Not surprisingly, visual images have become central to the ways in which migrants view and represent themselves in a variety of digital arenas, including but not limited to social media. When thinking of the role of visual images in migrants' everyday lives and their relationship to digital media, the notion of visuality becomes particularly apt, as it implies the existence of mundane, repetitive acts of visual production (whether as an image-maker or as a viewer) together with an engagement with the politics of representation in its own right (Mirzoeff, 2006). Rather than simply aiding us to reflect on how migrants may be represented or may self-represent in digital media, speaking of visuality helps us think through some of the ways in which their visibility is imbricated with issues of agency and power. This is exactly the type of intellectual work that Chapter 10 by Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Amanda Alencar and Yan Asadchy, Chapter 12 by Estrella Sendra and Chapter 13 by Moë Suzuki in the section on Visuality and Digital Media do, as they move beyond conceptions of the visual as a way to promote or altogether “other” particular identities to engage in more depth with the problems and potentials of digital media imagery in the pursuit of a sense of shared identity and belonging among migrants.

But what are some of the problems and potentials in how migrants engage with digital imagery in everyday life? First and foremost, the chapters consider the ways in which migrants' digitally mediated socialities are both enabled and constrained by the algorithmic logics of particular platforms together with the aesthetic demands of specific media—from the visual formats that are typical of social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook to the immersive and experiential qualities of virtual reality. In our work on visual self-representation in social media, and specifically on how trans people represent themselves on Instagram, Katy Parry and I have introduced the idea of “constrained empowerment” to engage with the tension
between the ways in which individuals from marginalized communities are increasingly able to perform their identities and solidarities publicly online and the affordances and discourses that limit their ability to do so in a truly diverse or emancipatory manner (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 50). In other words, digital visibility is very often a double-sided coin. On the one hand, and as the next three chapters show, digitally mediated practices of (self-)representation are now crucial to the development of support and community among migrants, while also working to foster the development of more inclusive “ways of seeing” across a variety of publics (Duguay, 2016). On the other hand, however, the very ways in which migrants can be seen and see themselves depend largely on the socio-technical constraints and semiotic conventions of the media and communication tools they use, however purposefully (Hand, 2022). Overall, across a variety of digital media, visuality is central to how migrants address and are addressed by “affective publics,” that is, others who may share affinities with them and may therefore both limit and reward the ways in which they express themselves online (Papacharissi, 2014).

And it is precisely the affective and overall more visceral aspects of visuality that are foregrounded in the chapters included in this section. Hence, a second key critical thread running across these chapters pertains to the emotional, material and sensorial inclinations that are generated in migrants through their engagement with imagery and/in digital media (Hansen, 2004). Together with Chapters 7, 8 and 9 in Section III on affect and belonging, this is an especially up-to-date contribution this anthology makes to academic debates on migrants’ digital practices. In Section IV, more specifically, visual imagery is not seen merely as a representation of migrant identities and experiences (although representation does matter) but also and perhaps more importantly as a means for an embodied understanding of such identities and experiences—from feelings of pride and cohesion between the roots and the diaspora to the development of relations and bonds between refugees and viewers. Across the chapters, we also find a keen emphasis on how these affective and overall embodied practices can and do lead to political engagement if not activist action.

In a related manner, the third and final thread that runs across these chapters is methodological in nature. Research on migrants’ (visual) digital practices cannot be reduced to observations about the technological structures and discursive instruments that contribute to their disempowerment. For this reason, the authors of these chapters all made a clear effort to design and carry out research that excavates deeper into migrants’ participation in digital communication to understand the ways in which agency,
performativity and embodiment play out, whether in unison or individually, in their lives (Marston, 2020). Ultimately, the visuality of digital media is a fraught terrain that however also potentially offers uplifting and even liberatory means to take part in networks of solidarity and affirm one’s identity in the face of erasure and discrimination.

References


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