

INSTAGRAM AS A CULTURAL ARCHIVE: THE ROLE OF WANABQA IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SYRIAN CULTURAL MEMORY AND IDENTITY AFTER RUPTURE

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Abstract: War and conflict have left a lasting trace on Syrian cultural heritage, identity and memory, impacting both individuals and society at large. Several physical sites of remembrance have been destroyed, or in the case of the diaspora, are inaccessible. Under these circumstances, it is crucial to find alternate ways to ensure cultural continuity and reconstruct collective identity. With the rise of digital media, this study argues that visual online platforms can provide an answer to this, especially among the Syrian diaspora. Using a qualitative case study, this research focuses on Wanabqa, a youth-led Syrian collective that operates mainly on Instagram. After thematically analyzing a sample of Instagram posts published between 2025 and 2026, four recurring themes emerged: collective memory and remembrance, cultural heritage and continuity, representation, identity and inclusivity, and diasporic identity and cultural negotiation. Wanabqa presents an example of how Instagram functions as a participatory space for Syrians all over the world to document traditions, observe collective trauma, negotiate their identities and connect with one another. Wanabqa's posts also illustrate how Instagram's visual and textual features, such as reels and carousels, provide various ways to communicate meaning and draw attention to certain topics. Ultimately, this research explores how theories of cultural memory and identity can be put into practice through visual media platforms such as Instagram, especially in the aftermath of rupture.

Keywords: *Cultural memory, Digital media, Identity reconstruction, Syrian collective identity*

KÜLTÜREL BİR ARŞİV OLARAK INSTAGRAM: KOPUŞ SONRASI SURIYE'NİN KÜLTÜREL HAFIZASI VE KİMLİĞİNİN YENİDEN İNŞASINDA WANABQA'NIN ROLÜ

Savaş ve çatışma, hem bireyleri hem de toplumu etkileyerek Suriye'nin kültürel mirası, kimliği ve kolektif hafızası üzerinde kalıcı izler bırakmıştır. Hatırlamaya ve anmaya hizmet eden birçok fiziksel mekân ya yok edilmiş ya da diaspora bağlamında erişilemez hâle gelmiştir. Bu koşullar altında, kültürel sürekliliği sağlamak ve kolektif kimliği yeniden

inşa etmek için alternatif yollar bulmak büyük önem taşımaktadır. Dijital medyanın yükselişiyle birlikte bu çalışma, özellikle Suriye diasporası arasında çevrimiçi görsel platformların bu ihtiyaca yanıt sunabileceğini savunmaktadır. Nitel bir vaka çalışması yaklaşımını benimseyen bu araştırma, faaliyetlerini ağırlıklı olarak Instagram üzerinden sürdüren, gençler tarafından yönetilen Suriyeli bir kolektif olan Wanabqa'ya odaklanmaktadır. 2025 ve 2026 yılları arasında yayımlanan Instagram gönderilerinden oluşan bir örneklemin tematik analizinin ardından dört tekrar eden tema ortaya çıkmıştır: kolektif hafıza ve hatırlama, kültürel miras ve süreklilik, temsil, kimlik ve kapsayıcılık ile diasporik kimlik ve kültürel müzakere. Wanabqa, Instagram'ın dünyanın dört bir yanındaki Suriyelilerin gelenekleri belgelemesine, kolektif travmayı görünür kılmasına, kimliklerini müzakere etmesine ve birbirleriyle bağlantı kurmasına olanak tanıyan katılımcı bir alan olarak nasıl işlediğine dair bir örnek sunmaktadır. Wanabqa'nın paylaşımları ayrıca Instagram'ın reels ve carousel gibi görsel ve metinsel özelliklerinin anlam üretmek ve belirli konulara dikkat çekmek için çeşitli yollar sunduğunu göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak bu araştırma, kültürel hafıza ve kimlik kuramlarının, özellikle kopuş sonrasında, Instagram gibi görsel medya platformları aracılığıyla nasıl pratiğe dökülebileceğini incelemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Kültürel hafıza, Dijital medya, Kimlik yeniden inşası, Suriyeli kolektif kimlik*

1. Introduction

Syria is a country with a deep heritage and ethno-religious diversity shaped by the many civilizations that have passed through the land. Unfortunately, over fourteen years of conflict and displacement have significantly disrupted cultural continuity and collective memory among Syrians both within and outside the country. The resulting trauma from displacement and conflict challenges the understanding of what it means to be Syrian and the connection between nation and identity.

