#Migrantes on TikTok: Exploring Platformed Belongings

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Digital media and human mobility are intrinsically connected in an era where the human and the technological converge for representation and agency. In this context, platforms such as TikTok become prime spaces for diverse creative voices. This study constitutes the first exploratory analysis of TikTok as a medium where migrants embody their belonging through aspirational, performative, and self-governance creative and platformed practices. Through a content and discourse analysis of 198 videos gathered with relevant hashtags, using a Python script, we delve into the content created by Latin American migrants in Spain and the United States. The concept of platformed belongings is theorized in their use of TikTok's affordances and vernaculars to express aspirations to be part of certain socioeconomic, national, cultural, and digital communities. This is achieved through a range of storylines, from collective identities that align with expected values to stern challenges to oppressive norms. In this sense, we argue that platformed belongings enable migrants to reclaim their rights and negotiate existing symbolic boundaries by achieving different levels of visibility within this platform.

Keywords: immigration, TikTok aspirations, belonging, self-representation, governance, performativity, content analysis

In the era of user-generated content, some argue that the ability to craft, tell, and propagate stories has been democratized (Blank, 2013). However, in the case of migrant populations, their experiences are still being told by dominant others on digital and social media, instrumentalized to fulfill political, economic, and ideological goals (Ekman, 2019; Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021). Nevertheless, recent evidence suggests that migrants and diasporic groups are, in some ways, becoming active agents of

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their own narratives on social media platforms, with several important initiatives being implemented to shed light on the diverse stories of migrants[1] (Chouliaraki, 2017). Although, in many cases, migrants need to adapt these narratives by conforming to certain values and expectations to fit the generally accepted plots in their receiving nation-states (Appadurai, 2019; Georgiou, 2018).

Thus, the aspirational nature of migrant *tiktoker* content responds to the difficulty of their narratives to fit in (Appadurai, 2019) as well as the desire for a better life both socially and financially (Witteborn, 2019). Moreover, the tendency of mainstream media (Benson, 2013), government-funded institutions (Georgiou, 2018), and political actors (McMahon, 2018) to instrumentalize migratory storylines means that migrant individuals often need to respond to widespread beliefs about themselves using creative practices and narrative strategies of interest (Udwan, Leurs, & Alencar, 2020). Performativity, for the purposes of this study, entails content-creation approaches aimed at resignifying (Austin, 1975; Jiménez-López, 2019) what it means to be a foreigner in a new country.

In this context, social media has been identified as an important component in the acculturation process for refugees and migrants in general, and as one that needs to be harnessed by government actors, to ensure that migrants have access to accurate and helpful information (Alencar, 2018). Considering this, we argue that performative and aspirational creative practices deployed by migrants on social media can, in some cases, constitute acts of self-governance as well as strategies to create a sense of belonging. Piper (2003) described these bottom-up approaches as grassroots efforts of empowerment, stemming from migrants themselves and attempting to fill the gap left by state-based governance in terms of rights, norms, services, and protections.

In the present study, we aim to understand the performative strategies and creative practices of Latin American creators who explicitly self-identify as foreigners living in the United States and Spain to assess their aspirations and their attempts to negotiate a sense of belonging through governance within the content they create online. Thus, our analysis attempts to assess how TikTok shapes migrant narratives and creative practices of belonging. This analysis allows us to expand on Marlowe, Bartley, and Collins' (2017) conceptualization of *digital belongings* and to theorize on the role of social media infrastructures as enablers of alternative forms of *platformed belongings*.

Literature Review

Latin American Migration in the United States and Spain

Spain and the United States have traditionally been desirable options for the Latin American migrant community, with financial, legal, geographic, and cultural factors decisive when considering these two countries as possible destinations (Connor & Massey, 2010). In terms of approaches to integration, both

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[1] Although visual and textual elements analyzed in this study regularly refer to a well-defined profile of migrants in terms of origin, it is not possible to determine if the content refers to a specific type of migrant. Given this limitation, we opted for the umbrella terms "migrant" and "immigrant," which are used interchangeably throughout the study to refer to the vast diversity of populations who migrate, including refugees and asylum seekers.

countries follow civic integration models, focusing on the acquisition of values established as "ideal," "shared," and "national" (Larin, 2020), and in the case of Spain, language proficiency (European Commission, n.d.; Fernández-Suárez, 2017), as benchmarks for integration. Furthermore, Spanish integration discourse from politicians is usually connected to employment, with a tepid standing in relation to multiculturalism (Fernández-Suárez, 2017).

While the possibility of accessing the job market in both countries has been pointed out as relevant in the decision to migrate (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019), the challenges for Latin American migrants remain significant. In the case of the United States, this group's low levels of educational achievement among minorities in the country have been linked to their exclusion from the qualified job market (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019), suggesting the existence of structural limitations in educational and work-related opportunities. In Spain, first-generation Latinxs are often overqualified for their jobs (Fernández & Ortega, 2008) and relegated to construction, cleaning, and care-related occupations (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019). Furthermore, since 2017, both countries have experienced a political and ideological shift. The recent rise of the far-right, anti-immigration party Vox, in the Spanish national congress, has created new challenges for the migrant community, through calls for the elimination of social benefits and other policies aimed at curbing migratory flows (Simón, 2020). In comparison, former U.S. president Trump's stern rhetoric and policies establishing legal and undocumented migration as a threat to the American economy and safety profoundly changed and hardened this country's approach to immigration, with more deportations and increased detention rates (Pierce & Steele, 2017). The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic in both countries have been detrimental to perceptions toward immigration because of limited availability of resources and rhetoric that positions the migrant as one of the culprits for the health crisis, and in the case of the United States, resulted in even harsher policies (Garcini, Domenech Rodríguez, Mercado, & Paris, 2020).

In the United States, increased xenophobia has promoted a surge in instances of hate toward Spanish speakers in this country (Martinez, Rojo, & González, 2019), whereas, in Spain, its colonial relations with many Latin American countries are derived from a culture that is closer to that of Latin American migrants (Connor & Massey, 2010). Research has shown that Latinx migrants encounter lower levels of discrimination than other migrant groups (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019), but the fact that they are performing jobs that do not match their skill level and training (Fernández & Ortega, 2008) suggests that colonial imaginaries and social structures still constitute a problematic boundary for this group of migrants to become full participants in Spanish society.

Thus, the relevance of the Latin American migrant population in both countries under study cannot be denied. In Spain's case, a large increase in Latin American migrant groups, such as Venezuelan nationals (47%), Hondurans (32.4%), and Colombians (25.1%) was evidenced in 2018 (European Commission, n.d.). In the case of the United States, the prevalence of Latin American migration has been solidly established, with around 51.3% of all migrants originating from Latin America (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019).

