

## Migrant Content Creators as Actors of Transnational Education on Social Media

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the role and motivations of migrants who create content about educational opportunities abroad and distribute it on social media platforms. Following a digital ethnography, this exploratory case study focuses on three young Brazilian women from lower socioeconomic classes who migrated to Germany to pursue formal education. Having identified a demand for information about such pathways, they started systematically compiling and circulating information about educational opportunities in Germany and gathered thousands of followers. Our analysis shows that their engagement in information sharing is based on solidarity and mutual support, paired with a personal enjoyment of social media use as well as expectations of future payoffs. We argue that their focus on vocational education and training highlights that the concept of transnational education is applicable beyond university degrees and that by circulating information about how to access those levels of education, these content creators contribute to the transnationalisation of education.*

**Keywords:** *Actors in transnational education; digital media and migration; migrants and transnational education; vocational education and migration*

### 1. Introduction

Social media has emerged as a crucial component in the lives of many migrants. In the context of educational migration, connections established on social media are used by newcomer migrants to obtain information and support to access universities abroad (Jayadeva 2020). Social media, particularly social networking sites like Facebook, provide a platform for “many to many” communication in online forums. At the same time, this dynamic allows the formation of audiences who follow the publications of particular individuals. These audiences can be actively cultivated by creating content tailored to their interests. This paper explores this phenomenon in the intersection between migration, education, and media use.

Looking at education-related information exchanges on Facebook groups of Brazilians who live in Germany – or wish to migrate to that country – we identified some young people who migrated following educational opportunities and now create content for social media based on their experiences. This way, they provide aspiring migrants with information that may help them navigate requirements and regulations and enter educational institutions in Germany. In

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this paper, we describe the case of three of these migrants and creators of content related to educational opportunities. We ask: how do these migrants participate in the transnationalisation of education? To answer that, we look at the content these actors create and the motivation behind their activity.

The results presented in this article are part of a broader research project about the role of social media in transnational educational trajectories between Brazil and Germany (Dedecek Gertz, forthcoming). This study adopts an exploratory approach based on digital ethnography (Hine, 2015). The participation in various online platforms made it possible to identify three young Brazilian migrants who, due to their prolific and varied publications about immigration, learning, and educational opportunities in Germany, can be considered content creators in this field. Our findings indicate that, on the one hand, their activities in social media are related to expectations of future payoffs, resembling the “aspirational labour” described in other more commoditized areas (Duffy, 2017). On the other hand, their engagement in information sharing is also based on solidarity and mutual support (Bucholtz, 2019; Jayadeva, 2020) and paired with a personal enjoyment of social media use.

In this paper, we first discuss the concept of transnational education in connection to migration. After that, we contextualise education and migration from Brazil as well as Brazilian migrants’ media use. The theoretical background section is wrapped up with the concepts of “latent ties” (Haythornthwaite 2002) and “aspirational labour” (Duffy 2017). The research design section describes the decisions and processes of the digital ethnography (Hine 2015) through which the three migrants and content creators were identified and accompanied. In the results, we present who these actors are, what kind of content they produce, their role online, and their reasons for doing that. To conclude, we suggest that these migrants may serve as nodes in migrants’ digital networks and argue that the information and the support they provide constitute a potential surrogate for the support offered by face-to-face transnational social networks or networks composed of stronger connections, such as in some families. Furthermore, as they focus their content on education beyond university levels, their activity reveals a demand for those educational levels. Finally, these content creators can be seen as social media agents that contribute to the transnationalisation of education.

## **2. Transnational Migration and Education**

The term “transnational education” has been coined by the UNESCO to designate the offshore provision of educational programmes (UNESCO and Council of Europe 2001). Studies under this label focus mainly on higher education, with some interest in international schools. These institutions are only accessible to socially and economically privileged groups with the resources to enter a global education market (Adick 2018). The symbolic capital they acquire there appears much more difficult to obtain in the public educational institutions of national states. This way, the transnationalisation of education contributes to a “redefinition of educational advantage”, fostering new social inequalities between those who do and those who do not have access to the transnational education market (Zanten, Ball, and Darchy-Koehlin 2015). Areas like vocational education and training (VET), as well as education in informal and non-formal settings, have attracted little research from a transnational perspective (Adick 2018). Only recently has the related international mobility of students begun to be examined under the lens of transnational migration research (Bilecen and Van Mol 2017; Brooks and Waters 2010; King and Raghuram 2013). These studies highlight the



increasing importance of transnational education strategies in the middle class. Among lower socioeconomic classes, however, we know little about how educational aspirations and strategies influence families and young people's decisions to migrate, as well as about their impact on transnational social spaces.