The Syrian diaspora is not only a result of the modern conflict; Syrians for centuries have migrated across the world (Kodmani & Jaber, 2018, p. 2). However, the post-2011 conflict has profoundly influenced how Syrians maintain connections to their homeland, and identity and preserve collective memory. Aside from mass displacement, a number of Syria's cultural heritage sites have faced destruction through bombardment, vandalism, and looting, targeting not only buildings and artifacts but also

legacies behind them (Shadi & Bashar, 2015). Thus, cultural destruction is not just physical, but creates a broader rupture in cultural memory and identity.

Assmann (2011, p. 18) states that “Every substantial break in continuity or tradition can produce the past whenever the break is meant to create a new beginning.” In times of conflict, communities must turn to memory to maintain their collective identity and create a sense of belonging, especially in the diaspora. In today’s context, digital platforms have an essential role in this. Millions of displaced Middle Easterners use social media to stay informed and connected to their homeland (Baser & Halperin, 2019, p. 215), making digital media increasingly embedded into everyday life. Furthermore, digital media platforms enable ordinary users to tell their stories through photography, videography and visual art, shaping their image away from the constraints of mainstream media.

The user-friendly nature of social media allows individuals to easily share their memories or cultural knowledge with users from around the world, forming online communities that transcend geographic boundaries and turning digital spaces into cultural archives that anyone can access and contribute to (Liang et al., 2021). This is one of the key characteristics of digital memory, which unlike traditional memory, does not rely on oral transmission or physical archives for continuity. Vulnerable cultural items such as manuscripts and photographs can be preserved in digital formats increasing their longevity (Oladoye & Akinluyi, 2026, pp.99-100). Digital media has revolutionized the way culture is promoted and preserved, creating new opportunities, especially for communities whose cultural identity is under threat.

Hence, this article aims to apply existing literature about cultural preservation, digitization and memory to the contemporary Syrian context by focusing on Wanabqa, a “grassroots Syrian youth-led collective dedicated to promoting, preserving, and rethinking Syrian identity through research cultural advocacy, social change, storytelling, heritage, and inclusive dialogue” (Wanabqa, 2022). This research forms part of a broader thesis examining a range of Syrian creators and content on Instagram. However, Wanabqa in particular was selected as the case study for this article based on

three criteria: its substantial reach, its transnational and diverse organizational structure, and its visual orientation.

Wanabqa has nearly 68,000 followers, giving the account considerable reach within Syrian-oriented spaces on Instagram (*Top Instagram Brands in Syria*, n.d.). Furthermore, the team members come from different backgrounds and are based in various places including Syria, the United States, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, France and Germany (*Our Team - Wanabqa*, 2023). This reflects the collective's transnational nature, which aligns with the study's focus on diasporic identity and cultural negotiation. Also, the founder, Al Allaf, has emphasized the importance of images, graphics, and presentation in Wanabqa's content (Mandapati, 2022). Given Instagram's strong visual orientation, the collective's emphasis on imagery and design makes it a suitable case for examining how the platform is used to represent, negotiate and reconstruct Syrian memory and identity. Lastly, Wanabqa's content is analytically distinct because it documents cultural and historical material, such as traditional festivities and ancient sites, while also discussing contemporary topics including identity, societal issues, representation and diasporic experiences. By focusing on Wanabqa, this research contributes to broader discussions on participatory digital spaces through which war-affected or marginalized communities can reconstruct memory and identity.

Accordingly, the research question of this study is: How does Wanabqa use Instagram to reconstruct, negotiate and preserve Syrian cultural identity and collective memory within digital spaces?

2. Literature Review: Cultural identity

Cultural identity is a social construct that includes the values, beliefs, customs, expressions and artifacts that shape our understanding of ourselves and how we relate to others (Bala, 2024, p. 308). In diasporic communities, cultural identity is often influenced by displacement, history and mediation between the country of origin and the destination. Through social and cultural exchange, identity does not remain fixed but becomes fluid and in an ongoing process of construction. Homi K. Bhabha (as cited in Bhandari, 2022, p. 172) expands on this through his concept of the "third space" which

describes the in-between space through which members of the diaspora constantly reinterpret their multifaceted identities.

These ideas correspond with Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as a continuous process of becoming rather than a fixed essence based strictly on ethnicity, geography or origin. Hall explains that "identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 2011, p. 4). History, migration, power and culture are factors that impact the ongoing production of identity; diasporic communities, for example, offer a clear picture of this process. This however does not minimize the importance of identity. According to Hall, though it is unstable, identity remains essential to politics, activism, belonging and cultural meaning (Hall, 2011, pp. 2-4).

Hall's explanation can be seen in the multifaceted nature of Syrian identity, which has been affected by conflict, displacement and fragmentation. Syrian identity is continuously reinterpreted and expressed differently based on background, history and lived experiences; digital media can function as a space where this process occurs.

