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MASSEY UNIVERSITY

Performing Identities on Facebook:

Young Bhutanese Women Becoming 'Kiwi'

A dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Social Anthropology at Massey University, Palmerston North New Zealand

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Abstract

This research traces the experience of resettlement among a family of five Bhutanese refugee women, a single mother and her four teenage daughters. My fieldwork involved ‘hanging out’ with the young daughters in this family. Using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and visual ethnographic methods, my findings reveal the struggles of being low caste single women in a predominantly Hindu refugee community. My participants used their research cameras to take photographs of themselves, tracking these photos led my analyses into the online world of Facebook. This research offers an anthropological enquiry into the impact of Facebook within the daily lives of young refugee women. The visual methodologies used in this project expose the private and complicated identity work that occupies Bhutanese youth in their experiences of learning how to be ‘Kiwi’. Using Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, this research seeks to understand the relationships between these young women and the complicated online and offline worlds they are a part of. My findings problematize universal notions that the identities of young refugees are a ‘singular’ or ‘fixed’ reality, centred on their inherent ‘refugeeness’. Alternatively this research endeavours to bring to light the enabling factors that allow these young women to negotiate the performative process of ‘growing up’ in a new country.

Keywords: performativity, identity, social media, refugee, New Zealand

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
Abstract.....	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Methods and Reflections on Fieldwork.....	5
Conducting fieldwork at home.....	6
Friendship in the field	8
Visual Ethnography.....	12
Using the camera and using the photos.....	14
Identity protection	15
Chapter 3: Mapping the Field and Exploring the Literature.....	17
The importance of a qualitative approach.....	18
The gendered experience.....	20
Education and young adults	23
The importance of friends	25
Facebook as space for identity work.....	25
Youth and identity in New Zealand	30
Discussion	33
Chapter 4: Theorising Judith Butler and Performativity.....	36
What is the performative?	39

Embodiment	41
Voluntarism vs determinism	43
Gender norms	44
Agency	46
Resistance and resignification.....	47
The gender order is made by practice	48
Discussion	49
Chapter 5: Tracing Bhutanese Refugee History, a Family Story.....	52
Bhutan’s political landscape.....	52
Refugee camps in Nepal.....	56
A stateless people	59
Resettlement in New Zealand	61
The impact of caste	64
Caste order.....	64
Caste reformation	67
The Palmerston North Bhutanese community	69
Sarah’s experiences	71
Strategies of resettlement and resistance.....	74
Discussion	79
Chapter 6: Growing up in a new country, the importance of Facebook and Taking Selfies	81
Facebook as an embodied space.....	83
Selfies	85
Friendship photos	100

Identity performing images	110
Bhutanese youth: a Facebook community	123
Discussion	133
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	136
Barriers and Opportunities	136
Using visual methodologies	137
The Importance of Facebook.....	138
References.....	142
Bibliography	152