (el-Aswad; 2010a and 2010c). I hasten to say that there is a mutual impact between electronic communication and folk culture. For instance, young Emirati people do not use the Arabic word *risāla*, which means message, but rather the word *mesij* (pl. *misjāt*) which is a modified form of the English word 'message,' showing the impact of e-communication on the daily use of language. One male student said: *I like stories* (sawālif), *I mean to talk and listen to stories. If the person I want to talk to is not available I send him a message* (nṭṭtarish mesij). Genres that primarily exist in an oral context, like jokes, riddles, proverbs, greetings, songs or rhymes, all these traditionally and emphatically oral genres appear in the e-mail and SMS that are to be discussed.

Two groups of text messages were collected from both male and female Emirati students. The first group contained traditional greetings and wishes, mainly linked to festive Islamic calendar occasions. The second group consists of SMS texts or messages that are not related to religious or calendar events. The texts related to religious occasions within the Islamic calendar were almost identical in meaning and content to those used in oral tradition; thus, they were easy to collect. Such religious occasions include Ramadan, *ʿīd al-Fiṭr* (the Feast following the fast of Ramadan, locally called *al-ʿīd aṣ-ṣaghīr* or the small Feast), *ʿīd al-Aḍḥa* (the Feast of Sacrifice, locally called al-*ʿīd al-kabīr* or the large Feast), and *mawlad an-nabi* (the Prophet's birthday). During such occasions, greetings are given in rhyme or prose as good wishes.

According to tradition, people go from house to house with certain greetings, while the electronic variant goes from handset to handset or from computer screen to computer screen. However, greetings conveyed by e-mail and SMS are shorter than the traditional greetings that are transmitted orally. During religious occasions, Emirati young people, using both e-mail and SMS, exchange traditional phrases expressing solemn greetings and good wishes. Such phrases include, for instance, *mubārak ash-shahr* (congratulation for the advent of the month [of Ramadan]), *mabrūk ʿalaij al-ʿīd* (wishing you a blessed Feast) *kull ʿām wa kull ḥaul* (wishing you the best all the year round), *asākum min ʿuwwāda* (good blessings this year and every year), and *taqabbal allah minna wa minkum aṭ-ṭāʿāt* (may Allah bless and accept our good deeds). It happened that the holidays of *ʿīd al-Aḍḥa* and the Emirates National Day (commemorating the formation of the confederation) came together in late 2009, on November (26th) and early December (2nd) respectively. Religious, social and national greetings were used simultaneously in the SMS and e-mail messages. *Mubārak ʿalaykum al-ʿīdīn* (May Allah bless you on the two festive occasions (the Feast of Sacrifice and the National Day).

Concerning the second group of SMS and email messages that are not related to calendar events, certain traditional and colloquial Arabic words, used orally in daily interactions within the local culture, are used by Emirati youth. The most common colloquial terms and phrases include, for instance, *salfa* (plural, *sawālif*) that means 'talking about past events', *ramsa (nirmis)* or 'chatting,' *ḥaiyyāk* or *ḥaiyyāk allah* that indicates 'greetings,' *yā halā bi-assāʿ* 'welcoming you, O guest', *sumuha* or 'pardon or forgive me/us,' and *afa ʿalayk* or 'no problem.' Also, interrogative expressions including such phrases as *tchif ḥālak* 'how are you,' and *shu ʿulūm* or 'what is new' are frequently used. One of the SMS messages, sent by a young man to a friend, attracted my attention. The message said, 'put your nose on the phone, your nose, your nose' (*ḥut khashmak ʿala at-talifon, khashmak, khashmak*). I could not understand the exact meaning of the message. I asked the young man who sent it about the significance of such a message, he replied:

According to our Emirati tradition, when an Emirati man wants to salute or greet another person he lets his nose (khashm) *touch the other man's nose. Women do that too. However, I invited my friend to place his nose on his mobile phone as I did, using my phone, as an intimate way of expressing our friendship as if we were physically touching our noses* [laugh].