2.1. Collective Memory

Collective memory theories can be traced back to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who believed that memory is a social construct essential for group unity. Halbwachs (as cited in Anastasio et al., 2012, p. 45) believed that a group's memories are not organically formed, rather they are created in accordance with its customs and behaviors. Anastasio et al. (2012, p. 48) mention Halbwachs' concept of 'historical memory' which describes the collective remembrance of significant events which were not directly experienced by all individuals within the group. Collective memory varies across different communities, as each develops their own interpretation shaped by a common understanding of the past.

Said (2000) adds onto this subject by explaining the selective nature of memory. Said argues that much of collective memory is curated by promoting certain historical narratives over others. Said uses the term "invention of tradition" to describe the role

institutions and authorities have in creating memory and belonging. Resulting in a memory that “is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful” (p. 179).

In Syria's case, historical and cultural tensions have created opposing narratives and different understandings of national identity. This has also been emphasized by the recent conflict; as a result, it is crucial that more attention is given to the reconstruction of collective memory. The Syrian diaspora may have an important role to play in this process as individuals abroad are less restricted by national institutions or authorities. Here, digital media could act as a space through which Syrians can work to understand, reevaluate and restore their collective memory.

2.2. Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann adds on to Halbwachs and Said's theories by emphasizing the importance of cultural memory. Assmann uses the term cultural memory to explain how collective meaning is preserved and passed down over a large period of time. According to Assmann and Czaplicka (1995, p. 129), cultural memory is based on significant events from the past that are transmitted through text, images, stories, traditions, art, poetry and other mediums which Assmann refers to as “figures of memory.” While cultural memory is attached to stable narrative or particular events, it is not entirely fixed as it “works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation” (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 130). Cultural memory has a self-reflexive nature, allowing societies to revisit, criticize, control or reevaluate their understandings of themselves (p. 132). In this sense, cultural heritage acts as a mirror in which “a society becomes visible to itself and to others” (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p. 133).

This process is particularly important in the context of war, trauma and displacement. Regardless of the outcome, conflict interrupts the continuity of a nation's memory, leaving a profound impact that can be seen both materially, such as in physical destruction, and psychologically in individuals (Drozdowski et al., 2019, p. 252). Therefore, when continuity is broken, memory becomes an essential method of restoration.

The process of remembering in this context is interconnected with cultural transmission, especially through non-physical forms of heritage. Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), is a form of “living heritage” that includes non-material practices such as traditions, music, art, language, holidays, beliefs, cuisine and other social or cultural forms of expression (Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2019). Unlike tangible heritage, ICH is adaptable and relies on communities, rather than fixed establishments, to sustain and pass it down (UNESCO, n.d.). According to Chatelard (2017, p. 5), such forms of cultural expression function as a channel for individuals to preserve their identity, create a sense of belonging and build resilience in the face of social or psychological hardships.

2.3. Digital Media, Memory and Identity

In contemporary life, digital media is an essential medium to study in regards to sustaining memory and identity through ICH. According to Hoskins (2014, p. 663), digital media has become inseparable from everyday life. As a result, memory now also operates through, and is actively shaped by networks, hyperconnectivity and media technologies. The era of the 'connective turn' in which we are living has altered the meaning and function behind memory. Memory is no longer bound by traditional archival institutions; this has brought forth unprecedented "ways of finding, sorting, sifting, using, seeing, losing and abusing the past." Digital media has not only changed the way history is stored, but how it is remembered (Hoskins, 2017).

Georgiou (2013) further expounds on this, stating that “most of what we know about each other and the world close by and at a distance is mediated” (p.81). Even prior to modern technology, the diaspora has always involved some form of media. Historically, individuals abroad relied on sending letters and photographs or making costly phone calls to stay connected to their homelands. However, in regards to representation, the nation’s image was traditionally defined within its borders.

Conversely, today boundaries have become much more flexible, and national or cultural concepts now extend beyond the territories they originated from. Digital connectivity has allowed for new ways of belonging, minimizing the gap between migrants and their homeland (Ponzanesi, 2020, pp. 980-982). Furthermore, digital

media has also offered spaces for individuals in the diaspora to express and negotiate their identity apart from the constraints of national or mainstream media (Georgiou, 2013, p. 83).

