

Digital Diaspora and Storytelling: A Quest for Self-assertion and Community.

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Abstract:

In the era of digital connectivity, diaspora and storytelling are being reshaped. Hence, this study aims to investigate how the digital diaspora has transformed nations into multicultural communities. It also analyzes how illegal migrants use digital platforms such as video-sharing sites to reconstruct and assert their identities while maintaining communal ties in the host nations. By relying on a qualitative approach, this study examines the stories that emerge through these digital practices, focusing on the movement from the traditional imaginary community into “a community of networks”. Drawing on a case study from the “You Kay” YouTube playlist, this article also investigates the experience of El Harga and how vlogs are used to elaborate on illegal migration in the discourse of digital diasporas. This study concludes that digital storytelling has led to the creation of a digital diaspora through networking, which contributed to the reconfiguration of self-assertion.

Keywords: Community of Networks; Digital Diaspora; El Harga; Self-affirmation; Storytelling; YouTube Vlogs

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INTRODUCTION

Diaspora has been the center of literary studies in the era of widespread digital connectivity. Departing from traditional storytelling, diasporic communities are utilizing digital platforms and technology to reshape the narratives and identities, and to feel a sense of belonging. According to Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” (1983), shared experiences and cultural heritage were imagined in relation to print media. However, based on Manuel Castells’ concept of “community of network” (1996), the transformation of the state is now facilitated by new digital platforms.

In this article, the concept of illegal migrant communities is explored, focusing on how digital narratives are used to negotiate the experiences of El Harga. Particularly, through the analysis of a You Kay vlog on illegal migration, this research investigates the importance of digital storytelling in enabling diasporic communities to reshare their stories about the dominant challenges of illegal migration across borders.

Structured in six main sections, this paper first introduces digital diaspora and reviews its

theoretical underpinnings. It then discusses diasporic stories in digital spaces. The next section of the paper tackles digital diaspora and YouTube vlogs as a site of self-assertion. The third section scrutinizes digital diaspora as a site of community formation. The following section of this paper details the selected methodology, providing a description of the given data and the approach of analysis. The section that follows presents the study's results. The article then discusses the results and concludes with practical suggestions for future research.

1. Digital Diaspora and Storytelling

The theoretical insights of digital diaspora and storytelling are highly important in examining how El Harga informs self-assertion and community. In other words, the rapid growth of technology paved the way for diasporic communities to participate in virtual spaces and share their stories through digital media. Hence, this section is devoted to paying close attention to digital diaspora and storytelling.

Diaspora was developed over time and global factors gave the concept a semantic shift. As technology has prevailed nowadays, the diaspora has also taken a new shift in a globalized world. Precisely, the modern diaspora is aligned with digitization. Accordingly, the term “digital diaspora” highlights the online activities of immigrants that connect them to their homeland and other diasporic citizens wherever they may be living (Laguerre, 2010). According to Sandra Ponzanesi (2020), digital diasporas have emerged as a result of a revision of the concept of diaspora in relation to contemporary developments in communication technologies. Media and communications are spaces in which identities are mobilized and greatly influenced; they serve as both reminders of the limits and boundaries of citizenship and belonging and as means for learning how to be a citizen (Stevenson, 2002; Couldry, 2012). Moreover, through the media, diaspora groups maintain strong cultural and political ties both locally and internationally (Morley, 2000; Cohen, 2008).

In the same vein, digital mediums and platforms create a space where diasporic stories are available to share and consume by illegal migrants. From here, narratives emerged from and about diasporic communities. Hence, illegal migration requires reinvestigation to have a nuanced understanding of diasporic practices and the implications for the sense of belonging and identity reconfiguration.

2. Digital Diaspora and YouTube Vlogs on Illegal Migration as a Site of Self-Assertion

Digital storytelling has emerged as an effective tool for illegal migrants and diasporic communities to share their stories, experiences, and connect with others across borders. According to Aaid (2020), digital storytelling of illegal migration has profoundly epitomized cultural encounters and cultural identity, as it accelerated in the twenty-first century. From here, it is essential to elucidate the theme of self-assertion, which has been thoroughly tackled via YouTube vlogs on El Harga.

Within the rise of digital diasporic consciousness, illegal migrants started to engage in online activities to such an extent that they received global recognition and many scholars have conducted countless studies in this area. By the same token, attempts are being made to understand immigration as a dynamic, multifaceted movement (Appadurai, 1990). Illegal immigration is facilitated by communication technologies. In this sense, diasporic online communities can serve as a platform for identity recreation, opportunity exchange, cultural dissemination, and impact on both the host and home countries (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010).

Having said that, self-assertion is grounded within frames of identity representation through

social media and online platforms. YouTube channels on El Hargha, such as You Kay (2022), have shortly reached a range of subscribers of 13.000 and 12 796 views on their story about their experience with El Hargha, marking this content as one of the types of vlogs on YouTube that is related to digital tools as a space of self-assertion. Aaid (2023) claims that in order to share their stories and views about their interaction with Europe, many Algerian migrants have recently joined YouTube. Numerous young people in Algeria have become avid followers of emigrant vloggers due to the kaleidoscope of content that depicts the tragedies and stunning views of adventure created by the journey to Europe. This paves the way to community creation and maintenance of self-assertion through digital interaction.

