10. Migrant Agency and Platformed Belongings: The Case of TikTok

Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Amanda Alencar and Yan Asadchy

Abstract

This chapter derives from a project exploring TikTok content by 53 Latin American migrant creators residing in the US and Spain. The goal was to identify their creative practices and affordance uses through a series of multimodal content analyses. Based on our analytical approach we propose four distinct forms of narrative agency and belonging experienced by these creators: 1) (self)representative, 2) utilitarian, 3) prescriptive and 4) activist agentic styles. The proposed typology expands the notion of *platformed belongings* understood as creative, narrative and agentic practices deployed by migrants—and other marginalized groups—that instrumentalize platform vernaculars and affordances to construct their identity by connecting, countering or establishing a dialogue with existing narratives.

Keywords: social media; narrative agency; belonging; ethnography; multimodal content analysis.

10.1 Introduction

This chapter is part of a larger doctoral research project entitled *Platformed Migrant Narratives: Mediated (Self)Representations of Migration on Social Media*, a project that delves into the platformed, (self)representative and activist narratives by 53 Latin American migrant TikTokers living in the US and Spain. Even though the multimodal elements analysed in this chapter refer to a specific profile of migrant in terms of origin and place of residence, it is not possible to determine if the content refers to a specific type of migrant. Due to this limitation, we opted for the blanket terms "migrant"

and "immigrant," which are used interchangeably in the chapter to refer to the vast diversity among people who migrate, including undocumented and forced migrants.

The decision to explore immigrant creators in the United States and Spain is motivated by their status as the two top destinations for the Latin American migrant community outside Latin America (Lorenzi & Batalova, 2022). However, research suggests that there are significant challenges for Latinx—a non-gendered term that comprises various ethnicities and cultures across national origins (Bodinger-deUriarte & Valgeirsson, 2019)—in both countries related to the difficulties to access the qualified job market (Yemane & Fernández-Reino, 2019). Both countries have seen a rise in far-right ideologies and related discrimination. In the case of the US these have resulted in instances of rejection of Spanish speakers (Martinez et al., 2019) while in Spain there has been a general hardening of opinions about immigration in the past few years (González-Enríquez & Rinken, 2021). The current political and economic situation results in significant precarity due to the scarce cultural, social and/or economic capital Latin American immigrants can access as well as an irregular migration status, which makes them increasingly vulnerable (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2020, p. 2). The unique situations faced by immigrants in both countries may affect their identity construction processes. For example, they call for increased adaptations to their surrounding context, due to political environments that have become more polarized with the emergence of the far-right, in the case of Spain with Vox and in the US with MAGA. The case of immigrant TikTokers provides unique and multidimensional insights into identity construction and belongings that are reflected by their agency in creating content. Such content points to online and offline personas that reflect the creators' individual and collective selves as they navigate unfamiliar spaces and societies. Moreover, the visual and multimodal nature of these narratives illuminates the ways in which new interactive and digital sociality is shaped. The platformed aspects of migrant narratives and related identities on TikTok are shaped by the connective, imitational and interactive possibilities of the social media platform's memetic structure and affordances (Zulli & Zulli, 2020). Throughout this chapter we use the term *platformed* to refer to the ways in which digital spaces—structurally and through their policies/politics—enable, promote and constraint certain types of content and interactions.

Methodologically, we use a digital ethnography approach to identify immigrant creators and assess their content to select only those who (self) identify as immigrants living in the US or Spain. Qualitative, inductive

and multimodal content analyses enable us to empirically explore the agentic character of these narratives, considering the sociotechnical nature of *platformed belongings* as conceptualized by Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022).

Below, we first define the key concepts that serve as the basis of our conceptualization including agency, belonging and identity. We then present the relationships between these and social media affordances, which enable the deployment of new digital and platformed forms of belonging, with TikTok as an example. The methodological considerations are then outlined, followed by an explanation and exemplification of four modes of agency identified in content by immigrant TikTokers and their implications for *platformed belongings*.

10.2   Agency, Belonging and Identity

Migrants have often been considered as passive, vulnerable victims. Their agency has largely been excluded from theoretical and analytical approaches in migration research (de Haas, 2021). It is urgently needed in digital migration studies to explore the extent to which migrants can counter governmental, legal, social and cultural limitations they face through their own forms of agency. Migratory agency is defined by de Haas as:

> the limited—but real—ability of human beings (or social groups) to make independent choices and to impose these on the world and, hence, to alter the structures that shape and constrain people's opportunities or freedoms (2021, p.14).