The following example shows the impact of folk genre or heritage on the content, form and use of electronic messages. A young Emirati man sent an e-mail message to his male friend describing another male person as 'behaving like *umm ad-duwais*.' The demonic figure of *umm ad-duwais* occupies a significant place in Emirati fairytales.[20] When I asked for further explanation of this specific phrase in the e-mail, I received a reply stating that *umm ad-duwais* is used by Emiratis to describe a showy person or a man who is an exhibitionist, applying extravagant perfume or wearing unconventional cloths.

Conclusion

Heritage is fluid; its content is maintained and redefined by each generation. What is new with the new generation of Emirati nationals is that heritage is mediated by technological means of communication at both formal and informal levels. This study has shown that UAE government institutions apply formal or official strategies for preserving local or folk culture through manipulating online heritage, the Internet and other electronic channels. In addition to official websites, individuals use e-communication and grassroots websites including blogs, forums (*muntadayāt*) and other online devices to have access to, and to circulate folk genres and other elements of heritage informally. This means that both government officials and ordinary people rely on their ability to use the Internet to circulate their folk culture as well as to appropriate materials from the Internet and integrate them into their everyday lives. It is worth noting that because of the extensive use of the Internet, the boundaries between public and private domains as well as between the formal and informal elements of culture are becoming more and more blurred.

This research has shown a correlation between use of the Internet and the perpetuation of heritage. Emirati folk culture has undergone a sort of 'cyber-circulation' or 'Internetisation,' which means a process through which core elements of folk heritage are mediated on the Internet. Put differently, the Internet reshapes, revives

and circulates traditional folk culture by maintaining the folk beliefs, practices and identities of Emirati people. Communication technologies and social networks including the Internet, Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, e-mail, mobile phone, texting (SMS), forums, blogging, to mention a few, are used not only as means of maintaining social connectivity, but also as mobilising tools expressing cultural heritage and lifestyles. The Internet facilitates innovation that in turn is used for maintaining and preserving heritage.

Although social, economic and political forces influence individuals' perceptions of their identity, heritage or local culture, in both offline and online contexts cyber technology is a key element in shaping Emiratis' identity. The research points out that local cultures are not stagnant, but rather are active in the process of selecting what is the best option for their development. Global flows of technology, goods, ideas and practices have been facilitated by the agency of national institutions such as universities as well as by indigenous people. Significant aspects of traditional culture in the form of online heritage have been promoted, not hindered or replaced as some scholars claim, by new and innovative forms of cyber-circulation. Electronic communication does not eliminate, but rather provides alternatives to (or even vehicles for), traditional means of communication. Emirati young people keep themselves informed of both local and international global events through direct contact with social and globalised media including the Internet and satellite communications. This article affirms that Emirati youth, particularly students who are involved in social interaction through e-mail messages and short message service (SMS) have a high sense of belonging, self-esteem and a meaningful existence.