The sociopolitical environment that migrants face in their receiving societies constitutes an important aspect of their possibility to become part of these communities. In the next section, we explore

the concept of belonging and its implications for emerging practices of *fitting in* as a migrant in these two nations.

Negotiating Belonging

Scholars have long been interested in the multiple ways in which migrants embody their belonging. From a socio-linguistic perspective, Heyd (2016) explored *narratives of belonging* to delve into the changing characteristics of personal diasporic stories in digital spaces and assess emerging linguistic practices of identity and affiliation. Along these lines, Marlowe et al. (2017) advance the theoretical framework of *digital belongings* to analyze "the dynamic of social participation and social cohesion as it interfaces with contemporary practices of family and friendship" (p. 17). These authors consider various forms of identity and different levels of belonging analyzed through the functions of digital media in the narrative, communicative, and identity-building practices of migrants. In their argument, the role of digital tools is merely instrumental, used to create or maintain connections that resemble in-person communication with family, friends, or diasporic groups. In these cases, social media are deemed as suitable contexts to observe such practices and the examination attempts to understand in-person belonging practices through the use of digital and social media tools. In the present article, we aim to extend this concept to consider the socio-technical affordances and configurations of social media—with TikTok as an example—as intimately intertwined with strategies of belonging, in a process where the aspirations of migrants to belong, shape their use of social media affordances and these, in turn, mold the belonging possibilities of migrant creators. We rely on two areas of research to expand on these concepts: media and migration scholarship, exploring the (self)representation practices of migrants using digital devices and social media, and Internet research, which illuminates the ways in which platformed sociality diverges from instrumental adaptations of social interactions using digital media.

Researchers in the field of media and migration have explored the aspirational and performative modes of belonging and exclusion enabled by digital media, including research focused on real and constructed first-person accounts by refugees, such as the appropriation of refugee selfie practices by mainstream media (Chouliaraki, 2017; Risam, 2018); the deployment of selfie activism to reframe refugees through individual stories, enabling belonging through adherence to dominant ideas of success (Nikunen, 2019); the instrumentalization of first-person migrant accounts to perpetuate ideal modes of belonging versus grassroots media initiatives that enable agency; and civic participation by migrants to define their own belonging (Georgiou, 2018). Studies have also assessed the mediated narrative practices of migrants including the amplifying effects of mobile devices on migrants' belonging practices through self-presentations of individual aspirations and achievements (Witteborn, 2019); the documentation of migration trajectories (Labayen & Gutierrez, 2021) and strategies of othering within these narratives (Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021); and the virtual, interactive, and multimodal practices of belonging by forced migrants through digital technologies (Witteborn, 2015). Research on social media and migration is also relevant, including a model for refugee integration using social media (Alencar, 2018); the *digital togetherness* established between migrants who share common cultural traits, national traits, and collective experiences in digital spaces (Marino, 2015); and the analysis of social media as a significant *site of witness* for forced migrants (Rae, Holman, & Nethery, 2018). It is worth noting that migrant portrayals and creative practices often face symbolic borders that confer a

sort of "conditional" belonging status that establishes behavioral and cultural requirements to become part of the receiving society (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Georgiou, 2018).

Thus, our research considers this corpus of research and intends to build on it to go beyond multimodality to draw on research related to platformed practices of visibility and influence and to assess how these shape and inform new modes of belonging in our sample of migrant creators, considering their aspirations, performativity, and self-governance. In the next section, we will introduce the significance of TikTok as a platform and a suitable example to explore such platformed practices.

Tiktok, Visibility, and Belonging in the Social Media Ecosystem

TikTok offers an excellent opportunity to explore strategies of belonging because of its popularity, with 1.5 billion downloads and more than 800 million active users (Mohsin, 2020). Moreover, the platform has significantly grown during the pandemic, becoming the top-earning app in the iOS App Store in Q2, 2020 (Koetsier, 2020). Its mimetic and viral character has been harnessed by companies to expand their reach, evidencing its potential (De-Casas-Moreno, Jaramillo-Dent, & Vizcaíno-Verdú, 2020). Finally, TikTok has been identified as a platform where hate speech, including anti-immigration discourse, flourishes (Weimann & Masri, 2020), making it a space worthy of exploration for immigration-related content.

The role of platforms in social interactions has been illustrated by Van Dijck (2013), who suggests that they go beyond facilitating communication to offer technological configurations and affordances that promote or inhibit interactive exchanges that follow specific characteristics. The importance of platform affordances in users' relationships has been seconded by McVeigh-Shultz and Baym (2015), who conceptualized the idea of *vernacular affordance* as a process of sense-making in which users of technologies negotiate their own practices with existing material structures. Moreover, the *platform vernacular* has been defined as the unique mixture of grammatical, logical, and stylistic practices in the uses of particular social media platforms' affordances (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen, & Carter, 2015).

Along these lines, Zulli and Zulli (2020) suggest that TikTok encourages mimesis through its content-creation capabilities, interaction options, and algorithmic content distribution model. Abidin (2021) argues that TikTok has also changed the previous logics of visibility. In this sense, she suggests that this platform's post-based virality model—versus other platforms' profile-based popularity—has changed the practices and strategies of creators, who aim for visibility through the inclusion of their short videos on the *for you* page. According to Abidin (2021), this overarching goal means that *tiktokers* often sacrifice the construction of a cohesive personal brand to follow the latest content-creation trends and include visibility strategies such as the use of certain hashtags, filters, audio tracks, and so forth. We argue that this platform's coded structure of mimesis and post-based virality is especially useful to explore the opportunities and challenges faced by traditionally underrepresented voices to exercise their agency.

These perspectives constitute the basis of our proposed expansion on the *digital belongings* concept advanced by Marlowe et al. (2017) to include contemporary practices that enable migrant creators to appropriate and deploy specific platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) and creative elements to negotiate

narrative, symbolic, and technological borders (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). We suggest that migrant creators harness these possibilities through the deployment of belonging strategies of mimesis, aimed at virality and enabled by their level of understanding of the platform. In this sense, *platformed belongings* include traditional understandings of belonging through self-representation and new digital cultures of belonging through social media visibility.

