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Performing identity online: a community on the digital frontier

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media, supported by digital communication technologies, sparked off the proliferation of virtual diasporic groups and networks that are gaining prominence as the digital diaspora. Drawing on a netnography of Tunisians in London, this article engages with 'linguaging', 'foodways' and 'solidarity' as identity markers of *Tunisianité*, and questions the idea of online and offline community networks as divorced. Tunisian Londoners' Facebook practices stand as another form of place-making where they are actively shaping their *milieu*, crystalizing the borders of their national identity and marking out the community as a cultural entity.

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Introduction

The development of new and cheap modes of communication and transportation made mobility a central feature of global cities (Brenner, 1998). This has, in turn, changed London ethnic minorities' modes of belonging and homeland ties. It has also spurred their transnational engagements and increased the intensity and scope of their transnational activities (Kaša & Mieriņa, 2019; Kusek, 2015; Sandu, 2013; Sepulveda et al., 2011; Zontini, 2015). In connection therewith, the emergence of social media, supported by digital communication technologies, and the increasingly pervasive presence of Internet in everyday practices, sparked off the proliferation of virtual diasporic groups and networks that are gaining prominence as the digital diaspora. From structured networks of migrant websites, to more personalised social networking sites, the wide variety of digital platforms has become an alternative public sphere of interaction for London diasporas, underpinning the construction of *networks* and *identities*. Anchored in common experiences and collective identities, these cyberspaces foster solidarity and negotiate social differences among diasporic groups, creating new patterns of socialisation and belonging where London diasporas are (re)created and made visible.

Addressing this in the case of the Tunisian Diaspora is part of a pioneering research project on this community in London, where I, the researcher, conducted holistic

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qualitative research, combining ethnographic and netnographic studies of the community. Due to the small size of the community,¹ Tunisians do not live in close proximity and therefore have no typical ethnic enclave similar to other larger and longer-established Arab communities in London. Rather, their presence is geographically diffuse, dispersed across various areas in London, particularly north of the city (Channoufi, 2024).

Like all London ethnic communities, Tunisians seem to actively shape their *milieu*, crystallizing the borders of their ethnic identity and marking out the community as a cultural entity through their 'multiple ways of belonging' and 'ways of being', (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) which stand meaningfully as cultural, economic and political arenas. Field observations cast light on the ways their cultural identity was expressed through cultural production, gastronomy and social events. Many strategies of their home-making were, indeed, observed through appropriating places of belonging – such as mosques, markets, coffee shops and restaurants – traditional food, music, the use of native language in the private realm and TV channels, as well as through specific symbolic, religious and cultural rituals performed inside participants' homes or in public (Channoufi, 2024).

Furthermore, compared to other Tunisian exiles in Europe, the London exiles have been recognised as a focal group for political resistance to the *status quo* in Tunisia. This was demonstrated through the case of Rached Ghannouchi, whose political activism had profoundly transformative consequences for his homeland politics. Although he lost his battle against secularism in Tunisia, his London exile 'opened up a space—at once historical, political, and imaginative—for thinking and being between nation-states'. (Stonebridge, 2018, p. 19). Besides politics, Tunisians of London are entrepreneurs who have been actively contributing to building their community in the city, and enhancing their homeland economy. London's multicultural and super-diverse environment has, indeed, been perceived by participating entrepreneurs as offering professional opportunities. Many of them have been engaged in 'cultural economy' (Du Gay & Pryke, 2002) with their businesses resulting from an increasing integration of culture and commerce (Channoufi, 2024).

Significantly, the interweaving of (trans)local elements is a fundamental feature of this community, redefining but not breaking ties with their homeland. While establishing ties in the place of residence are key to home-making, transnational dynamics and mobility are also part of the sense of *home* for Tunisian Londoners. They are, in this sense, transnational migrants whose life strategies transcend national borders and whose sense of belonging seems to be embedded in the motherland no less than in the host society, as two key domains of reference. Certainly, the global environment of London has influenced their *habitus* as well as their ways of producing diaspora spaces.

Significantly, the intersection of elements from Tunisian physical and virtual spaces in the study questioned the idea of online and offline community networks as divorced (Channoufi, 2024). Like all Diasporas around the world, Tunisians in Britain routinely use the Facebook platform to build new networks of belonging or manage existing ones. Their groups do not just contribute to the understanding of the lived experiences of community members, but also expose a map of social structures and practices that could not be captured offline, a case yet uncharted by any policy or scholarly work until this project (Channoufi, 2024).

Amid a wide array of social media, Facebook is by far the largest platform mediating 'transnational social spaces' (Pries, 1999), and one of the most popularly used by Diasporas (DataReportal, 2021), where they can access a series of resources and discursive forms of self-expression and belonging. By using friendship as the key contemporary

social tie, Facebook collapses many types of relationships in a reductive fashion, which interlock to shape digital Diasporas (Chambers, 2007; Hiller & Franz, 2004).

Drawing on qualitatively-oriented netnography on Facebook, this paper explores first generation Tunisian Londoners' articulation of identity by dissecting their digital networks of belonging. It also addresses the impact of transnational networks on their senses of belonging to a collective identity. These issues have been principally examined through the lens of transnationalism which perfectly integrates the research group's patterns of belonging in the virtual sphere, and constitutes a valuable lens through which their identities can be explored. The concepts of *identity* and *networks* will be used as analytical tools in this paper to highlight the internal dynamics as well as relational factors that underlie the construction of *Tunisianité*² online. These broad components are central to the Tunisian diaspora in London, whose transnational networks cut across the home-host country binary, to include other countries in Europe, notably France, where a larger and more established diaspora exists.

Three overlapping and interrelated dimensions of identity have been generated from the thematic analysis of the corpus; 'linguaging', 'foodways' and 'solidarity'. These dimensions are presented and discussed in this paper along three sections, each of which engages with a different identity marker. The first part of the paper reviews the conceptualisation of *networks* and *identity* in the existing literature on digital diaspora. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and the analysis method applied in the study. Results of the analysis are presented and discussed in the last part, which engages with 'linguaging', 'foodways' and 'solidarity' as identity markers of *Tunisianité*, and questions the idea of online and offline community networks as divorced.

The networked diaspora: a review

The expansion of migration networks has been largely facilitated by the proliferation of modes of communication and transportation which maintained transnational connections that can transcend the traditional home-host country binary. While communication systems underpinned the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale, advanced Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) markedly changed the 'transnational terrain' in a way that is novel to the contemporary era (Smith, 2005, pp. 239–240). Described by Vertovec as the '*social glue of transnationalism*' (2004, p. 219), ICTs have signalled the advent of '*the second wave of transnationalism*' (Rogers, 2005, p. 405). This not only transformed the ways and scales of interactions among diaspora members, but also led to a substantial transformation in the modern understanding of diasporas through the proliferation of digital tools.

Among the various ranges of digital tools, the value of online social networks has been significantly appraised in the emerging scholarship on digital migration (Alinejad & Ponzanasi, 2020; Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Everett, 2009; Leurs & Ponzanasi, 2022; Lindblad, 2021; Nedelcu, 2012; Nedelcu, 2024; Oltmann & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2024; Ponzanasi, 2020). While they diverge from traditional modes of networking, online social networks have a downsizing effect on long-distance ties as they make transnational interactions faster, more frequent and intensive. They also foster social ties, offering new patterns of socialisation where relationships are more instant and multiple (Castells, 2011; Ellison & Boyd, 2013; Navarrete & Huerta, 2006; Wellman, 2001).

Within a broader context, numerous recent studies have focused on migrants' engagement with online social networks during their migration and settlement processes (Alencar et al., 2019; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Diminescu, 2008; Komito, 2011; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018; McGregor & Siegel, 2013; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017). Specifically, scholars who observed the dynamics of migrants' networking, cast light on the difference in the strength of migrants' social ties between online and offline networks. The former are marked as *strong ties*, the latter as *weak* (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Komito & Bates, 2011; Postill, 2008).

On similar lines, the role of digital platforms in reconfiguring *presence* and *absence* is recognized in the literature, where they have been variously conceptualised as '*perpetual contact*' (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), '*connected presence*' (Licoppe, 2004) or '*absent presence*' (Gergen, 2002). As a frequent component of relocation, a significant amount of literature argues that homesickness is detrimental to the psychological and social well-being of migrants (Calvo et al., 2024; Dean & Edge, 2024; Gu, 2010; Hack-Polay, 2020; Sangaramoorthy & Carney, 2021). Scholars, in this regard, have called attention to the many ways in which social ties are nurtured by *solidarity* networks established through virtual interactions (Bucholtz, 2019; Millán-Franco et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2008). Support from co-ethnic networks, in particular, has been conceptualised as a form of social capital (Portes, 1998). Putnam, who has contributed substantially to the conceptualisation of social capital, defined it as '*networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives*' (1996, p. 66).