Adding to the discussion of digital media and identity, van Dijck (2007) uses the term “mediated memories” to describe the objects and practices shared through media technologies which help in the process of meaning-making. She explains that “Mediated memory objects and acts are crucial sites for negotiating the relationship between self and culture at large, between what counts as private and what as public, and how individuality relates to collectivity” (p. 21). Moreover, memory objects carry fluid meanings which can shift and adapt to different cultural, social and historical contexts. Even common items can have political and cultural meanings when reevaluated in larger socio-cultural frameworks (van Dijck, 2007, p. 23). On digital platforms, for instance, archives of everyday life from the past and present are recirculated and reinterpreted in ways that resonate with diverse social, cultural and political spheres. Another important aspect to note is that digital platforms have made it easier for individuals to be prosumers of media. This form of participatory media has blurred the lines between producers and audiences, giving rise to what Bruns (2007, as cited in Georgiou, 2013, p. 83) calls “produsage,” which describes users actively partaking in the creation, interpretation and distribution of content. Jenkins et al. (2009) also discuss participatory culture, suggesting that “we are moving away from a world in which some produce and many consume media toward one in which everyone has a more active stake in the culture that is produced” (p. 12).

Existing research on the Arab diaspora’s media practices shows how exposure to different cultural and political narratives on digital platforms produces a more complex and layered understanding of identity and belonging (Georgiou, 2013, pp. 88). Georgiou states that “While the socio-cultural realities that shape an imagination away from the nation or a singular community cannot be fully reflected in mediated communication, the sense of being in control of information and communication associated with new media has a significant symbolic role in supporting imagination. New media environments

allow participants to construct and share discourses of subjectivity around a deterritorialized and mediated sense of self” (p. 92).

As users increasingly engage in digital participatory culture, they gain more autonomy over their online representation and self-expression. This also enables the younger generation, especially within diasporic communities, to take part in cultural storytelling and identity construction (Jati, 2023, p. 3). This is especially important in the case of Syria, where representations may have been largely influenced by state media or by the generalizations of mainstream media. Al Zaim (2022) showcases different examples of participatory culture within Syrian online spaces. Several heritage-focused initiatives online rely on user contributions such as photographs or educational knowledge. The collaborative nature of such spaces not only contributes to Syrian digital archives, but also provides individuals with a sense of ownership over their collective memory.

Miconi (2020, p.9) states that Syrians abroad often used social media to keep contact with loved ones back home and connect with others in the diaspora through online communities. He highlights the positive aspect of this, noting that Syrians “are going through a delicate healing after the civil war” and face a identity issues related to “the lack of a properly shaped sense of ‘Syrianity’” (Ramírez Díaz, 2016, as cited in Miconi, 2020, p.9). However, one disadvantage of these environments is that they may lead to homophily: the tendency to only connect with like-minded or similar people. As a result, some Syrian online communities may leave out individuals who have different perspectives or political views from theirs (Miconi, 2020, pp.4-10). A study conducted by O’Callaghan et al. (2014) on Syrian digital discourse reveals the opposing narratives that were amplified on social media platforms during the conflict, ranging from moderate to extreme. These patterns do not only reflect communities online, but also represent the reality of the fragmented Syrian society. This raises questions on how digital media can be used to promote peaceful dialogue that benefits collective identity, rather than to fuel division. In her study for example, Al Hayek (2025) lists several small-scale Syrian media initiatives that work to foster communication and dialogue, especially between people groups who have historical tensions, such as Arabs and Kurds.

2.4. Digital Platforms as a Cultural Archive

Social media platforms have a strong capacity to circulate information and promote conversation, allowing users to learn more about their society, history and culture apart from traditional institutions. The unique features of various social media platforms enable different methods of cultural preservation. Twitter (now X) for instance, can shed light on linguistic diversity, demographics, and the different views that exist across communities. Instagram on the other hand is mainly used for images and short videos making it useful for showcasing historical sites and other forms of visual representation. YouTube also stands out as it offers users a space to share longer and more comprehensive videos of cultural traditions and practices (Indah et al., 2024, pp.104-105). This variety accommodates different user needs and preferences. While YouTube is suitable for individuals seeking detailed or in-depth content, Instagram and TikTok cater to users who prefer shorter or visually oriented forms of content. Such platforms are also efficient because they can be easily accessed by people of different backgrounds, age groups and locations (Febrianto et al., 2025, p.19). Individuals are not obligated to rely on institutions or passed down traditions in order to connect with their cultural identity.

2.5. Instagram as a Cultural Archive

Instagram has approximately two billion monthly active users, making it one of the most widely used social media platforms (Slotta, 2025). The image-based nature of the platform makes it particularly useful in the production and circulation of cultural memory and identity. Through photos, reels, captions and hashtags, users can document, share and reinterpret cultural content to a wide range of audiences. The combination of visual and textual content as well as audience engagement allows for multidimensional ways of storytelling and meaning-making (Sharma & Jonjua, 2025, p.33). These characteristics make Instagram an "excellent channel of study when discussing the intersection of culture, communication, and social media in the digital age" (Sharma & Jonjua, 2025, p.31). In diasporic environments, these elements assist in identity negotiation as users make use of cultural symbols, imagery, videos and archives to maintain connections to their homelands. Furthermore, diasporic users can

actively take part in the storytelling process, making digital communication a form of identity work.

