

**Narrating Irregular Migration on TikTok: A Content Analysis of Algerian
Harraga Route Narratives and Their Communicative Framing**
Exploratory content analysis of a purposive corpus of 44 TikTok videos

Sadek BOUGHEZALA

University of BISKRA, sadek-boughezala@univ-biskra.dz

Ahmed Amine FOURAR

University of BISKRA, a.fourar@univ-biskra.dz

Mohamed Taha FRAIDJA

University of BISKRA, mohamed.fraidja@univ-biskra.dz

Belgacem MIRA

University of BISKRA, belgacem.mira@univ-biskra.dz

Nasr eddine HADID

University of ALGIERS 3, nasreddinehadid@gmail.com

Received: 17/04/2026; Accepted: 20/08/2026; Published: 05/10/2026

Abstract

This exploratory study examines how irregular migration associated with Algeria is narrated on TikTok and how the platform's short-video form organizes the migration journey into recurrent symbolic and narrative units. The analysis focuses on the routes, means of crossing, destination references, depictions of departure and arrival, representations of ghorba (life away from home), expressions of success or hardship, and communicative framings through which Harraga migration becomes visible and narratable. Rather than testing whether TikTok causes migration attitudes or intentions, the study treats the platform as a mediated environment in which migration is selected, compressed, emotionally charged, and circulated. A purposive content corpus was constructed from four search groups collected through Apify. The initial retrieval produced 637 raw records; after deduplication by Video ID, 539 unique videos remained. Automated screening and staged manual review produced 158 candidate cases, from which 44 videos were retained for final analysis after direct review and application of explicit relevance criteria. Descriptive analysis shows that maritime or speedboat-related Harraga content constitutes the largest thematic cluster (23 videos, 52.3%), followed by Balkan land routes (10, 22.7%) and direct Harraga discourse or documentation (8, 18.2%). Qualitative analysis identifies competing but overlapping narrative models: migration as a route, speed and crossing as spectacle, arrival and joy as aspirational signs, ghorba as the social and emotional cost of mobility, and hardship or return as counter-narratives. Engagement is highly unequal, indicating that visibility within the selected corpus is concentrated in a small number of highly performing cases. The study concludes that TikTok should not be conceptualized as a single directional force that either encourages or discourages irregular migration. Its communicative significance lies in the coexistence of frames that make migration simultaneously visible, imaginable, desirable, risky, costly, and

contestable. Future audience research is needed to determine how users interpret and act upon these competing narratives.

Keywords: TikTok; irregular migration; Harraga; digital narratives; social representations; framing; migration imaginaries; Algeria

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become part of the communicative infrastructure through which migration is imagined, discussed, documented, and negotiated before, during, and after movement. Information about mobility that was previously concentrated in family networks, face-to-face conversations, migrant intermediaries, or traditional media can now appear as short audiovisual fragments that are searchable, repeatable, remixable, and socially endorsed through engagement. TikTok is particularly consequential because it does not separate message form from message circulation: music, captions, hashtags, comments, visual performance, and platform recommendation are integrated into the same communicative environment. Migration therefore enters the platform not as a stable topic reproduced from the outside but as material that is reformatted according to the logics of short-form video.

This transformation is especially important for irregular migration, because the journey itself can become content. A boat, a border crossing, a route through several countries, a moment of arrival, a residence document, or a description of life abroad can be condensed into a short narrative. Research on migrant TikTok use demonstrates that creators employ the platform to negotiate belonging, identity, visibility, practical knowledge, and aspirations. Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022a, 2022b) show that migrant creators can use TikTok to perform multidimensional identities and platformed forms of belonging, while Cabalquinto (2024) demonstrates that TikTok can also support counter-narratives that foreground exploitation, vulnerability, and the difficulties of life abroad. More recent work further conceptualizes migrant creators as forms of digital migration intermediaries who can connect experience, information, and imagined pathways of mobility (Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2025).

The study of migration content therefore requires analytical attention to narrative construction rather than to the mere presence of migration-related terms. A speedboat can signify transport, but it may also function as a condensed sign of courage, speed, danger, masculinity, or achievement. A route through Turkey and the Balkans can provide more than geography; it can turn an apparently distant and uncertain journey into a sequence of named places. Likewise, the Arabic expression *ghorba* connects irregular movement to the emotional and social consequences of living away from family and place of origin. The meaning of migration emerges through relations among these elements.

The Algerian context provides a particularly relevant case. Harraga is a locally established term associated with irregular migration, especially unauthorized sea crossings. Existing Algerian research has already identified social media as an important communicative space surrounding irregular migration, including studies focusing on Facebook and TikTok (Berghouti&Messani, 2024; Ben Rayala &Jafjafa, 2021; Adda, 2025). Yet the specific narrative organization of Harraga content on TikTok remains less developed in the literature

than broader questions about social-media influence. The present study addresses this gap by examining the communicative construction of irregular migration itself.

The paper deliberately avoids the claim that TikTok directly causes a desire to migrate. Such a claim would require audience-level exposure measures, attitudinal data, longitudinal evidence, or another design capable of distinguishing exposure from selection and prior predispositions. The present research has none of these. It is instead a content study concerned with what kinds of migration meanings are made available, repeated, and made salient within a purposively selected TikTok corpus. This distinction is central to the manuscript because visibility, circulation, and narrative salience are not equivalent to persuasion or behavioral influence.

2. Research Problem and Questions

The central problem addressed by this study is the transformation of irregular migration from an event into a platform-specific narrative object. On TikTok, the journey may be represented through a small vocabulary of recurring signs: speedboat, route, Balkan countries, Europe, ghorba, arrival, joy, cost, difficulty, return, or legal status. These elements do not carry a single predetermined meaning. Their significance depends on what the video foregrounds and what it leaves outside the frame. The research problem therefore concerns the narrative and framing processes through which irregular migration from Algeria becomes communicatively intelligible on TikTok.

Main research question: How is irregular migration associated with Algerian Harraga constructed and framed in TikTok content, and what communicative meanings are attached to the journey, the crossing, arrival, and life abroad?