Method

Using a variation of the virtual snowball method (Baltar & Brunet, 2012) a sample of TikTok videos was identified, focusing on the narrative elements and specific affordances of interest. Figure 1 illustrates the steps in the sampling process.
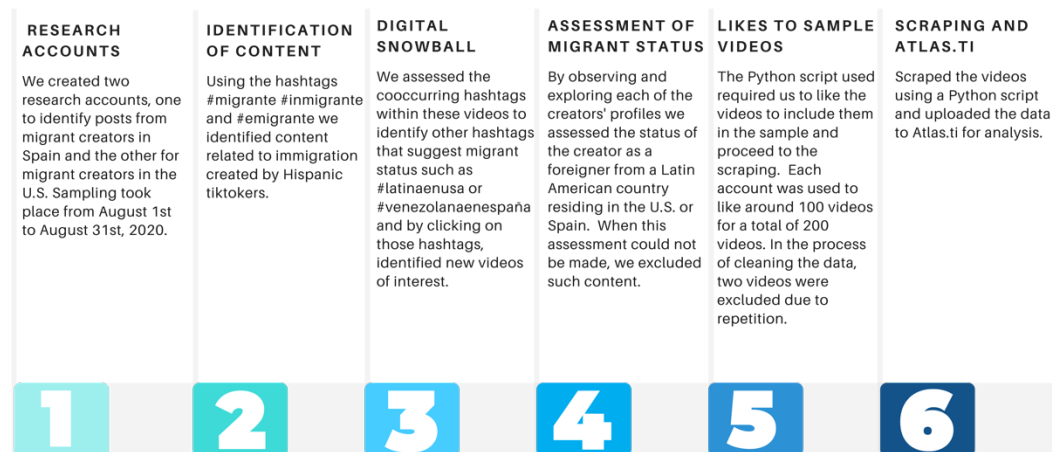
RESEARCH ACCOUNTS	IDENTIFICATION OF CONTENT	DIGITAL SNOWBALL	ASSESSMENT OF MIGRANT STATUS	LIKES TO SAMPLE VIDEOS	SCRAPING AND ATLAS.TI
We created two research accounts, one to identify posts from migrant creators in Spain and the other for migrant creators in the U.S. Sampling took place from August 1st to August 31st, 2020.	Using the hashtags #migrante #inmigrante and #emigrante we identified content related to immigration created by Hispanic tiktokers.	We assessed the cooccurring hashtags within these videos to identify other hashtags that suggest migrant status such as #latinaenusa or #venezolanaenespaña and by clicking on those hashtags, identified new videos of interest.	By observing and exploring each of the creators' profiles we assessed the status of the creator as a foreigner from a Latin American country residing in the U.S. or Spain. When this assessment could not be made, we excluded such content.	The Python script used required us to like the videos to include them in the sample and proceed to the scraping. Each account was used to like around 100 videos for a total of 200 videos. In the process of cleaning the data, two videos were excluded due to repetition.	Scraped the videos using a Python script and uploaded the data to Atlas.ti for analysis.
1	2	3	4	5	6

Figure 1. Sampling process.

It is worth noting that the use of hashtags for sampling enables the identification of content related to a topic of interest but also constitutes a limitation because it excludes content created by people who may not be familiar with hashtagging conventions and those who do not use them. In this sense, the sample was purposive (Palys, 2008) to include only content created by individuals who explicitly self-identified as foreigners residing in the United States and Spain (Figure 1).

We used Python TikTok API Wrapper (Avilash, n.d.), an unofficial Python library that allows scraping of necessary metadata from liked TikTok videos, such as hashtags, descriptions, number of likes and shares, embedded audio, and so forth. The data collection process was automated by a Python script written by one of the researchers. The script performed a two-step procedure: (1) requesting from the TikTok Server the information regarding videos liked by the researcher's public profile, (2) saving metadata of liked videos in a csv file.

In our analysis, we assess how the creative and self-representative practices of migrants on TikTok are constructed as aspirational content, which includes evaluating the creators' attempts to fit their narratives, culture, and identity to dominant storylines and formats (Appadurai, 2019). It also involves content that establishes a benchmark of achievement toward the desired life, as described by Witteborn (2019). Moreover, we ascertain whether the migrants' performative expressions of the self constitute bottom-up governance proposals, involving content that provides guidance for the migrant community to exercise their citizenship and navigate services, policies, and rights that concern them. These guiding concepts constitute the basis for our conceptualization of *platformed belongings.*

The analysis was conducted on Atlas.ti (V.8.4.5) using a hybrid codebook involving theoretically and inductively derived codes, explained in Figure 2.
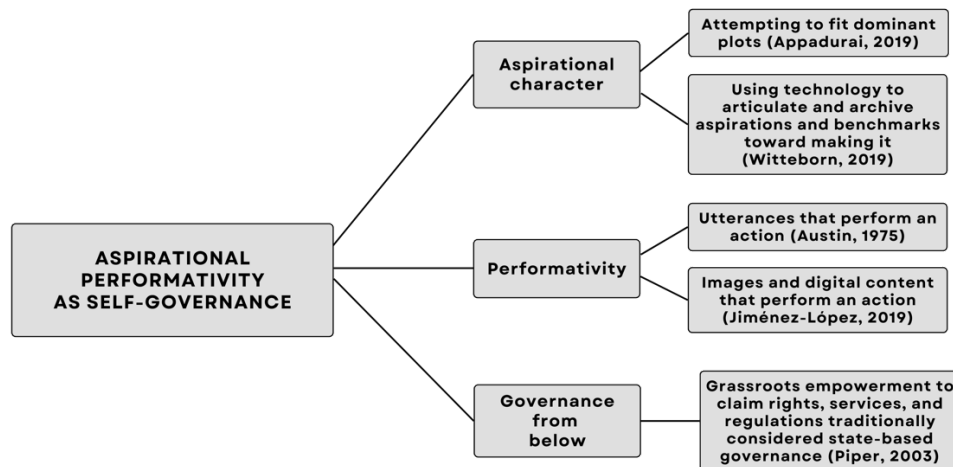
Figure 2. Theoretical basis for analysis.

The main code groups are included in Table 1; they are classified by the location of the content (bio, caption, in-video) with types of content as subcodes (text, emoji, hashtag). Two types of content have their own code groups because of their importance within the sample (audio, visual). Moreover, one code group labels the use of specific TikTok affordances of interest (TKTK), such as the use of embedded text, green screen, duet, response to a comment, and other effects. In iterative rounds of coding, these codes were also grouped within theoretical frameworks and subthemes. These groupings are not exclusive, as they refer to practices that happen simultaneously within the same content, but they attempt to provide different perspectives to understand the practices and themes present in the sample analyzed.

Moreover, through iterative rounds of coding, themes describing the relationship between creative practices and our theoretical framework were derived, as well as their relationship with our proposed conceptualization of *platformed belongings.*

Table 1. Code Groups Derived for the Present Study.