At the same time, Yadav & Wason (2025) explain that Instagram reshapes questions of visibility and cultural self-representation by enabling diasporic communities to exercise greater control over how their cultures and histories are portrayed online. Through practices of documentation and storytelling, users actively construct and negotiate identity within broader social and cultural contexts, making digital participation a form of ongoing identity work. Content on Instagram is not neutral, rather it reflects the cultural values of those behind it. The type of content someone chooses to share is influenced by broader cultural norms, values, social background and collective understandings of selfhood (Yadav & Wason, 2025).

Additionally, Drucker (2014) elaborates on the subjective nature of visual representations more deeply, stating that “Most information visualizations are acts of interpretation masquerading as presentation. In other words, they are images that act as if they are just showing us what is, but in actuality, they are arguments made in graphical form” (p.10). According to Schreiber (2017), images on social media serve as curated visual performances of identity and culture that can be further analyzed through their visual elements, social context, and the platform on which they are shared (p. 39).

2.6. The Impact of Visual Communication

Building on this, Rose (2016, pp. 24-26) explains that visual meaning is produced across multiple sites, including image production, circulation, reception and the image itself. Also, images can be analyzed through technological, compositional and social modalities. While the social modality concerns the broader cultural and political context surrounding an image, the compositional modality focuses on visual elements such as content, color, layout and spatial organization that contribute to meaning-making. Rose (2016) also discusses the importance of composition in understanding how visual meaning is constructed. She argues that different visual genres are built on recurring elements or intentions, noting that “A particular genre will share a specific set of meaningful objects and ways of showing them” (p. 28). For example, documentary photography has usually focused on representing marginalized or disadvantaged

individuals in an effort to raise awareness or inspire change. On the other hand, street photography, though it overlaps with documentary photography, aims to garner appreciation rather than sympathy (pp. 28-29). Visual genres are helpful because they help researchers understand how different elements communicate specific meanings to audiences.

Color is another crucial element of visual communication. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2022, pp. 348-349), color influences affective responses, conveys identity and draws the attention of audiences. In text, color also helps structure information and create visual harmony. Therefore, when analyzing content on visual platforms such as Instagram, it is important to examine the colors used and the intentions behind them.

3. Methodology

For the research, a qualitative case study is conducted on Wanabqa, an independent grassroots Syrian collective dedicated to cultural preservation, inclusivity and social change. Founded in 2017, the collective is heavily active on Instagram with varied content that covers themes of history, heritage, social issues, ethno-religious diversity and life in the diaspora.

Data was collected through the purposive sampling of 12 Instagram posts from a total of 61 posts published by Wanabqa between June 2025 and April 2026. This timeframe was chosen as it allows for the collection of recent content while being broad enough to identify recurring patterns. The 61 posts were reviewed, from which 12 were intentionally selected based on their relevance to the research question and their relation to Syrian memory and identity. Accordingly, concepts of heritage, remembrance, diversity, social issues and diasporic experiences informed the selection process. However, the 4 main thematic categories mentioned below were not predetermined but emerged through the coding and analysis process. The final sample of 12 posts enabled in-depth multimodal analysis while retaining diversity in thematic focus and format. The aim was to include posts with different thematic purposes, including educational, commemorative, historical and storytelling content, as well as

different Instagram formats such as text and graphic based carousels, reels, and biographical posts.

The selected posts were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach informed by the study's research question and theoretical framework. For example, a carousel written in both Arabic and English was not simply read as bilingual text but as an indicator of diasporic inclusivity. Each post was examined according to the following criteria:

- Subject matter
- Textual elements: captions, wording, bilingual text and typography
- Visual elements: photography, graphics, color, layout and composition
- Instagram format (reel, carousel, static post, etc.)
- Cultural meaning

The data was repeatedly reviewed to ensure familiarization with the content. Based on the elements mentioned above, they were labeled with codes derived from recurring topics, symbols and narratives such as gender identity, collective trauma, cultural tradition, nostalgia and diaspora. These codes were compared to identify broader patterns and shared meanings, then grouped into the following main categories:

1. Collective memory and remembrance
2. Cultural heritage and continuity
3. Representation and inclusivity
4. Diasporic identity and cultural negotiation.

These categories emerged as related codes were grouped according to a common core message. For example, a post about the history of Kurdish Nowruz celebrations was coded for cultural tradition, while a post about the ancient Dura-Europos site was coded for historical heritage. Although they have different subject matters, both posts present heritage as a means of connecting the past with the present and were therefore grouped under the category of Cultural Heritage and Continuity.

