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# Visual small stories of #JeSuisAylan: sharing cosmopolitan emotions on Instagram<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines the circulation of Instagram posts using the hashtag #JeSuisAylan on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2015 as a reaction to the breaking news of three-year old Alan Kurdi who drowned in the Mediterranean. Posts are analysed as *visual small stories* (Georgakopoulou 2016) and coded for types of story frames, which help to clarify users' participation patterns (De Fina 2016). Findings indicate that participation to this shared story involves acts of sharing *transportable stances* and cosmopolitan emotions, articulated mainly in the subjunctive mode. The article contributes to the analysis of multimodal posts as visual small stories and the study of sharing emotions online.

*Keywords: sharing, visual small stories, story frames, stance, cosmopolitan emotions,*

## Introduction

Migration has been at the centre of visual portrayals of human suffering in both documentary and artistic photography. To give one example, Sebastião Salgado's "Exodus" photo album - and its companion portfolio "Children" published in 2000<sup>2</sup> - is an epic documentation of the global migrant crisis over thirty-five countries, capturing the scale of the migrant crisis in moments of individual stories; and in the case of the companion to the album in portraits of children migrants and refugees under fifteen. The images provoke strong emotional responses from viewers in the form of what Beck (2006: 7) calls *cosmopolitan empathy*, i.e. an extended capacity to imagine and empathize with the suffering of others beyond one's immediate existence, and they also instil an individualized sense of moral responsibility. In an age of sharing (John 2016) the mobilisation of *cosmopolitan emotions* (Nussbaum 2007) through images is increasingly realised through social media users' sharing and commenting on certain media images, often in various reworked forms, attesting, thus, to vernacular creativities in participatory cultures (Burgess 2006). This article examines a case of this type of sharing in relation to the key types of cosmopolitan emotions expressed and the mode of their online expression.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a research monograph project to be published by Routledge which offers a narrative perspective on mediatized mourning based on the empirical analysis of different practices of sharing small stories of life and death online.

<sup>2</sup> The photo album was reissued in 2016.

The case of sharing is a photograph from the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, which made headlines in the Western world on September, 3<sup>rd</sup> of the same year. This was the photograph of the lifeless body of a little boy washed up on a Turkish beach, half in the sand and half in the water. The photograph is part of a series of photographs taken by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir for the Dogan New Agency (BBC 2015). The boy was three-year old Alan Kurdi, although he became globally known as Aylan after his name was misspelt in initial reports of his death<sup>3</sup>. Along with his family and other people fleeing the Syrian war, he had been on an inflatable boat trying to cross the Mediterranean, when the boat capsized resulting in the boy's drowning, along with his mother, Rihanna, brother Ghalib, and others on board, adding to the toll of 3,770 people who lost their lives during migration to Europe in 2015 (IOM 2015). The photographs of Demir, shared by Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch on social media, travelled from a beach in Bodrum to the screens of almost 20 million people across the world in the space of twelve hours and quickly turned to another iconic image of war and suffering (TIME 2015, Vis 2015, Vis & Goriunova 2015).

This image has attracted interest by commentators in the media and scholars across different disciplines. Parallels of the image to earlier emotionally evocative paintings, such as Nicolas Poussin's 1627 painting "Massacre des Innocents" have been pointed out (Renard 2018). Attention has also been drawn to the "new regime of visuality and meaning-making" that this shared story attests to (Goriunova 2015: 5) and to its role in turning the so-called "refugee crisis" into "a political crisis" (Blommaert 2015). Furthermore, other scholars have noted the intricate association of meaning-making practices in this emerging regime with social media publishing forms, as well as with humanitarian discourses and mainstream media representations (Pannti & Tikka 2014: 190).

This article proposes an approach that captures how stories focusing on a specific moment of individual suffering are shared and how specific types of attitudes, stances, and emotions become routinely associated with them. This approach is proposed as a key step in connecting social media practices of sharing to existing discourses and representations of suffering.

## **1. Small stories and story frames**

The study is informed by small story research (Georgakopoulou 2007, Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008), which encompasses the study of a range of seemingly ephemeral discourse engagements characterised by a narrative orientation to the world. Small stories have proven particularly apt for the empirical study of sharing as a narrative activity, which prompts recipients' reactions and creates participation positions of alignment or disalignment (see Georgakopoulou 2015).