Code Group	Definition
BIO	Includes content within the creators' bio, communicative elements, topics and their functions (text, emoji), as well as branding elements (beliefs/phrases, interests/hobbies, call to action, content description, email, name, followers' goals, other social media).
CAPTION	Describes the content of the caption in each video; it includes the communicative elements, functions, and topics used (text, emoji, hashtag).
VISUAL	Includes the visual aspect of the video and a label to describe what can be seen in the shot (e.g., visual work, visual journey, visual transport, dance, monologue, one-person dialogue roleplay). The content embedded within the video including emoji is also coded within this code group. The communicative functions and topics of interest described were also coded.
TKTK	Includes the affordances and content configurations that are enabled by the platform itself (e.g., embedded text, duo, response to comment, green screen, other effects).
AUDIO	This code group includes types of audios (oral, music), whether the audio was original or existing (original, nonoriginal), and practices such as lip-synching. Music genres are also coded (see Figure 8).
PLOT	This code group aims to describe narrative plots within the videos; it labels the main themes and topics advanced by each video (e.g., migration as a common experience, counter mainstream narratives, comparison, discrimination, difficulty, nostalgia)

Limitations are related to the method selected, for example, the hashtag-based sample, which excludes various types of creators, and the intrinsic limitations of content analysis related to the types of inquiry this analysis enables. In the next section, we will describe the results within each of the theoretical frameworks proposed to guide this study.

Results

The Aspirational and Memetic Nature of TikTok

Within aspirational content, migrant creators' collective negotiation of symbolic bordering practices (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019) is deployed through narrative strategies that establish similarities between migrants. Storylines within the *migration as a common experience* theme reflect the aspiration of affinity with people going through a similar journey, which may include difficulties, nostalgia, discrimination, and identities, among others. This is done by using memetic configurations enabled by TikTok's affordances (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that illustrate the unique character of this *platformed belonging* practice. Within collective experiences, the financial and work-related motivations to emigrate to the United States and Spain are central in these plots. In this sense, their level of integration in the labor market of their receiving country presents a series of challenges (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019). This section discusses such aspirations and narratives.

Migrants' collective difficulties to fulfill their aspirations are expressed in different ways. A noteworthy format that promotes different digital belongings is TikTok's *duet*. In this case, *tiktokers* use an existing video as the basis for their own, and both appear side-by-side, enabling narrative imitation, which refers to content that reflects on a similar experience (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Figure 3 illustrates an example of a *duet* video featuring a female migrant (right) describing her difficulties using embedded text:

> I came to Spain after obtaining my journalism degree. I dreamt of having my own radio station ... I have worked as a cleaner and caretaker for seniors. One day, while cleaning bathrooms ... I asked a woman to be careful because the floor was wet. She spat on my face and said "fucking immigrants ... an ignorant Indian with no education cannot order me around." I cried a lot, but the next day I woke up and kept going.[2]

Figure 3. Rendering of duet configuration. Created and translated by the authors based on videos analyzed.

Moreover, the second creator (left) also uses embedded text to respond to each of the statements by the original creator:

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[2] Because of the ethical challenges that arise from exploring user's social media data without consent (boyd & Crawford, 2012) and to protect creators and their identity, we created illustrations that reflect the original videos and opted not to cite and link the TikTok videos. Also, all the quotes and text within the videos have been translated from Spanish, providing an additional layer of anonymity.

I understand you and I support you, I am a doctor and when I came to Spain I could not find a job because I was a student, even with my degree legalized... I worked handing out flyers and waiting tables... I was constantly humiliated at these jobs... You are not alone.

The video features a popular audio meme with lyrics[3] about the difficulties of life's journeys (vallenato pop[4]), lip-synched by the original creator (right). This specific track has been used in 55.7K videos within the platform and has become popular among migrant creators. The use of popular audio tracks has been identified as a strategy to enhance the visibility of creators' content (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). This exemplifies a *platformed belonging* practice that strengthens the *common experience* narrative among migrant creators through its implementation within the *duet* format. It also reflects a form of *digital togetherness* (Marino, 2015) enabled by the commonalities between the two and the seemingly safe space created, albeit lacking intimacy.

This public display of shared vulnerability emphasizes the collective challenges migrants face in Spain to achieve their professional aspirations. In terms of the labor market, it supports findings that suggest Latin American migrants are overqualified for their jobs (Fernández & Ortega, 2008) as well as the fact that female migrants are overwhelmingly constrained to caretaking and cleaning (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019). This example highlights the existence of occupational bordering (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019) by illustrating the limitations in the jobs migrants can do, regardless of their education level. Figure 4 reflects the jobs of migrant creators in each country.
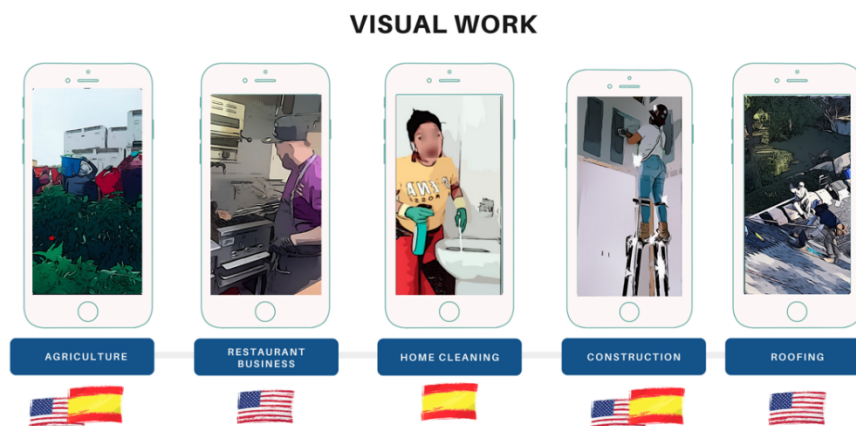
VISUAL WORK

Figure 4. Renderings of visual portrayals of work. Created and translated by the authors based on videos analyzed.

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[3] We have linked the audio tracks for each of the examples included in the study; many of these tracks are in Spanish but it was important to include migrant creators' voices within the study and to convey the importance of the multimodal analysis carried out.

[4] https://www.dropbox.com/s/xr226xaet7v84iu/1.VALLENATO.mp3?dl=0

Although immigration discourse in Spain is often linked to employment (Fernández-Suárez, 2017), and the United States defines the ability to self-advance and transcend one's provenance as desirable within the myth of the American Dream (Kimmage, 2011), Latin American migrants seem to be occupationally pigeonholed in both countries, supporting Yemane and Fernández-Reino (2019).

Aspirational Performativity in Migratory Journeys of … Success?

Aspirational plots also underscore migratory journey narratives. In the case of the U.S. sample, there is a narrative focus on the shared *difficulties* of the journey through the desert and crossing the border wall. This includes the border-crossing journey, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), detention, and death. The extreme experience of crossing the border by foot is central in this plot, and in some cases, the deaths and abuse suffered are narrated as part of sad corrido songs. In the U.S. sample, Mexican corrido lyrics such as "He said get ready for tomorrow we will cross the border if luck does not fail us"[5] and "I crossed in my first attempt ... my dream was not that far"[6] position the journey as part of an aspirational storyline toward migratory goals beyond the wall (Labayen & Gutierrez, 2021).