The posts were interpreted in relation to the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review, particularly theories of collective memory, cultural memory, digital media and identity construction, as well as the role of visual elements in meaning-

making. Rose's (2016) concepts of compositional modality and visual genres were applied during the visual analysis, considering how imagery, color, typography and layout were arranged within each post and how these elements contributed to its overall meaning. Recurring visual patterns were also observed, such as the use of certain colors or fonts. These elements were examined in accordance to the subject and tone of each post, considering that the same visual choice could have different meanings depending on context.

3.1. Limitations

This study is focused on a small, purposively selected sample of Instagram posts from one account, therefore it is limited in terms of generalizability as it prioritizes depth instead. The findings reflect the selected posts, not the entirety of Syrian content on Instagram. This research is part of a broader qualitative study that will examine a larger sample of content from different creators across Syrian spaces on the platform.

3.2. Findings and Analysis

Wanabqa uses Instagram as a participatory digital space where Syrians can reconstruct collective memory and identity through visual imagery, storytelling and knowledge circulation. Wanabqa's content is primarily in the form of visual and text-based carousels, alongside some reels. The following four themes emerged from the 12 posts analyzed in this study:

- **Collective Memory and Remembrance**

Several posts by Wanabqa carry themes of loss, remembrance, nostalgia and trauma, highlighting the ongoing emotional and social process tied to collective memory. For example, Fig. 1 shows the cover slide of a carousel commemorating the victims of the Syrian revolution. The cover slide uses a muted color palette and dream-like composition, with envelopes floating above Damascus, evoking feelings of grief and longing tied to collective memory. The title uses simple typography, allowing the imagery to be the main focus. The envelopes can then be understood as the messages referenced in the title, "Messages That Will Not Reach." They symbolize messages intended for those who have passed away, representing the emotional weight of loss that Syrians have experienced, regardless of whether they have personally lost a loved

one or not. The color palette and overall layout reinforce the mournful and nostalgic tone of the post, showing how visual compositions can communicate collective memory. Through these elements, Wanabqa uses Instagram as a place of public mourning and collective grief. This can not only contribute to the construction of memory, but also offers a sense of belonging or relatability, especially for Syrians in exile.

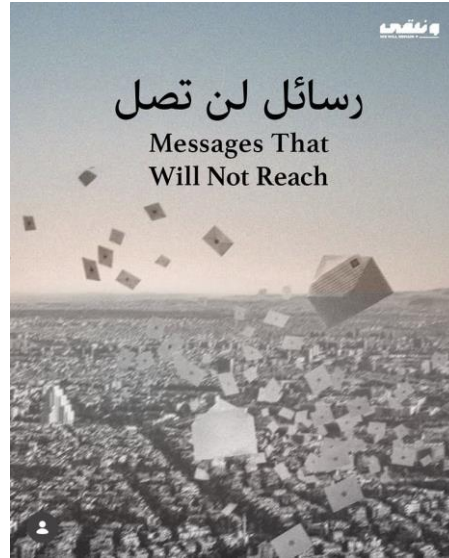


Figure 1: Instagram post in memory of the victims of the Syrian revolution. Wanabqa, December 17, 2025.

Other posts construct collective memory by highlighting national solidarity. One analyzed reel for example, shows Muslims and Christians in Syria united in prayer after a bombing attack on a church in Damascus. This not only demonstrates the use of Instagram for collective grief, but reinforces messages of unity in the face of division. Furthermore, it challenges the sectarian content that can be found within Syrian online spaces. Taking from Yadav & Wason's (2025) discussion in the theoretical section we can conclude the reel is not a neutral documentation. It reinforces national continuity in the aftermath of trauma and creates a sense of shared grief that overrides ethno-religious differences. The visual representation of Muslims and Christians participating in prayer promotes a message of solidarity, using imagery to highlight unity across religious differences.

Aligning with theoretical understandings of cultural and collective memory, these posts provide an example of how they are not static concepts but are actively produced through, in this case, visual communication.

• Cultural Heritage and Continuity

Across several analyzed posts, both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are represented through the documentation of traditions and the sharing of educational content. A key pattern is the emphasis on cultural continuity across time, space and sociopolitical disruption. Fig. 2 for example, depicts a reel dedicated to the history of Nowruz celebrations among the Kurdish population in Syria. The speaker discusses the suppression of Kurdish culture under the Assad regime which shows that the public celebrations of Nowruz in Syria are a symbol of cultural survival. Her traditional dress is not simply an aesthetic choice, but a cultural signifier that asserts the presence and continuity of a historically repressed people group. By centering Kurdish cultural expression, both verbally and visually, Wanabqa also promotes a more inclusive understanding of Syria's national identity. This overlaps with the third theme of this analysis.