We will focus on various forms of narrative agency, which in the context of social media and hashtagged content has been defined as "the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognized by the public" (Yang, 2016, p. 14). In our case we consider the ability of such content to counter existing beliefs and stereotypes about who migrants are, through the lens of their own life experience and expertise gained through their own migration. We go beyond hashtags to consider other connective possibilities afforded by TikTok such as audio tracks, effects and memetic affordances such as the *duet*. Moreover, although we consider actual public recognition as relevant in the study of platformed migratory stories, we consider that the mere willingness of migrants to create content and deploy visibility strategies on a platform such as TikTok—which in many

cases can put them at risk for harassment and discrimination—constitutes a form of narrative agency worth exploring due to the possibilities it entails.

Thus, we explore the relationship between these forms of agency in the formation of migrant identities and belongings through content creation, with TikTok as a case study. For this purpose, we consider identity as socially constructed and shaped by the contexts occupied and negotiated by the individual (Hall, 2019). In online spaces, identity is defined and built through users' actions and behaviours (Senft, 2013). It is then through identity construction that "individuals come to situate themselves, for instance, as belonging to a distinct 'race', place, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or culture" (Nsamenang, 2008, p. 6).

Belonging has been described by feminist sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (2011, p. 10) as the "emotional (or even ontological) attachment … [that] becomes articulated, formally structured and politicized only when it is threatened in some way." Yuval-Davis goes on to describe the dynamic nature of belonging processes, that are construed as "fixed" or scripted to the benefit of certain hierarchical power structures, as well as multi-layered including various forms such as practical, emotional and ideological belongings.

In migration studies, Jay Marlowe (2019) argues that social media provide unique opportunities for refugees to enact and expand their political capital and belonging to local and distant communities while negotiating different forms of identity expression. Thus, the narrative enactment of belonging can be understood as a form of articulation that has been denied to (im)migrants through various symbolic and material bordering strategies (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). In this sense, sociolinguist Theresa Heyd's (2016) *narratives of belonging* are instrumental, as they describe the shifting nature of digital diasporic stories that provide insights about emerging linguistic practices of identity and affiliation. Moreover, Marlowe et al.'s (2017, p. 17) notion of *digital belongings* describes the digitally enabled forms of social participation and cohesion among friends or family members. These authors incorporate various perspectives on identity, and belonging, analysed through the narrative functions of digital media to understand the identity-building practices of migrants.

For example, at the intersection of agency, identity and belonging, researchers that have explored migrant integration in Ecuador suggest that Colombian immigrants engage in an agentic *invisibility bargain* to negotiate the aspects of their identity they choose to present and make visible depending on how acceptable they are in their receiving society (Pugh, 2018). Moreover, sociolinguist Dominika Baran (2018) suggests that refugees' personal stories on Facebook illustrate different levels of agency

in relation to their perceived ethnic and national belonging. These previous studies provide the grounds for our theorization of different levels of agency modelled by migratory platformed narrative forms on TikTok.

Thus, when belongings, identities and agentic styles are established in the digital realm, they expand beyond traditional—non-digital—understandings to incorporate digital modes shaped by the creators' personal creative styles and their allegiance to certain digital groupings and trends. In this sense, we argue that TikTokers enact their various belongings and related identities using platformed strategies that are shaped by their agentic style and their perception, appropriation and vernacular knowledge of the platform. In the next section we introduce the platformed dimensions of our framework.

10.3   A Framework for Platformed Belongings

Our proposed framework to study platformed belongings is informed by various concepts derived from Internet research. On the one hand, the concept of *vernacular affordances* (McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015) refers to the process by which users make sense and negotiate their digital behaviours with a platform's material structures, by navigating the actions that are enabled and constrained within. On the other hand, Gibbs et al.'s (2015) *platform vernaculars* describe the unique combination of styles, grammars and logics that constitute the popular genres generated within a particular social media platform and are shaped and developed by users' behaviours. These are key concepts to locate belonging strategies in the negotiation between migrant creators and the platform, through their use and appropriation of existing affordances and vernaculars.

This constant bargaining process between the content creator and the platform is delimited by its moderation policies and its politics (Gillespie, 2018), as well as the unique algorithmic *for you* page—in the case of Tik-Tok. Creators belonging to marginalized groups have been able to impact platform policies in the past, an example was the case of Black creator Ziggy Tyler, who created videos bringing attention to biased moderation practices by TikTok when using the word "Black" in any phrase and getting flagged as inappropriate and comparing it to the use of the word "white," TikTok responded claiming that it was a glitch in the algorithm that was immediately fixed (Murray, 2021).