In the case of Spain, Latin American migration involves airports and passports, reflected through photo montages and nostalgia toward what is left behind. The difficulty is conveyed by the longing for the native country rather than physical danger or inhuman conditions in the journey (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Renderings of journey-related storylines in the United States and Spain respectively. Created and translated by the authors based on videos analyzed.

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[5] https://www.dropbox.com/s/9un07q49ankeuof/2.%20CORRIDOPREP.PACRUZAR.m4a?dl=0

[6] https://www.dropbox.com/s/utk69rcfjkt6kqa/3.CORRIDO_CRUZAR2.m4a?dl=0

Journey-centered narratives enable a *then vs. now* comparison to highlight a nuanced definition of success by emphasizing previous *difficulties* to current *achievement*. Success here is characterized by the opportunity to work, and it allows the migrant to highlight the achievements of the journey while self-representing certain emotions, such as gratefulness. These *desirable* values are illustrated through *platformed belonging* creative practices within self-portrayals such as that of the *grateful migrant*. This self-representation appears in the use of hashtags and bio descriptions across the sample, as well as entire videos devoted to gratefulness toward the receiving nation. Figure 6 illustrates such content in each country. Both stories share belonging aspirations toward their receiving society, by fulfilling national value acquisition requirements to belong within civic integration models (Larin, 2020), reflecting the familiarity of migrant creators with values that are required to belong (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen, 2019).

Figure 6. Renderings of grateful migrant storyline in Spain and good migrant self-portrayal in the United States. Created and translated by the authors based on videos analyzed.

In this case, both creators take advantage of a comparison between their aspirations and their achievements. On the left, the embedded text reads "I arrived to Spain eight years ago today" with a performative display of Spanishness, combining platform affordances such as the Spanish flag emoji and the hashtag #vivaespaña with a patriotic storyline, reflecting her appreciation of national symbols and color palettes. On the right, the creator presents a performative self-representation of the *good migrant* ideal (Kibria, O'Leary, & Bowman, 2018). The embedded text states, "Essential workers" and "under the rain" depicting solid work ethics under subpar working conditions, positioning herself as an essential worker during the pandemic, regardless of the weather. The aspirational caption reads "How many search for the American Dream [Flag emoji Mexico and US]?," suggesting that she is still on a journey toward her achievements (Witteborn, 2019). She also uses the flag emoji to represent her nationality or place of residence and #campesina hashtags that connect her content with that of other farmers, establishing occupational belonging with other creators through these connective elements.

Both videos use embedded text to narrate the story and incorporate existing audio memes to accompany these storylines (Abidin, 2021). In the Spanish case, a flamenco pop song,[7] "I wouldn't change you for anything ... I would die of love for you." In the U.S. case a Mexican corrido song,[8] "We are here for the American dream; we all agree that it is not easy here." This form of *platformed belonging* combines aspirations to become *part of* the dominant culture or society through patriotic values and work ethics, by deploying affordances of interest. In both cases, the story is constructed through a combination of suggestive visual appeals, mimetic elements such as the reuse of existing audio, and unique storylines enabled by embedded text, emoji, and hashtags. Allegiance to the receiving country is present in both: in the Spanish case, visually and in lyrics, and in the U.S. case through lyrics and captions referring to the "American Dream."

Previous examples show that an important *platformed belonging* practice involves the use of embedded text in videos, as portrayed in Figure 7.
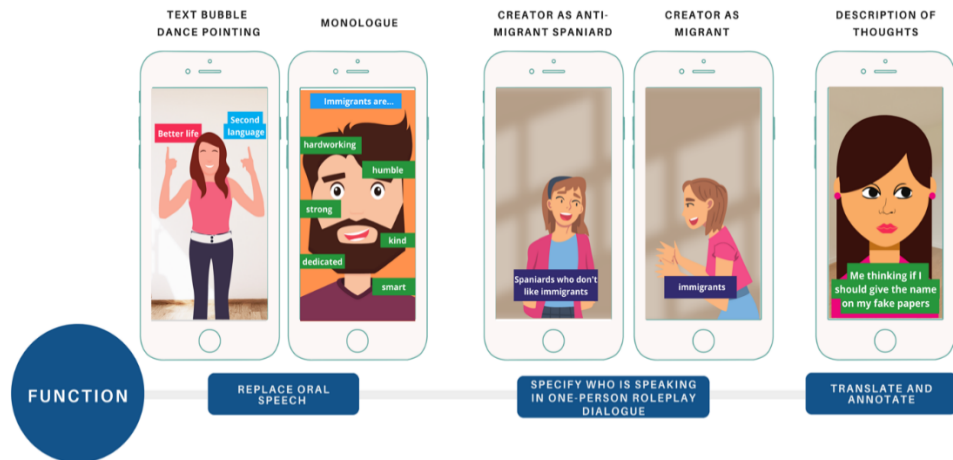

Figure 7. Renderings of the functions of embedded text. Created and translated by the authors based on videos analyzed.

Embedded text functions are interesting, especially considering the linguistic and narrative limitations of this short-video format. The use of text to replace oral speech and the use of viral audio memes is widespread on the platform, as explained in the previous sections. It enables creators to customize the storyline and adapt it to their own experience without compromising the visibility provided by using existing, highly viral audio tracks. The first function, which refers to *replacing oral speech*, enables the customization of personal migratory stories using different narrative formats of interest which include reasons to migrate, and advantages of the receiving country. This establishes various modes of belonging, from the dual nature of their national identity to the use of mimetic practices present throughout the platform, to tell a unique story. Thus, *platformed belongings* are established in relation to other migrants,

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[7] https://www.dropbox.com/s/ry8f3wzmxuzhqob/4.FLAMENCOFUSION.mp3?dl=0

[8] https://www.dropbox.com/s/r1ik1u0x2ywmceq/5.CORRIDO_SUE%C3%91O.mp3?dl=0

and also toward other *tiktokers*, through mimesis (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Another example involves embedded comments received from native citizens about each migrant creator, adapted to the country of nationality; this suggests an emphasis on existing stereotypes about Latin American migrants through playful, creative content. This establishes TikTok as a sort of *site of witness* (Rae et al., 2018), where creators themselves document their own experiences, providing a sense of credibility—because of the first-person account—of what life is like for migrants in the receiving society.

The one-person roleplay dialogue is also characteristic of the TikTok vernacular (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). As portrayed in Figure 7, it was used to depict exchanges between migrants and natives as a form of *performative agency* through stereotypical exchanges (Opfermann, 2020).

Performative Platformed Belongings

In this section, specific creative practices of interest will be described and analyzed to further understand how these creators resignify migration and debunk beliefs regarding migrants using TikTok's affordances and vernaculars.

