

Immobility During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Mobile Perspective of Detained Refugees on Twitter^{**}

Inmovilidad durante la pandemia de covid-19: la perspectiva de los refugiados detenidos en Twitter

RECIBIDO: 17 DE JUNIO DE 2024 / ACEPTADO: 2 DE JUNIO DE 2025

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Abstract: Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, social media played a prominent role in conveying information about policies regarding the management of unforeseen limitations of freedom of movement (Nguyet Erni/Striphas 2023; Wodak 2022). Yet while communities and individuals resorted to social media to find and share information, they also searched for a digital third place, i.e. a social environment that was neither home nor work and could provide a space for their communicative needs (Oldenburg 1989; Hadi/Evawani 2019). Building on an ongoing research project (Russo 2020; 2023; Grasso/Russo 2022), the article investigates a purposely built corpus comprising tweets posted by a group of digitally active refugees detained in the Australian context during the COVID-19 pandemic (March–October 2020). The paper critically examines the multimodal discursive expressions and strategies that permeated the digital environment under investigation. More specifically, it focuses on the discursive construction of *digital mobility* and/or *permanent/temporary physical immobility* in the context of the global health crisis. The analysis employs a combined Corpus-based Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to social media discourse (KhosraviNik 2014; 2017; Unger et al. 2016; Zappavigna 2012) to reach an understanding of how refugees narrated their own physical segregation with X/Twitter being the only possibility to experience mobility.

Keywords: Im/mobility. COVID-19 Pandemic. X/Twitter Discourse. Third Space. Detained Refugees. Australian Border Policy.

Resumen: A lo largo de la pandemia de COVID-19, las redes sociales desempeñaron un papel destacado en la transmisión de información sobre políticas relacionadas con la gestión de las limitaciones imprevistas a la libertad de movimiento (Nguyet Erni/Striphas 2023; Wodak 2022). Mientras las comunidades y los individuos recurrían a las redes sociales para encontrar y compartir información, también buscaban un «tercer lugar digital», es decir, un entorno social que pudiera proporcionar un espacio para sus necesidades comunicativas (Oldenburg 1989; Hadi/Evawani 2019). El artículo investiga un corpus que comprende tweets publicados por un grupo de refugiados digitalmente activos detenidos en el contexto australiano durante la pandemia de COVID-19 (marzo–octubre 2020). El objetivo del artículo es examinar críticamente qué tipo de expresiones y estrategias discursivas multimodales permeaban el entorno digital bajo investigación. Más específicamente, se centra en la construcción discursiva de la movilidad digital y/versus la inmovilidad física permanente/temporal en el contexto de la crisis sanitaria global. El análisis emplea un Análisis Crítico del Discurso Multimodal (KhosraviNik 2014; 2017; Unger y otros 2016; Zappavigna 2012) para llegar a una comprensión de cómo los refugiados narraban su propia segregación física siendo X la única posibilidad de experimentar movilidad.

Palabras clave: In/movilidad. Pandemia de COVID-19. Discurso de X/Twitter. Tercer espacio. Refugiados detenidos. Política fronteriza australiana.

* Although this article is the product of continuous co-operative research and planning, Katherine E. Russo is responsible for Introduction, and parts 1, 2, and 6 and Arianna Grasso for parts 3, 4, and 5.

CÓMO CITAR ESTE ARTÍCULO: Grasso, Arianna, y Katherine Elizabeth Russo. 2026. «Immobility During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Mobile Perspective of Detained Refugees on Twitter». *Rilce* 42.1: 224-56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15581/008.42.1.224-56>



The Covid-19 pandemic affected the health, well-being, economic, and social circumstances of most people across the world. However, recent studies have stressed that its experience was marked by social disparity and inequity. Research has shown that certain groups of people experienced disproportionate impacts and poorer outcomes across multiple domains, including hate speech and discrimination as well as economic instability and unemployment (Bezruchka 2023; Kerschbaumer et al. 2024; Navarro/Hernández 2022; Russo 2020; 2023; Grasso/Russo 2022; Ryan/Nanda 2022). Among these, asylum seekers and refugee individuals and groups generally faced higher risks, often living in packed detention centers, shelters and densely populated urban areas, with poor hygiene conditions and limited or no access to healthcare (Mengesha et al. 2022; Trew et al. 2023).

As the pandemic crisis unfolded, social media environments arguably provided a *digital third place*, an in-between social environment in which users could express their communicative needs (Oldenburg 1989; Hadi/Evawani 2019; Musolff et al. 2022). While online news-based risk communication discourse informed the public about policy-measures limiting freedom of movement (Lipsy 2020; Wodak 2022), people could express their opinions about such measures and/or share their *small stories* of borders in social media environments (Georgakopolou 2007). The latter often entailed intense discursive antagonism as social media users shared their ideas about policies and experiences but also interrogated shared values and identities. In many cases, it amounted to the emotional amplification of differences between a discursively constructed in-group and out-group, resulting in overt and covert hate speech towards mobile subjects (Russo 2020; 2023).

Nevertheless, social media gave the possibility to refugee communities and individuals to participate in discussions about *digital mobility* and/versus *permanent/temporary physical immobility*. The pandemic was an opportunity to inform the public about their needs and to comment on the vital nature of *digital third spaces* for those living in the liminal space and time of asylum seeking. As Baynham puts it, liminality defines ‘the in-between-ess of the asylum seekers’ life situation, in a kind of in-between space before the decision to grant refugees status is decided. In this case the liminality can become a way of life [...] decisions can be indefinitely prolonged over as much as five years’ (2012, 123). Thus, we argue that the analysis of covid-19 mobility/immobility in social media discourse entails the existence of multiple places and time frames, together with multiple and contested spaces of identity, calling for a socially contextualized analysis of digital third spaces.