Networks constitute the structural element of social capital which migrants put to use in order to obtain information as well as material and psychological support. They are maintained by norms of *trust* that individuals have in members and non-members of their community and indicate the level of engagement with the homeland and host society (Castells, 2011; Castles & Miller, 2009). Relations of *trust*, in fact, have been central in the debate about the norms underlying social capital and received considerable attention in the scholarship. In these studies, *trust* is conceptualised as not only an outcome of social capital, but also a component of the shared values which constitute it (Cote & Healy, 2001; Woolcock, 2001). It is classified, in Putnam's terms, into *thick* and *thin trust*. While the first pertains to intimate social ties, generated by *strong* and daily contacts between people of the same group, the second is the product of *weak* ties, but constitutes the basis for social integration in modern large-scale society (Putnam, 2000).

Online social networks have also emerged as a crucial medium for the construction and mobilisation of identities (Bell, 2001; Diamandaki, 2003; Slevin, 2000; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). One of the most ubiquitous human behaviour and the primary index or symbol of identities is language (Crystal, 2000). It represents manifold conscious and subconscious choices that individuals and communities make in reflection of their sociocultural, emotional and psychological values. Joseph (2016) writes, in this context, that 'identity relates classically to who individuals are, understood in terms of the groups to which they belong, including nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, sexual orientation, social class and an unlimited number of other possibilities' (p25). From this perspective, language operates, in its own right, as an identity marker in the tension between heritage language maintenance and language shift (De Fina et al., 2006).

More specifically, the language used, for example in addressing and greeting others, provides individuals with selective categories for group membership and identity. Thus,

language encodes the cultural rules of a society. It encompasses the symbolic and structural resources for fostering and negotiating religious, ethnic, class, and gender identity backgrounds. The emotional significance of this membership is equally an integral aspect of identities as theorised by Tajfel's (1978, 1981, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) series of publications.

Furthermore, if migrant communities have multiple semiotic practices that hold them together as shared *habitus*, Language – the most complex and culturally indexing of all semiotic practices (Chandler, 2007) – plays a central role in the identity marking of any community. Like English, Arabic includes many cultures. Though the *same* Arabic, different Arabic cultures of the world have different dialects. Each dialect is unique in its own right and thus can signal a given ethnic or national identity (Suleiman, 2003, 2006). Quirk (2000) suggests a typology of three models that explains how languages define nations; the 'one nation-one language' model, the 'one nation-several languages' model and the '*one language-many nations*' model. The latter applies to English and Arabic, where, as he acknowledges, national linguistic identities are more problematic. Adopting a discursive approach, Wodak et al. (2009) further showed that national identities are constructed, maintained and transmitted in the discursive performances of nations or countries, which suggests the shifting and hybrid nature of national identities.

In connection therewith, the concept of *linguaging* refers to the dynamic (re)creation and (re)positioning of ourselves in the setting in which we live, through language (Garcia & Wei, 2014). The extension of the term to *translanguaging* in sociolinguistics gave substance to multilingual speakers' fluid use of their linguistic repertoires without 'adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages' (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 1). In other words, it is a spontaneous and creative deployment of multiple semiotic resources between interlocutors with overlapping linguistic repertoires. In Blommaert and Rampton (2011), the linguistic repertoire '[...] refers to individuals' very variable (and often fragmentary) grasp of a plurality of differentially shared styles, registers and genres' (2011, p. 4). The construction of speakers' linguistic repertoires is generally shaped by the pool of linguistic resources available to them. Thus, migration inescapably contributes to its complex nature. Blommaert and Backus put this quite clearly when they said, 'repertoires in a superdiverse world are records of mobility: of movement of people, language resources, social arenas, technologies of learning and learning environments' (2013, p. 28).

In the '*superdiverse world*' of London, the role of language in marking off a linguistic diaspora from surrounding speech communities has generated a raft of research (Belabbas, 2020; Castellani, 2022; Huc-Hepher, 2021; Palacios-Martínez, 2023; Silvestri, 2024). Belabbas (2020), for example, addresses the interplay of secularism and religious identity within the Algerian Kabyle-speaking community in the UK, showcasing the diverse experiences and activism that shape Kabyle collective identity. The study delves into the complexities of Kabyle identity focusing on their articulation of identity in cultural organizations, daily interactions, and online spaces. Similar to the present case, the study casts light on a set of languaging practices, and interactions used by Kabyles in Britain to spread and maintain their linguistic heritage as they engage online.

Similar to language, food is a potent identity marker and its centrality in the construction of individual and collective identities is unquestioned in research on migration and

diasporic experiences (Brulotte & Di Giovine, 2014; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008; Mintz, 2008). The maintenance of well-known rituals and the preservation of food habits, in particular, provide a sense of stability against migrants' feelings of insecurity and disruption (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Ehrkamp, 2005; Gvion, 2009; Kershen, 2002; Petridou, 2001; Philipp & Ho, 2010; Vallianatos & Raine, 2008). Scholars, such as Mary Douglas (1972) and Claude Lévi-strauss (1983) treated food as a code that expresses patterns about social relationships, thereby adhering to the same practices as language. In addition, according to Fischler (1988), we learn the cultural rules of food and eating before we acquire language, and we only become aware of it when we encounter other cultures. More recently, Jonas (2013, p. 119) used the term 'vernacular foodways' to capture the 'set of social, economic and cultural practices around the production and consumption of food that are normatively distinctive to an ethnocultural group'.

Perceived this way, food operates as a communicative practice, enhancing social relationships and expressing common bonds between community members. In the '*superdiverse world*' of London, the role of food as a means of cultural expression and community bonding among migrant communities received much attention. Marino (2018) examined this through the case of the Italian diaspora in London, where she focused on the importance of virtual commensality in giving a sense of home and maintaining ties to the homeland despite physical distance. Her findings suggest that food practices, both online and offline, are crucial for understanding the dynamics of migration, identity, and community life in contemporary transnational contexts. Similarly, Brown and Paszkiewicz (2017) explored the role of food in the adjustment process of Polish migrants living in the UK, whose food practices helped mitigate feelings of loneliness, stress, and cultural dissonance during early migration phases. The study cast light on food parcels from Poland as well as the proliferation of Polish shops which played a vital role in maintaining food habits and the emotional well-being of Polish migrants.

Closely associated with collective identity – and frequently conflated with it – is the notion of *solidarity* which denotes a sense of devotion and commitment to others in a collectivity. Thus, if collective identity is '*first and foremost a statement about categorical membership*' (Holland et al., 2008, p. 97), solidarity and collective identity can be regarded as mutually constitutive and highly intertwined (Gamson, 1991; Hunt & Benford, 2004; Saunders, 2008). In the age of digital networks, solidarity finds new forms of expression, where physical distances are blurred by the sense of '*simultaneity*' (Levitt & Schiller, 2004), experienced through these networks. As an alternative public sphere of interaction for diasporic communities, digital spaces offer many of the wellbeing uses and functions that physical public spaces typically provide for migrants, yet in an immediate and more simplified way (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Diminescu, 2008; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Nedelcu, 2009). These platforms facilitate the creation of solidarity chains between community members, newly arrived as well as potential migrants. Marino (2014), for example, showed the role of these platforms in providing emotional and informational support for Italian migrants in London, facilitating their integration and enhancing their well-being.

From this perspective, identity can be understood as a multidimensional social product attaching claims to several dimensions (Phinney, 1996). Migrants tend to negotiate multiple forms of cultural socialization in constructing their identities. This task is especially challenging when the values and beliefs of the ethnic culture differ significantly from

those of the host society. By extension, in negotiating new beliefs and practices, migrants' identities acquire hybrid dimensions, which result from a '*process of translating and trans-valuing cultural differences*' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 252). It is precisely at these boundaries that migrants become sharply aware of their similarities and differences. It is also there that they begin to borrow characteristics across boundaries, resulting in multi-layered identities that reflect their experiences of home, self and belonging (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000).

A distinction should be made, however, between ethnic, religious and national identities. While ethnic identity focuses on common descent and cultural heritage, national identity is based on political sovereignty. When political sovereignty and cultural affinity are shared by the same group, ethnic and national identities become inextricable. Thus, the use of a given dialect, or accent, can index a person's ethnic and national origin. Within the Maghrebi community, for instance, Tunisian identity is heralded by a Tunisian dialect. By the same token, while ethnic identity is perceived as the attachment to a set of traditions or customs of non-religious origin, religious identity signifies belonging to a global community and a commitment to a set of doctrines that bridges ethnic and national affiliations.

Research method

Pioneered by Kozinet (1997) within marketing studies, netnography is now a firmly established research method adopted by researchers in various disciplines, enabled by the advanced high-speed communication system (Addeo et al., 2019; Beaulieu, 2004; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Burrell, 2009; Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2015; Murthy, 2008; Puri, 2007; Postill & Pink, 2012). As an evolving qualitative digital research method (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024; Palupi, 2024), it uses qualitative, interpretive research methodologies that incorporate different data collection methods and techniques.

