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'Hosting refugees is the most rewarding experience': migrant identity and affective positioning in curated NGO stories

Sofia Lampropoulou^a, Korina Giaxoglou^b and Paige Johnson^a

^aDepartment of English, School of the Arts, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK; ^bSchool of Languages & Applied Linguistics, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

This study explores positive migrant storytelling in non-governmental organizations' advocacy campaigns. We focus on the practices and implications of leveraging storytelling towards charity organizations' institutional goals. Drawing upon critical discourse studies and narrative studies, we propose a critical storytelling approach that pays attention to the specific nature of storytelling as a discourse practice in itself. We focus on a UNHCR human-interest story of refugee displacement and subsequent integration into the UK. We employ the heuristic concept of positioning that calls for analysis at different, though interrelated levels of narrative activity, to explore how affect is mobilized and the specific identity categories and affect types that are created for migrants and their hosts. We then situate these identity positions in wider dominant discourses of migrant integration. We show that the story foregrounds emblematic refugees, worthy of hosts' support as well as relationships of dependence between migrants and the host society as requisites to successful integration. We argue that the ways in which an individual refugee story gets mobilized as an exemplary story reveals canonized forms of positive migrant storytelling emerging in the UK context that end up invoking dominant power asymmetries in relation to migration and British integration.

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1. Introduction

Migration continues to be a politicized and salient issue across Europe. In the UK, in particular, migration is currently framed as a 'problem' capitalizing on 'small boat crossings' and calling for 'bold' government-led responses. This negative framing can be exemplified in political narratives about migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers by the former UK home secretary, Suella Braverman. The ubiquity of narratives in political speeches has been widely researched (see De Fina, 2023 and references therein). According to De Fina, narratives are particularly successful in creating frames for 'understanding and modifying the world around us' (2023, p. 214). Political narratives about migration matters in the UK have been mostly instrumentalized to frame migration as a 'crisis'

CONTACT Sofia Lampropoulou  lampropo@liverpool.ac.uk

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(Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2019). As the UK also continues to experience high migration numbers – with 1.2 million long-term migrants arriving in 2022 as well as 72,027 asylum applications (see UNHCR, 2023) – crisis narratives in the UK continue to frame migration as an existential problem that burdens its National Health Service, creates housing shortages, and exploits its social care and benefits systems (Vickers, 2019, p. 13).

In parallel to – and in reaction to – these practices of negative framing, there have been sustained attempts to promote more positive and (re)humanizing representations of migrants. Non-governmental organizations have been instrumental in these attempts in line with their advocacy and outreach work for immigrants and refugees. Positive discourses about migrants and refugees tend to foreground aspects of their integration into the host society. Within the context of positive migrant storytelling, the present study examines the practices and implications of curating personal experience stories as part of migration advocacy campaigns by non-governmental organizations. Our focus is on how affect is mobilized in relation to wider master narratives and discourses about migration and asylum seeking in the UK, based on the combination of a critical storytelling approach (see Giaxoglou & Spilioti, 2024) with critical discourse studies (henceforth CDS). With this approach, we aim to bring to the fore the embedding of narrative ideologies, exploring how particular ways of telling become regimented across different types of social situations (Merminod, 2023). This is with the broader aim of empowering migrant voices and ultimately, facilitating organizations' communication of their cause. We would like to note that our critical approach to pro-migrant campaigns is not to be taken as dismissive of organizations' efforts to support migrants and refugees – rather, it is proposed as a way of calling critical attention to the often-unintended consequences that using stories and mobilizing affect may have on migrant discourses, and to reinforce collaborative and continued efforts to challenge dominant migration discourses circulating in the UK and Europe more generally.

This paper is organized as follows: first, we historically and temporally situate discourses of migration and integration within the UK socio-political landscape and elaborate on the role played by philanthropic organizations in the British context. We then review the synergy of CDS and narrative studies towards a critical storytelling approach. We present our data collection methods, before moving on to our analytical framework on affective positioning and narrative analysis heuristics. In the remainder of the paper, we focus on the story of Abdul and his host Ingrid to illustrate how canonized forms of positive migrant storytelling are emerging in the UK context. We conclude by arguing that the ways charity organizations leverage storytelling reproduce dominant and potentially harmful discourses of migrant integration in the UK and we call for heightened awareness of narrative ideologies at play in the curation of migrant stories.

2. Discourses of migration and integration in the UK

With approximately 17.3 million refugees arriving in Europe over the last five decades (UNHCR, 2022, p. 11), migration has been an object of study across a range of disciplines – including CDS. The focus has tended to be on negative representations of migrants in relation to neoliberal ideas of individualism, personal success and, in the UK and Europe, (generally dominant) conservative and extreme right-wing populist ideologies (see, among others, Abbas, 2019; Parker et al., 2022; Pruitt, 2019), especially following the so-called 2015 'migrant crisis', 'migration crisis' or 'refugee crisis'. Migration continues to be framed