In this article, I examine the circulation of the image of Alan Kurdi shared via hashtags on Instagram, a medium which has received little attention so far in discussions of the texturing and mobilisation of affective publics. Shared images and their accompanying verbal posts are

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, I will refer to the boy as A(y)lan, unless quoting directly from users' posts or popular hashtags.

analysed here as *visual small stories* to which users respond in patterned ways (see Georgakopoulou 2016 for an analysis of selfies as visual small stories). These patterns of participation are examined through an analysis of story frames, drawing on De Fina's (2016) framework used in her study of participation to a YouTube story.

De Fina starts from the widely established distinction in narrative analysis (Young 1987) between the *taleworld*, that is the world where characters move and live, and the *storyrealm*, that is the storytelling event at the center of which the taleworld lies and which is embedded in conversation or in another communicative activity. These categories bracket a discourse activity as a story (Taleworld) or reveal attitudes towards the story or the storytelling event (Storyrealm) (De Fina 2016: 479).











Story frames can offer insights into participation patterns, given their association with participants' *stancetaking*, i.e. the way participants in conversation shift their stance in response to new or changing situations and to "the alignment participants take up to themselves and others in the situation" (Tannen and Wallat 1999: 363). Stancetaking is understood, here, as "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (DuBois 2007: 163). Story frames are, thus, sites where participants' stancetaking and positions of alignment/disalignment are articulated. In the case of affective stancetaking, story frames also allow analytical insights into the types of emotions displayed and shared.

## 2. Data and methods

Using Picodash, an online tool using APIs for searching Instagram posts, I searched for the hashtag #JeSuisAylan. This hashtag was selected as a key hashtag around which other related hashtags are used. Its selection was also motivated by the recognition of 'Je Suis...' hashtags as a metadiscursive and metanarrative resource (Giaxoglou 2018) and a resource for claiming affect (Pizzaro Pedraza & De Cock 2017). Although this filtered sample of Instagram posts cannot be claimed to be representative, it arguably provides useful insights into general patterns in the circulation of the story and key patterns of participation to it. Results were extracted to an excel spreadsheet and a separate document including the images shared with each post.

Posts were then coded manually adapting De Fina's (2016) coding scheme for YouTube comments. Each post was coded inductively and iteratively as pertaining to: the *storyrealm* (the storytelling event, which in this case refers to a (social) media event where sharing is a form of storytelling), the *taleworld* (the world of the story, in this case envisaged in the space of the images of Alan), the *outside world* (expressed as references to wider issues and concerns beyond the storyrealm or the taleworld), *second stories* (related stories prompted by the story of A(y)lan) (see Table 2). In cases when more than one story frames were identified in a post, the main one was coded.

**Table 2. Coding for story frames**

<p><b><i>STORYREALM</i></b> (1)</p>	<p>Posts focusing on:</p> <p>(a) the tellability or shareability of the story featuring the hashtag “#JeSuisAylan” or a series of hashtags, e.g. “#basta #helptherefugees #fightforpeaceintheworld #facethereality #refugeeswelcome#jesuisaylan.”</p> <p>(b) attitudes to the story, e.g. “We are not going to just sit back and watch this happen. Hope this will be of some help  #vigörvadvikan #jesuisaylan.”</p>
<p><b><i>TALEWORLD</i></b> (2)</p>	<p>Posts focusing on:</p> <p>(a) the character(s) of the visual story, e.g. “Il n'avait que trois ans... #jesuisaylan .</p> <p>(b) comments on the main event of the story, e.g. story evaluation or tributes via R.I.P. messages, e.g. “R.I.P petit ange, un ange parti trop tôt ...    #JeSuisAylan#RIP#AllahYRahmo     .</p>
<p><b><i>OUTSIDE WORLD</i></b> (3)</p>	<p>Posts focusing on:</p> <p>(a) broader issues, e.g. war, children, humanity (e.g. “With no humanity, there is no love. Without love we are nothing. #nohumanisillegal #stopwar #againstwar #noracism #medecinsansfrontiere #onu #unicef #imagineallthepeople #imagine #stopfanatism #sirya #cry #angels #nowar #children #help #regram #repost #angel #death #cruelty #whereisthelove #savethechildren #aylankurdi #jesuisaylan”)</p> <p>(b) attribution of responsibility and blame, e.g. “High time to point your government to their responsibilities, wherever you live, because this is a global problem!”</p>
<p><b><i>SECOND STORIES</i></b> (4)</p>	<p>(a) Follow-up related stories, e.g. reference to one’s own children</p> <p>(b) Comments to follow-up news-stories, e.g. comments on Charlie Hebdo’s controversial cover on Alan’s story.</p>