Similar to ethnography, netnography describes the lives and experiences of people and, in doing so, the ethnographic researcher takes a reflexive position that allows the observation of their practices and the context in which they are acting (Kozinet, 2019). As a 'participant-observational research based in online fieldwork' (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024, p. 60), netnography is capable of capturing complex cultural insights into digital diasporas that traditional methods may not generate. Beneito-Montagut referred to this method as 'expanded ethnography', whereby online experiences are considered as expanded enhancements of real relationships (2011, p. 718). Ethnography, thus, continues to be a valuable strategy of research that adapts to evolving research sites.

Data collection

A netnography was piloted for this study on Facebook, with the aim to map the digital social terrain of the Tunisian community in London. Facebook is 'inevitably mainstream and more demographically representative' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 10) than other social media platforms, and continues to be the most popular public social network, capturing 32.6 percent of social media users in 2024 (Statista, 2024a). For a small community such as Tunisians in London (Channoufi, 2024), Facebook is the virtual public space where a significant portion of this group is likely to be active, thanks to its broad reach and widespread use for community connection (Ballatore et al., 2024; Statcounter, 2025).

Additionally, while Facebook remains a leading social network in the UK, with a broad audience across a wide age range, it is becoming more popular among the older demographics (Statista, 2024b) which is crucial for the focus of this study.

Furthermore, Facebook 'remains principally dedicated to exchanging meaningful content' (Ballatore et al., 2024, p. 19). It exposes a map of social structures and practices that cannot be found on other public social networking platforms. It is conceptualised by Ballatore et al. (2024, p. 19) as an 'infrastructure' which means 'a form of orientation: not only orienting those using it as a social networking tool, but as an entity taking up space, and in so doing, spatially orienting users and even non-users'.

Methodologically, Facebook is an online space where the observation of social dynamics is 'faster, simpler, cheaper, naturalistic, and unobtrusive', compared to offline observations (Kozinets, 2002, p. 1). In the present study, Facebook groups were searched manually using keywords. To date, there are three groups of Tunisian Londoners; two private and one public, with the oldest created in 2007. The public group was not considered for research in this study due to its limited content and membership, in addition to its reduced activity. An initial observation period of three months offered good insights into the interactions and practices of the online community and generated valuable field notes. Of course, this was allowed by being admitted to the groups, yet without interacting with any user or responding to any post (Kozinets, 2020; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

The role of observer is, in fact, essential in any 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000). As described by Kozinets and Gretzel (2024, p. 60), netnography is a 'participant-observational research based in online fieldwork'. Similar to ethnography, a participant as an observer role allows the researcher to be immersed in the online field and to feel part of it. This role is not only unobtrusive, but also supports ethical and nuanced interpretation of data (Addeo et al., 2019; Alavi et al., 2010; Palupi, 2024). As Alavi et al. (2010, p. 88) put it, passive monitoring could possibly ensure that 'the analysis is conducted in the natural context of the community and thus is free from the bias which may arise through the involvement of the researcher or experimental research setting'. Many netnographers, such as Gilchrist and Ravenscroft (2011), as well as Mateos and Durand (2012), aligned with this approach refraining from participating in online discussions.

Then, over a period of five weeks, user-generated content from members' interventions was collected, screenshots captured and links saved in order to keep a record of the multimedia posts. A corpus of 150 posts – published between 2012 and 2023 – was finally built manually. Only posts with at least five comments were selected, enough to observe the interactive character of the communication (Bowler, 2010).

Data analysis

The present study applied the six-step analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in the analysis of the data. First, familiarisation with the data (i) was ensured by the translation of the digital texts which helped dive deep into the content of the narratives. During the reading process, all interesting information was highlighted and cross-referenced against the research aims. This step was also important to collect initial points of interest (Chamberlain, 2015). Then, segments of the digital texts' transcriptions were highlighted, summarized and coded (ii) into latent themes (iii) derived iteratively from the data and reflecting the range of participants' responses. Themes were then

refined and categorised into main themes and sub-themes (iv) and structured into a thematic map (v) (see Figure 1). In the last stage, an overall description of the key themes and subthemes was developed through the final report (vi). The various cultural patterns and perceptions generated from the analysis, and linked through with the themes chosen, produced a conceptual model on the case study which underscores the study's contribution to knowledge.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues involved in conducting this netnography were carefully considered, drawing on guidelines and best practices (British Psychological Society, 2021; Kozinets, 2015; Townsend & Wallace, 2016; Zimmer, 2010). In line with the British Psychological Society, informed consent from the group contributors and administrators was not deemed necessary, or indeed practically possible, since the use of public Facebook posts and comments can be considered as 'observation of public behaviour [that took] place only in public situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers' (2021, p. 8), and where the researcher did not react to posts or interact with any group member.

Furthermore, according to Kozinets (2015), ethical requirements can be reasonably met without valid consent as long as participants are aware that their online participation is public, that the researcher is reporting data from past contributions, and that their use has a very low probability of harm to contributors. Additionally, there is no evidence in

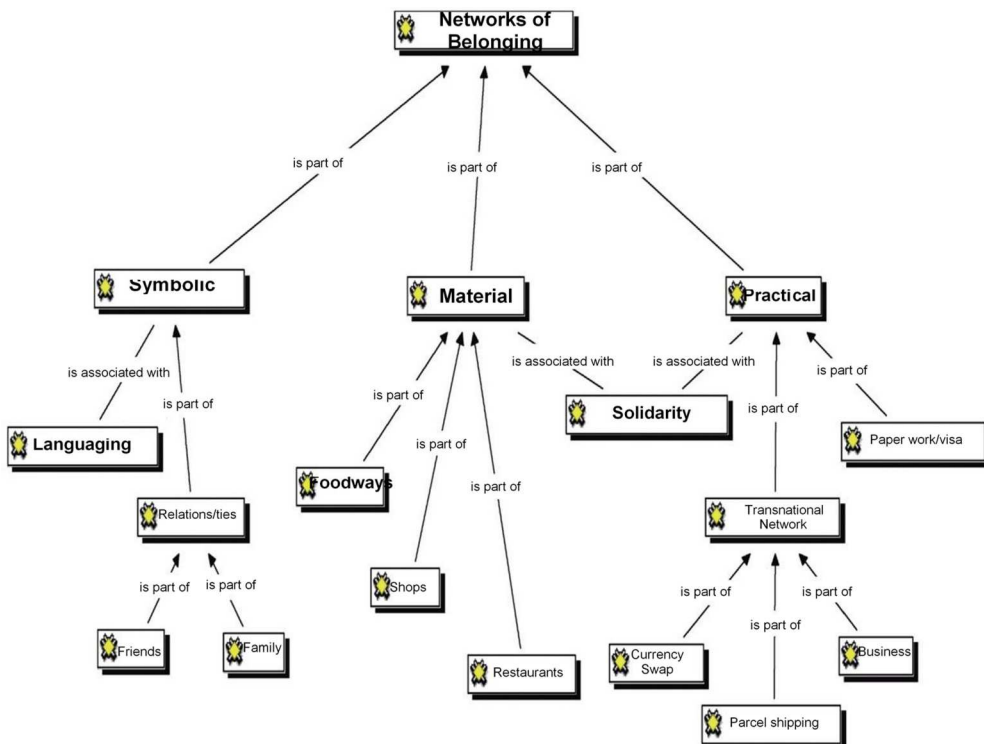


Figure 1. Thematic Map.

the literature that investigating migrants' use of social media caused any harm to them as long as ethical procedures of anonymization and the confidentiality of personal information were respected, as in the present study.

While this study did not expect to breach anonymity nor to cause distress to group members, it has also complied with entrenched norms set by group administrators. Furthermore, since the researcher did not react to posts or interact with any group member, the possibility of inflicting direct psychological harm is, arguably, very low. The possibility of inflicting indirect harm based on the results of the study is equally low, since the study does not focus on sensitive migration topics, such as pathways to claiming asylum or irregular practices of migration (Fischer & Jørgensen, 2021).

Study limitation

Although all ethical issues were considered in this netnography, internet sources can still be re-identified by third parties (Weller & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). This makes online privacy 'an eroding and ambiguous concept' as Markham put it (2012, p. 336). Many studies in this regard prefer to share only rough English translations of the user-generated data from social media or opt for fabrication (Dedecek, 2023; Markham, 2012; Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). This was not possible, however, in the present study since it was imperative to use verbatim quotations in the Tunisian dialect when exploring 'language-ing' in the first section. This, in turn, made fabrication void in the next sections. Furthermore, where English language predominates in the discussion, a translation is, obviously, not required. Although the study cannot ensure that information is not traced back to the contributors or the groups, all identifiable information was removed from the data, and the study did not harvest any information such as location or other sensitive data that could disturb users' expectations of being in a group with other people they do not know.

