Visual narratives of human smuggling: analyzing social media imagery in migration services

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Abstract

This study delves into the visual strategies employed by irregular migration service providers, commonly known as human smugglers, to advertise their services on social media platforms, with a particular focus on TikTok. By examining the advertisement hooks used in these visual narratives, such as promises of protection, solidarity, safety, freedom, and affordability, we aim to understand how these narratives influence perceptions of migration and governance thereof. Employing visual social semiotic analysis, this research scrutinizes videos shared over the past year, offering insights into the semiotic resources that smugglers leverage to appeal to potential clients. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between visual elements and viewer interpretation, highlighting how smugglers construct a persuasive visual rhetoric of migration. The relevance of this inquiry is underscored by the evolving role of social media in shaping public discourse on migration. Instances such as the migration crisis on the Belarus-Poland border, exacerbated by misleading information on platforms like Facebook, illustrate the potent effect of social media in both creating and aggravating migration challenges. This research contributes to the broader conversation on migration by exploring the visual dimension of smuggler narratives, a facet that has remained largely underexplored in discussions about migration governance and public perception. Furthermore, this study responds to the need for a deeper understanding of how visual representations of migration can influence societal views and policy decisions. By dissecting the visual tactics of human smugglers, this research offers critical insights into the broader spectacle of migration, where certain actors remain unseen yet profoundly impact the migration discourse.

Biography

Alice Massari is a Marie Curie Global Fellow at the CERC in Migration and Integration at the Toronto Metropolitan University and the University of Copenhagen. Her current work focuses on Visual Governance in Migration. She obtained a Ph.D. in Political Science, European Politics and International Relations, and a MA in International Relations. Since 2007, Dr. Massari has worked on migration and humanitarian aid in various capacities, including as a researcher, aid worker, and consultant. Her experience includes leading an INGO during the Syrian emergency, working as an EU expert on migration, and serving as a Humanitarian Analyst and Humanitarian Adviser for the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office. Dr. Massari's research and writing have focused on migration, visuality, humanitarianism, and governance. She is the

author of the book Visual Securitization – Humanitarian Representations and Migration Governance.

Luigi Achilli is a senior researcher at both the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, and the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. He earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in social anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, United Kingdom. Achilli has held teaching positions at the University of Cambridge, SOAS, and several institutions in the Middle East. His research and publications center on irregular migration, transnational crime, refugee studies, political engagement, nationalism, and the Palestinian issue. Adopting an ethnographic approach, Achilli's work is deeply rooted in extensive field research conducted in the Middle East, Southern Europe, and Mexico, primarily among refugees and other displaced communities. He has published numerous articles and influential works on these subjects. His most recent research endeavor culminated in the co-authored publication of "Global Human Smuggling" (John Hopkins University Press, New York, 2023) alongside D. Kyle.