This study examines story participation to the hashtag story #JeSuisAylan on Instagram in relation to emotional sharing, asking the following research questions:

- 1) *What types of story frames are used in Instagram users' participation practices?*
- 2) *What kinds of stances and emotions are enacted through these story frames?*

### 3. Findings

The collection of Instagram posts yielded a multi-lingual corpus of 230 posts posted between 3rd September 2015 and 26th May 2016<sup>4</sup>. The majority of these posts were in French (115), then English (65) and lastly, Spanish (14). Twenty-one posts were in another language (including Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Turkish and Greek) and fifteen posts were in mixed languages, often involving a mix of languages in the hashtag space. The use of multiple and often mixed languages highlights the globalizing dimension of hashtag sharing in this case. All posts were coded, but special focus was placed for the purposes of this article on the fifty-five (55) posts and images retrieved from the 3rd September.

Across the corpus, the analysis of participation to the shared story of Alan via the hashtag #JeSuisAylan on Instagram shows that users' emphasis is mainly placed on the *Storyrealm*, contributing meta-comments to the shared story of the death of Alan Kurdi (95). Engaging with aspects of the *Taleworld* (59) or making comments relating to the *Outside World* (60) is also relatively common, while *Second stories*<sup>5</sup> did not feature a lot in the corpus (15)<sup>6</sup>.

Given the small size of the corpus, it is difficult to generalise about trends or preferences. The analysis does clarify, however, the ways in which the image (or its creative reworking) is shared and how this sharing is framed as a story, a meta-story or a general comment. The different frames used recurrently contribute to the emblemization of the photograph as a 'human interest story' (Steimel 2010). It also signals the emblemization of stances and emotions that accompany its reception and interpretation. In what follows, I will discuss a selection of these posts, i.e. these acts of multimodal sharing (Androutsopoulos 2014, Giaxoglou 2015, Tagg & Hu 2017) as *visual small stories*, orchestrated combinations of image and text with a narrative orientation that shape the meaning and interpretation of the image and prompt specific kinds of audience reactions.

#### 3.1 Story frames in breaking news stories

Based on the analysis, one common way of participating to the hashtag story of #JeSuisAylan on Instagram on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September was to engage in the sharing of the media image of the boy's dead body on the shore as a breaking news story. Specifically, the following

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<sup>4</sup> Note that only six posts were retrieved from 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The scarcity of second stories in this corpus might be related to the fact that this is a (social) media story rather than a personal experience story which has been associated with the prompting of such stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> There was also one instance of hashtag hijacking, capitalising on the visibility of the shared hashtag to promote hotel accommodation.

types of posts and related story frames were identified in the corpus that illustrate this type of sharing:

(a) posts accompanying images as these appeared in the media (i.e. without any colour manipulation); these were focused on the *Storyrealm*, commenting on the tellability of this story and expressing attitudes to the story addressing networked participants (Example 1);

### **Example 1**<sup>7</sup>

“Cette photo choque est en trin [sic] de faire le buzz il vous faut sa [sic] pour réagir Certain vont en Syrie pour faire la guerre pendant que d'autre essaye de la fuir.. Pauvre petit Aylan tu aura ta place au paradis insha'Allah il est temps que l'Europe se réveille et leur viennent en aide. Qu'Allah facilite tous ces réfugiés, migrants et surtout les Syriens qui fuit la Syrie qui est actuellement en guerre.. Quel honte quand j'ai entendu certains propos a la radio ce matin... 56% est le chiffre des français qui sont contre les migrants.. l'Être humain est vraiment sans Coeur! #JeSuisAylan” (151: 1).

(b) posts accompanying the media image of the boy, set in high colour contrast; these focused on the *Taleworld* using direct addresses to the boy, which were offered as memorial tributes (Example 2):

### **Example 2**

“Petit ange, j'ai le coeur déchirer, je te connaissais pas, met en voyant ta photo, je vois une parti de moi au sol, tu as voulu fuir les horreurs de ce monde, allah ta repris a côté, dort bien aylan, ke ton ame trouve ça place au paradis ♡♡♡, #jesuisaylan” (141: 2)

(c) posts accompanying the media image of the boy, rendered in black and white; these related to the *Outside world*, mobilising citizens from around the world to pressurise their respective governments to own responsibility for this and related deaths (Example 3).