The politics of belonging as described by Yuval-Davis (2011) are, in some ways, perpetuated within digital platforms, where power configurations

and their agents are actively enacting digital (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019), coded (Benjamin, 2019) and algorithmic (Noble, 2018) forms of bordering. Concurrently, we suggest that migrant content creators are actively responding to these exclusionary sociotechnical structures by harnessing their own lived experiences and their platformed know-how to legitimize their status and their rights through multimodal (self)representations.

In this chapter, we understand *platformed belongings* as creative, narrative, and agentic practices deployed by migrants—and other marginalized groups—that instrumentalize platform vernaculars and affordances to construct their identity by connecting, countering or establishing a dialogue with existing narratives in digital spaces that enable and constraint these contents.

10.4 Methodological Considerations

The first step was to identify content and profiles of interest through hashtag and keyword searches on the platform. We then assessed profiles to ascertain creators' self-identification as immigrants living in the US and Spain. Our non-participant ethnographic study included four separate actions: (1) periodic observation of migrant content creators' videos for one hour a day every weekday, (2) consumption of general content on the platform to assess the latest and most relevant trends two times a week and (3) monthly walkthroughs as consumers of content and as content creators to identify changes in the affordances and configurations of the platform. These observations were recorded using field notes and screenshots of phenomena of interest considering these three separate tasks. Task (4) involved the selection and scraping of specific datasets to further delve into phenomena of interest.

One of the main challenges of conducting research on social media is its ever-changing nature. In terms of the platform, this means guidelines and moderation policies that are constantly shifting or whose interpretation changes (Gillespie, 2018). To minimize these challenges, we employed different forms of the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to keep our analyses current and relevant in relation to the platform and design changes. We conducted walkthroughs with two main goals: to understand the user experience while navigating and consuming content on the "for you" page and as a content creator, attempting to create videos and assessing the changes in platform affordances and configurations as they would be experienced by creators.

As part of the project, different analyses of the sample were performed, including three separate qualitative, inductive, multimodal content and discourse analyses comprising a total of more than 600 TikTok videos analysed. Each of these analyses served to inform the next, as phenomena of interest were identified, and new video samples were analysed to delve into specific phenomena. This chapter derives from observations made in the process of gathering and analysing the data in these three different studies to refine the concept of *platformed belongings* in migration research.

The main reason for taking a non-participant approach was the difficulty to contact content creators due to structural limitations of the platform, which make it very hard to contact other users, similar to the issues faced by He et al. (2022) in their study of Douyin. For the purposes of our study, data were identified in a process of observation for an extended period as explained before. For two of the data analyses the videos were labelled before being scraped as examples of phenomena of interest and for the third, four profiles of immigrant creators were identified and a sample of each of their profiles was scraped. In this case, the digital ethnography fieldwork of these communities of creators informed the scraping process, through a series of iterative observations of the data and fieldnotes that detailed the phenomena of interest.

When researching migration in these digital spaces, there are added difficulties due to the controversial topics migrant creators discuss, and the harassment they often receive due to their migratory status. Researchers in the field of media and migration need to keep in mind that the content that is available online is a tiny sliver of the migratory experience and provides a limited glance into migrants' lives due to the risks many other prospective and former migrant content creators have undergone. It is worth noting that TikTok offers a relevant space for the analysis of migratory narratives, due to its status as the most-downloaded app in 2021 (Cyca, 2022) and one that has also become a recognized space for political expression and influence (Lorenz, 2022). The TikTok Cultures Research Network (https://tiktokcultures.com/), led by digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin, provides a space of collaboration among scholars interested on TikTok and its communities of creators.

In terms of data collection and analysis, data analysed in depth were scraped using the Python TikTok API Wrapper (Avilash, 2021). To locate the data to be scraped, we first carried out a search using hashtags and keywords of interest in Spanish and English (e.g., #migrante #inmigrante and their English counterparts). Once we located the contents connected by these hashtags, we located hashtags and text referring to the place of residence

of the creators such as #colombianaenusa or #venezolanosenespaña or combinations of hashtags and emoji that signalled Latin American migration to these two countries.

Since various ethical challenges arise from analysing social media data without consent (boyd & Crawford, 2012) information was anonymized to protect creators and their identities. A critical and reflexive process was followed to ensure that the perspectives and realities of migrant content creators were included, by understanding specific contexts, as well as considering ethical concerns over privacy and data ownership in digital research (Metcalf & Crawford, 2016).

Below we include content examples that illustrate each mode of migrant agency and their associated belonging enacted on the platform, including their multimodal aspects and the ways in which these creators harness TikTok's affordances and creative functionalities to convey different agentic styles for belonging and identity. It is important to note that quotes have been translated from Spanish.