ENDNOTES

1. This research was funded by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, United Arab Emirates University (2013).
2. The UAE was ranked as one of the top 10 Mobile Network Performing Countries in 2012. This information was retrieved, on 22/11/2012, from http://www.uaeinteract.com/docs/UAE_ranks_as_one_of_the_top_10_Mobile_Network_Performing_Countries_in_2012_Cisco_Global_Cloud_Index/52090.htm
3. During the spring semester of the academic year 2010/2011 there were 12,279 students registered at the University. Male students represented 25% of the student population, female students represented 75%. See, *UAEU: Facts and Figures,* http://www.uaeu.ac.ae/about/history/facts_and_figures.shtml
4. A recent study conducted by the Kaspersky Lab survey in 2012, states that the UAE users are more likely to use a variety of online services to communicate and entertain themselves. Email, social networks, and online video were the most popular, with almost 85%, 83% and 82% of users respectively accessing them every day. Although the world average for email activity is almost the same (86%), the interest in social networks and online video worldwide is approximately 10% lower than in the UAE. For more information, see *UAE Internet users are keen on communicating and entertaining,* Retrieved on December 17, 2012, from http://www.albawaba.com/business/pr/uae-internet-users-457376
5. The UAE plays a significant role in conserving heritage at both national and international levels. In 2011, the UAE won a seat on the Executive Board of UNESCO. The UAE became one of the 31 new members elected to the 58-member body by UNESCO's member states. In addition, in November 11, 2011 the UAE became one of the 21 States Parties of the World Heritage Committee. According to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the *Committee is responsible for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, defines the use of the World Heritage Fund and allocates financial assistance upon requests from States Parties. It has the final say on whether a property is inscribed on the World Heritage List.*
   For more information see, http://whc.unesco.org/en/comittee and http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/ae
6. See, for example, UAE Institute of Education (http://www.uae7.com/vb/sendmessage.php), Emirati Heritage Network (http://www.trathuae.com/), Emirati *hegn* (camels) http://www.hegnuae.com/ and Emirati Heritage Club (http://wn.com/emirates_heritage_club)
7. For more information regarding this activity, see http://www.uaeu.ac.ae/about/news/2012/11/poetry_night/index.shtml
8. The homepage of ADACH website is http://www.adach.ae/en/
9. The UAE was chosen to be a member a committee of experts formed to discuss and study the files submitted by countries to record elements of intangible heritage on the UNESCO list. The Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority (http://www.godubai.com/gulftoday/articlearc.asp?AID=179249&Section=Home)
10. See *Kaleej Times* (Feb. 10, 2012), http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle11.asp?xfile=data/theuae/2012/February/theuae_February258.xml&section=theuae and *The National*, (Feb. 10, 2012), http://www.thenational.ae/business/travel-tourism/new-tourism-authority-to-replace-two-agencies-for-abu-dhabi
11. For further information, see *The Gulf Today,* 3/30/2010 http://www.godubai.com/gulftoday/articlearc.asp?AID=175499&Section=Home)
12. Readers are enabled to download information through PDF. The website of this magazine is: http://www.adach.ae/ar/portal/publications/intangible.heritage.mag.aspx Also, see: http://www.godubai.com/gulftoday/articlearc.asp?AID=159738&Section=Home
13. The main home page or website of the Emirates Heritage Club is: http://www.torath.ae/
14. The online or virtual tour can be accessed by this link: http://www.mydestination.com/abudhabi/6177725/heritage-village-in-abu-dhabi-uae. See also the Virtual Museum Website: http://www.uaeinteract.com/VIRTUAL_MUSEUM/museum_index.html
15. Some of these forums include: *ma'had al-imarat al-ta'limi* (The Emirates' Institute of Education) http://www.uae7.com/vb/forum.php
16. Folk performances of *al-'aiyyāla, al-rizfa* and *al-arbiyya* have some common features belonging to war dances. Men align themselves in two rows facing each other. They carry sticks in their right hands. There is a drummer between the two rows who goes from one row to another while beating the drum. The participants in the two rows sing some songs (*shallāt*) and poems about bravery, victory and glory. They brandish the sticks they hold in their hands, to the right, to the left and up and down. For the performance of *'aiyyāla*, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RboMyYSpUX4

17. For the performance of *rizfa* , see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtjkgjooMBQ
18. The *nadba* is a traditional performance performed among the Shuhuh of the northern Emirates for special occasions such as weddings. It is performed exclusively by men. However, the most important part is that which is performed by a man surrounded by men of his tribe. The man raises his right hand high in the air and shakes it occasionally. He stretches his left hand close to his face or forehead, then he shrieks loudly. The surrounding men respond to him with deep short screams. See, for instance: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC0WX8RPbQ8 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0b7Ayns240&feature=related
19. The interviewee who found information about preparing and making incense can be seen at: http://www.bnatqtr.com/vb/archive/index.php/t-63977.html
20. The local fairytale of *umm ad-duwais* deals with an imaginary female character who combines contradictory features. On the one hand, she is depicted as an extremely attractive, graceful and beautiful woman who lures men with her long black hair and fair, soft, silky skin. On the other hand, she is a demon whose legs are those of goats (or donkeys) and whose mouth is that of a mouse or rat. She is also portrayed as holding a sharp sickle in her hand for killing men – the *dās* [or *duwais*] after which she was named. She is the 'mother of the sickle' or *umm ad-duwais*. The pedagogical lesson of such a fairytale is to advise people, particularly men, to preserve the traditional values of honesty and chastity (el-Aswad; 2010b).

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