### **Example 3**

“High time to point your government to their responsibilities, wherever you live, because this is a global problem!” (161: 3)

In these posts the choice (or not) of colour manipulation forms an integral part of the construction of a particular stance to the story: for example, maintaining the documentary-like quality of photo-reportage foregrounds the story's 'emotional realism' and the shock effect of the photo in the comment to the story (Example 1), while adding colour contrast alludes to the intensity of provoked personal feelings in the tribute post (Example 2). Finally, rendering the

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<sup>7</sup> Posts are reproduced as they appeared on Instagram, i.e. without any further editing. The first number in the parenthesis indicates the number of the post in the corpus; the second number indicates the coding category (1 for the *Storyrealm*; 2 for the *Taleworld*; and 3 for the *Outside World*).

photo into black and white, arguably, underscores its grim and grave symbolism of more global issues in the post commenting on the outside world (Example 3).

The next section turns to the discussion of the types of stances and emotions visual small stories organised around the rescripting of the boy's image. Rescripting refers to the reworking of a story based on emplotment manipulations (Georgakopoulou 2016). In the case of the story of Alan such manipulations involved changes in the main character(s) portrayed or the place of the events (see Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2017).

### 3.2 Transportable stances and emotions in rescripted visual stories

Across the Instagram corpus, rescripted stories were found to involve changes in emplotment as well as small changes in the overall format and shape of the image, including for instance the addition of text, a hashtag or other images. Example 4 below illustrates a rescripted story based on the reworking of the photograph as a coloured sketch, which features the mini-story of the boy's life as a headline and caption in the accompanying post.

#### Example 4

*Il s'appelait Aylan Kurdi, il avait 3 ans et  
il fuyait la guerre en Syrie*



Instagram icon and username 'aylan2016'

Instagram icon and username 'Mickal'

“Il s'appelait Aylan et il voulait simplement vivre heureux .... #aylan #ReposeEnPaixPetitHomme #syrie #aylankurdi #tristemonde #jesuisaylan”. (108: 2)

The reworked image as a drawing renders the photo less raw and arguably more acceptable for sharing on Instagram. Instead of the direct addresses encountered in other posts in the corpus, the story is articulated in the third person. This pronoun choice suggests a departure from breaking news stories illustrated in the examples discussed in the previous section and a sharing preference for a moment of individualised suffering with a focus on the *Taleworld*, and more specifically the boy's life and death both in the image and the accompanying post.

Other cases of rescripting in the corpus included the case of the image of the boy's creating a simulacrum of his body as a sand sculpture as he's playing on the beach, while another showed the image of the boy's body re-replaced in his imagined bedroom. These



examples point to story participation modes which involve some level of abstraction from this individual story of suffering to more generic portrayals accompanied by expressions of personal feelings. Notably, these portrayals are articulated in the subjunctive mode ('asif'), projecting a reflection on an alternative reality and a wish that they boy were still alive, playing or sleeping as any child his age.

The importance of the use of the subjunctive mode in visual portrayals is further attested in the most widely shared image in the corpus and its accompanying posts (the image appeared seven times in the corpus). The image, shown in Example 5, is here reworked as a sketch and covered in a handwritten account, which encapsulates a personal and emotional version of the story ("Je me dis qu'on pouvait croire qu'il dort, qu'il va se réveiller..."). This account written all over the image makes an affective stance available for viewing, foregrounding it as the main focus of story participation. Sharing this image offers to viewers a *transportable stance*, i.e. a stance which captures a generic reaction that is to be shared further.

### Example 5



This reworked image selects personal reactions as the target of evaluation and comment, inviting reflection on the wider importance of the story, often expressed in the subjunctive mode. In this type of posts, users position themselves to the event and the victim through the expression of a wish about how things should be in the world (Example 6, emphasis added).

### Example 6

**“Aujourd'hui devait être un jour comme les autres ... Un beau jour puisque je déjeunais avec mari et enfants (rare)... Puis un ange est passé. Il avait trois ans, s'appelait Aylan ... RIP petit ange que là où tu vas ce soit plus doux que ta vie ici bas #aylan #savepeople #syrie.”** (126: 2)

The use of the subjunctive and the generally reflective mode in this type of participation invites more explicit displays of emotion, documented as direct reactions to viewing the visual story.