as a risk to national and citizen security in the public sphere, resulting in crisis narratives that not only call for tighter border protection and control (cf. Vickers, 2019; Pruitt, 2019; Vaughan-Williams, 2021), but do so by distinguishing between the 'good' and the 'bad', the 'genuine' and the 'disingenuous', and the 'legal' and 'illegal' migrant. This 'crisification' of migration was also echoed by Suella Braverman at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2023 (see UKPOL, 2023), where she referred to the 'hurricane' of 'unprecedented mass migration' as 'uncontrolled' and 'unmanageable', and where she pledged not only to deter 'bogus asylum seekers' but also to ensure that 'legal migration ... only occurs when there is a clear benefit to the British people'. These narratives bely the fact that the UK's asylum 'backlog' is only partially explained by net increases in migration in recent years, overlooking other factors like delays in processing times by the Home Office, delays in decisions being made by asylum caseworkers, high staff turnover, among other administrative issues (see TMO, 2023). Transforming migration into a 'crisis' therefore serves to create a broader affective environment in which individuals are pushed to seek action, to restore a sense of ontological security, and to secure constant, stable, predictable environments (and thus senses of self) (Giddens, 1991; see also Homolar & Scholz, 2019). As such, the migrant 'crisis' currently functions as a mode of governance that allows political agents in the UK (and Europe more broadly) to create environments of ontological insecurity.

Despite this overall 'hostile environment', charity organizations that support and assist migrants are well-established in the UK (Nawyn, 2011). These organizations provide various types of assistance in the aim of ensuring that refugees and migrants are eventually able to live independently and self-sufficiently. For instance, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) works to 'ensure that everybody has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge, having fled violence, persecution or war at home', aligning with an explicitly humanitarian ethos. To provide this assistance, these organizations must appeal to the public and promote the idea that refugees are worthy of support by reproducing more positive, anti-racist representations of migration in the UK. However, the provision of humanitarian assistance and its relationship with wider state institutions is contested. Although research has shown that migrant advocacy organizations can bypass the impositions of the state, liberal forms of social regulation and control also instrumentalize humanitarian ideals that become 'both an *enabler* and a *limit* on state powers' (Reid-Henry, 2014, p. 423). Otherwise put, the involvement of philanthropic actors in migration governance is complicated by the fact that they must also create *and* navigate conditions through which the incoherence of illiberal migration practices can be managed (Schweitzer et al., 2022, p. 6). This is because while an explicitly humanitarian actor may not intend to reproduce negative frames and discourses, the action they undertake is ultimately influenced by their own knowledge of institutional norms and expectations (Trepagnier, 2010). For instance, as Jacquemet (2011, p. 493) argues in his ethnographic study of asylum proceedings for refugee recognition in Italy, Belgium, Canada, and the UK, contemporary media ecologies are saturated by institutional power asymmetries that create challenges for refugees and asylum-seekers who are encouraged to 'adjust their conversational style or face the consequences of their inability to do so'. This also extends to the telling of their stories in a linear, credible, and therefore authentic way (McKinnon, 2009), and so they are rarely the primary tellers of their own stories – other participants, including interpreters, decision-makers, organizations, and institutions, participate as co-tellers (Smith-Khan, 2017, p. 513) who leverage storytelling towards

'strategic and measurable goals driven by philanthropic foundations' (Fernandes, 2017, p. 3). Because these goals are informed by institutional norms and expectations, leveraging storytelling in this way runs the risk of reproducing dominant power asymmetries, despite there being a desire to do 'the right thing'.

3. Critical storytelling approach

To explore how narrative ideologies, and therefore specific ways of telling, are embedded in wider migration discourses in the UK, we propose a hybrid methodology that combines a critical storytelling approach with a critical discourse perspective. Our motivation for this synthesis stems from the fact that narrative studies often neglect the political embedding of storytelling (De Fina, 2023). At the same time, CDS would benefit from an approach that pays close attention to the multiple layering of storytelling in context (including the story organization and the storytelling activity) rather than treating narrative as a trace of a discourse, or as broadly referring to widely circulating discourses. In this way, we respond to calls for more approaches within CDS that embed narrative as a core component of their conceptual architectures (Forchtner, 2021: 305). While attention has often been drawn to the ideological orientation of narratives in CDS, it is also important to be attentive to their textual organization and its role in the construction of interpretations of events and identities (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 145). Indeed, a pitfall of a strictly CDS approach to narrative lies in its lack of attention to its *specific* nature as a discourse practice in itself, as narratives have mainly been approached by CDS as 'big frames for understanding reality rather than as specific types of texts' (De Fina, 2023, p. 208). Likewise, De Fina argues that narrative studies will benefit from more work 'with a critical angle to study how narratives shape and are shaped by power relations and ideologies in public life' (2020, p. 65). To this end, we adopt an approach that starts from the micro- details of storytelling in context while addressing the 'multiple embedding of narrative within social processes, relations and discourses at different levels and the ways in which storytelling practices impact on and are impacted by power relations' (De Fina, 2020, p. 51). We bring together the micro aspect from narrative studies and the macro aspect of CDS by using the heuristic concept of 'positioning' that calls for analysis at different, though inter-related levels of narrative and affect analysis (see section 3.2). We highlight the potential for this synthesis specifically at the macro level of positioning analysis where the analyst is seeking to connect identified linguistic, identity and affect choices to the wider discourses and ideologies that these index. A critical storytelling approach, thus, recognizes the emotive, affective, and persuasive potential of narratives and their textual organization, the emancipatory potentials of the narrative form, *and* the processes that lead to the embedding, production, regimentation, and circulation of particular narrative ideologies within, in this case, the UK socio-political context.