Figure 2: Instagram reel discussing Kurdish Nowruz celebrations in Syria. Wanabqa, March 21, 2026.

Other posts in this category adopt a more explicitly formal or educational layout.

One post for instance, is an image and text based carousel showcasing the ancient site of Dura-Europos. Information about the site's history and significance is spread out across the slides in a reader-friendly font alongside archival photographs. The minimalist layout and pastel color palettes present educational content in an organized and accessible way, without any visual distractions. Restrained compositions and muted color palettes across these posts keep the focus on the historical content as the design choices do not compete with the text. Overall, both posts use different elements, such as minimalist layouts or cultural symbols, to foster a sense of continuity through lived tradition and historical knowledge.

● **Representation, Identity and Inclusivity**

Inclusivity is a central theme in Wanabqa's content which seeks to represent Syria's diverse identities and challenge stereotypes on both the individual and societal levels. Some posts address Syrian society as a whole, reflecting on its fragmented nature due to socio-political factors. While others, such as a post about the Alawite community, focus on specific groups, their enduring history and their lived experiences. Fig. 3 displays the cover slide of a carousel posted on Women's Day to honor the role of Syrian women. The title, "Syrian Women as Women, Not a Political Decor for Foreign Consumption," immediately draws the viewer's attention with its bold typography against the dark background. The high contrast in the image also makes the title stand out as a powerful statement. This is a recurring visual preference in Wanabqa's posts with strong messaging, where bold typography and contrast create a composition that is visually assertive. The background shows an image of Leila Tabris Touma, the first Miss Syria in 1952. Including a prominent woman from history like Touma, who represented Syria through beauty and cultural participation rather than conflict, counters the mainstream image of Syrian women that is built on war, displacement or conservatism. As a whole, the post communicates a message of resilience and highlights women's impactful role in a context where they are often deemed as passive.

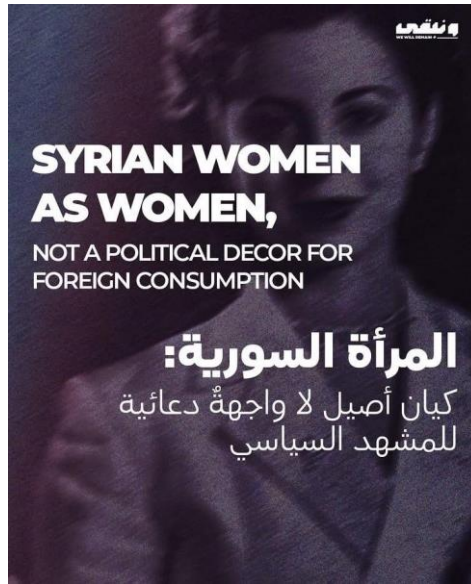


Figure 3: Women's Day Instagram post in honor of Syrian women and their role in society. Wanabqa, March 8, 2026.

Other posts in this theme highlight creative identities by sharing their artistic work and portraying them as key players in the construction of Syrian memory. On the other hand, some posts focus on representing Syria's different ethno-religious groups using photographic archives, visual design and historical knowledge. A recurring element across these posts is the use of historical images for representation, rather than contemporary photos. This is significant because it asserts that diversity is not something recent or imposed onto Syrian society, but has always existed as an integral part. Such posts are important not only for representation and education, but for challenging harmful stereotypes that may exist in Syrian spaces online and on ground. Overall, the posts in this category demonstrate how Instagram can be effectively used as an inclusive space.

• Diasporic Identity and Cultural Negotiation

While the posts in the previous categories are relevant to diasporic communities, several of Wanabqa's posts are specifically directed to them. Some showcase diasporic figures such as Eddie Kochak (fig. 4), a Syrian-American musician born in 1922, whose work blends Middle Eastern and Western genres and references. The reel seen in Fig. 4 combines archival images of Kochak with excerpts of his songs and subtitles of the

lyrics, presenting him as a figure whose work blended two cultures. The audiovisual format of the reel bridges historical documentation and contemporary digital practices. Furthermore, as a platform, Instagram simplifies the process of sharing and accessing historical archives that otherwise may be difficult to find. Individuals who may have never heard of Kochak could be introduced to him by the reel through Instagram's algorithmic features.