The use of specific audio tracks is noteworthy as a *platformed belonging* practice, as diaspora, creativity, and visibility strategies converge with the functionalities of the platform. In this sense, music and utterances of cultural belonging emerge as definers of a *soundtrack* for specific migrant communities in both countries. The ways in which these audio files are used exemplify the aspirational character of this content, as they suggest an attempt to fit (Witteborn, 2019) with other *tiktokers* in the platform through characteristic vernacular practices and content-creation configurations. They do this while reflecting on their cultural identities through their choice of music genre. These creative strategies include lip-synching oral (spoken) and melodic (sung) audios. The use of audios that are viral among generalist *tiktokers* is also noteworthy as a practice aimed at visibility (Abidin, 2021; Zulli & Zulli, 2020). This is illustrated by a video where the very popular song "Ride It"[9] (2.8M videos) is used with embedded text bubbles describing the stereotypes that exist in Spain about Argentinians. Moreover, another practice of interest involves a music track called "Laxed-Siren Beat"[10] (51.3M videos) that has become a staple of the TikTok community and a remix version adapting it into a new audio track to be used by Salvadorean creators. These practices reflect Zulli and Zulli's (2020) argument that the remix of existing components seems to be more effective in making the content visible on this platform. Moreover, it aids in musicalizing a specific storyline (Abidin, 2021) that includes a solid cultural component that reflects an identity marked by nationality, creative practices, and an insider knowledge of trends and affordances on TikTok. In their use of music, creators engage in forms of "(in)visible relationalities" of belonging, similar to those described by De Martini Ugolotti (2022), but adapted to the digital space (p. 3). Stemming from his argument, TikTok functions as an informal space of cocreation where the choice and modification of existing audio tracks and their integration into video narratives constitute mimetic statements to collectively reflect on experiences of difficulty, success, and uncertainty that characterize migratory experiences. *Platformed belongings* emerge toward fellow Latinx

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[9] https://www.dropbox.com/s/81ns2g9k71aureb/6.RIDEIT.mp3?dl=0

[10] https://www.dropbox.com/s/ietuldb3woeb8gh/7.LAXEDSIRENBEAT.mp3?dl=0

tiktokers through a combination of narrative plots in lyrics, embedded text, and culturally relevant musical choices as reflected in Figure 8.
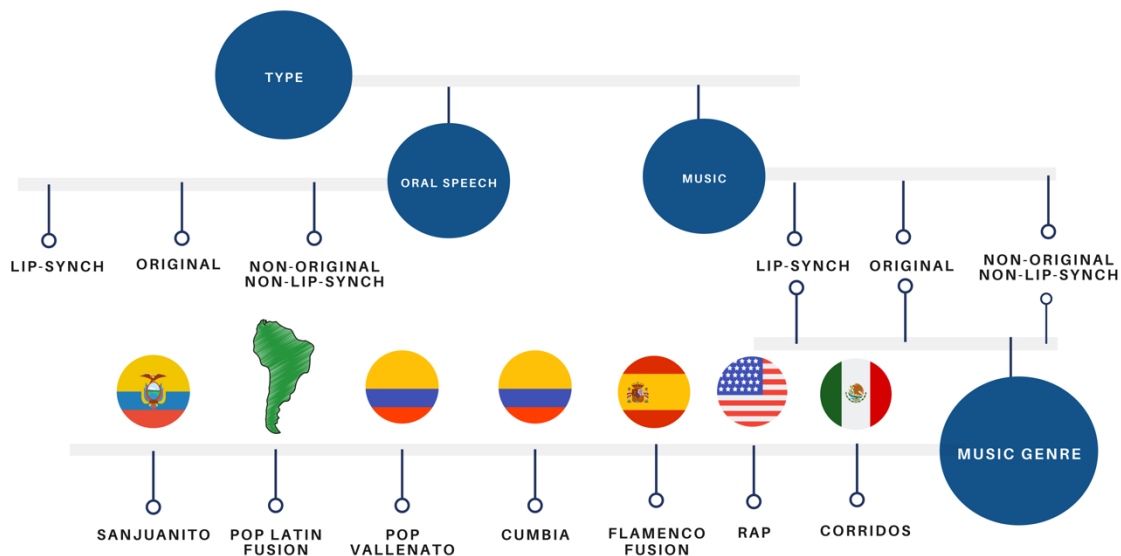

Figure 8. Audio categories used by Latin American migrant creators.

In this case, the use of lyrics and specific music genres is inextricably linked to performative and empowering practices within self-governance, which will be described in the next sections.

Within our sample, *platformed belongings* occur in relation to multiple identities and aspirations to fit in and also within specific audience niches. There are widespread practices, such as the use of *visibility hashtags* including #foryou, #fyp, and their Spanish version #parati; there are also self-explanatory examples such as #viral and #trend, which are also present in Spanish. However, there are more refined *visibility hashtags* such as #xyzbca and its variations, which respond to a belief of unknown origin among *tiktokers* that its use can trick the algorithm into promoting said content in a practice coined as *algorithmic gossip* (Bishop, 2019). Conversations about the use of such hashtags and the results of these uses are often shared in forums (MpSocial, 2019) where creators exchange experiences in the use of certain hashtags and their combinations to "test" the algorithm. In this context, we argue that these visibility strategies illustrate the migrants' agency to amplify their own voice and make it heard. They emerge as unafraid agents who enter a conversation about themselves, an important process where Couldry's (2010) embodied, self-representative, and active nature of *voice* is deployed. In this case, *voice* is neither given nor enabled but it is taken, seized and reclaimed as inherently human and undeniable, by a community that has been excluded from their own stories, which have been told and retold by others (e.g., Georgiou, 2018; Jaramillo-Dent & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2021). Moreover, these practices constitute a mediated defiance of established beliefs that limit migrants' agency in deciding where to live (Labayen & Gutierrez, 2021). These strategies

reflect a negotiation with social media logics and structures through the use of vernacular affordances (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). In this case, migrant creators attempt to go beyond perceptibility to become salient and even viral among some circles, taking advantage of existing "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017) that enable a mode of *platformed belonging* through inclusion in the *for you* page.

This is even more evident in posts that include hashtags that reveal the intended recipient of the content, which may include country of origin (COO) and receiving country (RC) or a succession of Latin American countries, with hashtags such as #MAGA in the United States (referring to Trump's slogan Make America Great Again) and #Vox in Spain (referring to the far-right party with legislative representation), usually paired with content responding to, debunking or challenging statements by these political movements. It is important to note that, as Georgiou (2018) reminds us, the presence of migrant voices does not involve their definite recognition, because of existing structural limitations and symbolic bordering practices that exist in the digital realm. Thus, the different levels of *platformed belonging*, from *memetic content* to the competent use of *enhanced visibility* strategies is in constant contestation with oppressive configurations, narratives and limitations, that in many ways constitutes bordering strategies (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Georgiou, 2018). Thus, these narratives become visible through their inclusion in certain videos and in the adaptation of personal experiences to well-established TikTok configurations, as exemplified in the next section.