Subquestions: (1) Which migration themes, routes, and symbolic markers recur most visibly in the purposive corpus? (2) How are the journey, means of crossing, destinations, and migrant identities represented? (3) Which framing patterns emphasize aspiration, success, adventure, normalization, hardship, risk, cost, return, or human-interest meanings? (4) How does the semantic field of ghorba connect the journey to post-arrival experience? (5) What does the distribution of engagement indicators suggest about unequal visibility within the selected corpus, and what cannot those indicators legitimately demonstrate?

3. Objectives of the Study

The study pursues five objectives: first, to describe the structure of the selected TikTok corpus and its dominant thematic clusters; second, to identify recurring narrative models through which Harraga migration is rendered meaningful; third, to analyze the framing of routes, boats, destinations, arrival, hardship, and return; fourth, to interpret the communicative role of recurring symbolic terms such as Harraga and ghorba within Algerian migration discourse; and fifth, to examine the relation between narrative form and platform visibility without conflating engagement with audience influence.

4. Scientific Significance

The study contributes to migration and communication research in three ways. Conceptually, it brings together Social Representations Theory and Framing Theory to explain how a complex social process is compressed into memorable platform-native symbols. Uses and Gratifications is retained only as an audience-contextual lens: it reminds the researcher that

content may be sought for information, identity, curiosity, entertainment, or social interaction, but no audience motivations are empirically measured here (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The aspiration-capability perspective similarly provides an interpretive vocabulary for distinguishing imaginability from actual mobility rather than serving as an outcome model (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

Empirically, the paper adds a TikTok-specific Algerian case to a growing international literature on migrant self-representation, digital migration mediation, and migration imaginaries. Methodologically, it demonstrates a transparent corpus-construction pathway from a large retrieval pool to a tightly relevant purposive sample, while explicitly acknowledging the limits of single-coder analysis and nonprobability sampling.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Social Representations Theory

Social Representations Theory, associated most prominently with Moscovici, examines how social groups transform complex objects into shared forms of everyday knowledge through communication, interpretation, and circulation. Rather than treating social knowledge as a simple transmission of expert information, the theory foregrounds the processes through which people make unfamiliar or complicated phenomena familiar, concrete, and discussable. Migration is particularly suitable for this perspective because it exists simultaneously as a legal category, an economic strategy, a family concern, a moral issue, and an imagined future. In the present corpus, objectification is visible in the condensation of irregular migration into a limited symbolic vocabulary. Speedboats, sea crossings, Balkan countries, Europe, arrival, and ghorba can function as mnemonic units that allow migration to be represented without narrating its entire complexity. The term *Harraga* itself is a powerful shorthand. It identifies a migration practice while also invoking a culturally recognizable social type. The communicative process is therefore not only descriptive. It organizes knowledge through recurrent signs and stories.

The relevance of Social Representations Theory becomes stronger when contradictory elements coexist. Social representations are not necessarily internally homogeneous. Alternative representations can coexist within a wider field of meaning, allowing an object to be understood through competing images (Gillespie, 2008). In this corpus, migration can simultaneously be represented as a dream, a route, a gamble, an achievement, a source of money, a painful separation, a failure, or a humanitarian event. Such plurality is analytically important because it prevents the researcher from assigning a single ideological meaning to the entire sample.

5.2 Framing Theory

Framing Theory provides a second level of explanation. Entman (1993) conceptualizes framing as the selection and salience of some aspects of perceived reality over others. A frame can define a problem, suggest causal interpretations, convey moral evaluation, and imply possible responses. In migration communication, this means that a video showing the same event can construct different meanings depending on whether it centers the route, the danger, the migrant's personal story, the arrival scene, the emotional experience, or the economic outcome.

The corpus demonstrates the usefulness of this perspective because the semantic center of migration shifts from one video to another. “My journey from Algeria to Europe via the Turkey-Balkans route” centers experience and geography. “Indescribable joy” centers affect. “Life abroad is difficult” combined with a stated cost and return centers consequence and counter-experience. These differences are not cosmetic. They shape the interpretive structure within which viewers encounter the phenomenon.

TikTok intensifies framing because the platform requires content to be compressed into highly economical audiovisual units. Titles, captions, hashtags, facial expression, movement, music, editing, and visual selection can all contribute to salience. The platform does not determine a frame, but it creates affordances that reward compact, recognizable, and emotionally legible narratives. Research on Canadian immigration content similarly shows that TikTok can host competing positive, informational, community-oriented, and exclusionary frames rather than a single stable discourse (Hollingshead et al., 2026).

5.3 Uses and Gratifications as an Audience-Context Lens

Uses and Gratifications theory argues that media users are not passive recipients but may select content to satisfy needs such as information, entertainment, identity, personal relevance, and social interaction (Blumler & Katz, 1974). The theory is not tested directly in this content study because no audience data were collected. Its value here is methodological: the same Harraga video may be encountered as information by one user, entertainment by another, a personal identification resource by a third, or an object of criticism by a fourth. Consequently, no narrative category in the present paper should be treated as producing a uniform audience response.

5.4 Aspiration, Capability, and Migration Imaginaries

Carling and Schewel (2018) distinguish aspiration to migrate from the ability to realize mobility. This distinction is useful because a person can desire migration without possessing the resources or opportunity to undertake it. In digital environments, a route narrative may reduce the cognitive distance between “wanting to leave” and “imagining how leaving could happen,” but such imaginability is not equivalent to capability or behavior.

The broader concept of migration imaginaries is therefore used in this paper as an interpretive bridge. A migration imaginary involves a socially available picture of a possible future: where one might go, how one might travel, what life abroad might look like, what costs might be incurred, and what kind of person the migrant might become. Recent studies show that social-media content can be associated with migration aspirations in audience research, but such findings come from designs that include actual survey or interview evidence and should not be transferred causally to a content-only study (Meierrieks & Stier, 2025; De-Santis & Torres-Toukourmidis, 2026).