As numerous studies have claimed, asylum seekers' experiences of the *liminal* space was particularly prolonged and inhumane in the Australian pandemic context (El Tatary/Gill 2022; Mengesha et al. 2022; Trew et al. 2023). While the existing literature outlines the pandemic's impact on individuals on temporary or no visas in Australia, there is a paucity of research capturing their strategic use of social media to find a voice and share their narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown periods. While previous work has focused on positioning in long distance communication (De Fina 2003; Haviland 1996), multimodal narrative analysis (Page 2012a; 2012b) and the strategic use of social media by Australian refugees in prolonged detention (Grasso 2023), scarce if null attention has been devoted to the investigation of how refugee individuals and communities employed social media to share their experiences mobility and immobility during the pandemic crisis.

Keeping in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic was and remains so overwhelming because it refers to a series of superimposed social, cultural, political crises (Nguyet Erni/Striphos 2023; Wodak 2022; Musolff et al. 2022), the article will investigate a purposely built corpus comprising tweets posted by a group of digitally active refugees detained in the Australian context during the COVID-19 pandemic (March-October 2020). The aim of the article is to critically examine what kind of multimodal discursive expressions and strategies permeated the detained refugees' digital environment. More specifically, it focuses on their discursive construction of *digital mobility* and/versus *permanent/temporary physical immobility* in the context of the global health crisis. The analysis employs a combined Corpus-based Multimodal and Critical Discourse Analysis to social media discourse (KhosraviNik 2014; 2017; Unger et al. 2016; Zappavigna 2012) to reach an understanding of how refugees narrated their own physical segregation with X/Twitter being the only possibility to experience mobility.

1. CONTEXT

Australian refugee policies have often faced criticism for human rights abuses, including the illegal prolonged detention of asylum seekers and inadequate medical care. Under the Migration Act (1958), asylum seekers who arrive by boat without a valid visa are held in immigration detention until they are granted a visa or removed from the country. Australian law does not set a maximum duration for detention. Hence some asylum seekers may spend extended periods in detention while their refugee claims are assessed, health, identity, and security checks are completed, or they may await removal if not

recognized as refugees or eligible for complementary protection. Moreover, in August 2012, the Australian Government implemented a third-country processing system for asylum seekers arriving by boat without a valid visa. According to this policy, these asylum seekers must be transferred to a third country as soon as practicable unless the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection decides otherwise. On the other side, if asylum seekers arrive via plane and in some other exceptional cases, Australia's immigration authorities utilize hotels called Alternative Places of Detention (APODs) instead of traditional immigration detention centers. APODs comprise chains and independent operators across the Australian territory, that have been used by the Australian government as places of detention for people seeking asylum.

In mid-2022, the Australian Human Rights Commission conducted inspections, interviews, and consultations to monitor the human rights of people detained in hotel APODs in Melbourne and Brisbane and raised significant concerns about the process of releasing individuals from hotel APODs and the provision of post-release support. The pandemic only exacerbated these conditions, with a profound impact on the mental health and wellbeing of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. As Trew et al. (2023) suggest, the crisis revealed a systemic failure to recognize and address the unique needs of these groups in Australia. Furthermore, displaced individuals—such as asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants, and those on temporary protection or bridging visas—consistently encounter chronic economic, health, and social challenges, along with significant marginalization. These groups often have restricted or limited access to essential support and services due to their migration or legal status, and globally, they experienced higher exposure to and infection rates of COVID-19. During the pandemic, additional challenges such as acculturation difficulties, social isolation, poor living conditions, and financial disadvantages further exacerbated their health and well-being globally and in Australia. In particular, the majority of closed immigration detention facilities, including hotels that were used as alternative places of detention were overcrowded. People in these facilities were not able to maintain the social distancing recommended by health authorities to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19. In this respect, the global lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented attention to the realities of restricted mobility. For the first time, many individuals experienced limitations that, while not identical, paralleled those faced by detained asylum seekers and refugees, whose freedom of movement has been and continues to be routinely curtailed. Notably, refugees themselves leveraged this moment to raise awareness about their condi-

tions, using the shared experience of confinement to draw broader public attention to issues of forced immobility and human rights violations, as well as to invoke feelings of empathy and compassion that could lead to social mobilization. As the pandemic crisis unfolded, social media intensified their role as a channel for the sharing of opinions and lived experiences of detention. Within the context of this paper, this parallel underscores the need to critically address digital mobility in relation to the pandemic experience.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social media platforms such as X provide an ideal and immediate window into discursive struggle and legitimation of policy measures during epidemic crises (Russo 2020; 2023). As Bednarek et al. (2022) recently put it, X (formerly Twitter) is particularly well suited for the analysis of discourse in times of crisis as it enables users to draw attention to, and interact with communities as crises are unfolding, thus functioning as a collective space where discourses can be represented, appraised and made part of larger issues of social significance.

From a Critical Discourse Studies viewpoint, social media platforms such as X may be analyzed in terms of 1) how power structures shape social media discourse, 2) how social media discourse supports the interests of powerful groups by assuming a stable and invisible structure of ideological meanings, or 3) how users engage with familiar images and language patterns in relation to tacit mental categories, frames, schemata, and general propositions (van Dijk 2016; KhosraviNik/Unger 2016). Indeed, the analysis of large amounts of X data may reveal shared presuppositions, cultural stereotypes, and ideological inferences (KhosraviNik/Esposito 2018).

On the other hand, they may provide a space for self-representation, a space where users' conscious or unconscious choices of modes may reflect their particular social and cultural positioning and stance (Kress 2010; Machin/Mayr 2012). For instance, as previous studies have found, both visual and verbal modes are fundamental to protest material by social movements (Philipps 2012), as their combination conveys immediate messages and strong emotions. Moreover, multimodal text may resist discourse colonization and manipulation. Visualization may also offer alternative routes to official discourse for those who lack visibility in mainstream media platforms, such as refugees using English as a lingua franca to address a global audience. Hence, this study adopts a Multimodal Critical Discourse Approach since we believe that in our corpus each mode contributes to the overall meaning and to a

framing of social reality that is not neutral in regard to power (Ledin/Machin 2018; Jewitt et al. 2016; Machin/Mayr 2012).