10.5   Four Modes of Migrant Agency for Enacting Belonging

In this section we propose a typology of agentic styles that define the platformed belongings and identities deployed by migrant TikTokers. These agentic styles are all adapted to the platform through practices that position them in relation to others, through original creations, affinity or by countering existing content. We came up with this typology while analysing TikTok content created by migrant creators, as we observed that these contents reflected their agency through narrative genres that were unexpected and that in some cases promoted different forms of agency in the immigrant community.

In terms of platformed practices, belongings and their respective identities are established through an array of affordances and formats, such as the inclusion of niche hashtags that connect migrant creators with their perceived communities. These may refer to specific national (#mexican) or ethnic groupings (#Latinos) there are also words that are known by those familiar with the specific culture itself such as (#catrachos).[1] There are also platform-specific hashtags (#foryou or #parati) that connect content with specific communities of creators and reflect their vernacular knowledge of the platform. The use of affordances within the platform that enables

---

1   Catracho/a is a word that (self)identifies Honduran nationals.

SELF-REPRESENTATIVE AGENCY	UTILITARIAN AGENCY	PRESCRIPTIVE AGENCY	ACTIVIST AGENCY
BELONGING THROUGH STORYTELLING	PRACTICAL BELONGING	INSTRUCTIONAL BELONGING	BELONGING THROUGH RIGHTS PERFORMANCE
THEMES Cultural/National pride Clarify misconceptions	**THEMES** Practical tips / advice housing / job market / school/	**THEMES** Patriotism; gratefulness; lattitudinal integration	**THEMES** Actions you can take to change situations of oppression/injustice
ASSUMPTIONS Differences are good Multicultural integration Diverse stories as models.	**ASSUMPTIONS** Migratory status is not important to belong.	**ASSUMPTIONS** There are correct and incorrect ways to belong	**ASSUMPTIONS** Human rights / equality constitutional rights / right to migrate
TONE Passive; humorous; sarcastic; non-aggressive	**TONE** Instructional non-judgemental	**TONE** Authoritative judgemental	**TONE** Activist / modeling actions / interactions / empowerment /calls for action
PLATFORM Popular audio embedded text Duet/Stitch Hashtags: for you ; audience; topic; genre Choreograph; lip-sync; pointing and dancing	**PLATFORM** Original audio response to comment hashtags: niche; audience; topic Monologue	**PLATFORM** Original audio response to comment hashtags: niche; audience; topic Stitch; duet; green screen	**PLATFORM** Original audio response to comment hashtags: niche; audience; topic ; call to action ; emotional Monologue; stitch; duet
EXAMPLES (1) the migrant worker; (2) personal experience stories (3) content representing the daily life of immigrants	**EXAMPLES** (1) legal advice (2) how to find a home, job, school. (3) how to enter the country	**EXAMPLES** (1) how to behave (2) acceptable ways to migrate (3) correct/incorrect ways to be an immigrant	**EXAMPLES** (1) activism (2) anti ICE vigilantism (3) content modeling how to enforce human rights (4) calls to action

Figure 10.1. Proposed forms of agency and belonging, characteristics and examples.

the reuse of content—such as *duet*,[2] *use this audio*[3] and *green screen*[4]— are deployed to connect with and counter existing narratives. Multiple identities are reflected through these belongings and agentic styles. Figure 10.1 reflects the four modes of agency and corresponding forms of belonging reflected by immigrant TikTokers' content.

(Self)representative agency: belonging through storytelling

The first agentic style and its corresponding mode of belonging can be described as migrant (self)representation. Such self-representations may range from seemingly passive to subversive. This style can be illustrated

2   The *duet* affordance enables the creation of a new video that will appear side-by-side an existing video.
3   The *use this audio* affordance allows the content creator to use an existing audio track in a new video.
4   The *green screen* effect on TikTok enables the inclusion of existing videos or images in a new video as background or as a small, overlaid square.

by migrant creators who present a specific rendition of the migrant experience that offers opportunities for interpretation, and which may challenge existing beliefs. Self-representations present a story that is often personal and may include persuasive elements. In the strongest cases, it may include an identifiable call to action or a clear message about what is expected from the viewer.

Examples of (self)representative agency include content featuring migrant workers. Migrant worker (self)representations in previous research revolve around narratives where the immigrant strives for deservingness to belong (Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen, 2019) and that strategically emphasize identity features perceived as more desirable to be accepted into receiving societies (Pugh, 2018). This content ranges from passive representations of a working migrant to a more empowered rhetoric that includes mentions of the stereotypical beliefs within the receiving country versus the reality shown in the narrative.