6. Previous Studies and Research Gap

The international literature on TikTok and migration increasingly moves beyond the question of whether migrants use the platform and asks how migration is performed, narrated, and negotiated. Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022a) analyzed 198 videos associated with Latin American migrants in Spain and the United States and showed that platformed belonging is expressed through aspirational, performative, and self-governing practices. Jaramillo-Dent et al.

(2022b), drawing on 252 videos and interviews with immigrant creators, further demonstrated that migrant creators construct multiple personas and negotiate algorithmic visibility rather than presenting a singular “migrant” identity. Jaramillo-Dent (2022) also documented how immigrant creators use platform vernaculars to manage algorithmic visibility.

Cabalquinto (2024) shifted attention toward the counter-narrative function of migrant TikTok content. His analysis of 100 #OFW videos found that creators foregrounded workplace hardship, precarious resources, abuse, and the self-responsibilization of migrants. This is significant for the present study because it shows that social-media migration discourse is not equivalent to promotion. Cabalquinto and Soriano (2025) extend this line by conceptualizing migrant creators as emerging digital brokers who can assemble migration pathways, construct credibility, and contribute to migration imaginaries through TikTok’s participatory and affective features.

Folino Juanola (2025) analyzed 66 TikTok videos and 7,373 comments concerning migration journeys through the Darién Gap and emphasized the value of first-person migration content as experiential knowledge and as a counter-space from which migrants can narrate otherwise difficult-to-see experiences. Ramírez Plascencia et al. (2025) showed that TikTok can contribute to social representations of migration and the American Dream among Latin American users, while their 2026 study draws attention to aspirational narratives and the risks associated with trafficking and migration mediation on the platform. Çakıcı and Meriç (2024) likewise demonstrate that TikTok can be used institutionally to communicate migration-related information and personal narratives.

Audience-oriented research provides a complementary but methodologically distinct perspective. Meierrieks and Stier (2025), using survey and interview data from Senegal, report a positive association between viewing migrant social-media content and migration aspirations. De-Santis and Torres-Toukoumidis (2026), based on a survey of 1,048 young people in Ecuador, examine migration imaginaries and the role of traditional and social platforms in perception and decision-making. These studies are relevant because they show why audience analysis matters, but they also clarify the boundary of the present paper: content analysis identifies symbolic resources available in the media environment; it does not measure individual responses to those resources.

In the Algerian literature, Berghouti and Messani (2024) examine Facebook as a site where images, videos, and information can facilitate particular perceptions of irregular migration, while Ben Rayala and Jafjafa (2021) directly connect TikTok discourse to Algerian youth and irregular migration. Adda (2025) addresses youth attitudes toward irregular migration in the context of social-media reliance. The present study extends this literature by making TikTok itself the object of narrative analysis and by focusing specifically on how routes, boats, ghorba, arrival, cost, and hardship are assembled into communicative frames. Its contribution is therefore not a new claim of “media influence” but a more precise account of the symbolic repertoire through which irregular migration is made visible.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study adopts an exploratory content-analysis design combining descriptive quantitative analysis with inductive qualitative thematic interpretation. The quantitative component is intentionally non-inferential. It describes the composition of the selected corpus and the distribution of available engagement and temporal indicators. The qualitative component examines recurrent meanings, frames, symbolic units, and narrative contrasts. The design is appropriate for a topic in which the objective is to identify how migration is represented rather than to estimate its prevalence across TikTok or to test audience effects.

7.2 Corpus Construction and Sampling

The corpus was constructed through four search groups using Apify to retrieve TikTok records associated with Arabic and Latin expressions referring to Harraga, irregular migration, Algeria, European destinations, and maritime or Balkan routes. The retrieval process generated 637 raw records. Video ID was used as the principal deduplication key, resulting in 539 unique videos. Automated screening then identified 158 candidate records requiring substantive verification. The researcher subsequently reviewed the candidate cases and retained 44 videos that clearly met the topical criteria.

The sampling strategy is purposive rather than probabilistic. The purpose was to construct a highly relevant corpus of migration narratives, not to calculate the prevalence of migration content on TikTok. Search visibility is shaped by algorithmic ranking, query formulation, hashtag performance, persistence of old posts, and platform changes. Consequently, the 44 videos should be understood as a bounded analytical corpus captured during the 2026 collection period, not as a representative sample of all Algerian TikTok content.

Table 1

From raw retrieval to the final analytical corpus

Procedure stage	Number	Interpretation
Raw records across four search groups	637	Initial retrieval before deduplication
Unique videos	539	Records remaining after deduplication by Video ID
Candidates after preliminary screening	158	Cases showing potential topical relevance
Final analytical corpus	44	Videos retained after direct review and explicit relevance criteria

Note. The figures describe the documented corpus-construction workflow. The 539 unique videos were not all subjected to full detailed coding.

7.3 Unit of Analysis and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The unit of analysis is the individual TikTok video. Inclusion required clear substantive relevance to irregular migration associated with Algeria, its routes, experiences, symbolic markers, or post-arrival status. Relevant cases included speedboat or sea-crossing material, Balkan-route narratives, descriptions of Harraga experiences, references to arrival following irregular migration, and discourse explicitly organized around Harraga identity or ghorba when the context connected those terms to irregular mobility. A single hashtag was never treated as sufficient evidence of relevance.

Exclusion was applied where migration-related terms appeared peripherally or in an unrelated context. Examples included generic travel or tourism content, videos in which a migration hashtag was attached to gaming or unrelated entertainment, and cases where the available context did not establish a connection to irregular migration. The reduction from 158 candidates to 44 final cases therefore represents a substantive relevance decision, not a statistical subsample. This distinction is important because it clarifies what the 44 cases are intended to represent: analytically meaningful examples of Harraga-related narrative construction.

7.4 Analytical Instrument and Coding Logic

An extended coding form was developed with approximately 50 variables covering identification, publication and engagement metadata, format and language, main topic, migration motivations, representations of migrants and destinations, route depiction, practical information, risks, outcomes, stance toward migration, narrative type, emotional appeals, encouragement and warning indicators, family presence, visual elements, source type, and final narrative direction. The present article reports only variables that were actually established in the final database and manual review. No unobserved visual, audio, or audience reaction was inferred merely because such a variable existed in the coding framework.