These emotions include more specifically ‘disgust’, ‘shame’, and ‘sadness’, as illustrated in the following examples (emphasis added):

### Example 7

[...] “Et puis ce sentiment plus fort que tout qu’ont les parents pour leur enfant. On regarde Aylan mort alors que ses parents ne pouvaient juste pas rester en Syrie. Bordel, on ne traverse pas la méditerranée sur un pneu pour toucher des allocs. Il est pas temps de faire quelque chose là ?? **Je suis dégoûtée**. #jesuisaylan (désolée pour le bazar de mes mots, mes maux empêchent leur fluidité là)” (107: 3)

### Example 8

... “#jesuisaylan **#shame** #laphotodelahonte **#tristesse** #ouvalemonde #syrie **#sad** #sadayforhumanity #refugiés regram” (117: 1)

These acts of sharing also prompt some form of action, such as rallying (Example 10) or just further sharing of the visual story via reposting (Example 11 and 12) or ‘regramming’ (resharing on Instagram) (Example 13).

### Example 9

“03.09.15 / Je suppose que vous avez tous vu la photo de ce petit enfant mort sur la plage. Il s’appelait Aylan il était syrien et avait 3 ans. Il était avec son papa, sa maman et son frère. Pour lui et tous les autres il est temps de se bouger. **Rdv a République** a 17h ce samedi 5 septembre. Événement Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/events/115934458759304/>” (144: 2).

### Example 10

“Merci @mathouchou pour ce dessin! 🙏 #aylan #jesuisaylan #syrie #refugees #migrant #helppeople #savepeople #fuckwar #fuckdictature #peaceandlove #crayondhumeur #mathou #draw #drawing #art #artist #photo #photography #jesuisaylan **#Repost** @pascale\_hiboocha with @repostapp (172: 1).

### Example 11

“ST O P W A R!

With no humanity, there is no love

Without love we are nothing. #nohumanisillegal #stopwar #againstwar #noracism #medicisenzafrontiere #onu #unicef #imagineallthepeople #imagine #stopfanatism #sirya #cry #angels #nowar #children #help **#regram** #repost #angel #death #cruelty #whereisthelove #savethechildren #aylankurdi #jesuisaylan (69: 3).

The prevalence of the use of the subjunctive mode in sharing of the story helps us to better understand how this image has turned into a viral icon of Syrian migrants' suffering. As Zelizer notes in her analysis of the 'about-to-die' images, such images provoke strong emotional reactions on account of their articulation in the subjunctive voice of the visual – the 'as if', which forms a visual prelude to an invisible unfolding of events (Zelizer 2010: 66-67). Similarly, the image of a child's death conjures up images of the unfolding of events that led to that death and invite viewers to imagine alternative possibilities that could have prevented that outcome or even put forward alternative realities that deny its irrevocability.

## Conclusion

Acts of sharing stories of suffering on Instagram are centred around the image and its caption creating visual small stories for viewing and sharing. The analysis of story frames suggested that participation to this story was organised around: (a) comments relating to the *Storyrealm* and more specifically to the tellability or shareability of the story and the creation of ambient connections with other participants, (b) comments relating to the *Taleworld* through evaluations of the story focused on the boy and his death; this type of participation was evident in the sharing of direct addresses as tributes to the boy, attesting to the positioning of viewers as distant witnesses and mourners for the Other's death, (c) comments relating to the *Outside world*, i.e. to broader issues the story raised about the world and humanity, putting forward messages of cosmopolitan solidarity and hope for a more 'humane' humanity where children are not left to die. Unlike comments on Twitter (see Giaxoglou & Spilioti forthcoming), Instagram reactions avoided direct engagement with the refugee crisis and Europe's complicity in it. There were, in fact, few calls in the corpus for direct action or comments addressing in more detail the political situation behind Alan Kurdi's death. Rather, on Instagram the social-mediatization of the shared story as an emblematic story of Syrian migrants' suffering was found to be embedded in users' self-focused sharing, offering opportunities for them to show instances of their engagement and involvement in social issues as part of what is referred to by some users as 'instagood' sharing.