An example of a seemingly passive (self)representation includes a video that visually depicts a man and his colleagues picking up vegetables in the field on a sunny day with overlaid text that reads "Working in Spain, the life of an immigrant 💪 (Ecuadorian and Spanish flag emojis)." The audio is a popular Ecuadorian song used around 4,000 times on the platform with the lyrics (translated from Spanish): "I am also a migrant, a Latino migrant. I did not have enough to live in a dignified way. Going through risks in the journey, I have come to strive." The caption promotes action from the viewer: "... 💪💪💪 (Ecuadorian and Spanish flag emojis) like this video for the workers." In this example, agency is twofold, first through the presentation of immigrants in a positive light, which, beyond the establishment of deservingness, these content creators can respond to widespread beliefs through first-person accounts of their life, second by promoting support from the viewer.

As shown in Figure 10.1, the assumptions of this mode of agency and belonging include the value of testimonial, first-person accounts. The tone of the message will often match TikTok's platform vernacular (Gibbs et al., 2015; Zulli & Zulli, 2020) such as the use of emoji and overlaid text, as well as audio that has been used in several videos before. The vernaculars in this type of video may also appear as humorous or choreographed messages that may include narrative configurations such as one-person role plays, point-dancing or lip-syncing to illustrate the desired message.

In the (self)representative agentic example, belonging can also be established through narratives that can go from (self)representation to

affinity and the shared migrant identity constructed collectively through the deployment of the duet format. Other TikTok formats for reuse such as *green screen* or *stitch*—which enables the use of an existing TikTok video that can be cut to create a new video and "stitch" them together—can also be used as part of the (self)representative agentic style.

Utilitarian Agency: Practical Belonging

The second agentic style involves practical tips and advice to make belonging easier for prospective and current migrants. There is an emphasis on functional aspects of belonging through the provision of a set of guidelines to facilitate basic needs and resource acquisition for migrants. We posit that the focus on accessing resources constitutes an empowered form of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Content reflecting this style thematically ranges from financial matters related to migration, to finding a home, getting a job or accessing school. It also includes strategies for bureaucratic processes to gain lawful status. In some instances, it may involve answering questions about specific actions that are (un)safe for migrants including specific tips to navigate life in the new country while undocumented.

Overall, utilitarian agency refers to a perspective which assumes that migratory status is not paramount to entering a country with the intention to stay, integrate into the job market, get housing or access school. The tone is instructional, non-judgmental and based on a combination of personal experience, anecdotal information and different levels of knowledge of the legal, cultural and social systems in the receiving country. The format is mostly original video and audio which sometimes may include the *response to comment* affordance—which allows for a creator to visually embed a comment from a previous video in a new one and respond to the comment in question.

For example, a female creator speaking to the camera and responding to a comment that reads "can I travel to Colombia for a month as soon as I get my Residence card?" by using original audio:

> You can travel to Colombia for a month when you get your residence card
> … the first card expires after one year and you need to contribute to your
> Social Security for a minimum of six months by the time of renewal.

The quote illustrates an immigrant creator who is knowledgeable—from her own experience—sharing information about the strategies needed to

navigate migratory processes in the receiving nation. In the case of this creator—whose content ranges from Colombian recipes to housing advice and cultural content—the advice is prompted by a person using the *response to comment* affordance. The recommendations feature a knowledge of the procedural requirements to maintain residency status and ensure its renewal. The creator's position of power among her followers as a leader for Colombian immigrants is evident. This agentic mode also highlights the role of digitally-enabled community support networks (Udwan et al., 2020) who build forms of collective agentic knowledge among immigrants establishing different forms of utilitarian and practical belonging in their new context.

Utilitarian agency also resembles Marlowe's (2019) description of a sort of awareness-raising political engagement through social media, which enables the commenter to take control of her newly acquired status and ensure a form of legal-status-based belonging. The hashtags included in the caption for the example above are "#parati #foryou #inmigrantes #colombianosenelexterior #viajaracolombia" and reflect the intended audience, and TikTok-specific hashtags relating to the algorithmic *for you* page, suggesting the goal of gaining visibility within the platform and the specific community of Colombian immigrants. Thus, the utilitarian agentic style enables belonging by promoting compliance with legal requirements of residency in Spain, which are delineated by this creator.