The qualitative analysis followed an inductive thematic logic. First, the researcher identified recurrent narrative objects and textual markers. Second, related markers were grouped into broader thematic patterns such as route, speed, arrival, ghorba, hardship, or humanitarian documentation. Third, these patterns were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of representation and framing. Fourth, contradictory cases were retained rather than forced into a single “positive” or “negative” category. This procedure reflects the assumption that a migration video can contain multiple communicative functions simultaneously.

7.5 Coding Reliability and Dependability

A formal inter-coder reliability coefficient such as Cohen’s kappa or Holsti’s percentage agreement was not calculated because the final corpus was coded by the principal researcher alone. This limitation is stated explicitly rather than obscured. To strengthen analytic dependability within a single-coder design, the study maintained an auditable screening trail, documented the search-to-sample pathway, used explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria, retained the video ID as the core case identifier, and preserved the reasons recorded during manual review. The resulting claims are therefore framed as interpretive findings from a transparent purposive corpus, not as highly reliable estimates of category prevalence. Future replications should independently code a defined subset of the corpus and report agreement statistics, ideally after pretesting the codebook.

7.6 Research Ethics

The study draws on publicly accessible TikTok content but treats public accessibility as ethically relevant rather than automatically sufficient. In the article, creators are not presented by account name as analytical subjects, and cases are identified primarily by video number. Direct identifiers are not required for the argument and are therefore minimized. Short quotations are used only to illustrate analytic patterns, and the paper avoids unnecessary reproduction of account-level information that could increase visibility or create additional

exposure for individual creators. This approach is consistent with the Association of Internet Researchers' emphasis on contextual integrity, potential harm, and the ethical responsibilities of researchers working with public digital data (Association of Internet Researchers, 2019).

8. Results

8.1 Corpus Composition

Table 2

Thematic composition of the 44-video analytical corpus

Aggregated thematic category	n	%
Maritime, speedboat, or engine-related Harraga content	23	52.3
Balkan land routes	10	22.7
Direct Harraga discourse or documentation	8	18.2
News/documentation of irregular migration	1	2.3
Residence/regularization and sans-papiers status	1	2.3
Peripheral content embedded in gaming	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0

Note. Percentages are descriptive indicators of the purposive corpus and should not be interpreted as estimates of prevalence on TikTok.

The most striking structural finding is the dominance of movement itself. Twenty-three of the 44 videos (52.3%) were retained because they revolved around boats, speedboats, or the mechanics of maritime Harraga mobility. A further 10 videos (22.7%) centered on Balkan land routes. Taken together, these categories mean that 33 videos, or three quarters of the corpus, make the migration pathway itself a central narrative object. In other words, irregular migration is represented less as an abstract socioeconomic phenomenon and more as a sequence of movement, route, crossing, and destination.

This result is theoretically consequential. The vehicle, route, and geographical sequence can function as forms of narrative compression. A complex process that includes planning, uncertainty, legal vulnerability, financial pressure, and family consequences is rendered through a small set of recognizable signs. The boat becomes a visual shorthand for the crossing; the Balkans become a shorthand for terrestrial mobility; Spain, Italy, or France become destination nodes. Such condensation fits the logic of social representation: complexity is reduced to objects that can be named, remembered, shared, and recontextualized (Moscovici, 2008).

8.2 Temporal Distribution

Table 3

Publication-year distribution of the selected videos

Publication year	n	%
2023	4	9.1
2024	4	9.1
2025	16	36.4
2026	20	45.5

Publication year	n	%
Total	44	100.0

Note. The selected cases range from July 5, 2023, to September 12, 2026. The concentration in 2025–2026 partly reflects the collection window and should not be interpreted as evidence of a historical increase in TikTok migration content.

The concentration of recent material is notable: 81.8% of the final cases were posted in 2025 or 2026. This makes the corpus useful for examining contemporary narrative language, but the pattern cannot be interpreted as a time-series trend. A purposive search conducted in 2026 is necessarily affected by what remained visible and retrievable at the time of collection. Older videos may be less likely to surface, while recent content may receive ranking advantages or benefit from currently active hashtags. Digital corpora therefore require temporal transparency, not assumptions of archival completeness.

8.3 Engagement and Unequal Visibility

Table 4

Descriptive engagement indicators for the 44-video corpus

Indicator	Mean	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Likes	16,191.7	1,013.5	15	395,900
Comments	135.5	20.5	0	1,985
Saves/collections	1,175.9	72	1	30,543
Video duration (seconds)	57.0	31	6	312

Note. The large gap between means and medians indicates substantial right-skew; medians are therefore more informative about the typical case than means.

The engagement data reveal an important distinction between content presence and digital visibility. The 44 videos accumulated 712,435 likes, but the median was only 1,013.5, compared with a maximum of 395,900. The most-liked video alone accounts for approximately 55.6% of the total likes in the corpus, while the top five account for approximately 83.8%. The same pattern appears in comments and saves. This concentration suggests that the corpus includes a small number of highly visible nodes around which migration narratives may circulate more strongly than around the majority of cases.

The communicative meaning of this concentration should nevertheless be treated cautiously. Engagement metrics are not direct measures of persuasion. A like may indicate curiosity, empathy, amusement, agreement, disagreement, or identification with a visual style. A save may reflect informational interest or simply an intention to revisit content. TikTok recommendation systems are partly shaped by behavioral signals such as following, liking, and viewing patterns (Boeker & Urman, 2022), but the present study cannot trace what happened to individual viewers after encountering the selected videos. The evidence therefore supports a claim about unequal visibility within the corpus, not about influence on attitudes or behavior.