Notwithstanding the power and dominance of the algorithmic regime (KhosraviNik/Unger 2016), the analysis of social media texts may help us to develop a situated and multifaceted understandings of lived experiences of freedom of movement (Oberhuber/Krzyżanowski 2008). It may provide a space for self-representation and subject-positioning in social media narratives (Angermüller 2018; Grasso 2023; Blommaert/De Fina 2017). Moreover, it may address how refugees construct their own self-representation as social actors in the political space of social media (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021; Machin/Mayr 2012; Russo 2020; 2023; van Leeuwen 1996). Finally, social media offer moments of intense ambient affiliation around shared interests (Zappavigna 2018). Through social media devices such as hashtags, users may create *ad hoc* publics that are ‘formed, re-formed, and coordinated via dynamic networks of communication and social connectivity’ (Bruns/Burgess 2011a, 14; Bruns/Burgess 2011b).

Hence, work in the subfield of Hashtag Studies have investigated hashtags as fundamental to activism and protests (Rambukkana 2015; Bonilla/Rosa 2015; Papacharissi/Oliveira 2012; Florini 2013), and political events (Sauter/Bruns 2015; Bruns/Stieglitz 2013; Bruns/Burgess 2012). Most importantly, through hashtags, social media such as X may provide a digital third space in which users make sense of happenings as they unfold and communicate defying the boundaries of confined spaces. In this sense, digital third spaces, represent hybrid arenas where diverse and intersecting discourses may flourish, transcending the limitations of physical geography. In the realm of multimodal discourse, these digital third spaces offer a unique convergence point for multiple semiotic modes –text, image, video, and more– that enable the creation and dissemination of complex, layered meanings. As Leppänen et al. (2018) argue, digital third spaces facilitate the fluid movement between different identities and cultural narratives, allowing marginalized voices, such as those of asylum seekers and refugees, to articulate their experiences and aspirations in a way that might be constrained in traditional, physical spaces. This hybridity is particularly significant in the context of refugee discourses, where the digital realm provides a platform for the enactment of agency and the assertion of identity amidst physical immobility. According to Chouliaraki/Musarò (2017), these spaces enable a form of digital mobility that allows individuals to engage in global conversations, advocate for their rights, and mobilize support, effectively transforming their digital presence into a form of social and political action. As we will illustrate, in these cases, digital third spaces are

not merely virtual meeting points but are crucial in reconfiguring power dynamics and fostering inclusivity within the broader spectrum of multimodal communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 *Approach*

This article seeks to explore how the detained refugees selected for the study tapped into the in-built multi-semiotic resources of X to produce their own perspectives on the pandemic crisis from detention. In particular, the investigation examines how the verbal mode interacts with other digital modes of communication to construct a particular discursive representation of *digital mobility* and/versus *permanent/temporary physical immobility* in the context of the global health crisis.

Applying the analytical tools of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), the analysis focuses on the multimodal strategies used by the detained refugees to construct socio-digital actors and events as they are represented within the digital and the detention environment (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021; Kress 2010). In line with the aforementioned lens of Critical Discursive approaches to social media (Ledin/Machin 2019; Wodak/Meyer 2001), the investigation explores the interconnections between the macro-level of the analysis, that is the situational context in which the multimodal content is produced, and the micro-level, which includes the multimodal text in which the represented participants and events are presented (Ledin/Machin 2019).

For the categorization of socio-digital actors, the present analysis draws upon the Social-Actor Network developed by van Leeuwen (1996), which offers an articulate ‘socio-semantic inventory’ for the analysis of participants in given communicative events. Darics and Koller (2019, 222) have further elaborated a three-step model based on van Leeuwen’s analytical taxonomy, which comprises the following stages: a) identifying the explicit and implicit social actors (or represented participants), defining their agency (or the lack thereof) and the relationship between the communicators (or image-makers) and their audience (or viewers); b) inferring the ideologies that underlie the social actor and event representation; and c) recognizing the intentions of the communicators. The implementation of the Social-Actor Network on multimodal discourse, also called Visual Social-Actor Network, has proven particu-

larly useful for MCDA scholars who have applied it in a variety of contexts (see e.g., Silva Bezerra 2020; van Leeuwen 2014; Sunderland/McGlashan 2012). In this context, exploring how the notions of *mobility/immobility* are multimodally constructed by refugees in the digital discourse and the detention context may provide some insights into the ideological standpoint embedded in the multimodal text (Darics/Koller 2019; Koller 2020).

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar is applied to identify the multimodal strategies used by refugees to construct their *mobile/immobile* visual representations (2021, 49). Visual grammar has been defined by the two scholars as 'an account of the explicit and implicit knowledge of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication' (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 43). In other words, the authors' visual grammar provides a set of combinatory principles for identifying visual conventions in the analysis of multisemiotic artefacts, while also offering insights into the components of visual content within a specific socio-cultural context. Visual Grammar will be employed in conjunction with the Visual Social-Actor Network (van Leeuwen 1996). In light of the above, the research questions that guide the investigation are so formulated:

rQ1. What kind of multimodal discourses are articulated by refugees in the digital third space of X/Twitter to construct *mobility/immobility* during the COVID19 pandemic?

rQ2. What multimodal strategies are used to construct these visual discourses?

The analysis will ultimately seek to understand how the socio-digital actors and events are multimodally constructed in the corpus under investigation, what kind of agency they exhibit, what their relationship is with the audience and what their communicative intentions are within the socio-digital landscape under investigation.

3.2 Data

Due to the recently introduced limitation of API-based data collection methods, the web scraping tool Zeeschuimer was used. Zeeschuimer is a browser extension that enables users to capture and gather digital data while browsing social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, LinkedIn, among others. Once collected, the retrieved data was exported as a JSON file

and then converted into a *xlsx*. file. Posts were exported in combination with the associated metadata, which included X name, user ID, username, date, and time as well as URLs, photos, replies count, retweets count, likes count, mentions, hashtags, and the link of the tweet. All tweets posted individually by each X user were collected and then manually filtered based on whether they referenced the pandemic, either implicitly or explicitly. The final corpus includes 420 tweets posted during the covid-19 pandemic (specifically from March to October 2020), 15 047 words, and 242 images.