Prescriptive Agency: How to Belong Correctly

Prescriptive agency intends to promote certain "correct" ways to belong to the new country. In this case, the assumptions include the belief that there are correct and incorrect ways to belong, in terms of what is expected from the migrants in their host society. It reflects an authoritative tone, often with a sense of superiority from the perspective of a more experienced immigrant who instructs others who just arrived or are making the decision to travel. The platformed configuration of this content may include a monologue by the creator looking at the camera or a duet/green screen to include examples of the wrong ways to be. Thus, the narrative format of this agentic form often includes examples of "wrong" forms to be an immigrant and the corresponding "corrective" modes according to the creator. These may involve linguistic, cultural or attitudinal instructions that in many cases resemble top-down integration policies to achieve mainstream forms of belonging, such as adapting to the host country's labour market, regulations and its ways of working.

An example is depicted by an immigrant creator promoting gratefulness. This goes beyond the *grateful migrant* or the *migrant worker* representations illustrated in the first case and in previous literature as forms to establish deservingness to belong (Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen, 2019). In this case the creator provides stern instructions about the best way to migrate in which seemingly contradictory claims about the home country's identity appear side by side: using a commanding tone within an original oral audio,

> I want to invite Latinos and Colombians to be grateful with what Spain gives us ... look, come to Spain to contribute, and do not try to trick the system, leave that "indigenous malice" that they mention in Colombia behind.

The video is an example of her personal definition of a "good migrant" which refers to different forms of acceptable and civic behaviours that enable certain immigrants to belong (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014). This is faced with what she sees as incorrect behaviour described as "indigenous malice," which she portrays as an intrinsic form of corruption that is native to Colombia that circulates within the community. In this case, belonging is established within these behavioural lines the creator provides, as well as leaving behind what is seen as a negative trait among Colombians to become a "better immigrant."

The creator employs an authoritative tone to convey information about how immigrants should behave. Considering that the lack of recognition and loss of social identity are important post-migration challenges affecting the belonging prospects of migrants in their host societies (Mulvey, 2013), these narratives can be interpreted as forms of resistance towards exclusionary integration policies that undermine migrants' agency and aspirational life trajectories (de Haas, 2021). This mode of agency/belonging also reflects the ways in which top-down normative belongings set by governments permeate horizontal forms of belonging established between members of the immigrant community in these receiving nations (Chin, 2019). The lack of empathy for the possible variations in the migratory experience is striking in this example in which the hard truth as seen by some members of the migrant community is salient.

Activist Agency: Belonging Through the Performance of Rights

Activist platformed belongings are reflected by themes related to specific actions and behaviours that can be enacted to change the outcome of real-life

experiences for vulnerable populations such as the case of some of the most precarious immigrants—those with an irregular migration status (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2020). These videos also follow what Cogo (2019) has defined as migrant activism through narratives that emphasize experiences of oppression and racism and claims for rights and citizenship. In this case the creator emphasizes aspects of life that are subject to inequality, systemic oppression and injustice. The assumptions in this case include the belief that all people have rights regardless of their documentation. Rights, in this case, include human or constitutional rights as well as driving principles such as equality and justice for all people.

The tone of content illustrating this form of agency and belonging is empowered, active, instructional and performative. It includes specific actions viewers can take in such situations in a way that is fearless and unconcerned with the possibility of retaliation by haters or opponents. In this regard, it is important to highlight that an explicit awareness of the dangers of surveillance by the government (Witteborn, 2021) and/or explicit mentions of fear related to these dangers are also absent from content reflecting this agentic style.

An example involves an immigrant who provides information about entering the country as a tourist to stay and reside in Spain in response to a follower's question "What type of questions does the immigration officer ask?" The TikToker responds facing the camera and, describing the exchange with the immigration officer, provides specific questions and requirements a person needs to enter the country as a tourist and stay:

> They asked whether I had family here, I said I didn't. They asked about the length of my stay, I said 15 days. They asked about the hotel ... the amount of money I had ... it is important to answer calmly ... you need to bring 90 euro per day.

The quote is an example that borders the utilitarian agentic style described in an earlier section, but in contrast to the utilitarian agentic style, this example highlights the importance of making use of digital spaces to enact narrative agency in the context of existing political structures. This is a subversive form of agency that intends for the immigrant to claim mobility rights from below, on their own terms. It is considered activist agency because it subversively and strategically models this form of entrance to a country. Belonging is established through assumptions that legitimize this migration strategy and enable a form of casual, political counter-narrative (Marlowe, 2019) while facing material and legal borders established by Europe with regard to

many Latin American countries for prospective immigrants. Activist agency connects to a form of belonging based upon migrant activism (Cogo, 2019).