8.4 Narrative Frame 1: Migration as a Route and a Knowable Pathway

The strongest qualitative pattern is the transformation of irregular migration into a route narrative. Video 8, for example, explicitly frames the experience as “My journey from Algeria to Europe via the Turkey-Balkans route.” The phrase “my journey” establishes first-person authority, while the sequence of named territories converts migration into geography. Video 26 similarly foregrounds “Balkan route” together with Turkey and Europe. Video 14 refers to “the days of Harraga in Serbia,” and video 24 invokes “Harraga, Balkans, Turkey, Europe.” These formulations move the narrative away from a single moment of departure and toward a pathway that appears sequential, spatially organized, and narratable.

From a framing perspective, the route is made salient while many less visible elements of irregular migration are pushed into the background. Waiting, fear, uncertainty, failed attempts, legal vulnerability, and the cumulative consequences of mobility may be difficult to compress into a short video. The route, by contrast, is concrete and visually legible. It can be represented through place names, borders, vehicles, and directional movement. This is one reason migrant journey content can function as experiential or quasi-practical knowledge, as Folino Juanola (2025) also observes in a different geographic context.

The interpretive importance of this finding is not that route information “facilitates migration.” That stronger claim would require evidence about audience uptake and use. The narrower finding is that route-oriented narratives can make an unfamiliar process cognitively more graspable. The route becomes something that can be pictured rather than merely feared. This is an important distinction for research on migration imaginaries because imaginability is a communicative condition, not a behavioral outcome.

8.5 Narrative Frame 2: Speed, Mobility, and the Spectacle of Crossing

The second major pattern concerns speed. Terms such as “speed,” “speedboat,” “the fast one,” and references to boat engines recur in the corpus. Twenty-three videos were ultimately grouped into the maritime/speedboat/engine-related category. The recurrence of the boat is communicatively significant because the means of crossing itself becomes the object of representation. It is not merely a technical device used to move from one point to another; it is a symbol around which identity, excitement, risk, and social recognition can be organized.

The rhetoric of speed is particularly compatible with TikTok’s short-form logic. A fast-moving boat provides immediate motion, visual intensity, and narrative compression. Such material can produce what may be termed a spectacle frame: the crossing appears through action, speed, and immediacy rather than through extended explanation. The communicative economy of the form can unintentionally privilege what is visually striking over what is temporally prolonged, such as waiting, debt, failed crossings, or legal uncertainty.

Importantly, the presence of speed does not equal glorification. The same boat may appear in a warning video, a personal testimony, a news report, or an entertainment-oriented post. The analytical distinction must therefore be between the symbolic presence of risk and the evaluative treatment of risk. This is why the study resists a binary coding in which every speedboat video is labeled “encouraging.” The corpus contains evidence for competing interpretations of the same object.

8.6 Narrative Frame 3: Arrival, Joy, and Aspirational Compression

A third narrative pattern appears in content that compresses migration into successful arrival or positive affect. Video 30 contains the phrase “indescribable joy, praise be to God” alongside hashtags referring to Turkey, Italy, and the Balkans. Video 43 states, “Since I was young, I dreamed of the Italian crossing.” These formulations are analytically important because they connect mobility to emotion and long-term desire. The migration event becomes not only something that happened but something celebrated or imagined as a dream.

The narrative force lies in compression. A long and uncertain journey is condensed into a moment of arrival, relief, joy, or self-confirmation. This creates an emotionally intelligible endpoint. In social-representation terms, Europe can become an affectively charged social object rather than a geographical location. In framing terms, the positive endpoint receives narrative salience while the less visible stages of the journey recede. This does not prove that viewers adopt the frame, but it identifies the symbolic material available for such interpretation.

Aspirational narratives are especially important because they do not necessarily present explicit instructions. An aspirational story can operate through recognition and identification: if someone similar to the viewer appears to have crossed, arrived, or achieved a desired outcome, mobility may appear socially and psychologically imaginable. Contemporary research on migrant TikTok narratives likewise shows the importance of aspirational storytelling in the formation of migration imaginaries, while emphasizing the interaction between identity, information, and platform affordances (Ramírez Plascencia et al., 2025; Cabalquinto & Soriano, 2025).

8.7 Narrative Frame 4: Ghorba as the Social and Emotional Price of Mobility

One of the most revealing linguistic findings is the recurrent appearance of *ghorba* or related variants in 21 of the 44 videos (47.7%). *Ghorba* is not synonymous with irregular migration. It refers more broadly to life away from home and can encompass separation, belonging, work, homesickness, and identity. Its frequency therefore broadens the migration narrative beyond the physical act of crossing. It shifts attention toward what happens once the journey is over.

The dual role of *ghorba* is especially visible in the contrast between celebratory and critical cases. In some videos, *ghorba* is paired with speed or hashtags that evoke the call of Europe. In video 19, however, *ghorba* is attached to an explicit statement that life abroad is difficult, together with a reported cost of 160 million Algerian dinars, a six-month period, and a return to Algeria. Here the semantic field of migration is transformed from adventure into cost, duration, and outcome. The same social object—going abroad—acquires a different evaluative frame.

This finding complicates simplified understandings of migration aspiration. A person may desire departure while remaining ambivalent about the life that awaits after arrival. Conversely, a person may recognize hardship but still perceive migration as worthwhile if the expected benefits of leaving are judged greater than the perceived costs of staying. The content does not resolve this tension; instead, it makes the tension visible. This is precisely

where a capability-oriented understanding of migration becomes useful: desire and actual ability to move are distinct dimensions (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

8.8 Narrative Frame 5: Cost, Hardship, Return, and Counter-Narrative

The corpus contains several cases that challenge idealized interpretations. Video 19 is the clearest example, linking difficulty, a monetary cost, time spent abroad, and return. The narrative has a counter-aspirational structure because it foregrounds the “price” of mobility rather than its symbolic reward. Such content is important because it can expose dimensions of irregular migration that are difficult to sustain in a spectacular short-video format: economic loss, uncertainty, and the possibility that migration does not generate the expected transformation of life.