We understand narrative here as *storytelling*, that is as a 'set of communicative practices that aim to captivate and convince an audience through emotion and the sharing of inspiring stories' (Merminod, 2023, p. 4; Baroni, 2016). Our focus is therefore on the political economy of narratives as evident in the mobilization of stories for utilitarian ends. Following Fernandes (2017, pp. 10–11) we call attention to the way stories are *curated*, showing how subjects are guided by neoliberal principles of upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance in neoliberal philanthropy contexts. Fernandes (2017) shows

how storytelling can narrowly confine the interests and aims of the marginalized groups whose voice it nominally represents and restrict their potential for real social change. In our study, we situate the practices – and implications of – curating storytelling in the context of positive migration discourses (as advocated for by philanthropic organizations supporting migrants), examining how affect is mobilized in relation to wider discourses about migration and asylum seeking in the UK. We will argue that a cross fertilization of narrative studies with CDS best captures the regimentation of (migrant) storytelling, relating the identity categories and affect types that are created for story participants to the wider processes that underly this regimentation.

4. Data, methodology and analytic approach

4.1. The dataset

We focus on a dataset of 21 curated narratives of personal experience published by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as ‘News and stories’ on their website between 2016 and 2018.¹ UNHCR is a United Nations non-profit organization that provides international aid and protection for refugee communities. The stories were all published as part of the ‘No Stranger Place’ series, which emerged from a collaboration of UNHCR with photographer Aubrey Wade to profile refugees and their hosts across European countries, including the UK. The genre of these stories is a combination of a news story article and a human-interest story. We will report on the findings from the analysis of five stories from this series that were all published in the UK context compared to the rest of the stories that are located in European contexts. Our focus on UK-based stories will enable us draw conclusions about the wider discourses of migration in which the stories are embedded. Having acknowledged the benefits of the synergy between narrative studies and CDS in section 3, we are also aware of potential tensions in achieving the right balance between a close, in-depth micro analysis required for narrative studies and a macro, CDS-led socio-political analysis. To achieve this, an in-depth and often lengthy qualitative analysis is required that unpacks the multilayering of storytelling as well as its wider political embedding. To this end, we take one representative story as our main focus – the story of Abdul, his hosts Ingrid and her sons, entitled ‘UK family helps Syrian teenager forget horrors of the “Jungle”²’. The story has been selected for analysis as one example of the way a personal experience story is curated – in this case as part of a UNHCR communication campaign – which mobilizes human-interest stories of migrants to promote more positive and affect-based representations. The stories in this campaign are distinctive in terms of their focus on the inclusion and foregrounding of the experience, and thus the voices of the hosts apart from the refugees. Additionally, as we will show in the analysis, the story of Abdul embeds multiple stories and characters in a way that is not that common in such contexts. This case, thus, presented an opportunity to explore a case of a more complex curation of stories and positionings of characters in relation to one another.

4.2. Framework of analysis

Our analysis draws on the empirical framework of *affective positioning*, which extends existing frameworks for the analysis of narrative identity positioning (Bamberg &

Georgakopoulou, 2008) to encompass aspects of affect. In line with the growing media (tiza)tion and instrumentalization of storytelling and the increasingly affect-based and affect-triggering discourses, this framework foregrounds affect as an integral component of narrative activity where it forms the ground for the negotiation and construction of identities (Giaxoglou, 2021; Giaxoglou & Georgakopoulou, 2021). We approach affect as (a) a discursive practice, which involves articulations and recruitments of embodied affect and meaning-making in activity flows (see Wetherell, 2013), (b) a mode of performance via different sets of *affiliative techniques* (Marwick and boyd, 2011), indexed by context-specific cues and indexing aspects of context; (c) an act of stance-taking (see DuBois, 2007), whereby *affect* or emotional attitude, is accompanied by *investment*, namely epistemic attitude, and *alignment* or relational attitude (Saračević & Mitkovska, 2021) and (d) a practice of calibrating a relative degree of proximity or distance at different levels (at the level of characters, audiences – known and unknown, and self) via the more or less strategic use of linguistic, discourse, and visual cues (Giaxoglou, 2021).

Affective positioning is an integral part of the analysis of narrative practices, and it can be empirically studied at the following three interrelated levels: level 1 – taleworld, level 2 – storyrealm and level 3 – wider discourses and positions. The levels of taleworld ('the world where characters move and live') and storyrealm ('the storytelling event at the centre of which the taleworld lies') are drawn from Young's (1987) distinction of the two realms involved when people are telling stories and the recognition that these realms constitute different narrative levels. The taleworld brackets a particular discourse activity as a story, while the storyrealm refers to the storytelling event and reveals attitudes towards it as well as towards the story (see also De Fina, 2016, p. 479). Below we further unpack the analytical considerations at the three levels.

Level 1 (taleworld): focus on characters, events and affective experiences selected for configuring the taleworld(s). As analysts, we ask the following questions: What is selected as narratable material? Who are set up as the main characters and how are their identities and affect linguistically (re)presented in the narrative? What cues are used for affectively positioning characters to each other?

Level 2 (storyrealm): focus on aspects of the narrative(s)' emergence, participation positions and curation. We ask the following questions: what types of narratives emerge and what kinds of affective participation positions for the main characters and audiences do these narrative types become associated with? How are the narratives put together and presented and what purposes are they mobilized for?

Level 3 (wider discourses and positions): Finally, we focus here on wider discourses, positions and social narratives around shared cultural/British values that are indexed as a way of creating affiliation among readers. We ask what kinds of wider identities and affective positions are indexed by the story/ies?