Performative Creative Practices to Resignify Migrant Identities and Narratives

Content considered *performative* involves storylines that counter mainstream narratives*,* where attempts are made to respond and, in some cases, debunk existing beliefs about migrants. This is done through the inclusion of creative and narrative elements that establish the multiple identities of the creator, in line with previous research on digital migrant identities and belonging (Heyd, 2016; Marlowe et al., 2017). Thus, the migrant *tiktoker's* relational resilience is displayed in the use of vernaculars and affordances, enabling a complex aggregation of digital identities (Udwan et al., 2020). This is reflected by the twofold goal within this type of content: clarifying the reality of life for prospective migrants and debunking and challenging widespread misinformation about migrants for audiences within the RC.

In this sense, the redefinition of the migrant goes beyond positioning this segment of the population as the "good migrant," namely a *deserving, law-abiding, hardworking* person who is a *family member* (Kibria et al., 2018) to establish them as necessary within the receiving society and especially important in the face of the health crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The "migrant as …" themes fall within this type of counternarrative and go from an argument for equality and humanity to establishing migrants as students, professionals, entrepreneurs, and essential workers, among others. Performative utterances and actions emphasize migrant identities that counter mainstream ideas and widespread beliefs in both countries but often fall within arguments for worthiness (Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen, 2019). The most common subcategory within this topic is the *migrant as a worker*, and the migratory experience as an aspirational quest for an improved life. An example of this includes the questioning of widespread beliefs of migrants and their actions as *felonies* and contrasting work and crime as opposites "Similar to others we work to make sure that we have everything we need. I don't understand what the crime is of working hard to earn a few pesitos" (rap,

U.S.[11]). These lyrics also clarify some of the motivations and actions that compel people to migrate, while establishing the work as "hard" and the pay as scarce. This example positions the migrant as unthreatening (Benson, 2013) but within the boundaries of victimhood and marginalization expected (Georgiou, 2018) while proving civic integration by being law-abiding and hardworking (Larin, 2020).

Some creators portray themselves and migrants in general as *brave* and *strong* in some cases going further to say that migration makes people better at certain desirable occupations such as entrepreneurship because of the resilience developed through the migration experience such as this original oral audio in Spain, "three things from my migrant experience that made me a better entrepreneur."[12] These narratives make a strong equality argument by positioning the migrant in the same realm as nonmigrants and the migratory experience as an enriching attribute, rather than a disadvantage. These practices reflect resistance in the face of dominant narratives (Georgiou, 2018). However, they could also be seen as attempts to establish worthiness by aligning with neoliberal values of productivity (Georgiou, 2019). In the United States, entrepreneurial messages align with the American Dream narrative—"I came 12 years ago from El Salvador. I used to be homeless (...) and now I own a restaurant"[13]—as a benchmark for economic success and possibility regardless of the starting point (Kimmage, 2011).

Another example, which is only present among creators in Spain, represents a powerful counternarrative that could be defined as a more aggressive, empowered protest. This rap audio meme[14] has been used 1,080 times. First, it clarifies a widespread belief that migrants take Spaniards' jobs (McMahon, 2018). "Immigrants don't come to take your job away; they are doing those jobs that you don't want." This part of the song also positions migrants as subalterns who deserve to be in the country because they take jobs nobody wants (Georgiou, 2018) engaging in support for migrants through occupational symbolic bordering and worthiness to belong (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Nikunen, 2019). The tone changes in the second part, where the song constructs a narrative that faces migrants and native citizens as opposites and positions the migrant as hardworking and the Spaniard as reliant on public aid: "This myth must be nipped in the bud, while you are at home, they are lifting the country. You are sleeping, happy, receiving public aid, while they are contributing to get you paid."

Self-Governance

In our sample, these videos may involve practical information about getting an apartment, visa documents (Figure 9), as well as discussions about rights. Thus, self-governance videos mostly fall into the monologue category and use original audio, as they reflect a person speaking directly to users and interested viewers.

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[11] https://www.dropbox.com/s/0msj7vnum60b0z6/8.RAPUS.mp3?dl=0

[12] https://www.dropbox.com/s/y7wm0uau3c24dhc/9.INMEMPRENDEDOR.m4a?dl=0

[13] https://www.dropbox.com/s/jn49he4m4115k5f/10.IMMRESTAURANTEUR.m4a?dl=0

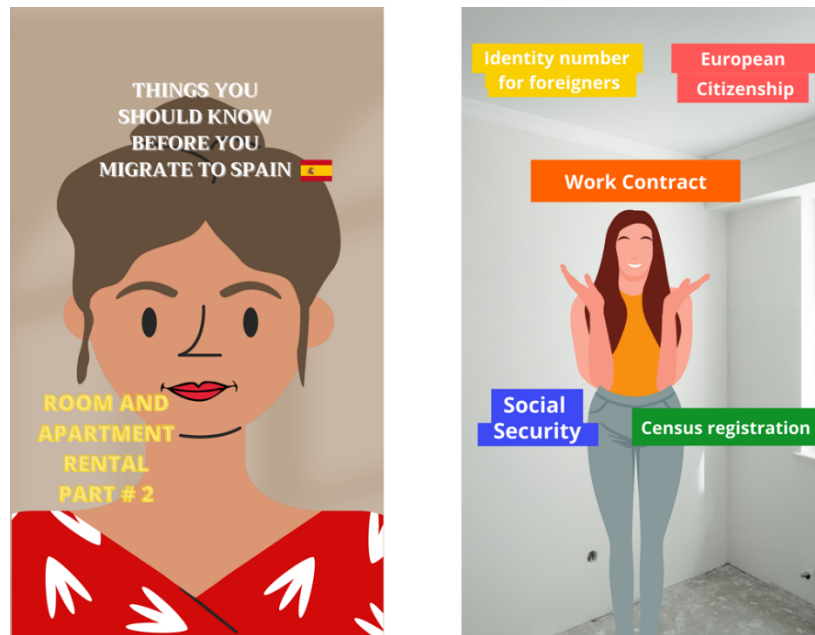[14] https://www.dropbox.com/s/9v50zugg28iii1p/11.RAPMIGESP.mp3?dl=0

***Figure 9. Renderings of videos about practical aspects of migration in Spain. Created and
translated by the authors based on videos analyzed.***

A noteworthy storyline that is present in the Spanish sample involves the legitimization of migration
and a call to gain representation in leadership roles and become part of all levels of society, not only those
where migrant people are allowed, needed, or helpful "we have entered the commercial realm and have
businesses (…) but we need to enter the government institutions (…) we are a group that contribute to
society and should not be sub-represented as we are."[15] It goes beyond the idea of *the good migrant worker*
(Kibria et al., 2018) to establish the need for legislative and electoral representation to match the migrant
population in the country in an empowering use of migrant *voice* (Couldry, 2010; Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen,
2019). This content also uses hashtags related to the intended audience, and directs content to Vox, the
far-right party, suggesting an attempt to challenge and argue with opposers. This is an interesting take on
the rights of migrants in their RC because once again, we see a solid equality argument that establishes the
migrant as deserving of representation in government.