Yet counter-narratives should not automatically be understood as deterrent narratives. A story of hardship may still contain evidence of endurance, survival, or achievement. The communicative effect of risk depends on how the viewer evaluates the trade-off between risk and expected benefit. Cabalquinto’s (2024) findings on migrant counter-narratives similarly demonstrate that TikTok can reveal exploitation and precarity without becoming a simple anti-migration platform.

8.9 Narrative Frame 6: News, Humanitarianism, and the Humanization of the Migrant

A smaller set of cases uses a news or human-interest frame. Video 37, posted by a media account, presents the arrival of dozens of migrants by speedboat. The migratory event is organized as news: an event, a location, and a visible arrival scene. Video 6, by contrast, presents an undocumented Algerian migrant who becomes a hero by saving another person’s life in France. Here legal status becomes a contextual detail while ethical action becomes the narrative center.

These cases are analytically valuable because they demonstrate that “migration content” is not a homogeneous communicative genre. The same phenomenon can appear as a personal testimony, news item, success account, humanitarian story, entertainment product, identity statement, or route narrative. Any content-analysis system that collapses these forms into a single positive/negative variable would lose the communicative heterogeneity that makes TikTok significant as a media environment.

8.10 Tension and Coexistence Among Narrative Models

The most important interpretive finding is the coexistence of competing narrative models. The corpus does not produce a stable directional message. Instead, it contains an aspirational pole emphasizing arrival, joy, route, speed, and dreams; a counter-narrative pole emphasizing hardship, cost, return, and the difficulties of ghorba; and an informational or news-oriented middle ground that documents events without clearly endorsing or condemning them. This plurality is consistent with research showing that TikTok can host multiple and sometimes contradictory migration frames on the same platform (Hollingshead et al., 2026).

The coexistence of these frames is theoretically more productive than a simple question of whether TikTok encourages migration. Social representations emerge through circulation and comparison. A viewer may encounter a video that romanticizes arrival, then another that depicts hardship, and another that supplies route information. The meaning of migration can therefore become a comparative field in which users negotiate what counts as success, risk,

sacrifice, or opportunity. Content analysis can identify this symbolic environment, even though it cannot determine how each viewer resolves the contradiction.

8.11 Platform Affordances and Communicative Compression

Although the present dataset does not contain a standardized transcription of audio or a systematically coded visual-feature matrix for every case, the reviewed material illustrates several platform-native affordances that matter analytically. Short duration encourages selective narration; captions and hashtags create searchable semantic anchors; first-person phrasing can establish experiential authority; repeated symbols such as speedboats or route names support recognition; and engagement metrics potentially increase the visibility of cases that attract attention. These affordances help explain why migration can circulate as a sequence of highly condensed narrative fragments.

TikTok's architecture also supports participatory recirculation. A migration story can be reused as a template, attached to a different caption, embedded within a trend, or connected to broader hashtag communities. Jaramillo-Dent (2022) shows that immigrant creators develop visibility tactics using platform vernaculars, while Boeker and Urman (2022) demonstrate that behavioral signals affect recommendation patterns. For the present study, this means that narrative meaning cannot be separated entirely from circulation. The content is produced within an environment where discoverability and audience attention are structurally relevant.

8.12 A Qualitative Matrix of Narrative Frames

Table 5

Analytical matrix of major narrative frames in the selected corpus

Frame	Central signifiers	Illustrative cases	Communicative function
Route / pathway	Turkey, Balkans, Serbia, Europe, "my journey"	Videos 8, 14, 24, 26	Makes the journey spatially knowable and sequential
Speed / spectacle	Speedboat, fast crossing, boat engine	Videos 1, 5, 16, 28, 38	Compresses movement into immediacy, action, and visual intensity
Arrival / joy	Arrival, praise, joy, dream of crossing	Videos 30, 43	Centers emotional reward and aspirational meaning
Ghorba / lived abroad	Ghorba, distance, life abroad, return	Videos 19, 22, 33, 40	Connects migration to belonging, hardship, and social cost
Cost / hardship / return	Financial cost, difficult life, six months, return	Video 19	Produces a counterweight to easy-success narratives
News / humanitarian	Arrival event, undocumented migrant, heroic action	Videos 6, 37	Frames migration through newsworthiness or human interest

Note. The matrix is interpretive. It does not imply that each video contains only one frame, and it does not assign statistical prevalence to qualitative narrative types.

8.13 Selected Cases and Analytical Readings

Table 6

Selected cases illustrating narrative variation

Video	Textual cue	Analytical reading
8	"My journey from Algeria to Europe via the Turkey-Balkans route."	First-person route narrative; converts migration into an experience and a geographically ordered pathway.
19	"Life abroad is difficult ... 160 million ... six months ... returned home."	Counter-narrative centered on cost, hardship, duration, and return.
30	"Indescribable joy, praise be to God" with Turkey, Italy, and Balkans hashtags	Arrival/affective frame in which mobility is compressed into emotional reward.
37	"Arrival of dozens of migrants on a speedboat ... Spain."	News/event frame; emphasizes spectacle of arrival rather than personal aspiration.
43	"Since I was young, I dreamed of the Italian crossing."	Long-term aspirational self-narrative; migration is represented as a life project or dream.
44	"The speed ... and ghorba ... a boat in Algeria, switch it off in Spain."	Blends speed, departure, destination, and transnational imagination in a highly compressed formula.

Note. Quotations are short excerpts from the study corpus and are used to identify communicative patterns, not to establish audience effects.

9. Discussion

Taken together, the findings suggest that TikTok functions as a site of narrative condensation and competition. The boat, route, destination, and ghorba are not isolated variables. They form a vocabulary through which migration can be recognized quickly and recast in different emotional and evaluative registers. Social Representations Theory explains the condensation of complexity into familiar symbols; Framing Theory explains why some of those symbols become more salient than others; the platform literature explains how such fragments can circulate within an algorithmically mediated environment.