The corpus was designed following the ‘sampling by individuals’ criterion, which is based on participants’ socio-demographic features (Androutsopoulos 2013, 238-39). For the current investigation, the sample of X users was heterogeneous, in that it included four different users, all male, with different years of age, belonging to different ethno-cultural and national groups. These refugees were selected on the ground of their intense tweeting activity and shared experience, as they were all detained in Melbourne’s Mantra Hotel and subsequently in the Park Hotel at the time of the data collection. Both the Mantra Hotel and Park Hotel are part of the network of Alternative Places of Detention (APODs) (see Section 1).

Once the corpus was compiled via Zeeschuimer, the visual contents were downloaded onto the picture section of an Excel spreadsheet. Images were tagged according to the visual themes represented in the corpus under investigation. In order to address our research questions, a Hashtag Frequency List was retrieved to identify the most recurring themes of discussion articulated by refugees on the digital environment under investigation (Table 1). Secondly, the visual contents were uploaded onto the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) Atlas.ti, where thematic codes were applied to sort them into emerging visual discursive categories. During the first round of multimodal coding, the corpus was mapped using the quotation tool to gain insights into the macro-thematic visual categories. In the second round of coding, more precise codes were applied to classify the visual data systematically. A total of 8 codes/visual themes were assigned in this second phase, as outlined in Table 2.

4. ETHICS

With the ‘mass growth of visual-heavy social media platforms’, ethical questions surrounding image-based Internet research have become central to

academic research (Warfield et al. 2019, 2). Since there is little established literature on how to handle ethical quandaries in visual research, Markham and Buchanan have argued that ethical-decision making should ‘remain flexible and be responsive to diverse contexts’, as the specificities of Internet research might be diverse and ever changing (2012, 5). When assessing potential risks connected to using visual content retrieved from the Web, there are several factors that should be considered, such as the status of the content producer and the sensitivity of the published data, among others. To put it in another way, well-balanced ethical decisions should combine research deontology with platform policy, safeguarding research participants.

To come to terms with these issues, recent codes of ethics have maintained that, when reporting results related to visual data retrieved from social media, a fundamental inescapable step is to inform research participants and ask them for consent in all circumstances (e.g., Ahmed et al. 2017; Williams et al. 2017). This is also essential for the honesty and accountability of reporting, and to maintaining the participants’ trust (Ahmed et al. 2017, 92). According to Fiesler and Proferes, minimizing risks and maximizing benefits should be “a large part of the ethical calculus” of visual research (2018, 9). This implies that the research needs to benefit those involved, and that the benefits for conducting it are expected to overcome the risks to which research participants might be exposed during the research work.

Therefore, for the current paper, ad-hoc precautions were considered to protect refugees’ best interests. These crucially involved the collection of informed consent before the use and publication of their own posts in academic research. Another important ethical move was the involvement of a gatekeeper in the formulation of best practices to approach potential research participants, i.e., Omid Tofighian, an activist and academic based in Australia who has been engaged in the fight for human rights of asylum seekers and refugees. Being a trusted insider member of the refugee community, he has played a crucial role in building a communicative bridge and a network of trust between the refugees and the researchers.

On the other hand, visual data circulating across web platforms have proven pivotal for radically excluded individuals to acquire a space of visibility and social participation both in digital and non-digital contexts. Excessive privacy or confidentiality might in fact perpetuate a model that ‘sees participants as always vulnerable and in need of protection by researchers rather than providing participants with agency and potentially social capital’ (Warfield et al. 2019, 11). In light of this, the choice of displaying posts with their

original authors was motivated by the fact that refugees are/were aware of the public exposure attainable through the platform.

Moreover, at the time of writing, the research subjects in this study are public figures, both nationally and internationally, and therefore did not require anonymity. The majority of participants have already engaged in extensive public activities, including appearances on television, participation in public rallies, involvement in refugee-related events, and attendance at academic conferences and non-academic festivals. Some have exhibited artwork, released songs and films, produced documentaries, or relocated outside the control of the Australian government. Given their established public profiles, the risk of harm resulting from their participation was therefore considered to be minimal. Overall, the potential benefits of the study were carefully weighed against any potential risks, which were deemed negligible due to the participants' prior public exposure. As will become clear in the following analysis, using *x is/was* ultimately viewed as a way of claiming their visibility back and of raising their individual and collective voices within a public setting in a time of crisis.

5. RESULTS

5.1 *Hashtags Analysis*

A Hashtag Frequency List was retrieved to identify the most recurring themes of discussion articulated by refugees on the digital environment under investigation (Table 1). As mentioned above, the main purpose of hashtagging is to categorize posts under the same semantic label on a social media platform at a given time (Ichau/Frissen 2019, 6). The Hashtag Frequency List revealed that the most frequent hashtags in the corpus revolved around different themes; a) *politics*, #auspol, #ausgvt; b) the *pandemic*, such as #covid19, #covid, #coronavirus; c) *detention locations*, i.e., #mantra, #manus, #nauru, #png; d) *liberation slogans*, such as #freedom, #gameover, #releasethemen, #nophonesnolife, and e) *self-referential hashtags*, i.e., #refugees, and #asylum-seekers.

In regard to the category of *politics*, the hashtag #auspol (114 hits), which stands for Australian politics, started to be used ever more frequently 'in early 2010 and [nowadays] is widely held to be the co-ordinator of general discussion of everyday political events in Australia' (Caple 2018, 91-92). Therefore, the widespread use of this hashtag highlighted that, with their tweeting prac-

tice, refugees not only aimed at entering the Australian political discourse and consequently gathering likeminded social media users, but also that national politics were/are closely interrelated with the refugee issue and its management, particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unsurprisingly, hashtags referring to the COVID-19 pandemic are the second most prevalent category in the corpus, i.e., #covid19 (89 hits), #covid (5 hits), #coronavirus (3 hits). These hashtags hint at the temporal context of the tweets, that is at the global health crisis arising and worsening during those months. In this case, hashtags constructed a form of ‘searchable talk’ for the general social media audience, who could be interested in getting information or accidentally read about the dire situation of refugees in detention (Zappavigna 2015, 9). Using unspecific hashtags would in fact increase the possibilities to inform as many social media users as possible as well as demand a collective acknowledgement of their risky condition while pleading for a form of commitment by the government.