3. Digital Diaspora as a Site of Community Formation

Diaspora studies have tackled many essential concepts, including homeland and host land. However, moving from the traditional imaginary community into a community of networks requires close attention. Anderson states that:

“Although a member of even the smallest nation may never meet, know, or even hear of the majority of their fellow citizens, a community is imagined...and possibly even these are imagined. Communities should be identified by their imagined style rather than by their authenticity or falsity” (qtd.in Ponzanesi, 2020, p. 980).

This shows that, according to Anderson, an imagined community is related to the image created in the mind of every nation's member. However, it is crucial to pay attention to the technological advancements that made a shift from a traditional imaginary community into the community of networks.

Nevertheless, in a world of technology and digitization, Anderson's concept of imagined community becomes more fluid. The meaning of nations in today's world is not confined to the traditional image of national borders. Brinkerhoff (2009) asserts that starting with the Internet's enabling qualities for the creation of volunteer communities, it performs a pivotal role in diaspora connection and potential mobilization.

Within this scope, Rheingold contends that the foundation of communities, particularly virtual communities, is the expression or elicitation of feeling/emotion and communication/discussion (qtd. in Brinkerhoff, 2009, p. 86). The virtual communities are grounded in the works of Ponzanesi and Brinkerhoff, who theorize digital diaspora and transnational engagement. Alinejad and Olivieri claim that digital networks have developed a new form of affection and belonging by converting physical distance into virtual proximity. They established a cross-border space through navigation and translational connections (qtd. in Aaid, 2023, p. 507). With this regard, one can say that the community of networks goes beyond the physical space; precisely, YouTube Vlogs, Facebook and TikTok are the new spaces where those communities interact.

As Manuel Castells states (2010), with the advent of the Internet and the startling, unplanned appearance of new types of virtual communities, a different communication system that is structured around computer networking is subsequently tackled. Thus, Castells suggests that the “culture of real virtuality” has emerged due to the significant impact of the new systems of communication (358). Castells recognizes that technological advancements have created a flow in the network of global interconnection. This is displayed in Bhabha's concept of third

space, which shows the switch from the imagined community into a community of networks through digital spaces.

4. Research Methodology

The study relies on a qualitative method to dive deep into the exploration of self-assertion and community formation in digital spaces. More precisely, a content analysis design is adopted to tackle the use of YouTube vlogs as mediums of storytelling that inform the digital diaspora and experiences of illegal migration. The videos of an Algerian vlogger are selected to scrutinize the ways the internet reflects and creates a community of networks. It is drawn on the analytical approach to tackle how the network society has fully risen on a global scale. Also, vlogs on El Harga contribute to understanding how migration and travel-telling stories as a cultural phenomenon perpetuates and influences traditional spaces of belonging. Therefore, digital stories are regarded as a tool through which one grasps how diaspora is transformed from a physical into a digital space. Videos are collected and carefully analyzed to consider how they intervene in the process of creating and reshaping sense of belonging in the host nations.

5. Results

A qualitative analysis revealed that globalization makes the global exchange of ideas and cultures easier. In the era of digital connectivity, YouTube vlogs have become a source of digital storytelling and shared experiences; hence, they gained popularity in the last decade. In this regard, digital storytelling and virtual spaces are observed as universal indicators of global connection. Also, globalization has led to the emergence of new storytelling forms that reflect the transnational and transcultural nature of contemporary literary production.

In other words, digital practices allow El Harragas to tap into the dimension of belonging. For YouTube vloggers, the utilization of digital platforms is clearly rooted in the requirement of maintaining connections both with their acquaintances and with other diaspora individuals “through specific digital strategies and tactics in ways that we deemed revealing and insightful for understanding the paradigm of digital diaspora from the bottom up” (Ponzenesi, 2022). Along this line of thought, the implications of digital diasporas give insights into identity in the 21st century. It captures the hybrid nature of the illegal migrants as they are navigating new spaces of belonging, which transforms the diasporic experience into a vivid site of self-assertion.

Remarkably, the internet created a new space where the traditional meaning of Anderson’s imagined community is being reconfigured. The necessity of self-assertion and community is not confined to the physical space of the host nations. Specifically, illegal migrants use Vlogs as a tool to connect to people they know or even people they have never met. Anderson asserts that:

“Though these connections were originally envisioned particularistically as continuously extending networks of family and clientship, Javanese villagers have always understood that they are connected to people they had never met” (7).

Unquestionably, imagined home and communities of network are universal as they accentuate digital diaspora; therefore, YouTube vlogs provide an easy and free access to cross borders through sharing their stories. Consequently, they play a crucial role by facilitating self-assertion and community creation. Henceforth, Algerian Harragas use Vlogs to feel a sense of belonging in the host nations.