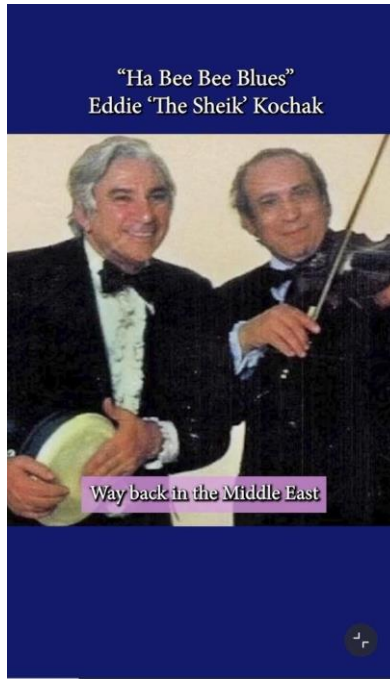


Figure 4: Instagram reel showcasing Syrian-American musician, Eddie Kochak. Wanabqa, August 9, 2025.

Other posts by Wanabqa represent members of the Syrian diaspora as active participants in social change while simultaneously navigating their different social and cultural contexts abroad. Rather than portraying the diasporic individuals as passive bystanders or as detached from the homeland, they are included as a core part of Syria's social fabric and cultural memory. This is evident not only in posts about the diasporic experience, but also in the bilingual nature of Wanabqa's content. A common pattern is that all linguistic material, whether on the image itself or in the caption, appears both in Arabic and English. This is critical because it creates a space for Syrians abroad who may not be fully fluent in Arabic, to understand the content. It also

helps them feel included in the community and connected to others online who have a shared identity.

Overall, the recurring themes in Wanabqa's content on Instagram demonstrate Syrian identity as multifaceted and continuously negotiated. This is done primarily through the focus on representation, historical knowledge, visual imagery and multimodal strategies. Overall, the analyzed posts illustrate how Instagram can be used to produce, document and discuss complex and nuanced topics in various textual and audiovisual formats that are available on the platform.

4. Discussion

Several aspects of the study's theoretical framework can be applied to its findings. Halbwachs (as cited in Anastasio et al., 2012, p. 48) emphasizes that memory is socially constructed and shared within group contexts; this can be seen in Wanabqa which acts as a community where memory is constructed through digital storytelling, documentation and the sharing of educational information. Moreover, Assmann & Czaplicka's description of cultural memory as self-reflexive (1995, p. 130) are relevant to Wanabqa's posts that address social issues and fragmentation as they offer an outlet for individuals to contemplate on or reconsider societal norms.

Said's description of selective memory (2000, p. 79) can also be applied to the findings. Wanabqa's emphasis on inclusivity can be understood as curated narrative construction, through which various histories and identities are showcased to promote social cohesion and present a pluralistic understanding of Syrian identity. Wanabqa's content portrays Syrian identity as multifaceted and complex, including many narratives and experiences. Examples of this are evident in the Kurdish Nowruz and Women's Day posts.

Apart from the theoretical aspect, the imagery and design elements in Wanabqa's posts align with Rose's explanation of visual genres (2016, p. 28). Each post has unique imagery, typography and colors that are compatible with its core message. For example, the colors on Syria's national flag, green, red, white and black, can be seen on several posts by Wanabqa. The use of these colors is not solely for decoration or symbolism. Since they are drawn directly from Syria's flag, they convey a

sense of solidarity, pride and national belonging, connecting visual imagery with collective identity. Reflective and commemorative posts such as “Messages That Will Not Reach” often used softer colors while posts focused on empowerment or strong messaging such as the Women’s Day post displayed bolder, high-contrast palettes that stood out.

Furthermore, Instagram’s different features also influence how content is communicated and received. The reel about Eddie Kochak, for example, allows information of his work to be quickly interpreted and circulated. While carousels, such as the Dura-Europos one, are suitable for longer or more complex forms of storytelling. Both formats allow for the text to be integrated directly onto the image or video which makes the content more engaging for the viewer and also gives the creator more control over the typography and color of the text.

Wanabqa has so far attracted nearly 70,000 followers on Instagram, creating a community for Syrians of different backgrounds to connect with their homeland and with one another. Though the analyzed sample is small, its depth supports the argument that Instagram can function as a space for the construction and negotiation of cultural identity and memory. This not only applies to the Syrian context, but is relevant to other communities as well, especially ones that have faced rupture.

5. Conclusion

This research explored how Wanabqa uses Instagram as a cultural archive to construct Syrian memory and identity through various visual and text-based methods. The recurring themes that emerged portray Syrian identity as nuanced, diverse and constantly evolving. Furthermore, Wanabqa’s content shows the importance of visual communication when discussing these complex themes. Instagram is effective here because it creates a space for everyday users to share this type of content to a global audience away from the constraints of national institutions. The platform’s multimodal features and popularity, especially among the younger generation, further increase its impact. Ultimately, the findings of this study reveal how modern digital methods can be used for the benefit of communities that have faced cultural disruption due to conflict.

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