Detention locations expressed in the form of hashtags –i.e., #mantra (Mantra Hotel) (15 hits), #manus (Manus Regional Processing Center) (6 hits), #nauru (Manus Regional Processing Center) (5 hits), #png (Papua New Guinea) (3 hits)– could be defined as geotags, in that they provided the geolocation of the unfolding events described or mentioned in the tweets (e.g. Yilmaz/Hero 2018). Accordingly, this user-generated geographic information could be interpreted as an attempt to re-localize posts once they were disseminated into the digital environment. In other words, these hashtags attributed geographic spatiality to the post and informed the digital audience about the specific location where events were occurring at the time of tweeting. Notwithstanding their physical confinement/immobility, through spatial hashtags, refugees managed to geographically locate the discourses produced from detention within the digital space, thus attaining mobility in the digital third space.

The category of *detention locations*, which hints at a spatial and geographical type of immobility, stands in semantic opposition to the category of *liberation slogans*. The category of *liberation slogans* includes hashtags that requested the release of detainees, e.g., #releasethemen (5 hits), the end of the detention regime (#gameover, 101 hits), while claiming the refugees’ #freedom (10 hits) back, thus the recovery of their physical mobility. Interestingly, #nophonesnolife (3 hits) is a slogan that pointed to the vital importance of mobile phones and internet access within detention, allowing detainees to expose their life to the outer world during the COVID-19 pandemic and denounce a state of emergency because of the risk of infection.

#	HASHTAG*	FREQUENCY
1	#auspol	114
2	#gameover	101
3	#covid19	89
4	#mantra	15
5	#refugees	10
6	#freedom	10
7	#unhcr	9
8	#ausgvt	9
9	#manus	6
10	#covid	5
11	#asylumseekers	5
12	#releasethemen	5
13	#nauru	5
14	#coronavirus	3
15	#nophonesnolife	3
16	#png	3

Table 1. Hashtag Frequency List (*case insensitive).

5.2 *Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis*

The preliminary thematic classification showed that x provided a fertile ground for the production of multimodal meanings within the digital communicative practices enacted by refugees. The most recurring visual themes in the corpus under investigation were PEACEFUL PROTEST, ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS, PRO-REFUGEE PROTESTS, VIDEOS, DETENTION CONDITIONS, SATIRICAL VIGNETTES AND SELFIES. Of course, the boundaries among the identified micro-thematic categories were not necessarily clear-cut, given that different semantic meanings coexisted and could be enacted simultaneously in the same visual representation. However, for the sake of classification, images were coded according to the predominant visual category. In order to systematize the analysis, the presentation of findings is divided into three different subsections, the Multimodal Discursive Representation of Im/Mobility through Peaceful Protests, Arts, and Mobile Phones. However, as mentioned above, only a few examples were chosen as the most representative of each multimodal discourse. These are analyzed in detail in the following sections.

#	VISUAL THEMES	Nº OF IMAGES	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	Peaceful protest	189	68 %
2	Artistic productions	10	16 %
3	Videos	16	7 %
4	Pro-refugee protests	8	3 %
5	Remediated posts	8	3 %
6	Detention conditions	7	2 %
7	Satirical vignettes	3	1 %
8	Selfies	1	0 %
		Tot. 242	100 %

Table 2. Visual themes in the corpus under investigation.

5.2.1 The Multimodal Discursive Representation of Im/Mobility through Peaceful Protests

The first visual theme, that is the Multimodal Discursive Representation of Im/Mobility through Peaceful Protests, comprises the largest number of visual contents in the investigated corpus (See Table 2). This subsection examines how through protest actions asylum seekers and refugees elaborate experiences of constrained or resisted mobility through performative modes of expression, such as banners, placards, and the strategic occupation of space to convey political messages. Peaceful protests are analyzed not only as acts of resistance but also as discursive sites where discourses of border enforcement and demands for freedom of movement are symbolically negotiated.

The post in example 1 was published on the platform by Farhad Bandesh, on March 28th, 2020, during a month-long protest that was initiated by detainees due to their growing perceptions of health insecurity. More specifically, concerns were raised and voiced on this occasion due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 outside detention and the fact that the APOD guards and service operators were not following the prevention measures issued by the government to avoid transmitting the infection when entering the hotel facilities.

The setting in which the protesters are standing validates their preoccupations, in that the hotel corridor seems to be a cramped and claustrophobic space with limited room to stand, limited light and air ventilation. As a matter of fact, those in the foreground are crouching down to make room for those standing behind them –the former covering their faces with the posters (possibly to avoid repercussions following their demonstration), the latter crossing

their fists in sign of dissent. The photograph attached to the post, in this regard, follows a naturalistic coding orientation, i.e., it shows reality in a documentary style specifically serving a reporting function (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 363). In fact, the purpose of the visual content is to document the protest, deliver a message of denunciation, and persuade the viewer of its legitimacy.

Despite the lack of space that forces them to squeeze in a spatially constrained setting, refugees represent themselves as a cohesive group by means of their collectively organized peaceful protest and by holding posters that acquire a global semantic meaning only if displayed and read together. This is visually achieved through the strategy of association, which refers to the representation of social actors as a group (van Leeuwen 1996, 49). Textually, the collective entity is made explicit at the beginning of the tweet, 'We Refugees', while, multimodally, it is associated with the photographed protesters and virtually with other detained refugees incarcerated within the Australian mandatory detention system during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Example 1.