10.6   Conclusions

The present chapter considered a perspective on narrative agency to analyse how different forms of belonging are enacted on TikTok contents created by Latin American migrants in the US and Spain. It found that traditional forms of belonging, agency and identity in migration research can be enriched by new dimensions enabled by platformed spaces and creative possibilities.

First, the relationship between narrative agency, belonging and identity was outlined and the relevance of understanding these together was established. An explanation of the platformed content creation possibilities adds an analytical dimension to our conceptualization of agency and platformed belongings. Furthermore, we presented each of the four agentic forms and their corresponding belongings, illustrated with examples of TikTok content and the use of different affordances that enable these agentic forms to emerge. Finally, it was argued that content creation on TikTok can be seen as an opportunity for different levels of migrant agency and rights claims, as well as the construction of collective knowledge in the process of establishing their belongings in their receiving country. There are nuanced differences between these agentic forms in the two receiving countries analysed. For instance, prescriptive agency always intends for the migrant community to follow certain guidelines, but the guidelines themselves change depending on the individual content creator and in some cases reflect normative integration notions of the receiving nation—linguistic integration in the US that is not necessary in Spain, for instance.

The relevance of developing approaches that include migrant agency in the analysis of belonging and identity processes is becoming increasingly pressing in the face of diverse bordering strategies that may be physical, symbolic and digital (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2019). It is noteworthy to highlight the methodological possibilities of scrutinizing social media content which provides an overview of the diverse voices within immigrant communities and their content creation strategies of identity, agency and belonging. Social media analyses of content created by immigrants, such as the one presented here, can provide interesting perspectives about the nuanced and unexpected ways in which horizontal forms of agency, belonging and identity are policed and negotiated within the migrant community and facilitated by the configurations of platforms.

References

Avilash (2021). TikTokAPI-Python. *GitHub.* https://github.com/avilash/TikTokAPI-Python

Baran, D. M. (2018). Narratives of migration on Facebook: Belonging and identity among former fellow refugees. *Language in Society*, *47*(2), 245–268. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404518000027

Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race after technology.* Polity Press.

Bodinger-deUriarte, C., & Valgeirsson, G. (2019). La familia in digital space and face-to-face: Millennial Latinx navigating, customizing, and reconfiguring familismo. In C. Bodinger-deUriarte (Ed.), *Interfacing ourselves: Living in the digital age* (pp. 107–124). Routledge.

boyd, d., & Crawford, K. (2012). Critical questions for big data. *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 662–679. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878

Chauvin, S., & Garcés-Mascareñas, B. (2014). Becoming less illegal: Deservingness frames and undocumented migrant incorporation. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(4), 422-432. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12145

Chin, C. (2019). The concept of belonging: Critical, normative and multicultural. *Ethnicities, 19*(5), 715–739. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819827406

Chouliaraki, L., & Georgiou, M. (2019). The digital border: Mobility beyond territorial and symbolic divides. *European Journal of Communication*, *34*(6), 594–605. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323119886147

Cogo, D. (2019). Communication, migrant activism and counter-hegemonic narratives of Haitian diaspora in Brazil. *Journal of Alternative & Community Media*, *4*(3), 71–85. https://doi.org/10.1386/JOACM_00059_1

Cyca, M. (2022, March 9). *23 Important TikTok Stats Marketers Need to Know in 2022.* Hootsuite. https://bit.ly/3z675as

de Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *9*(1), 8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4

Georgiou, M. (2018). Does the subaltern speak? Migrant voices in digital Europe. *Popular Communication*, *16*(1), 45–57. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1412440

Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., & Carter, M. (2015). #Funeral and Instagram: Death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society*, *18*(3), 255–268. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2014.987152

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.

González-Enríquez, C., & Rinken, S. (2021, April 15). *Spanish public opinion on immigration and the effect of VOX*. Real Instituto Elcano. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/spanish-public-opinion-on-immigration-and-the-effect-of-vox/

Hall, S. (2019). *Essential essays volume 2: Identity and diaspora.* Duke University Press.

He, G., Leurs, K., & Li, Y. (2022). Researching motherhood in the age of short videos: Stay-at-home mothers in China performing labor on Douyin. *Media and Communication, 10*(3), 273–289.

Heyd, T. (2016). Narratives of belonging in the digital diaspora: Corpus approaches to a cultural concept. *Open Linguistics*, *2*(1), 287-299. https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2016-0013

Jaramillo-Dent, D., Alencar, A., & Asadchy, Y. (2022). #Migrantes on TikTok: Exploring platformed belongings. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*(22), 5578–5602.