Furthermore, despite the sizeable membership of the Facebook groups investigated, it is not clear whether these groups can be representative of the broader Tunisian community in London, considering people who are not online. Studies on the digital divide between migrants, in fact, show that the most marginalised migrants tend to have less access to digital spaces and online services (Alam & Imran, 2015; Ragnedda, 2017), compared to 'connected migrants' (Diminescu, 2008). Recently, Holmes and Burgess (2022) cast light on various forms of disadvantage which intersect to shape experiences of digital exclusion in the UK. Although, findings in this study are context-specific and may not represent offline behaviours, it is still reasonable to assume that the data can represent to a large extent the views, opinions and attitudes of the majority of Tunisians living in London, given the small size of the community, as previously mentioned.

Performing *tunisianité* online

Results show that Tunisians' virtual spaces and practices on Facebook are an integral and mutually constitutive part of their place-making in physical urban spaces, offering symbolic, material and practical/relational resources for articulating their identities; (i) symbolic, through their vernacular language; (ii) material, through their culinary practices; and (iii) relational/practical, with group members forging and maintaining bonds of solidarity and networks of social ties in London or elsewhere.

(Trans)linguaging

Thanks to the multimodal and dialogical system that Facebook allows, Tunisian Londoners have relocated their linguistic practices by creating spaces where they share opportunities or discuss subjective as well as common-interest issues. Discussion threads usually start with a series of responses to the initial post and may gradually develop into stretches of interactions, as users start responding to previous posts. The majority of posts on these groups are written in the Tunisian dialect, with a high level of code switching patterns. Understood as the alternation of more than one language, code-switching, is a typical characteristic of bilingual discourse and can be a resource for the negotiation and construction of identity (Castellani, 2022; Finer, 2020; Finnis, 2013; Nafa, 2016; Nazmul & Ali, 2017; Wei, 1994). It is defined as the 'juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of [...] two different grammatical systems or subsystems' (Gumperz, 1982, p. 59).

The use of greetings, closings, words of thanks and good wishes in Tunisian-speak is definitely a common pattern in these groups. Specifically, opening a post with 'Salam' and ending with 'Chokran', 'Ayichkom' or 'Baraka Allahou Fikom' is a conventional signal of common cultural bond, reciprocally sustained all through the posts. English language rarely predominates throughout a discussion thread, unless a discussion starts in English. It mainly occurs in isolated, inserted switches, which are non-consequential for the thread's base language, as in Figure 2.

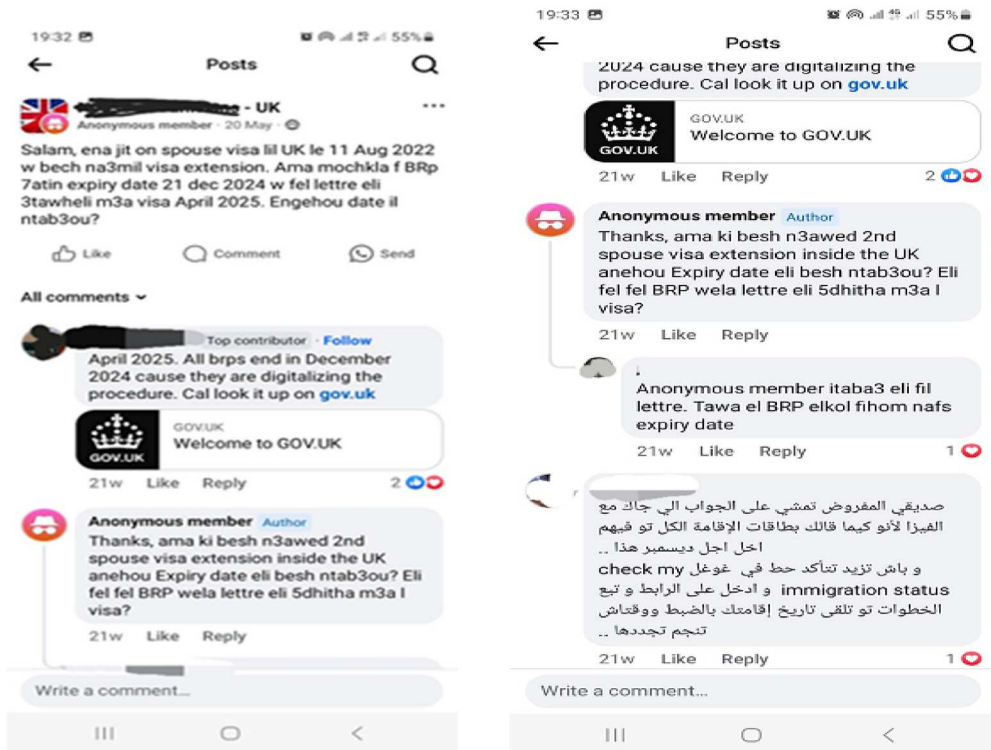


Figure 2. Screenshot of language alternation in an interaction on visa extension.

The translated interaction

- A. Hi, I came on spouse visa to the UK on 11 Aug 2022 and I will apply for visa extension. But the problem is that the expiry date of the BRP is 21 Dec 2024, and in the letter they gave me with the visa, it's April 2025. Which date I should follow?
- B. April 2025. All BRPs end in December 2024 'cause they are digitalizing the procedure. Look it up on gov.uk
- A. Thanks, but if I want to apply for 2nd spouse visa extension inside the UK which expiry date I should follow? The one on the BRP or in the letter I received with the visa?
- B. You should follow the one in the letter. All BRP have the same expiry date now.
- C. My friend, you should follow the letter you received with the visa because, as they told you, all BRPs now expire by end of next December. In case you're still in doubt, google 'check my immigration status', click on the link and follow the step by step instructions, you'll find your residence expiry date and when you can exactly renew it.

This extract is typical of language alternation in the initial phase of a discussion thread. The thread initiator seems to be unable to express himself adequately in English, thus he switched to Tunisian Arabic to work around the deficiency. Interactant B switched the verbiage to match the interlocutor by paraphrasing the previous post for a subtle answer. The difference between the two responses of interactant B corresponds 'to a difference between information-carrying parts' and 'comment' as observed by Sebba and Wootton on interactions in London Jamaican (1998, p. 269). The patterns of language switching exhibited by this discussant are influenced by the author's level of proficiency in English. Responding with a similar switch can, therefore, be read as establishing a degree of rapport with the author of the post.

While switching codes to English was used to contextualize the discussion, the language shift, made by interactants B and C, to Tunisian-speak seems to have triggered a different interactional framework. Particularly, it unwrapped a stance of solidarity in relation to the author of the thread. *Stance* is a concept that has been used mostly in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology to refer to positions people take in conversations. Specifically, a speaker's relationship with interactants is affected by the way they indicate their stance in an interaction (Kockelman, 2004; Stivers, 2008). These are given intuitive labels such as politeness, affect or solidarity (Jaffe, 2009; Kaltenböck et al., 2020; Snell, 2018).

In connection therewith, the sustained use of Tunisian dialect by Interactant C, is the result of individual code choices which, therefore, might not rule out the respondent's competence in English. Rather, it is a means of showing compassion with the author, validated by the term 'Sadiki' [my friend (male)]. Research on multilingualism, indeed, shows that migrants tend to perceive their first language as the 'language of the heart' (Pavlenko, 2005, pp. 172–173). The use of the address term 'Sadiki', in fact, indexes both a stance of solidarity and a gender-specific 'interactional' stance (Lempert, 2008, p. 571). Although it is quite common for Tunisians in the groups studied to use this term, it is the stance of solidarity which circulates more in this example, rather than the male identity associated with the term 'Sadiki'.

In the second example (Figure 3), the author points out in the Tunisian vernacular that what they are looking for is not familiar in London – 'a bit odd' – but is part of their general love for plants and, arguably, the search for a *smell of home*. This suggests that online communicative interactions between Tunisians have the potential to compensate for 'the loss of the familiar, including language (especially colloquial and dialect), attitudes,



Figure 3. Capture of language alternation in an interaction on looking for a familiar plant.

values, social structures, and support networks' (Bhugra & Becker, 2005, p. 18). Language is, indeed, not arbitrarily used but acts as an in-group identity marker through which migrants negotiate their identities and belonging in peer group interactions, showing certain alignment and shared experiences among community members. Thus, the main purpose of the use of the home language in this example is affirming identity. As in face-to-face bilingual talk, indeed, 'language alternation can be [...] extremely rich in the identity work it accomplishes' (Auer, 2005, p. 409).