The capitalized text 'WHO IS RESPONSIBLE OF THIS IF ONE OF US GETS COVID-19' is an explicit call for accountability from the service operators that are in charge of the functioning of the APOD (i.e., the multinational SERCO Group,

the International Health and Medical Services organization, the Manufacturing Modernisation Fund, and the federal agency Australian Border Force), but also from the Australian government, which is backgrounded in the text in relation to the protest, but mentioned elsewhere in the tweet (van Leeuwen 1996, 44), i.e., in the comment of another X user who replies ‘I’m so sorry for my disgraceful government 😞’.

The detainees are captured while holding handwritten posters that read ‘WE DO NOT WANT TO GET COVID19’, ‘#COVID19 28 March 2020’ and ‘#GameOver’. It is interesting to note that #Covid19 and #GameOver are hashtags that are also used within the verbal part of the tweet, which contributes to the construction of the peaceful protest as an event that takes place both online and offline, in the digital third space. In so doing, hashtags enhance transmediation processes (Chouliaraki/Musarò 2017), that is, the circulation and mobility/mobilization of multisemiotic resources (in this instance a hashtag) from offline to online contexts, i.e., from handwritten posters shown in a corridor of the Mantra Hotel to the digital environment of X/Twitter.

In Example 2, published on April 10th, 2020, the peaceful protest that originated inside detention is extended to include Australian civil society. In the post, Thanush Selvarasa communicates the refugees’ frustration for not being able to express their gratitude towards the protesters who gathered outside the Mantra Hotel, both to show support to the detainees and indignation towards the Australian government. More specifically, the tweet denounces that they were hindered and prevented from doing so by the ‘Hotel Management and security’, even when they resorted to handwritten messages on paper. Interestingly, Thanush is conceptually framing the possibility of showing gratitude as a fundamental human right, comparing their situation to that of ‘slave[s]’, and therefore lamenting their silencing (expressive immobility/immobilization).

Multimodally, the construction of mobility *vs* immobility is achieved through the attachment of two different photographs, which stand in striking contrast, each representing its opposite: on the left-hand side, the inmates are shown from behind while holding posters that point towards the crowd outside, which is visible only from their perspective. On the right-hand side, the photograph pictures the outside of the Mantra Hotel, recognizable from the fence and a man dressed in black, probably a security guard. Conceptualizing color as a semantic marker, (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021), it could be argued that the black fence, or the black color, is contrasted by a number of different colored balloons; the former symbolizing isolation, confinement and oppression and the latter freedom and liberation, which is deeply desired by the detainees.

 @thanush_selva

We couldn't thank the people who came to support us, so we wrote "Thank you" in a peice show them but the hotel Management and security shed us not to do this. Aren't we allowed to express our gratitude, dont we have a fundamental rights, are we a slave. #COVID19 #mantra #auspol



2:35 PM · Apr 10, 2020



Example 2.

The posters, although shown in reverse, read: ‘LET US FREE’, ‘SET US FREE’, ‘WHAT WAS OUR FAULT’. This series of slogans displayed by the protesters play a significant role in the multimodal construction of Im/Mobility via peaceful protests. Moreover, the use of object pronouns and possessive adjectives (i.e., us/our) in these texts distinctly separates ‘us’ from ‘them’, as emphasized by van Leeuwen (1996, 52). Interestingly, ‘Mantra Hotel’ –which accounts for a digital ‘integrated text’ (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 468)– was added in yellow and placed at the bottom of the right-hand picture, perhaps to contribute to the spatial/geographical interpretation of the picture. This intertextually relates to the hashtag #mantra that closes the verbal part of the tweet, a spatial hashtag that similarly pinpoints the real location of the refugees’ activities. If, on the one hand, the detainees use handwritten posters to assert their presence and demonstrate symbolic resistance within the walls of the Mantra Hotel, on the other hand, the transmediation of hashtags from protest signs to digital platforms illustrates a multimodal enactment of agency, enabling meaning-making across online and offline contexts and fostering collective solidarity through digital semiotics.

5.2.2 The Multimodal Discursive Representation of Im/Mobility through Arts

The second analytical subsection, that is the Multimodal Discursive Representation of Im/Mobility through Arts, includes the categories of ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS, VIDEOS, and SATIRICAL VIGNETTES. This subsection focuses on how various forms of artistic expression are employed to communicate experiences of mobility and immobility. Through these multimodal artefacts, asylum seekers and refugees persistently contest their socio-spatial conditions, which allows them to reimagine their positioning through artistic skills and aesthetic resources.

The following tweets exemplify the digital artwork created by one of the detainees, Farhad Bandesh. Specifically, example 3, posted on June 1st, 2020, represents the figure of a bird that flies out of his cage, escaping captivity. The flying bird metaphorically symbolizes the artist's willingness to escape the imprisonment and confinement he experiences in detention. While this image conveys freedom and mobility, with this tweet, he complains about the impossibility of finishing his digital artwork, allegedly because his computer was confiscated ('I'm not allowed to have my computer. Why?'). The artistic talent of the refugee is therefore arbitrarily and voluntarily suppressed, leading to his artistic and expressive immobility/immobilization.

In terms of color choice, the artist uses the black color for the background and the white color for the bird and the cage with the open gate,



Example 3.

probably to play with the darkness/lightness contrast (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 342). The elements in white are in fact the most salient and compelling parts of the artistic representation, essentializing the message of communication: (the desire of) freedom/freeing oneself. Moreover, a grey figure seems to emerge from the right-hand side of the background. However, considering the low modality of the depiction (i.e., the unrealistic representation of the artwork subject), it is hard to distinguish what it is precisely (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 304).

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The artwork attached to Example 4, which was posted on June 9th, 2020, is also in black and white. The absence of color has a strong visual impact, emphasizing the act of breaking one's chains and freeing oneself, i.e., a quintessential act turning immobility into mobility, oppression into liberation. The broken chain, which is also the most salient and informative element of the artwork, is emblematic in this regard, in that it occupies a central position in the visual composition (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 352). Moreover, the written slogans 'IT IS OVER' on the top and 'NO MORE PRISONER' at the bottom confer semantic coherence to the artwork, making it a composite visual, i.e., the integrated text synergically interacts with the visual elements.