In summary, at Level 1 our analytic focus on is on the 'what', at Level 2 on the 'how', and at Level 3 we bring the analytic insights from the first two levels to address the 'so what?'. It is then through our analysis at Level 3 that we illustrate our combination of a critical storytelling approach and critical discourse analysis.

Our methodology involved the coding of the story at the different levels of narrative practice, using a qualitative-driven, inductive, iterative approach which involved looking for commonly occurring features of affective positioning at Levels 1 and 2 in

the stories and noting down their specific realization and prevalence. Our analytical approach pays attention to the identification of affective positioning cues, such as emotion terms, direct speech, deictics, naming expressions, uses of syntax and multimodal elements. Once these cues were identified, we then sought to connect these to aspects of the local context, that is the narrative curation activity and the wider context of circulating discourses about migration.

5. Analysis

As an entry point to our analysis, we use the small stories heuristics, namely *ways of telling*, *sites*, and *tellers* (Georgakopoulou, 2015). The ‘ways of telling’ are the organizational stories designed and curated as an appeal to the public for support. The ‘sites’ where these stories are shared include the UNHCR website and, specifically, the series entitled ‘No Stranger Place’ which is part of a campaign aimed at promoting ‘compassion, hope, and humanity.’ ‘Tellers’ are complex entities in this case, as although the refugees and the hosts are seemingly the main tellers, the directing teller is the UNHCR story designer(s) and curator(s). In what follows, we present our analysis of affective positioning at each level in turn.

5.1. Level 1: configuring the taleworld

At this level of analysis, we focus on the characters, events and affective experiences selected for configuring the taleworld(s). Specifically, there are three parallel and intersecting taleworlds. In the first taleworld, the different moves and stops of Abdul’s migrant journey from his home country to the UK are selected as events relevant and worthy of narrating (see Extract 1). Abdul is introduced as the main character, a Syrian teenager who separated from his family and set out on a migrant journey that ultimately brought him to the UK.

Extract 1. Abdul’s narrative

Abdul fled Syria in 2014 when a bomb flattened his neighbourhood and rockets destroyed his home. His family went to Turkey and he headed for Lebanon, where he spent a year doing odd jobs until he saved enough money to go to Greece.

He found his way to the United Kingdom after spending four weeks in the makeshift camp for migrants and asylum-seekers known as the ‘Jungle’, outside Calais on the French coast.

Nothing prepared him for the horrific conditions in the notorious shantytown, which was demolished by the French authorities in October 2016.

‘People literally died around us in Calais. It was very scary and dangerous,’ he said. ‘I was 100 per cent certain I was going to die. I never felt so much terror in my life.’

When he finally reached British shores on the back of a train, he was so happy he hugged the immigration officers who caught him. He was placed with 500 other young asylum-seekers at the Birmingham hotel.

Abdul’s different moves and stops are presented in this third-person narrative alongside justifications providing rational and acceptable explanations that motivated each

move or stop until his entry to the UK. Specifically, the war in Syria and the destruction of his home was the main reason for his move from Syria, while the need to work and save money to continue his journey was the reason for his stay in Lebanon for a year. Where a reason is not provided, it is assumed that the move or stay was obligatory, with little control on Abdul's part, as in the case of his temporary stay in Greece and Calais (see [Table A1](#) in Appendix).

Abdul's migrant experience narrative is organized around his arrival to the UK, which is set up contrastively against the background of his stay at the camp in Calais. The parts of Abdul's personal experience that are foregrounded as most relevant are represented vividly through the use of direct quotes and narrative evaluations, investing the story with affective weight and meaning. For example, the quote relating Abdul's experience of life at the Calais camp includes explicit expressions of negative valence affect, namely emotions of fear of dying, risk, and terror articulated through adjectives reinforced by quantifying adverbs, e.g. 'very' ('it was very scary and dangerous'), 'so much' ('I never felt so much terror in my life') and quantifying expressions, e.g. '100 per cent' ('I was 100 per cent certain I was going to die'). The representation of terror in this quote is juxtaposed to the third-person narrative description of his arrival, ultimately, to the UK represented as a moment of relief and happiness ('he was so happy').

The second taleworld relates the narrative of Ingrid, one of the people who has supported Abdul since he arrived in the UK and who is introduced, here, as the other main character of this story (see Extract 2). The focus is placed on Ingrid's personal and professional biography presented alongside short justifications for her professional moves, for example, giving up medicine to care for her children and later on setting up her own refugee charity. Ingrid's narrative culminates to her meeting with Abdul, which led to a host-hosted arrangement and the development of a relationship between them, akin to a foster mother-foster son.

Extract 2. Ingrid's narrative

Ingrid, who had given up practising medicine to focus on raising her three children, had been volunteering with refugees in Greece, and also at the Jungle in Calais.

She now runs her own charity for refugees, called CalAidSurrey, and met Abdul during a chance visit to the hotel where he was staying.

A few months later, Abdul received his residency papers and had to find his own accommodation. Ingrid, who hosts refugees through an organization called [Refugees At Home](#), invited him to Epsom for the day in June 2016.

Her two eldest children had moved out and only Ross was still at home. The two boys swam, and played soccer and video games. They had so much fun that by the end of the day Ingrid invited Abdul to move in.

'I was overjoyed,' Abdul said. 'Ingrid is a super mum. She helps me with everything. I missed my family so much but when I came here even my mum said "are you forgetting about me?"' he laughed. 'I really hope one day I can work and repay her somehow. My life has changed 180 degrees, all thanks to her.'