The translated interaction

- A. I'd like to ask about something a bit odd. I'm a plant lover, I have been looking for Pelargonium] but couldn't find any. Please, is there anyone, back [to] عطرشية London] soon, who can bring me [عطرشية] from Tunis, les transporteurs in particular. I live in [...].Thanks
- B. It's available in Britain, ask or look for a plant named 'Pelargonium'
- A. Pelargonium graveolens doesn't exist, I looked for it everywhere. They don't have it here. They have some varieties like lemon scented one but not our (plant name in Tunisian vernacular)
- Thanks

In connection therewith, the author's sustained use of Tunisian-speak can definitely be considered as a choice and, therefore, does not rule out their competence in English. Indeed, at the end of the discussion, the author shifts to English with a relatively good command of the language, switching code to Tunisian-speak at the end of the stretch only for rhetorical emphasis – 'عطرشية' *our*. Generally, monolinguals can communicate these effects to some extent by varying the level of formality of their speech. Bilinguals, however, can express such emphatic stance through language switching (Wei, 2000). By the same token, the author's shift to English in the last stretch can be read as an active and conscious way in which they define the parameters of their identity, thereby using sustained English to position themselves as Londoner. Thus, while language shapes identities, identities in turn influence language choices and communication styles.

Following the same line of argument, the author seems to be aware of the symbolic status of English as the dominant language. Thus, shifting to sustained English, at the end of the interaction, may point to the author's need to sound accurate and authoritative in the interactional framework. This can possibly illustrate the subjective self-positioning that proficiency in English brings to the non-native speakers. It can also suggest that language proficiency enhances the non-native speaker's self-image. Alongside this, the use of the determiner 'our' works towards building rapport with interactant B, thereby triggering a sense of belonging to the Tunisian collective identity.

Such hybrid and creative discursive praxes show how the author negotiates personal and common aspects of their identity, defines their spheres of belonging and claims their identity as a Tunisian Londoner. This is because, according to Norton (2000), identity is constructed or performed over 'historical time and social space' (p.125). Thus, language identity pertains to:

the ways in which people position or construct themselves and are positioned or constructed by others in sociocultural situations through the instrumentality of language and with reference to all of those variables that are identity markers for each society in the speech of its members. (Omoniyi & White, 2006, p. 1)

This definition lends credence to the postmodernist understanding of identities as fluid, decentred and enacted in interactions (Bendle, 2002; Block, 2013; Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2014; Noonan, 2019; Wodak et al., 2009), given that a speaker can take different positions to enact different linguistic identities in different 'sociocultural situations', as Omoniyi and White (2006) tell us.

Switching between two or more languages, indeed, involves a *performative* act parallel to 'translating lives', in the words of Besemeres and Wierzbicka (2007). A process that is highly relevant for a migrant's self-positioning within a sociocultural space, navigating different social contexts and adapting to new environments (Cho, 2007; Clifford, 1994). As put by Saraceni and Jacob, 'the discursive structuring power of named languages remains crucial [...] in how people define and continue to re-negotiate their identities' (2018, p. 8).

Perceived this way, identities are primarily socially constructed through narratives, dialogues and performances (Lawler, 2008). The *narrative*, *dialogic* and *performative* ways tend, according to Yuval-Davis (2010), to overlap, since 'the dialogical approach can be seen as assuming the construction of identities as specific narratives that collude or diverge from each other in the on-going process of 'becoming' involved in the dialogical

process' (p.272). In light of this, it is plausible to argue that Tunisians' digital mode of *linguaging* expresses their search for a sense of interconnectedness as they relate to other community members. When considering the instrumental functions of Tunisians' overlapping language repertoires, what stands out is their ability to communicate in a language they constantly adapt and recreate. From this perspective, Tunisian Facebook groups act as a 'translanguaging space' (Wei, 2018, p. 10), allowing users to engage in a cultural *bricolage*, pushing and breaking the geographic and linguistic boundaries of their online groups, and 'impos[ing] an imaginary coherence' to the Tunisian speech community (Hall, 1990, p. 224). As an all-encompassing term for diverse multilingual and multimodal practices, *translanguaging* underscores migrants' linguistic creativity, breaking boundaries between languages and language varieties and navigating norms of linguistic behaviour (Wei, 2011; Wei & Zhu, 2013).

In addition to its instrumental value, language has a powerful symbolic value for the users' sense of belonging to the Tunisian speech community whose dialect clearly differs from other Maghrebi colloquial Arabic, namely Algerian and Moroccan (Aguadé, 2018). This was attested through the long stretches of vernacular talk in the corpus, where a great sense of ease and familiarity between the users was observed and no problem of intelligibility was identified. As put by the sociologist Göran Therborn, 'to belong to a culture means, most generally, to be part of a universe of shared learning' (1991, p. 182). Like all Arabic dialects, the Tunisian *darija* is used for daily oral communication and does not adhere to the strict rules of grammar or word order of Modern Standard Arabic. Although *darija* is commonly used in such areas as arts, TV talk shows, radio and publicity, it is devoid of any literate written tradition. With the advent of the internet and the proliferation of social media, Tunisian *darija* joined Arabic dialects in their way to online non-standardised written forms, largely contributing to their virtual community building (Abdul-Mageed et al., 2018; Zaidan & Callison-Burch, 2011).

It is plausible to argue, therefore, that although a distinctive Tunisian linguistic identity seems to be lacking in London – in the same way that there is no Tunisian ethnic enclave per se (Channoufi, 2024) – Tunisians are able to define their social spaces online and to demarcate their linguistic identity from Algerian and Moroccan speech communities, often conflated as Maghrebi. As Blommaert put it, 'linguistic identity is the backbone of claims to cultural uniqueness' (1999, p. 428). As a core feature of *Tunisianité* (Helal, 2019; Jerad, 2004), the vernacular not only lays the foundation for the Tunisian online community, but also indexes national affiliation, connecting Tunisians regardless of internal differences. This can probably inform Anderson's claim that 'from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood' (1983, p. 145).

Food and foodways

Results of the analysis show that Tunisian online culinary narratives and practices on Facebook shape the diaspora in unique ways, specifically during the holy month of Ramadan and Eid celebrations, when the symbolic and emotional prominence of Tunisian food increases and Tunisian identity gains a more ostentatious collective performance. A close look at Tunisians' online Ramadan practices, in fact, shows that these revolve more around food rituals than the strict observance of religion. The excerpt below (Figure 4) gives original insights into group members' personal and collective identities,

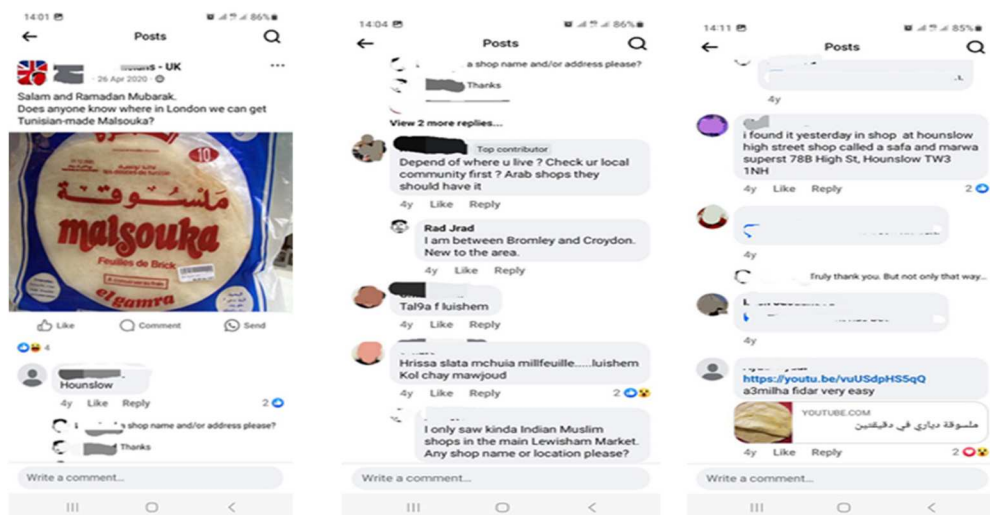


Figure 4. Capture of an interaction on Tunisian Ramadan food rituals.

their sense of belonging to the community and processes of adjustment to an unfamiliar environment.

An interaction on Tunisian Ramadan food rituals.

- A. Salam and Ramadan Mubarak. Does anyone know where in London we can get Tunisian-made Malsouka?
- B. Hounslow
- A. a shop name and/or address please?
- B. Depend of where u live? Check ur local community first? Arab shops they should have it.
- A. I am between Bromley[...] and [...]. New to the area.
- D. Tal9a f luishem
 - [You can find it in Lewisham]
 - Mrissa slata mchuia couscous ... luishem Kol chay mawjoud
 - [Harissa, grilled salad, couscous ... everything is available in Lewisham]
- A. I only saw kinda Indian Muslim shops in the main Lewisham Market. Any shop name or location please?
 - Thanks heaps. I have a small stock and I need it replenished before it dies up during Ramadan 😊
 - This was the shop opposite the Grand Maghreb cafe in Lewisham. Found everything I wanted, and more. Many thanks
 - [Photo]
- E. I found it yesterday in shop at hounslow high street shop called a safa and marwa superst 78B High St, Hounslow TW3 1NH
- F. A3milha fidar very easy
 - [Do it at home, very easy]
 - YOUTUBE.COM ملسوقة ديارى في دقيقتين
 - [Home-made malsouka in two minutes]

Sharing the photo of authentic Tunisian Malsouka³ in the initial post can be read as an act of ritualising belonging and delineating the difference between Tunisian-made and other foodstuffs. There is no Tunisian Ramadan *iftar* without this ritualistic dish, it is

firmly anchored in moments of family gathering. Typically, rituals are linked to an idealised perception of *home*, which seems to be lost and is fragmentarily reconstituted through different practices, including food (Sutton, 2001). Once a food ingredient becomes rare and sought after, as in this example, it is fetishized and triggers a multi-sensory collective memory that 'bridge[s] the sensual gap between "here" and "there"' (Collins, 2008, p. 155).