Moreover, in some cases, self-governance appears in the form of stern and fearless challenges to
oppression, establishing the right to migrate through comedic content about deported migrants returning,
videos that show how to deactivate a GPS ankle bracelet, and digital strategies to avoid border patrol
checkpoints when crossing the U.S.-Mexico border (Figure 10). This form of content establishes any means
used to migrate as adequate, providing resources to enable border crossing and challenging material means
of border enforcement, recognizing these actions as acts of survival (Labayen & Gutiérrez, 2021).

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[15] https://www.dropbox.com/s/irbprv9hptqjlhg/12.WEENTEREDCOMMERCIAL.m4a?dl=0
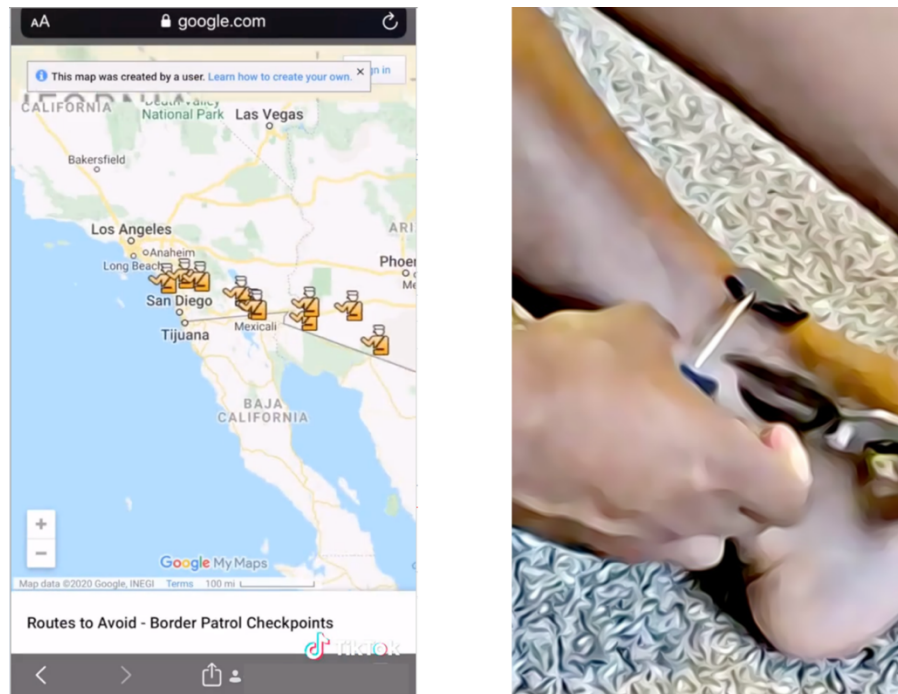
Figure 10. Videos that challenge border-crossing limitations in the United States.

Within the governance theme, some of these creators have achieved the level of minority celebrity, a concept that refers to social media influencers whose "fame and recognition is founded on commodifying and representing a marginalized (…) demographic of society" (Abidin, 2019, p. 1). In our sample, there are 41 profiles with more than 10K followers and 11 with more than 100K, evidencing the reach and influence some of these *tiktokers* have achieved. In all the cases presented here, the creators or influencers self-identify as foreigners living in Spain and the United States and some monetize their status as migrants to gain followers from this community through calls, for follows and shares.

Thus, our analysis suggests that grassroots attempts at self-governance as described by Piper (2003) are present in the sample. These reflect *platformed belonging* practices aimed at reaching intended audiences and adapting the information offered to the current needs of the diverse migrant community. They use *enhanced visibility* strategies to reach and enter a conversation with their audience and seem to effectively bridge the gap left by the public and other organizations to cater to the needs of migrants.

Conclusions

The present study aims to understand the content-creation strategies of Latin American migrants living in Spain and the United States. The use of *platformed belonging* practices emerges as especially significant because, if successful, these contents may enter into dialogue with other migratory narratives with opportunities of interest. Thus, the use of these elements and creative practices represents an attempt at going beyond *aspirations* to fit (Appadurai, 2019) toward *perceptibility* (Witteborn, 2015) to reach

visibility (Georgiou, 2018) and finally use their own *voice* (Couldry, 2010). The seemingly strategic use of certain affordances and vernaculars that characterize and differentiate TikTok from other platforms, namely its memetic nature (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) and visibility possibilities (Abidin, 2021), make it the perfect context to test and experiment with the reach and opportunities of underrepresented segments of the population to embody different belongings (Marlowe et al., 2017).

In this sense, *platformed belonging* practices combine migrant *tiktokers'* familiarity with algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) with their endeavors to belong through (self) representations that go from marginalized to aspirational and empowered. The possibilities to negotiate migrant belongings through the use of platform vernaculars (Gibbs et al., 2015) and vernacular affordances (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) are harnessed through migrant communities' appropriation of the structural mimesis (Zulli & Zulli, 2020) that characterizes TikTok. The coexistence of audio and visual memes that are unique to migrant *tiktokers* and those that are generalized in the platform suggest the construction of multipronged identities and belongings of resilience (Udwan et al., 2020), both in terms of their cultural or national selves as well as their digital persona. These practices reflect the aspirational character of migrant storylines, which need to fit (Appadurai, 2019) but also show the creation of unique diasporic spaces where the multiple creative practices and experiences of migrant *tiktokers* can fit and connect, in this case, within the platformed context, while reaching various digital audiences. However, some of these narratives seem to constitute attempts to justify migrants' worthiness and deservingness in each of these countries (Georgiou, 2018, 2019; Nikunen, 2019) suggesting their awareness of symbolic borders and conditional belongings (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019; Georgiou, 2018) that define their role in their receiving society.

The themes of these narratives become relevant as part of a collective story from the migrants themselves and one that speaks of nostalgia, hard work, discrimination, and difficulties but also of empowerment and success, of gratefulness and belonging. They go from narratives that fit expected molds to those that break with expectations and forcefully challenge them, through content that is honest, in some cases raw, and undeniable. Future work could focus on the privacy and safety implications of this type of creative and visibility practices for vulnerable populations, such as migrants.

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