The biographical part of Ingrid's narrative is articulated in the third-person, while the positive impact of Ingrid's hosting Abdul is presented through a direct quote from Abdul himself,

foregrounding his feelings of joy ('I was overjoyed'), appreciation for Ingrid ('Ingrid is a super mum') and his gratitude to her ('I really hope one day I can work and repay her somehow'). Through this taleworld configuration, Ingrid is positioned to readers as a successful professional (medical doctor), a 'good mother' (leaving her job to care for her children), and a caring and entrepreneurial citizen (volunteering with refugees and ultimately setting up her own charity), which represent her credentials for her qualifying as a 'good host'.

Following Ingrid's narrative, the focus returns to Abdul's narrative, this time placing the focus on his present activities, challenges, and future ambitions. This final part of Abdul's narrative is represented through a narrative evaluation immediately followed by a direct quote that adds to it detail and affective depth (see Extract 3).

Extract 3. Return to Abdul's narrative

Abdul studies English full time and wants to do civil engineering at university.

'In Syria, I would have been in college by now,' he added. 'Here, I am still studying English. I have started from zero again. It is not an easy life, it's difficult. It's hard to adapt to this new language and culture, even here with this wonderful family. It's not easy but I won't give up'.

The composite story ends with Ingrid's evaluation of Abdul (see Extract 4) and some of her other parallel migrant hosting activities (see Extract 5).

Extract 4.

Ingrid said: 'He is like my son. I'm really proud of him and so impressed with his resilience and good character. He is a wonderful example for my young son.'

Extract 5.

Ingrid is hosting two other refugees: Isak, 18, from Ethiopia, who moved in last October and speaks little English, and a 31-year-old engineer from the Middle East who did not want to be identified for security reasons.

Ingrid's narrative concludes with a direct quote from her summing up the positive outcomes she envisages coming out of her hosting activity, the expectations she engenders from the hosted migrants as well as the ultimately rewarding effect of the experience for her (see Extract 6).

Extract 6.

I always tell them one day you pay me back by having a good job and speaking good English,' Ingrid said. 'Hosting refugees is the most rewarding experience. I strongly encourage people to look into it'.

The third taleworld introduces Ingrid's son, Ross, the only one of Ingrid's three children who was still staying at home when Abdul joined their household, as a supplementary character. Ross's narrative offers his perspective on the experience of hosting Abdul. Similar to the previous two narratives, Ross's perspective is represented through narrative evaluations backed up by direct quotes that directly follow these (see Extract 7).

Extract 7. Ross's narrative

(Narrative evaluation 1) Ross said meeting Abdul and other refugees had a profound impact on him.

(Direct quote 1) Initially I was a bit taken aback by the idea but now they are like brothers to me,' he said. 'Before I wanted to go into business or economics but now I feel like my eyes have been opened. I want to make a difference and maybe become a human rights lawyer.

(Narrative evaluation 2) He said it had taught him to be grateful that he had a proper home and did not live in fear.

(Direct quote 2) Now, when I see people working, and they have an accent, I think they must have very interesting stories, and I know how difficult it must be for them to get here.

As shown in the above extract, Ross is seen to initially acknowledge the tensions in this experience ('initially I was a bit taken aback by the idea') only to go on to highlight the positive and inspirational aspects of this experience for him. Through Ross's words, Abdul is portrayed as a role model. His story, then, can be said to promote positive representations of migrants, foregrounding migrant's life experiences and stories as useful sites for reflecting on and appreciating (the comforts of) Western lifestyles.

The three characters and their actions are affectively invested using direct quotes that complement the narratives of Abdul and Ingrid by serving as narrative evaluations with a persuasive function. They communicate the key aspects of characters' portraits and foreground the message(s) of the entire story. This includes, for example, the positive outcome of Abdul's migration journey communicated through the juxtaposition of the negative valence emotions of his experience in Calais with the positive valence emotions of his experience at Ingrid's home. Abdul is portrayed not only as resilient, but also as willing to succeed (in a context where success equals integration), while Ingrid is portrayed not only as successful in her role as hostess but also as fulfilled by her hosting activity. Finally, Ingrid's son, is portrayed as an indirect beneficiary of hosting Abdul, exposed to, and changed by the 'Other's' inspirational life stories.

The following sub-section turns to analytic insights at level 2 of affective positioning.

5.2. Level 2: mobilizing and curating personal experience narratives

At Level 2, the level of storyrealm, the analytic focus is placed on narrative(s)' emergence, participation modes, and curation. Here, we consider how the selected events are configured into specific types of stories that are curated as part of the story campaign and how these stories get associated with modes of audience involvement and affective participation.

The selected key events from the life of Abdul and Ingrid are configured as a typical narrative of vicarious experience (i.e. narrated in the third person) as described by Labov (2013). The story opens with an *orientation* section (which in a way also serves as the abstract of the story) where Abdul's backstory is presented: his fleeing Syria and journeying to the UK via Lebanon, Greece, and the 'Jungle'. The orientation is followed by *evaluation sections*, zooming in – even if briefly – on his horrific experience in the Jungle and the affective impact of that experience on him ('I never felt so much terror ...'). The *main event or complication* (i.e. Abdul's eventual arrival to the British shores) is presented along with the *evaluation* of that event as a positive event that brought joy to Abdul ('he was so happy ... who caught him') describing his experience in terms of a change from *dysphoria* to *euphoria* (Merminod, 2023) (see Table A2, Appendix). The recount of Abdul's personal experience narrative focusing on the positive outcome

of his migration journey helps to set up some distance from the war and destruction in his home country of Syria and his family.