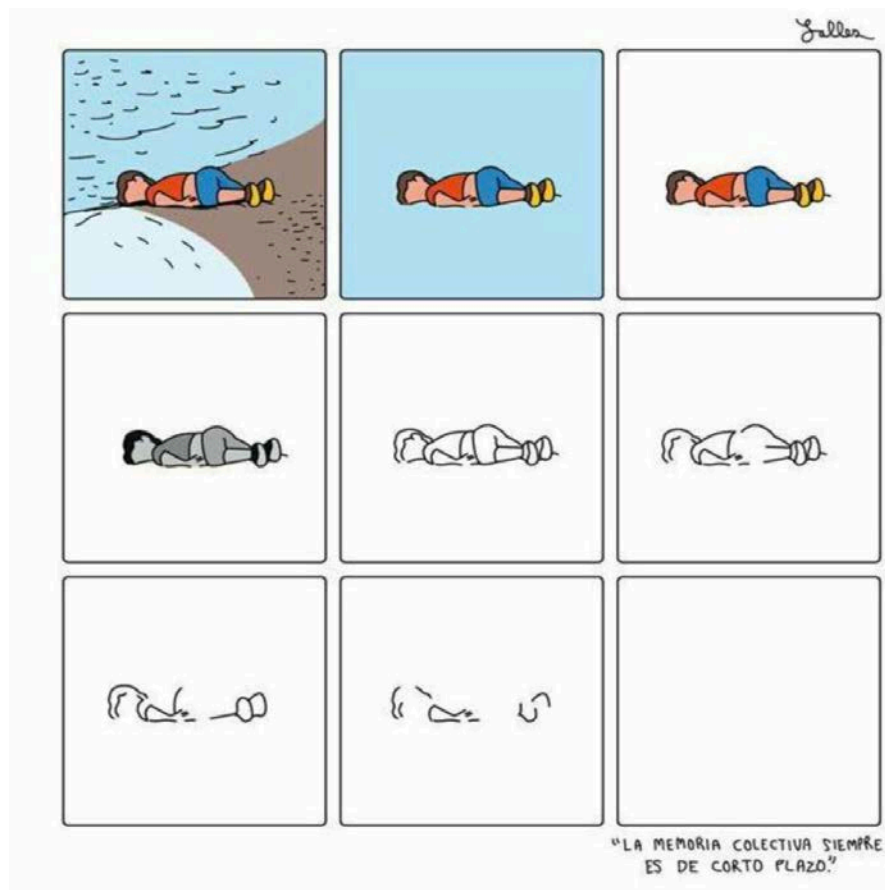
It is notable that irrespective of the specific story frame used, there was a prevalence for users to articulate their affective participation to the story in the subjunctive mode ('as if'), contrasting reality with alternative possible realities in which the boy would still be alive. These types of reactions record the user's emotions in line with global affect regimes of compassion and sadness.

Similarly to the YouTube videos of disaster appeals studied by Pannti & Tikka (2014: 190), visual stories of #JeSuisAylan shared on Instagram "create objects and subjects of feelings as well as communities of feeling [that relate] to other humanitarian discourses and media technologies". As Chouliaraki (2010) has argued, humanitarian appeals have been moving away towards a post-humanitarian style of appeal, avoiding the use of 'shock images' and the elicitation of 'traditional' emotions of guilt and empathy in favour of short-term and

low-intensity forms of engagement. The identified story frames and modes of story participation in the case discussed here arguably emerge as forms of *vernacular post-humanitarianism* online, promoting a cosmopolitan sense of moral responsibility and an obligation to show and share emotions of sadness, but also shame and disgust at contemporary humanity. In these types of sharing, acts of stancetaking and displays of emotion arguably contain the individualised reception of these stories of suffering into moments of emotional upheaval that make people feel better about their own moral universe. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent emotion is experienced preceding, following or simultaneous to the sharing of a reaction to the story. It seems though, that anytypes of emotions expressed as transportable stances are regimented by social media practices organised around phatic, rather than dialogic communication (Miller 2008: 39) and by media and (post)humanitarianism emotional repertoires.

To conclude, online participation to stories of migrant suffering and death needs to be understood as part of cosmopolitan forms of reflection and engagement in contexts of digital late modernity characterised by reflexive individualization (Svensson 2014: 20), where users manage and control the display of their emotions in order to connect with peers and gain or increase their own visibility online. As Barbie Zelizer notes (Zelizer 2010: 336) the impact and reception of images of death is very much an open debate – it is yet unclear whether images of the dead nurture or kill compassion (see also Sontag 2004) and whether - or when - they can actually impact policy and change. Perhaps the best answer to this question is offered by more recent visual small stories shared on social media, such as the one below by Eduardo Sales @Sallesino, condemning the ephemerality of remembering Alan and denouncing the quickness with which the effervescence of collective memory tends to fade away.

### **Example 12**



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