If the ritual starts with the choice of Tunisian products over local foodstuffs, the journey made to shops spread across London, as can be read in the post, adds value to the *authenticity* of one's membership to a group (Bourdieu, 1984). In addition, the waiting time for a parcel of foodstuff arriving from Tunisia carries profound emotional meaning. This is, in fact, the most regular type of in-kind remittance exchanged between Tunisians and their families, as the next section of the article shows. As a tangible expression of love, care, and belonging, the centrality of food parcels in maintaining transnational family bonds has called the attention of considerable studies on diasporas (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Mata-Codesal & Abranches, 2018). They are not only reminders of home, but also symbols of a way of life that is deeply connected to traditional methods of food production. It is specifically the superior taste of these products and the knowledge of how they are made or grown which add to their value.

Faced with a new environment and a dearth of familiar ingredients and foodstuff, the author of the post was anxious that his 'small stock ... dies up during Ramadan'. Fischler (1988) described this feeling as the tension between the fear of the unknown – or resistance to change – and the need to change which creates an intrinsic anxiety in our relationship to food (Fischler, 1988). However, challenges may turn into an opportunity for creativity and resourcefulness by searching for substitutions, such as learning how to prepare *Malsouka* leaves at home through YouTube, as suggested by the last interactant. Sharing YouTube videos of cooking Tunisian dishes and treats is, in fact, a common feature of Tunisian Facebook groups during Ramadan, which arguably acts as 'a palliative for dislocation' (Mannur, 2007, p. 14), facilitating the process of continuity for Tunisians in the diaspora.

Expressions like 'Tunisian-made', 'special Ramadan treats right from Tunisia' or 'Consummi tounsi' [translates into 'consume in the Tunisian way'], as featured in the posts, give insights into how Tunisians 'mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat' (Fischler, 1988, p. 6). The orthodox attitude encapsulated in such expressions draws upon a collective identity rooted in a common cultural heritage. Collective identity is generally defined as 'a shared sense of "oneness" or "wholeness" anchored in either real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of others' (Snow, 2001, p. 2). From this perspective, 'harissa, grilled salad and cous-cous', are mentioned by Respondent D as abbreviations of *Tunisianité*, taken for granted by the interactants in the thread and, by extension, all the members of the group. They are, indeed, examples of tastes that generally Tunisians miss in the diaspora.

Such culinary practices are so instilled in the collective memory of Tunisians that, once away from home, they become not only objects of culinary desire, but part of a structure of thinking. Since heritage is able to contain and embody the memories of people and places, across space and time (Brulotte & Di Giovine, 2014), food as a cultural heritage

becomes, in the words of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'edible chronotopes' (2004, pxiii). It is in this way that couscous, among other dishes, has become an object of cultural and gustatory reconfiguration of *home* for Tunisians in the diaspora. A dish of Berber origins, couscous is a cornerstone of Tunisian culinary identity and history (Hubert, 1995, p. 115). Whether a staple, a delicacy or a banquet, the material forms and symbolic meanings couscous takes across time and space mark key rituals and family times (Mouhoub & Claudine, 2003).

As with language, therefore, Tunisians' online *foodways* extensively contribute to crystalizing the borders of their national identity and demarcating the community online. As Gabbaccia put it, 'eating habits both symbolize and mark the boundaries of cultures' (1998, p. 8). Since identity cannot be performed in isolation, food as a form of communication shapes community members' sense of self (Cramer et al., 2023; Stajcic, 2013; Tammi, 2013). It is, indeed, a form of shared narrative through which Tunisians communicate their emotions and share meanings with community members.

In addition to food consumption, Tunisians' online culinary practices encompass the craft of cooking 'Tunisian food with Tunisian hands' 🇹🇺, as Figure 5 shows. Sweets, in



Figure 5. Capture of a Tunisian café restaurant advertisement in the group.

particular, are by far the most common crafted food that feature in the data through posts and video advertising. Arguably, this has transformed Tunisian Facebook groups into 'a placeholder for marking cultural distinctiveness' (Mannur, 2007, p. 14). From small family businesses that prepare online orders upon request and distribute all through the UK, to café restaurants advertising all types of Tunisian food and treats, *Tunisianité* is, indeed, performed through the cooking craft. These practices significantly contribute to enhancing Tunisian community cohesion and visibility online and are being extended to physical public spaces as well (Channoufi, 2025).

Solidarity

Results of the netnography show that Tunisian Facebook groups constitute very active hubs for sustained chains of solidarity in different matters such as job searches and offers, currency swap and parcel shipping. Paperwork, however, stands as one of the most important drivers of solidary attitudes in the groups studied. This is featured through posts related to visa applications, passport renewal, as well as procedures for applying for residence permits. Such posts rank higher by the Facebook algorithm thanks to their high engagement levels, including comments, shares and likes. Usually written in Tunisian speak, these posts commonly feature courteous expressions of thanks and good wishes, which help trigger reciprocal feelings of affection and compassion among group members. The following excerpts are illustrative examples of the posts related to paperwork (Figure 6).

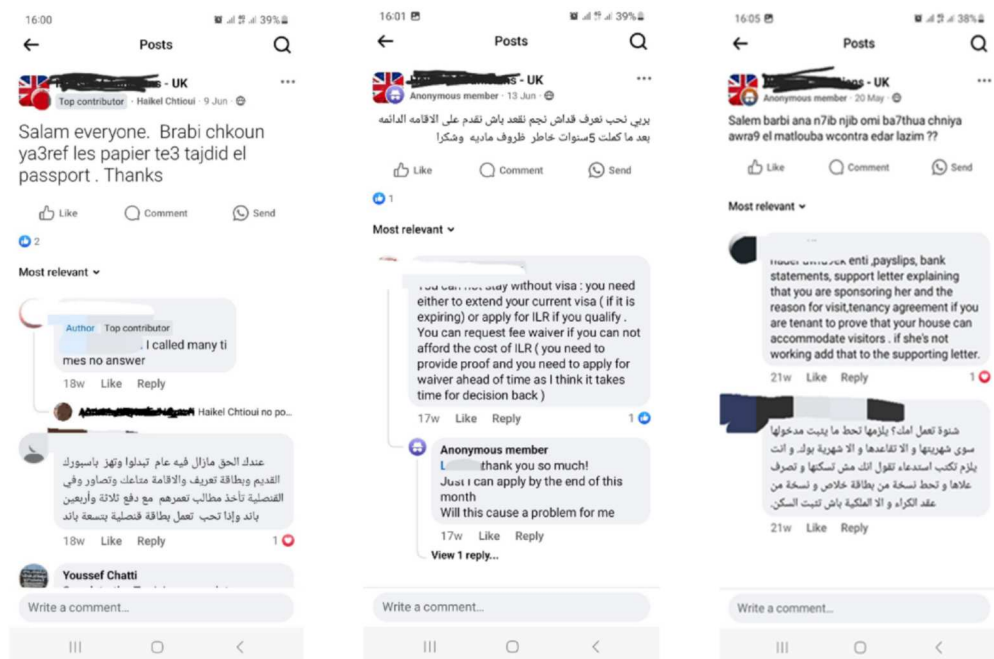


Figure 6. Capture of the three posts on paperwork issues.

Posts on paper work issues

Salam everyone. Brabi chkoun ya3ref les papier te3 tajdid el passport. Thanks
[Hello everybody. Please, who knows what kind of paperwork is required for passport renewal? Thanks]

:
بربي نحب نعرف قداش نجم نقعد باش نقدم على الإقامة الدائمة بعد ما كملت 5 سنوات خاطر ظروف مادية وشكر [I'd like to know how much time I should wait before applying for ILR, after completing the 5 years and thanks]

Salem brabi ana n7ib njib omi ba7thua chniya awra9 el matlouba wcontra edar lazim??
[Hello, I'd like to bring my mother to my place, please, what are necessary documents and is tenancy contract required?]

Typically, discussion threads develop into stretches of interactions in which participants exchange information, reciprocate feelings and relate to each other empathetically, as the interaction below shows (Figure 7). With twenty-six responses, the post acted as a catalyst for interactions, creating an interconnected network of shared experiences and stories. Terms such as 'bro' and 'أختي' [sister] are reciprocally sustained all through the interaction. This is, in fact, a quite common type of expression in Tunisian speak, which, in this interaction, indexes a solidarity stance.