5.1. The Online Experiences of Algerian Harragas: You Kay’s Story about Illegal Migration

You Kay has engaged in a series of episodes that tell his stories of El Harga from Algeria to the United Kingdom. He uses the videos and the comment section to engage the audience in his

experience. In the first two videos, he narrates the experience and struggles that he faced while navigating the way to the target nation. Hence, this section is devoted to going beyond the personal experience of You Kay in order to provide a nuanced understanding of how digital storytelling influences illegal migrants to “shape the Arabo-Islamic audience, including the community of Algerian immigrants in Europe” (Aaid, 2023).

You Kay was influenced by Amir DZ and Barizi’s experience of illegal migration and before leaving the country, he used to watch their stories and learn from them. For that reason, You Kay claims that he was helping other Algerian and Moroccan Harragas by showing them the easiest routes to the hosting country during their journey. The results reveal that digital storytelling plays a crucial role in paving the way for new illegal migrants, whether by informing them about the possible challenges or by guiding them through their journeys. Also, the vlogger under study has shown that the vivid image of life abroad hung You Kay’s hopes with the idea of El Harga.

5.2. Illegal Migrants in EL Ghorba: The Quest for Self-assertion

“The illegal migrants forged a social imaginary where the boat, the road and mobility act as indispensable markers of survival and transformation” (Aaid, 2023). Also, El Harragas believe that illegal migration serves their potential and goals; therefore, it is common that they have stereotypical ideas about the nature of survival and transformation abroad. Moreover, within the context of diaspora studies, bringing attention to the way illegal migrants get dressed is essential. The Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian Harragas usually wear “Lacoste and Larini,” which makes them the center of attention to the police of the host nation; in other words, it is also common that the police have a stereotypical idea about illegal migrants.

To that end, You Kay claims that he met a devoted Muslim man who wears Kameez and has a long beard on the way from Paris to Brussels, the man had never been arrested due to his style of clothes. Therefore, through his vlogs, You Kay shows that Lacoste and Larini or any other style of dressing have nothing to do with the idea of being arrested or deported from the host nation. From here, the findings indicate that meeting people from the same country or having an encounter with other El Harragas contributes to the recreation of the imaginary ideas, as it also contributes to self-assertion and community. Accurately sharing stories that demonstrate the cultural aspects of illegal migrants, including language and clothes, contributes to the facilitation of self-assertion.

6. Discussion

With the advancement of technology, diaspora is now strongly tangled with self-assertion and the creation of community. In addition to virtual engagement in digital spaces, El Harragas use YouTube vlogs to display a sense of belonging towards their land. Digital diaspora, therefore, can be seen as a process of accumulating traditional and modern modes of storytelling that are part of the culture, identity and sense of belonging passed from one generation to another.

According to Lori A. Brainard, Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2002), digital technology help migrants to increasingly connect with their home communities and other similar associations in the host nations. Similarly, Ponzanesi (2020) concentrated on how migrants form communities of belonging through digital diasporas in order to forge new relationships within the host nations as well as with other ethnic diasporas, while simultaneously strengthening ties to their home countries. Hence, members of digital diaspora use digital storytelling, which prepares them to feel

a link with their homeland.

As mentioned earlier, this article took as a sample of study You Kay's YouTube vlogs about his experience of illegal migration. Therefore, illegal migration is a common theme in the digital diasporic narratives. Also, Aaid (2023) contends that numerous instances have been documented on vlogs to inform followers and offer guidance and recommendations to illegal migrants in their temporary dwellings. The discourse of the YouTube platform demonstrates this sort of solidarity by providing a digital means of interaction that unites Algerians, whether they are native or migrants, across national boundaries. Based on Aaid's perspective on migration and digital storytelling, one can say that the digital diaspora forged a community of networks and brought illegal migrants together through digital platforms.

7. Conclusion

In essence, digital diaspora and storytelling become an effective medium in the era of technology. Hitherto, whenever Algerian illegal migrants engage in telling their stories via virtual spaces, the digital community grows bigger. Academics proved that the traditional meaning of diaspora or imagined community has become more fluid, which explains the power of technology throughout history.

Thus, instead of craving home and struggling to maintain their identities, YouTube vloggers manifested the sense of belonging, self-assertion and community on digital platforms, using advanced tools. Building upon the findings previously mentioned, the researchers suggest further studies, such as enhancing digital platforms to bring diasporic communities, particularly, El Harragas together.

The unique contribution of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of diaspora and storytelling from a digital perspective, offering insights into their contribution stories told by illegal migrants to navigate their culture and identity in the hosting countries. The findings have important theoretical and practical implications for the field of literary studies, particularly in understanding the dynamic interplay between digitalization and literature and how digital mediums grants. Moreover, the research is the author declares that she has no conflict of interest. It is recommended to expand the scope of study to include broader range of digital storytelling and to explore the female community of network in other languages and cultural contexts.

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