Regarding the latter, the broken pieces of metal that are produced as a result of the prisoner's liberation convey dynamism and action to the whole composition, and more generally the representation of this liberatory act evokes the restoration and re-affirming of one's agency. The refugee and artist's dignity is reclaimed also through his personal signature, which occupies the bottom left-hand side of the artwork. Given that the drawing cannot be signed manually, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2021, 440), 'electronic signatures can now be synthesized, using digitally designed "handwriting" fonts', which nonetheless attribute authenticity and uniqueness to the refugee's piece of art.



Example 4.

Examples 5 and 6 account for an appeal to the global artistic community to contribute to supporting and fighting for the recognition of the refugees' rights. Thus, mobility is here understood in terms of the mobilization of the refugees' support network at a global level. From a textual perspective, Example 5, which was posted on June 30th, 2020, opens with an imperative in capitalized letters 'DON'T BE SILENT' and continues with a direct address to the art community, which comprises 'artists, painters, writers, actors, dancers, movie directors, film producers, songwriters, poets, instrument makers, teachers, sculptures, jewelers'. The self-representation of the detained refugees and the other-representation of their allies is achieved through the strategy of association, whereby these collective groups are constructed linguistically by means of inclusive pronouns, that is 'us' for the refugees, and 'you' for the art community (van Leeuwen 1996, 49). Implicitly, through the pronoun 'I', Farhad Bandesh includes himself in the artist community and therefore implicitly entitles himself to submit this explicit request to his community of belonging.



Example 5.



Example 6.

At a visual level, the attached picture represents a raised fist, which traditionally symbolizes strength and resistance against an oppressor or an inflicted injustice but also solidarity and cohesion among oppressed people who get together to combat a common enemy (Seravalle 2018; see also Davidson/Blair 2018). The clenched fist, in this case, constitutes a 'demand image' (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 312), whereby a social response is demanded from the digital audience, that is the need to join the refugees in their struggle to have their rights recognized and respected. This is further corroborated at a textual level, in that the tweet closes with 'Refugees need you stand up and fight for the refugees rights'.

Example 6 resonates with the previous in terms of the involvement of the art and music community in the fight for the refugees' rights. In this spe-

cific instance, Farhad Bandesh is promoting the release of his new song ‘Friendship’, which ‘is about the friendship between someone who is a refugee and someone they have never been able to meet’, due to the marginalization practices to which refugees have been subject. Through the publication of this tweet, the artist seems to have reposted a message published on another social media site while attaching a YouTube link to his new song for the virtual public to listen. This digital practice enhances an intermediation process (Chouliaraki/Musarò 2017), which refers to the horizontal circulation of discourses (i.e., the solidarity and support between the refugee and the artist community) and multisemiotic resources (i.e., the YouTube link) across the digital media contexts (i.e., third spaces). The alliance between artists and musicians further engenders a third space of artistic collaboration where ‘there are no borders’. In other words, by reaching out to a broader artistic community online, they transform individual aesthetic expressions into collective political counteraction, forging empathetic connections across geographical borders and digital platforms, and prompting broader mobilization. In conclusion, this analytical subsection demonstrates how refugees use (digital) art as an empowering tool to assert themselves and exercise their suppressed agency. Even within the harsh confines of detention, in fact, they succeed in creating multimodal artworks that transcend physical boundaries and function as both personal acts of resistance and collectively shared political statements.

5.2.3 The Multimodal Discursive Representation of Im/Mobility through Phones

This third analytical subsection overlaps partially with the previous one in that it includes the categories of DETENTION CONDITIONS but also ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS, VIDEO, and SATIRICAL VIGNETTES. This subsection epitomizes how mobile phones function as key instruments for enhancing users’ visibility and offering a space to represent their experiences of immobility to external communities, while also serving as tools of control and surveillance, enforced through political maneuvers and securitizing policies.

For instance, the tweet in example 7 was published on August 31st, 2020, following the attempt by former Minister Alan Tudge to introduce the Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill (Law Council of Australia 2020), which would allow officers ‘to search for and

seize mobile phones, tablets and other internet enabled devices' in immigration detention facilities (Tudge 2020). The Minister motivated this decision affirming that 'detainees have used mobile phones to conduct criminal activities such as fraud, drug deals, the grooming of children and other child exploitation offences' and therefore urged the passing of the legislation (Tudge 2020).



Example 7.

This statement followed allegations of child exploitation against a detainee, who had been accused of circulating thousands of exploitative images through his mobile phone. Eventually, the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs vetoed the amendments, raising concerns on the unconstitutionality of the Bill, including that 'prohibiting mobile phones in immigration detention will unreasonably limit detainees' rights to privacy and political communication, and contact with family members and legal representatives» with the consequence of infringing 'detainees' personal rights

and liberties» (Petrie/Spinks 2020, 3). Hence, this effort to isolate and prevent refugees from communicating with the outside world paradoxically revealed the vital importance of mobile phones inside detention contexts.

The image attached to the tweet is a self-produced satirical vignette (which also accounts for a type of artistic production), which criticizes the abovementioned Bill by representing the monstrous caricatures of two politicians, who advocate for the confiscation of the detained refugees' mobile devices while the latter, on the other side of the detention fence, are talking on their phones with their loved ones. The image viewer, in this instance, is invited to take the perspective of the inmates in that they stand on this side of the fence, holding the refugees' phones in their hands and video calling their family members. This can be clearly deduced from the squared speech bubbles comprising: 'Hey my dear' 'Hey my wife our kid is fine? Love you' 'Hiii son' 'Hi my friend. They want to take the phone'. On the opposite side of the fence, the two politicians echo each other in a dialogue the first saying 'Confiscate the phones' and the second replying 'OH YESSS', thus expressing their willingness to carry out their punitive political agenda.