The predominance of route-centered content is particularly important. Route narratives can be understood as a form of narrative feasibility: they provide an answer, however partial, to the implicit question "How does this journey happen?" By naming countries, vehicles, and destinations, the content reduces some of the uncertainty surrounding mobility. It does not necessarily provide complete practical instructions, and the present study does not infer facilitation intent. Rather, it documents how migration is translated into a sequence of recognizable stages. This finding resonates with Folino Juanola (2025), who emphasizes the experiential knowledge embedded in migrant journey videos, and with Cabalquinto and Soriano (2025), who demonstrate how creators can act as intermediaries between information and imagined mobility.

At the same time, the strong presence of speedboat narratives raises a question about the temporal structure of risk communication. Short-video media can foreground the moment that is easiest to visualize: the boat moves, the border is crossed, the shore is reached, the migrant celebrates. The costs that unfold before and after may be dispersed and therefore narratively weaker. This does not mean that TikTok necessarily hides risk; rather, its communicative economy may privilege certain dimensions of risk over others. In a highly compressed story, danger can be represented as an exciting challenge, an obstacle already overcome, or a warning, depending on framing.

The density of *ghorba* further complicates the distinction between journey and destination. Nearly half of the corpus contains the term or its variants. This suggests that irregular migration discourse cannot be understood solely as “crossing to Europe.” It also concerns what it means to live away from home, to remain attached to Algeria while working or surviving elsewhere, and to evaluate whether departure produced the life that was imagined. The migration story therefore extends into identity, belonging, family distance, and the moral evaluation of success.

This is where the coexistence of aspirational and counter-narratives becomes theoretically significant. A platform can simultaneously host a celebratory arrival scene and a story of six months abroad followed by return. These narratives do not cancel one another; they create a field of comparison. Social meaning can emerge through tension between what is desired and what is experienced. The communicative environment can therefore contribute to a migration imaginary without producing a singular imaginary. There may be multiple versions of Europe, multiple versions of the migrant, and multiple definitions of success operating side by side.

The engagement results add a second dimension to this interpretation. Not all migration narratives enjoy equal visibility. A small number of highly engaged videos account for a very large share of total likes. This matters because narrative competition is not necessarily symmetrical: some stories have greater opportunities to circulate. Yet popularity cannot be equated with influence. Without audience-level data, we cannot know whether a highly engaged video changed a viewer’s perception, confirmed an existing belief, was watched because it was already controversial, or simply benefited from platform recommendation dynamics. The correct conclusion is therefore that the corpus exhibits unequal circulation potential, not unequal persuasion.

The findings also clarify why the concept of “encouragement” is too narrow for this research problem. A migration narrative can normalize without explicitly recommending; it can inform without facilitating; it can warn while still presenting a successful endpoint; it can criticize *ghorba* while reaffirming the desire to leave. Communication around irregular migration is multidimensional. Future coding systems should therefore distinguish at least four analytical dimensions: representation of the event, evaluation of the event, informational content, and emotional orientation. Treating these as separate but intersecting dimensions would provide a more robust basis for comparative research.

The Algerian case also speaks to a broader transformation of migration communication. The digital migrant is not necessarily an actor who merely reports after the fact. Creators can

become witnesses, route narrators, identity performers, informal advisers, or symbols of successful mobility. At the same time, they can expose vulnerability, disappointment, and the costs of life abroad. This plurality reflects what Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022b) identify as the multidimensional nature of migrant self-presentation and what Cabalquinto (2024) identifies as the counter-narrative potential of migrant TikTok content.

Finally, the study supports a conceptual shift from asking whether TikTok “encourages” migration to asking how platform-mediated narratives alter the symbolic conditions under which migration is imagined. This is a more modest claim, but it is also more analytically defensible. The present data demonstrate the availability of narrative resources: routes can be pictured, success can be dramatized, hardship can be compressed, and ghorba can be attached to both aspiration and disappointment. Whether these resources become relevant to an individual’s migration aspiration is an empirical audience question that lies outside the evidentiary reach of this paper.

10. Implications for Communication Research and Practice

For communication scholarship, the main implication is methodological. Studies of digital migration should separate content-level phenomena from audience-level effects. A content study can identify narrative resources, frames, symbolic objects, platform vernaculars, and circulation patterns. A survey or interview study can then ask how audiences interpret them. Combining these stages can be productive, but they should not be presented as if they were the same design. The present manuscript deliberately ends at the content-analytic level.

For communication practitioners concerned with irregular migration, the findings suggest that generic fear-based messaging may fail to compete with vivid platform-native narratives. Effective public communication would need to address the same narrative objects that appear in user-generated content—routes, boats, arrival, costs, work, documents, return, and ghorba—while presenting credible and experience-based accounts of consequences. Communication interventions should avoid exaggeration, moral panic, or stigmatizing migrants. Instead, they can use short-form storytelling to make less visible dimensions of the migration process equally narratable.

11. Limitations

The study has five principal limitations. First, the sample is purposive and small ($N = 44$); it cannot support statistical generalization to TikTok as a whole. Second, the corpus was retrieved through search-based collection, so platform ranking, query formulation, hashtag performance, and content persistence may have shaped visibility. Third, the final coding was conducted by one researcher, and no inter-coder reliability coefficient was computed. Fourth, engagement metrics describe platform activity but do not measure actual exposure, persuasion, attitudes, or intentions. Fifth, although the researcher directly reviewed the candidate videos, the available database did not contain a standardized audio transcription or a full quantitative visual-coding matrix across all 44 cases; claims about audio and visual affordances are therefore interpretive rather than exhaustive.

These limitations define the evidentiary boundaries of the paper rather than invalidate its contribution. The value of the corpus lies in traceability: the retrieval strategy, deduplication rule, screening stages, and final selection are documented. Such transparency permits future

researchers to replicate the search logic, independently recode the same cases, and compare results over time.

12. Directions for Future Research

Future research should extend the present content analysis in two directions. First, independent coders should double-code a defined proportion of the corpus and calculate agreement coefficients after pilot testing the codebook. Second, audience research should examine whether different patterns of TikTok exposure are associated with different perceptions of migration, perceived feasibility, risk evaluation, or migration aspiration among Algerian youth. Such audience work should measure qualitative exposure to specific narrative types rather than generic platform use and should control for relevant social and economic factors. These are future research needs, not findings of the present study.

13. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that irregular migration associated with Algerian Harraga is represented on TikTok through a heterogeneous but recognizable repertoire of narrative forms. The route, the speedboat, the Balkans, Europe, arrival, ghorba, cost, hardship, and return operate as recurrent symbolic resources through which a complex social phenomenon is condensed into short, circulable stories. The maritime and route-centered dominance of the corpus shows that movement itself is frequently treated as the principal narrative event.

The analysis also shows that TikTok does not produce a single migration message. Aspirational stories coexist with counter-narratives, informational posts, news reports, and humanitarian accounts. The same platform can therefore make irregular migration appear adventurous, achievable, emotionally rewarding, difficult, costly, or morally ambiguous. This plurality is not a weakness of the data; it is one of the principal findings. It demonstrates why migration communication on short-video platforms should be analyzed through frames and competing representations rather than through a single scale of positive versus negative influence.

Methodologically, the documented movement from 637 raw records to 539 unique videos and finally to 44 purposively retained cases provides a transparent foundation for exploratory research. The study does not claim that TikTok causes migration aspirations. Instead, it shows how the platform supplies narrative materials through which migration can be imagined and debated. The next scientific question is therefore not whether TikTok “causes” Harraga migration, but how audiences interpret, compare, and possibly incorporate these competing narratives into their own understandings of mobility. That question requires a separate audience-level design.

References

- Adda, M. (2025). اتجاهات الشباب نحو ظاهرة الهجرة غير الشرعية: اعتماد على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي [Youth attitudes toward irregular migration through reliance on social media: An exploratory study of University of Chlef students]. الرواق, 11(2), 507–523. <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/279604>
- Association of Internet Researchers. (2019). Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0. <https://aoir.org/ire30/>

- Ben Rayala, S., & Jaffafa, D. (2021). وهندسة المجتمعات العربية المعاصرة "تيكتوك" الوسيط الاجتماعي. [The social medium TikTok and the engineering of contemporary Arab societies: A descriptive analytical study]. *مجلة علوم اللغة العربية وآدابها*, 13(1), 1602–1617. <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/146954>
- Berghouti, A., & Messani, F. (2024). The role of social media platforms (Facebook) in influencing Algerian youth to facilitate illegal immigration. *International Journal of Social Communication*, 11(3), 86–101. <https://revue.univ-mosta.dz/index.php/ijsc/article/view/479>
- Blumler, J. G., & Katz, E. (Eds.). (1974). *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research*. SAGE Publications.
- Boeker, M., & Urman, A. (2022). An empirical investigation of personalization factors on TikTok. *Proceedings of the ACM Web Conference 2022*, 2298–2309. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3485447.3512102>
- Cabalquinto, E. C. B. (2024). #OFW: Filipino migrant workers brokering counter narratives of overseas life on TikTok. *First Monday*, 29(8). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i8.13748>
- Cabalquinto, E. C. B., & Soriano, C. R. (2025). Filipino content creators brokering migration to Australia on TikTok. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 40(2), 177–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2025.2518978>
- Carling, J., & Schewel, K. (2018). Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(6), 945–963. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146>
- Çakıcı, Z., & Meriç, E. (2024). Exploring United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) TikTok landscape: Insights into migration representations. In S. Kir Elitaş (Ed.), *Media representation of migrants and refugees* (pp. 278–295). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-3459-1.ch017>
- De-Santis, A., & Torres-Toukoumidis, Á. (2026). Media influence and youth migration imaginaries through traditional and social platforms in the context of perception and decision-making. *Child & Youth Services*, 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2026.2637125>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Folino Juanola, P. (2025). "Use my experience to your advantage": The agency behind TikTok portrayals of the migration journey through Darién Gap. *International Migration Review*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183251365924>
- Gillespie, A. (2008). Social representations, alternative representations and semantic barriers. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38(4), 375–391. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.2008.00376.x>

- Hollingshead, W., Gruzd, A., & Mai, P. (2026). Same platform, different stories: TikTok and the battle over immigration narratives. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 11409. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11409>
- International Organization for Migration. (2019). Glossary on migration (International Migration Law No. 34). <https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration>
- Jaramillo-Dent, D. (2022). Algorithmic (in)visibility tactics among immigrant TikTokkers. *Mediální Studia*, 16(2), 215–235.
- Jaramillo-Dent, D., Alencar, A. P., & Asadchy, Y. (2022a). #Migrantes on TikTok: Exploring platformed belongings. *International Journal of Communication*, 16, 5578–5602. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17435>
- Jaramillo-Dent, D., Contreras-Pulido, P., & Pérez-Rodríguez, A. (2022b). Immigrant influencers on TikTok: Diverse microcelebrity profiles and algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media and Communication*, 10(1), 208–221. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4743>
- Meierrieks, D., & Stier, J. (2025). The role of social media content in migration aspirations: Mixed-methods evidence from two Senegalese regions. *International Migration Review*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183251376544>
- Moscovici, S. (2008). *Psychoanalysis: Its image and its public* (D. Macey, Trans.; G. Duveen, Ed.). Polity. (Original work published 1961)
- Ramírez Plascencia, D., Pérez Yáñez, J., & Alonzo González, R. M. (2025). Sharing the American Dream on TikTok: Latin Americans' social representations of migration. *Cuadernos.Info*, 61, 26–48. <https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.61.85476>
- Ramírez Plascencia, D., Pérez Yáñez, J., & Alonzo González, R. M. (2026). "Lo vi en TikTok". *Migración, influencers, narrativas aspiracionales y tráfico de personas en América Latina*. *Revista Internacional de Estudios Migratorios*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.25115/riem.v16i1.10830>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2025). Smuggling of migrants: Working Group on the Smuggling of Migrants, CTOC/COP/WG.7/2025/3. https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/WG_SOM_2025/3/CTOC_COP_WG.7_2025_3_E.pdf