Ingrid's story also features the key elements of (vicarious) narrative structure described by Labov (*ibid*), starting with an *orientation* that introduces her and her charity and a compressed *complication or main event*, that describes how she ended up inviting Abdul to stay with her and her family. The story ends with an *evaluation* of that experience through the words of Abdul's who describes her as a 'super mum' and as someone to whom he is grateful and hopes to be able to repay in the future (see [Table A3](#), Appendix). In Ingrid's story, we learn more about what happened to Abdul after he reached the UK, and what constitutes the main message of the entire story, that is Ingrid's benevolent and supportive role in this integration. Her personal experience narrative emphasizes her proximity to Abdul and other migrants in a similar situation and as such, authenticates her charity action.

Abdul's and Ingrid's intersecting personal experience narratives are brought together into a composite 'success story' about the rewarding experience of 'hosting refugees in the UK'. This 'success story' is mobilized in the UNCHR campaign to showcase to a wider audience the UK's 'welcoming' of refugees and its positive outcomes for all involved. The success story is built up in a series of direct quotes by the three characters that are embedded in the story.

For example, the use of affective positioning deictic cues in Abdul's quotes juxtapose the 'before' and 'now', marking Abdul's distance from his war-ridden home country and his proximity to his present host society (see underlined parts in Extract 8).

Extract 8. Abdul's quotes (underlining added)

'In Syria, I would have been in college by now,' he added. 'Here, I am still studying English.

It's hard to adapt to this new language and culture, even here with this wonderful family. It's not easy but I won't give up.

The above linguistic representation of Abdul's affective positioning underscores his predominant orientation to the present and future integration and by extension of other migrants like him.

Ingrid's direct quote places Abdul (and migrants like him) in positions of reciprocation of support through their work and English language skills, thus setting out clear expectations about their integration to the host society:

Extract 9. Ingrid's quote

One day you pay me back by having a good job and speaking good English ...

Finally, Ross's direct quote at the end of the news story article marks his proximity to people like Abdul and proposes audience positions of empathy and positive identification with migrants like Abdul (see Extract 10).

Extract 10. Ross's quote (underlining added)

Now, when I see people working, and they have an accent [...] I know how difficult it must be for them to get here.

These affective positions made available to readers are reinforced by the way the composite story is curated and presented on the (web)page, i.e. the way images and quotes

are used and foregrounded. Specifically, selected quotes from Abdul, Ingrid, and Ross are decontextualized and visually foregrounded on the screen, bringing forward the main messages of the story, namely the human-interest story of a migrant's successful integration and the charity's message about the benefits of hosting refugees.

The composite story ends with an italicized meta-comment that frames the story and explicitly articulates its purpose in the context of the campaign it is part of (see Extract 11). The story is one of many setting out Ingrid's migrant support activity and people like her as emblematic characters and stories, contributing to achieving integration as a two-way process, i.e. as bridging 'cultural divides and language barriers, embracing compassion, hope and humanity'.

Extract 11. Framing the story

This story is part of a series entitled *No Stranger Place*, which was developed and photographed by Aubrey Wade in partnership with UNHCR, profiling refugees and their hosts across Europe. More than a year after the drowning of three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, thousands of people have come together to bridge cultural divides and language barriers, embracing compassion, hope and humanity – even as some European governments continue to build obstacles. Their generosity is an example to the world.

Summing up our analysis so far, the main characters featured in the composite story are Abdul, Ingrid and Ross, who are established through the evaluative presentation of their parallel personal experiences and their intersection in the context of Abdul's hosting in Ingrid and Ross' home. In terms of the affective representation of characters, Abdul is positively represented as a teenager who made 'a huge impression' on Ingrid. This positive characterization is constructed through the use of the following evaluative indexicals: (a) other-assessments (e.g. Ingrid's quotes where she points to his efforts at integrating, i.e. speaking English; eagerness to go to university; Ross's quote where Abdul is presented as a *relatable* person and a *good example* for him), (b) speech and thought representations of emotional states in the context of Abdul's migration journey story as curated in the article, contrasting his *suffering and resilience* in the context of the scary and dangerous conditions of life in Calais ('I never felt so much terror in my life') to his positive emotions once he reached the UK ('he was so happy he hugged the immigration officers who caught him'); and (c) other-directed affect, where Abdul is seen to directly express his feelings of *gratitude* to his hosts, Ingrid and her family ('I really hope one day I can work and repay her somehow. My life has changed 180 degrees, all thanks to her') which, alongside positive representations of Ingrid through referring expressions (e.g. 'mother of three', 'doctor', 'charity volunteer') index recognizable and relatable roles and achievements reflective of normative representations for middle-class women.

We now turn to the insights from our analysis at Level 3.