The politicians are the most salient elements of the vignette in the visual composition, clearly recognizable from their smart suits and ties. Color saturation is here full-scale, conferring the image a low modality, i.e., a non-naturalistic look (Kress/van Leeuwen 2021, 352). Being highly saturated, colors create the effect of two unempathetic personalities, with an empty and frightening gaze, who only strive to obtain their political goals, notwithstanding the affective and relational world of people in detention. In terms of framing, they are positioned beyond the fence, even though bits of telephonic conversation trespass the detention limit to apparently reach them. In this sense, mobile phones become tools of everyday agency for refugees, enabling forms of emotional survival within highly regulated and dehumanizing spaces. At the same time, efforts to confiscate or restrict access to these devices illustrate how political actors attempt to suppress this agency by framing phones as security threats. The satirical vignette in Example 7 reveals this tension through visual irony, inviting the viewer to empathize with detainees rather than their political antagonists.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present article investigated asylum seekers and refugees' use of social media in the COVID-19 pandemic, while focusing on how they navigated and expressed their experiences of mobility and immobility during the global

health crisis. In regard to the multimodal discourses articulated by refugees on X/Twitter to construct *mobility/immobility* during the COVID-19 pandemic, the analysis of refugee posts on X/Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the articulation of distinct multimodal discourses used to negotiate identity, agency, and resistance within the constraints of immobility. Central among these is the discourse of peaceful resistance as it challenges dominant media representations that often criminalize or victimize refugees. Alongside this, the discourse of aesthetic reclamation emerged through artistic works that symbolically recast the refugee condition via metaphors of flight, rupture, and empowerment. The latter contributed to the construction not only of presence but also of voice, countering the discourse of invisibilization. A third key discourse was that of digital vigilance, in which the smartphone appears both as a site of connection and surveillance. Posts thematizing the control or denial of digital access foreground the infrastructural politics of mobility, revealing how digital tools mediate power relations between refugees and state actors. Through these interwoven discourses, the digital third space became a terrain for both expressing political subjectivity and enacting virtual mobility in the face of physical containment.

Through the strategic use of hashtags, textual narratives, images, and videos, refugees reasserted their agency and challenged dominant Australian media narratives that portray them as passive victims, while also strategically using the public's experience of temporary immobility to call for a greater attention to their condition. Simultaneously, photos of overcrowded rooms and corridors functioned as evidentiary tools that visualized the suspension of human rights in real time. This digital storytelling transformed X/Twitter into a politicized space of visibility and resistance, where affective appeals and political demands intersected, enabling refugees to claim a form of mediated mobility even while physically immobilized. The multimodal nature of these posts reflects a hybrid discourse that transcends traditional media constraints and foregrounds refugee voices in global conversations on justice and inclusion. In particular, the analysis underscored the critical role of hashtags and visual content in shaping the digital communication practices of detained asylum seekers and refugees on the X platform. By analyzing the hashtags and the visual themes prevalent in their tweets, it revealed how these multisemiotic resources contribute to self-representation, the articulation of discourses, and the consolidation of communicative practices online.

The multimodal analysis revealed that peaceful protests were the most common visual theme, followed by artistic productions, pro-refugee protests,

videos, and representations of detention conditions. Images of peaceful protests documented detainees' health concerns and their calls for accountability, while artistic productions often symbolized their desire for freedom and self-expression. These visual representations not only documented the refugees' experiences but also served to mobilize support and solidarity from a broader audience. Peaceful protest was strategically represented to transform the digital third space of spatial confinement into the space of collective political agency and mobilization. Artistic productions further articulated this dynamic by metaphorically contesting detention and reclaiming aesthetic self-expression, through symbolic imagery such as birds, broken chains, or clenched fists. These multimodal artefacts not only served as a means of self-representation but also as instruments for the mobilization of global solidarity networks. Mobile phones, simultaneously depicted as tools of empowerment and targets of state control, underscored the paradox of communicative mobility under conditions of physical immobility. Collectively, these discourses illustrate how refugees strategically deploy visual, textual, and digital resources to negotiate agency, contest exclusionary policies, and reaffirm their presence in a transnational public sphere.

Moreover, the most frequently used hashtags in the corpus included themes related to politics, the pandemic, detention locations, liberation slogans, and self-referential terms. These hashtags not only categorized posts under specific semantic labels but also facilitated a user-generated system of organizing content and discourse online. The widespread use of political hashtags, such as #auspol and #ausgvt, indicates that refugees were not only aiming to engage with Australian political discourse but also to highlight the intersection of national politics with refugee issues, particularly exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prominence of pandemic-related hashtags like #covid19 and #coronavirus contextualized the tweets within the global health crisis, calling the international community to pay attention to the heightened risks faced by refugees in detention.

Detention location hashtags, such as #mantra, #manus, and #nauru, served as geotags, providing specific geographic information and attempting to re-localize posts within the digital environment. These spatial hashtags allowed refugees to achieve a form of digital mobility, despite their physical confinement. This digital mobility contrasts sharply with their physical immobility, demonstrating how online platforms can create a 'digital third space' where the physically constrained can still engage and interact on a global scale. Liberation slogans like #freedom, #gameover, and #releasethemen underscored the refugees'

demands for release and the restoration of their physical mobility, highlighting their persistent struggle for freedom and dignity.

Overall, this study emphasizes the significance of digital platforms in providing a voice for marginalized groups like asylum seekers and refugees. The interplay between linguistic and visual elements in their tweets highlights how digital communication can serve as a powerful tool for advocacy, awareness-raising, and community-building. The findings illustrate the potential of multimodal discourses to transcend physical boundaries and connect diverse audiences, thereby fostering a more inclusive and informed public discourse on refugee issues. Through their digital practices, refugees navigate and negotiate their mobility and immobility, utilizing digital third spaces to articulate their struggles and aspirations. Most importantly, the shared global experience of restricted movement during the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique moment of identification, which refugees strategically leveraged to highlight their own prolonged experiences of immobility and their unequal condition in regard to safety and health measures. By drawing parallels between pandemic lockdowns and detention, refugees used social media to raise awareness, invoke empathy, and foster solidarity, transforming digital platforms such as x/Twitter into critical arenas for articulating human rights concerns and mobilizing public support. This convergence of shared confinement and digital activism pushes us to reconsider the importance of digital mobility as a site of resistance and visibility during crises.

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