Jaramillo-Dent, D., Alencar, A., & Asadchy, Y. (2022). #Migrantes on TikTok: Exploring platformed belongings. *International Journal of Communication*, *16*(22), 5578–5602. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17435/3963

Light, B., Burgess, J., & Duguay, S. (2018). The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society*, *20*(3), 881–900. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816675438

Lorenz, T. (2022, March 11). The White House is briefing TikTok stars about the war in Ukraine. *The Washington Post*. https://wapo.st/3lTWA2i

Lorenzi, J., & Batalova, J. (2022, February 16). *South American immigrants in the United States*. Migration Policy Institute. https://bit.ly/3kYpEFc

Marlowe, J. (2019). Social Media and Forced Migration: The Subversion and Subjugation of Political Life. *Media and Communication*, *7*(2), 173–183. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1862

Marlowe, J. M., Bartley, A., & Collins, F. (2017). Digital belongings: The intersections of social cohesion, connectivity and digital media. *Ethnicities*, *17*(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816654174

Martinez, D. C., Rojo, J., & González, R. A. (2019). Speaking Spanish in white public spaces: Implications for literacy classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 62*(4), 451–454. DOI:10.1002/jaal.924

McVeigh-Schultz, J., & Baym, N. K. (2015). Thinking of you: Vernacular affordance in the context of the microsocial relationship app, couple. *Social Media + Society*, *1*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604649

Metcalf, J., & Crawford, K. (2016). Where are human subjects in big bata research? The emerging ethics divide. *Big Data & Society*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716650211

Mulvey, G. (2013). *In search of normality: Refugee integration in Scotland.* Scottish Refugee Council. https://scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/In-search-of-normality-Refugee-Integration-in-Scotland-PDF.pdf

Murray, C. (2021, July 9). *TikTok algorithm error sparks allegations of racial bias.* NBC News. https://nbcnews.to/3ssanAV

Nedelcu, M., & Soysüren, I. (2020). Precarious migrants, migration regimes and digital technologies: the empowerment-control nexus. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.* https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1796263

Nikunen, K. (2019). Once a refugee: Selfie activism, visualized citizenship and the space of appearance. *Popular Communication*, *17*(2), 154–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2018.1527336

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York University Press.

Nsamenang, B. (2008). Constructing and reconstructing identity. In L. Brooker & M. Woodhead (Eds.), *The right to identity and the development of identity* (pp. 1–14). The Open University.

Pugh, J. D. (2018). Negotiating identity and belonging through the invisibility bargain: Colombian forced migrants in Ecuador. *International Migration Review*, *52*(4), 978–1010. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12344

Senft, T. (2013). Microcelebrity and the branded self. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Udwan, G., Leurs, K., & Alencar, A. (2020). Digital resilience tactics of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands: Social media for social support, health, and identity. *Social Media + Society 6*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120915587

Witteborn, S. (2021). Digital placemaking and the datafication of forced migrants. *Convergence*, *27*(3), 637–648. https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565211003876

Yang, G. (2016). Narrative agency in hashtag activism: The case of #BlackLivesMatter. *Media and Communication*, *4*(4), 13–17. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v4i4.692

Yemane, R., & Fernández-Reino, M. (2019). Latinos in the United States and in Spain: The impact of ethnic group stereotypes on labour market outcomes. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 47*(6), 1240–1260. DOI:10.1080/1369183X.2019.1622806

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011). *The politics of belonging: Intersectional contestations*. Sage.

Zulli, D., & Zulli, D. J. (2020). Extending the internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform. *New Media & Society*, *24*(8), 1872–1890. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603

About the Authors

Daniela Jaramillo-Dent is Senior Research and Teaching Associate at the Department of Media and Communication Research at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. She is part of the Media Change and Innovation division. Her research explores othering, belonging, identity, activism and minority content creation on visual social media. She is part of research

networks and projects at the national, Latin American and European levels researching social media platforms and content creators.

Amanda Alencar is an Associate Professor at the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Her research and work focus on how digital media shape refugees' experiences of belonging in Europe and Latin America. She has worked on several projects related to digital place-making, translocalism and refugees (www.translocal-lives.com) and was co-principal investigator of the 2021 UNHCR workplan on *Digital Leisure and Displaced Populations in Brazil*. More recently, she has started looking into how migrants re-construct their financial lives using digital money and blockchain technologies.

Yan Asadchy is a PhD student at the School of Humanities of Tallinn University, Estonia and a Junior Researcher at the Cultural Data Analytics Project. His work focuses on using a combination of quantitative, qualitative and digital-only methods to study digital cultures, online communication and self-representation on social media.