5.3. Level 3: wider migration discourses and affect

At Level 3, the level of wider sociocultural context, we turn towards what the choices at Levels 1 and 2 indicate for wider discourses of acceptability and appropriateness of affective experiences and displays for a migrant and a host. Thus far, our analysis pointed to shifts in the story from portrayals of self-centred affect in personal experience

stories to other-directed affect, used here as contextualizing devices that create an indexical order against which specific types of migrants are seen as worthy of hosts' support. Here, the positions created for refugees are positions that construct them as 'acceptable citizens' who are not only willing to integrate to the host society, but who are also prepared to express their gratitude for being accepted, echoing findings of previous research (cf. Giaxoglou & Spilioti, 2024; Lampropoulou & Johnson, 2023). The ideal refugees are positioned, despite their traumatic past, as resilient, hardworking who get ultimately transformed, via positive adjustments, to successful citizens and potential contributors to the British society (Lampropoulou & Johnson, 2023). Additionally, these positions sustain a dominant migration as transaction discourse that overlaps with a discourse of integration as a two-way process (ibid). These discourses not only reflect, but also contribute to the re-shaping of a neoliberal integration paradigm and affectively appeal to the wider public to believe that migrants have only themselves, rather than wider institutional structures, to blame if they are rejected by their host communities. Importantly, the positions created for the characters in the above curated story foreground relationships of dependence (Horner & Weber, 2011, p. 140; Bennett, 2018, p. 51) that are couched in dominant discourses of integration. It is through the inevitable dependence of refugees to hosts that refugees will eventually become independent and successfully integrate within British society. Thus, although the neoliberal integration paradigm promotes eventual self-sufficiency, freedom and autonomy, it relies on relationships of dependence (between migrants and the host society) as a requisite to successful integration. This relationship brings to the fore the underrepresented but unique roles of hosts in public discourse and in British society more widely, emphasized in our curated story dataset. On first look, Ingrid's affective positions as a successful mother, charity entrepreneur and aid provider reproduce a 'hosting refugees is rewarding' (Monforte et al., 2021) discourse constructing the UK as an unambiguously welcoming society. A closer look, however, reveals that this discourse is problematic in that it assumes the need for migrants to explicitly (and unambiguously) express their indebtedness/gratefulness to host individuals and, by extension, to host societies. According to Chouliaraki and Stolic (2019: 318) the act of hosting sets up an 'unequal relationship between vulnerable but grateful recipients and their hosts' charitable' work. Importantly, this unequal relationship between refugees as worthy of receiving help and hosts as fulfilled by offering help reproduces the UK as white saviour discourse that is couched in the UK's colonial past (Bennett, 2018). It relies on some form of cultural superiority based on values that are claimed as originating from the UK (Bennett, 2018, p. 26). To this end, the British hosts, and British society more widely, are superior enough to act as benefactors or security actors of vulnerable subjects 'whose very precarity becomes a resource for meaningful action' (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2019, p. 318), rendering them as worthy of receiving help. In turn, the entitlement of refugees to receive help has been secured by the affective organization of the stories which are then mobilized by the charity organizations for utilitarian ends.

6. Conclusions

Our analysis of Abdul (and Ingrid's) curated story has pointed to a shift in organizational pro-migrant storytelling from personal experience stories of migrant journeys and

suffering to stories of migrant success and integration. This shift attests to the emergence of *canonized forms of positive migrant storytelling* through the strategic use of other-directed affect, which can have a 'psychological effect on the audience that goes beyond that of usual talk, facilitating the adherence to the storyteller's viewpoint' (Merminod, 2023: 13). These stories are, therefore, used as an efficient tool of communication and persuasion where migrant personal experience stories are curated in ways that foreground migrants' 'thymic trajectory' from dysphoria to euphoria (see Merminod, 2023, p. 8), following their affective (re)positioning. At the heart of this repositioning lies an agentive shift from precarity to stability and safety enabled by the foregrounded but unequal relationship between refugee and host.

Additionally, the affective positions constructed for the characters create expectations regarding 'ways of doing and ways of being' (Merminod, 2023, p. 12), promoting specific types of refugees as worthy of hosts' support. Specifically, these ways of telling mobilize migrants' stories in ways designed to justify why they are worth supporting in terms both of their relatability and their positive host-oriented emotions, representing them as ideal and non-threatening and allowing them access to a Western lifestyle on the condition of their dependency (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2019, p. 318). We therefore see the effects of leveraging storytelling for the production, regimentation and circulation of particular narrative ideologies on migrant integration that dominate the UK socio-political context.

As such, these canonized forms of positive migrant storytelling, despite their focus on refugee agency, do not successfully challenge the 'crisification' of migration promoted by political narratives in the UK context. First, their curation operates on the assumption that nations become 'imagined communities' with sovereign boundaries that are delimited by, and embedded in, national histories (Bennett, 2018; Yuval-Davis et al., 2018), creating a divide between host societies and out-groups. Secondly, because the concurrent rise of pro-nationalist discourses centring a threatened sovereign in-group identity are couched in national histories, these discourses work to legitimate the dominance of in-groups while marginalizing and inferiorising out-groups (typically based on physical, cultural, and/or symbolic differences) (Shankley & Rhodes, 2020, p. 203; Bennett, 2018). Thirdly, the foregrounding of ideal refugees who are autonomous, entrepreneurial, hard-working, and adaptable risks marginalizing those taken to embody undesirability, fear, and uselessness (Jaskulowski & Pawlak, 2022, p. 2059; Lampropoulou & Johnson, 2023), framing *certain* migrants as a 'problem' and a 'burden'. Finally, the foregrounding of hosts who are accomplished, generous and compassionate also helps to secure the project of restoring Britain as a proud, safe, and idealized heartland.