An interaction on paperwork involving solidarity.

- A. [Assalam Alaikom.. good morning and good day ... I'd like to ask you, please, for passport renewal, is it possible to send the passport and the necessary documents to the embassy by post?]
- B. [Well, actually it's possible to send the documents by post but it takes so long, personally I have sent mine since the 17th but still have not received anything. Normally, this should be done on the same say, an easy thing, but with our embassy, all you have to do is be patient]
- A. [Sorry for that, hope you'll get an answer quickly, sister ... could you please tell me if this can be done the same day, or I'll need to go back to pick it up? I really need it as soon as possible]



Figure 7. Capture of an interaction on paperwork involving solidarity.

- B. [The same day, hopefully]
- C. [God save you, I'll do sister ... seems that it's the right way ... but hope I can get it the same day]

As the series of interactions show, reciprocal feelings of affection and compassion among interactants intersect with their sense of mutual obligation to give support to each other and exchange information. In other words, the level of emotional engagement expressed between interactants in this example connotes a sense of 'duty of assistance' (Trifunovic, 2012, p. 155). Laitinen and Pessi put this clearly in their definition of solidarity as an 'emotionally and normatively motivated readiness for mutual support, as in the slogan "one for all and all for one"' (2014, p. 1). Specifically, it is through *reciprocity*, *exchange* and *empathy* that the stance of solidarity circulates in this example. Such solidarity attitudes structure the interaction, facilitating the connection between participants with 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), oftentimes without previous face-to-face contact.

Providing support for members facing migrant settlement issues, and coping with emotional stress and alienation, is the second most important driver of solidary attitudes in the groups. Figure 8 casts light on expectations and needs that generally drive migrants' search for networks of belonging and, therefore, trigger chains of solidarity between community members. The author's post expresses a feeling of homesickness

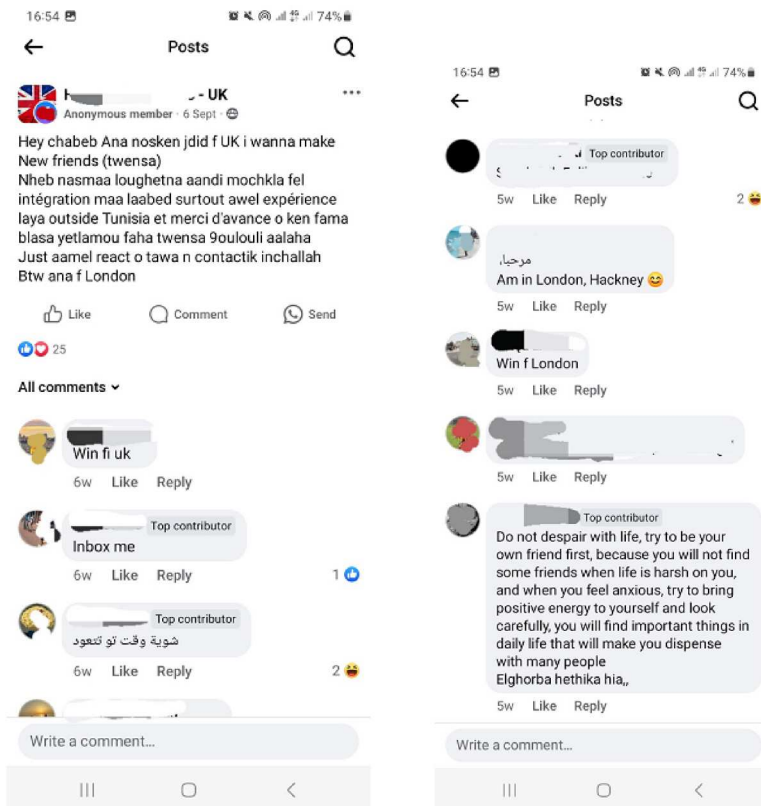


Figure 8. Capture of an interaction involving emotional support.

evoked through the search for a sense of familiarity and community. Defined as a commonly experienced state of distress among migrants, homesickness occurs because the transition from a familiar to a new environment may result in a sense of loss of control (Fisher, 1989; Van Tilburg et al., 1996). The author clearly expressed this feeling through the post, which stands as a narrative of loss. The rhetorical emphasis on everything ‘Tunisian’ – language, friends and togetherness – indexes this sense of homesickness and loss.

An interaction involving emotional support

- A. Hey chabeb Ana nosken jdid f UK i wanna make New friends (twensa)
Nheb nasmaa loughetna aandi mochkla fel intégration maa laabed surtout awel expérience laya outside Tunisia et merci d'avance o ken fama blasa yetlamou faha twensa 9oulouli aalaha
Just aamel react o tawa n contactik inchallah
Btw ana f London
[Hey guys, I'm new in UK, i wanna make New friends (Tunisians) I want to listen to our language, I have an integration problem it's my first experience outside Tunisia and thanks in advance and let me know if there's a place where Tunisians meet together Just react to the message and I'll get in touch with you Btw I'm in London]
- B. Inbox me
- C. [It takes only some time to get used to it]
- D. [Welcome]
- E. [Welcome] Am in London, Hackney 😊
- F. Do not despair with life, try to be your own friend first, because you will not find some friends when life is harsh on you, and when you feel anxious, try to bring positive energy to yourself and look carefully, you will find important things in daily life that will make you dispense with many people
Elghorba hethika hia,
[Homesickness that's it]

What stands out in this post is the number of responses triggered and the empathetic feeling it generated. Recent psychology studies, in this regard, have highlighted three core aspects of empathy: *affect*, *cognition* and *moral concern* (Gerdes et al., 2010; Preckel et al., 2018). While *affective* empathy means to feel the emotions experienced by others, cognitive empathy implies understanding the world of others. The first is automatic and can be read through the number of responses – twenty-six triggered by this post. The second involves reasoning and thought processing, as put by Respondents C and F [‘It takes only some time to get used to it’], [‘Homesickness, that’s it’]. *Moral concern* is the third aspect of empathy. It is the altruistic manifestation of empathy which in turn lies at the root of social responsibility (Goleman, 2006). This can be read through the good number of offers of connection and ‘welcome’ responses in the interaction and, by the same token, shows that solidarity chains born online can be extended offline. Thus, in addition to building social ties and easing pathways to social inclusion for newly arrived Tunisians in London, Facebook groups of Tunisian Londoners are key for face-to-face dynamics to unfold, blurring boundaries between digital and physical diaspora, and fulfilling important bridging functions between Tunisians, as figure 9 showcases.

Furthermore, sustaining virtual relations of solidarity between Tunisians seems to generate possibilities for practical forms of solidarity and collaboration in various matters

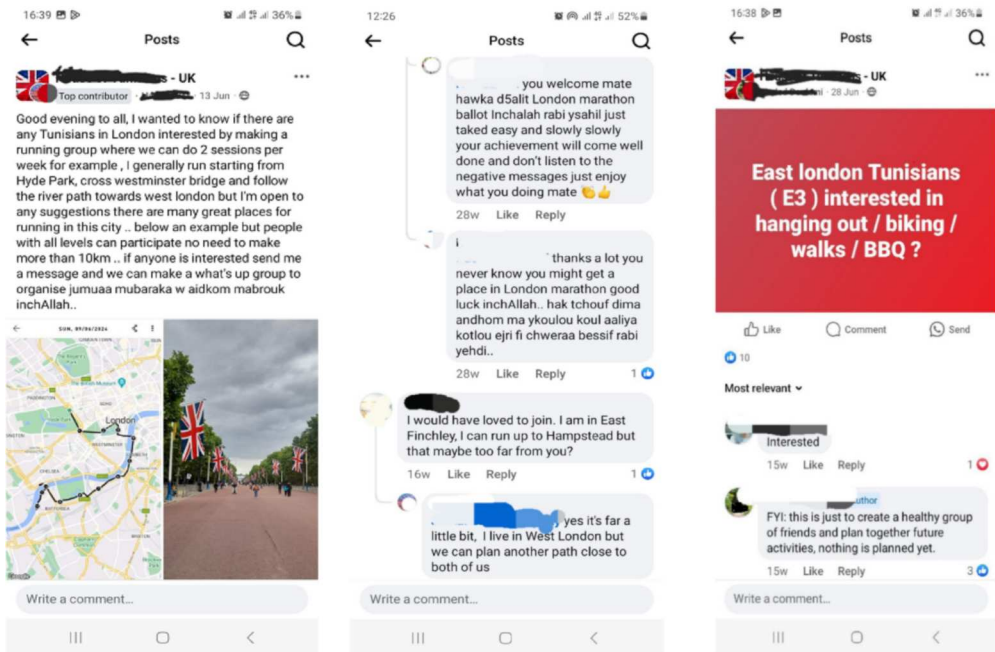


Figure 9. Capture of posts inviting for face-to-face socialising.

related to life in London such as, paper work, access to jobs and accommodation. The most common and frequent posts, however, are related to activities which have acquired a transnational dimension, specifically the circulation of remittances and goods between London and Tunisia. It is, in fact, a universal diasporic practice which has called the attention of considerable ethnographic accounts in Europe and America (Caracentev, 2020; Mata-Codesal & Abranches, 2018; Norman & Magdalena, 1998). In the UK, Gonzalez (2018), among others, explored the complex meanings associated with food through food parcels sent from Spain to London. The study highlights the interplay of cultural identity, nostalgia, and the ethical implications of food production for the Spanish community in London.