Our study illustrated a critical approach to storytelling that pays attention to the multiple embeddings of narrative within social processes and wider discourses and to the ways in which storytelling practices impact on and are impacted by power relations. The host/refugee relationship foregrounded in the story analyzed above is situated within existing 'political and cultural power relations of global migration' (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2019, p. 321). Our findings call for continued critical reflection on discourse representations and projected – often unintended – affective and identity positions of migrants and hosts, looking out for aspects of localized positive discourses about migrants and migration and the wider discourses they seem to be couched in. We have therefore offered a critique of the contemporary humanitarian discourses in which campaigns like UNCHR's are

embedded (Archakis et al., 2018; Giaxoglou & Spilioti, 2024; Lampropoulou & Johnson, 2023) aiming to open up lines of ongoing reflection on positive representations of migration in a hostile environment. We acknowledge that in charity discourse, such representations are bound to the communicational purposes and audience (generally defined as finding ‘the middle ground’), which are linked with outreach and the gaining of financial and emotional support. Our recommendations at this stage include the needs to (a) raise awareness of the limits of stories in an era of storytelling boom, (b) pursue studies of the uptake of these stories by different audience groups, and (c) recognize the need for migrant-led initiatives within and outside of charity contexts in order to communicate the migrant experience beyond the narrative canon.

Notes

1. We use ‘story’ and ‘stories’ when referring to our dataset given that these are presented as ‘stories’ in the campaign, we use ‘narrative’ when referring to analytical aspects of these stories and ‘storytelling’ to refer to the use of these stories in the context of a campaign or other contexts (see also Giaxoglou & Georgakopoulou, 2021).
2. All stories discussed here are publicly available on UNHCR’s website.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Sofia Lampropoulou is Reader in English Language at the University of Liverpool. Her research interests lie in sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis, and specifically how social, racial and gender inequalities are manifested through discourse. Her publications include articles in (among others): *Discourse and Society*, *Language and Communication*, *Discourse, Context and Media*, *Journal of Pragmatics*. She is external collaborator on the project ‘Tracing Racism in Anti-raCist discourse: a critical approach to European public speech on the migrant and refugee crisis’ (TRACE/ HFRI-FM17-42), funded by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation.

Korina Giaxoglou is Senior Lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University. Her research interests lie at the intersections of linguistic anthropology, the sociolinguistics of narrative, and (mediated) discourse analysis. Her research monograph on social media mourning was published in July 2020 from Routledge Research. She is external collaborator on the project ‘Tracing Racism in Anti-raCist discourse: a critical approach to European public speech on the migrant and refugee crisis’ (TRACE/ HFRI-FM17-42), funded by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation.

Paige Johnson is a PhD researcher in English Language at the University of Liverpool, funded by the Duncan Norman Charitable Trust. Her research explores how unequal relations of power, gender, and race are shaped by discourse from a (critical) discourse analytic perspective. Her PhD thesis takes up the narrative and affective positioning paradigms to explore how racist discourses are produced by anti-racist texts in the UK.

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Appendix

Table A1. Abdul's movement in the taleworld (level 1).

Move from/to a place	Why?	When?
'Fleeing' Syria	Bombing of his neighborhood and destruction of his home by a rocket	2014
Move to Lebanon	Need to work and save money for this next move	For a year between 2014 and 2015
Move to Greece	Not specified	2015
4 weeks temporary stay in the 'Jungle' camp for migrants and asylum-seekers	Not specified	2016
'Found his way to' the United Kingdom	Not specified	2016

Table A2. Abdul's story coded for personal experience narrative categories.

Category	Extract
Orientation	Abdul fled Syria in 2014 when a bomb flattened his neighbourhood and rockets destroyed his home. His family went to Turkey and he headed for Lebanon, where he spent a year doing odd jobs until he saved enough money to go to Greece. He found his way to the United Kingdom after spending four weeks in the makeshift camp for migrants and asylum-seekers known as the ' <u>Jungle</u> ', outside Calais on the French coast.
Evaluation (external)	Nothing prepared him for the horrific conditions in the notorious shantytown, which was demolished by the French authorities in October 2016.
Evaluation	'People literally died around us in Calais. It was very scary and dangerous,' he said. 'I was 100 per cent certain I was going to die. I never felt so much terror in my life.'
Complication/main event (with embedded external evaluation)	When he finally reached British shores on the back of a train, he was so happy he hugged the immigration officers who caught him. He was placed with 500 other young asylum-seekers at the Birmingham hotel

Table A3. Ingrid's story coded for personal experience narrative categories.

Category	Extract
Orientation	Ingrid, who had given up practising medicine to focus on raising her three children, had been volunteering with refugees in Greece, and also at the Jungle in Calais. She now runs her own charity for refugees, called CalAidSurrey, and met Abdul during a chance visit to the hotel where he was staying. A few months later, Abdul received his residency papers and had to find his own accommodation. Ingrid, who hosts refugees through an organization called <u>Refugees At Home</u> , invited him to Epsom for the day in June 2016.
Complication/Main event	Her two eldest children had moved out and only Ross was still at home. The two boys swam, and played soccer and video games. They had so much fun that by the end of the day Ingrid invited Abdul to move in.
Evaluation	'I was overjoyed,' Abdul said. 'Ingrid is a super mum. She helps me with everything. I missed my family so much but when I came here even my mum said "are you forgetting about me?"' he laughed. 'I really hope one day I can work and repay her somehow. My life has changed 180 degrees, all thanks to her.'