Additionally, Rabikowska (2010) explored how Polish migrants in London negotiate their national identity through food rituals. Food parcels from Poland, especially during significant times, like Easter, evoke memories of family gatherings and home, intensifying Polish migrants' longing for home. While homemade food is perceived as healthier and more authentic than local alternatives, the act of receiving and consuming symbolizes care and family connection for Polish migrants in London, serving as a vital ritual in maintaining cultural identity and homeland ties.

In the case of Tunisians in London, it is principally the digital space that facilitates these transnational activities which constantly move between the virtual and physical spheres. Parcel exchange, in particular, is a pervasive business within the Tunisian diaspora in Britain. It is conducted through private vans, owned by Tunisians, for a price of £5 per kg. In comparison with international postage services, parcel vans are approximately twice cheaper, with fewer restrictions on the types of items allowed and the standards

of packaging. As a cost-effective way, it facilitates the flow of resources between Tunisians and their families in Tunisia, notably foodstuffs, as addressed in the previous section.

Trust represents a crucial pillar sustaining this non-regulated business. It maintains a delicate balance between rights and obligations binding Tunisian transporters and customers. Perceived this way, 'solidarity sets up a social space where in trust can take hold in a positive way and build relationships beyond the purpose or end that brings people together' (Scholz, 2023, p. 9). As a set of social expectations, *trust* imparts particular value claims on Tunisians, enforced by monitoring through Facebook. This understanding is informed by Tilly's (2007) conception of 'trust networks', as sites of social insurance and commitments between community members.

Furthermore, the dynamics of bilateral exchange, mediated through Facebook, offer deep insights into Tunisians' 'transnational habitus' (Nedelcu, 2012). Specifically, parcel circuits cast light on the multifaceted nature of their life in the diaspora which transcends the home-host country binary. With London as a central node, the journeys of parcels go through several collection points in England – with Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Bristol as the most frequent locations – and in France, particularly in Marseille, Lyon and Paris, where a larger and more established Tunisian diaspora exists (Figure 10). Yet, the lack of focus on these dynamics within the Tunisian diaspora in France highlights the need for more comprehensive and nuanced research approaches to better understand the multifaceted nature of their transnational life.

In light of this, it is proper to say that online interactions between Tunisians in London have a concrete impact on their social experiences and fit with other aspects of their lives in London, which can be seen as a hybridisation of virtual and physical spaces. Such continuums between migrants' virtual and physical spheres have presumably transformed transnational fields into 'fluid spaces' (Lindblad, 2021, p. 1). This assumption is at the

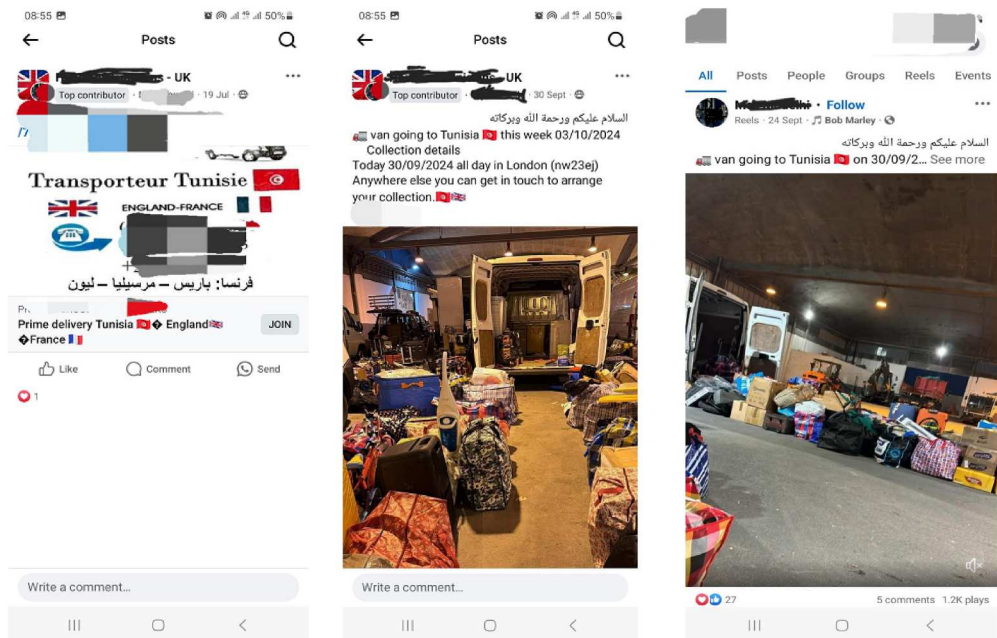


Figure 10. Capture of posts showing locations where parcel delivery can be arranged.

core of scholarship, which recognizes digital networks as spaces where efficient patterns of solidarity chains can work and can positively foster community ties (Bakardjieva, 2003; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Miller & Slater, 2000). More recently, studies attempting to identify the territorial bounds of virtual spaces have been prolific (Fortunat & Roca-Cuberes, 2019; Fortunat & Roca-Cuberes, 2021; Priya, 2012; Teodor, 2020). By challenging the idea that online relationships are less meaningful or authentic, some of these studies have argued for a reformulation of the concept of 'transnational migrants' (Lindblad, 2021).

It seems appropriate, therefore, to consider Tunisians' online networks as parallel to, and not divorced from, their offline community networks, and that 'the Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality' (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 334). These 'liminal sites' (Nedelcu, 2012, p. 1350), offer possibilities for Tunisians to build new modes of belonging, characterised not only by transnational exchange and activities, but also by the 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004) of Tunisians in multiple locations.

Conclusion

The principle contribution of this netnography of Tunisian Londoners is its focus on their Facebook practices as another form of place-making and an alternative public sphere of interaction underpinning the expression of their collective identity. Their mundane virtual practices demonstrate a sense of interconnectedness anchored in their collective identity and maintained through their linguistic practices, food habits and the cultural norms of solidarity they share. Significantly, in reproducing, consuming and performing rituals that have many original elements of their cultural heritage, Tunisian Londoners record and celebrate a sense of cultural authenticity and ethnic belonging while manifesting a strong symbolic and material attachment to the homeland.

By overcoming the dichotomies between the virtual and physical spheres, this study offers an understanding of identities as an ongoing, evolutionary process of transformation within the rapidly changing communication technoscapes. Specifically, the study brings into view new modes of belonging, characterised not only by transnational exchanges and activities between migrants, but also by their 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004).

Against this background, this pioneering work could open several areas of research on Tunisians in Britain. First, the modes of online *linguaging* explored by this research could be further expanded upon. Second, this study has laid the basis for further investigations on the presence of many business ventures by Tunisians in Britain. A line of investigation could, for instance, be developed on the non-regulated transnational business of parcel-shipping and situate this pervasive element of the Tunisian diaspora under a more comprehensive light. Third, an additional line of investigation could be developed on Tunisian gastronomy in London as a developing field of 'cultural economy' (Du Gay & Pryke, 2002), in which many Tunisians are engaged, with their businesses resulting from an increasing integration of culture and commerce.

Notes

1. There were approximately 16,000 Tunisian-born residents in the UK in 2022. Their number could amount to well over 20,000 if considering undocumented migrants (Channoufi 2024, p23).

2. *Tunisianité* is the belief that Tunisia forms a nation/alism in its own right because of its unique historical, territorial, linguistic and sociocultural specificities. Although historians trace the birth of *tunisianité* to the Berber Hafsid Dynasty (1229–1574), it was given full impetus by the Tunisian nationalist liberation movement led by Habib Bourguiba during the late 1920s.
3. Malsouka are thin hand-made pastry leaves similar to spring roll wrappers. It is stuffed to make crispy *Brik* [bri:k] with an endless array of fillings, for entries or desserts.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Monia Channoufi**: Writing – original draft.

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Monia Channoufi is currently a lecturer in migration studies at the University of Tunis El-Manar. She has completed her PhD from the University of Westminster (London), College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS). Her doctoral project is a pioneering study of the Tunisian diaspora in Britain. It is within the ‘super-diversity’ of the city of London that cultural, economic and political cases analysed in her thesis have developed. By over-coming the dichotomies between virtual and physical spheres, her thesis offered an understanding of diasporic spaces of belonging as a dialogic, relational phenomenon and identities as an ongoing, evolutionary process of transformation within the rapidly changing communication technoscapes.

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