Transnational migration research attempts to understand “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, 8). This perspective analyses the social practices of migrants and non-mobile persons embedded in broader contexts, like families and social networks. It describes the contributions of individuals and families to processes which have been labelled as “globalisation” elsewhere. Transnational migration research stresses the fact that migration, or international mobility, is rarely accomplished by isolated individuals. Social relations are crucial in the decision to move and in its realisation. The transnational perspective points to the emergence of novel social realities and emphasises that by “linking together their societies of origin and settlement” (*ibid.*), migrants contribute to the arousing of “pluri-locally spanned transnational social spaces” (Pries 2001, 3). Accordingly, transnational *educational spaces* “emerge and consolidate themselves by relations, interactions and perceptions” (Kesper-Biermann 2016, 93). Although transnational education can reinforce social inequalities, it may also be a means of upward social mobility, even if this only occurs in exceptional cases. Previous research indicates that educational aspirations may be an important reason for migration among the underprivileged, especially if linked to educational upward mobility (Carnicer & Fürstenau, 2021). This is especially apparent in countries like Brazil, where the educational system can hardly fulfil the aspirations of striving lower socioeconomic classes.

### 3. Education and Migration from Brazil

Access to high-quality education in Brazil is dependent on economic resources. At primary and secondary levels, the quality of public schools varies greatly, yet, on the whole, according to PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and university transition rates, it remains low compared to the quality of private schools. For public school graduates, it is difficult to get a place at one of the free public universities, which, unlike public schools, are ranked higher than private ones. Graduates of expensive private schools have an advantage as they are better prepared for the highly competitive university entrance exams (Pfeiffer 2015). Policies aimed at widening access for Black students and public school graduates have contributed to an increase in the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds at public universities. Still, extreme educational inequality persists (Trevisol and Nierotka 2016).

For Brazilians, studying abroad requires considerable economic resources and academic certificates and is usually possible only in high- and middle-class contexts. However, previous research has described settings that allow for transnational educational trajectories even in rather underprivileged socioeconomic contexts (Carnicer, 2019; Fürstenau, 2019). These settings are based on transnational social networks that make transnational migration a viable education strategy through social support and shared norms, ideas, and knowledge. The transnational educational careers of underprivileged migrants are shaped not only by the educational systems of the emigration and immigration countries but also, in a decisive way, by labour markets and migration regimes. Migration and education regimes intertwine to determine residence, study and work possibilities. The knowledge of these possibilities can be

difficult to acquire, and migrants often rely on advice to realize their plans. Social networks supply this advice. These provide information about the available opportunities and support their realization, both mostly based on previous experiences of participants of the network. This way, social networks may shape trajectories, functioning as an orientation for newcomers (Carnicer, 2018; Fürstenau, 2019). Sara Fürstenau (2019) describes a network of young female “care workers” from Brazil in Germany. The first of these women arrived in Germany as Au Pairs, which allowed them to stay in Germany, learn the language, and look for further educational opportunities. After one year, they applied for a voluntary social year, a *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr* (FSJ), in a residential care home for the elderly, which appeared as the only option to prolong their stay. There, they discovered an area of work that they liked, but also a vocational training opportunity as geriatric nurses. Whereas professional training in Brazil is rarely free of charge, the German dual system offers free professional training plus a small salary for apprentices who work and attend vocational school simultaneously. Nowadays, this network offers younger relatives and friends in Brazil both career orientation, accommodation, contacts with families, and agencies for Au Pair stays as well as with homes for the elderly that are happy to employ these women. Given the lack of opportunities and resources to develop their own life plans in Brazil, the women involved in the network clearly perceive migration as an emancipatory step (Idem). The network acts here as a structure that channels educational aspirations into transnational careers and contributes to the institutionalisation of particular forms of educational migration. As in other migratory contexts, these social networks are constituted mainly by rather ‘strong’ ties between relatives and friends who usually maintain long personal relationships (Boyd and Nowak 2013). Being involved in such networks entails opportunities not accessible elsewhere. In this sense, transnational social networks also constitute a factor of inequality.

#### **4. Latent Ties and Brazilian Migrants’ Media Use**

The transnational networks described in previous studies about Brazilian migrants pursuing degrees in Germany comprised non-mediatised networks (Carnicer, 2018; 2019; Fürstenau, 2019). However, mediatised networks have also been present in Brazilian migration already for a decade (Oosterbaan 2013; Schrooten 2012) with growing figures nowadays (Folletto, 2018; Dedecek Gertz & Süßer, 2022). Recently, the relationship between migration and social-media-based networks has also been explored (Bucholtz 2019; Dekker, Engbersen, and Faber 2016; Jayadeva 2020), describing migrants' use of online networks to establish “latent ties”, that is, ties that are “technically available but have not yet been activated by social interaction” (Haythornthwaite 2002, 389). An example of this is the use of Facebook groups in which participants gather according to a shared nationality, interest or migratory aspiration. For instance, latent ties are activated when an aspiring migrant posts a question about the requirements to enrol in an educational institution abroad and receives replies from other unknown participants in the Facebook group (Jayadeva, 2020).

Brazilian migrants’ fondness for social media is not new. Almost ten years ago, Brazilian migrants used Orkut (a platform deactivated in 2014) to engage in political discussions with other Brazilians abroad, to arrange in-person gatherings, and to exchange information about paperwork and employment opportunities (Oosterbaan, 2013; Schrooten, 2012). Orkut was embedded in migrants’ daily life already before they migrated, and after migration, it became a relevant source of social, political, and cultural connection (Schrooten, 2012). After Orkut was deactivated, migrants and aspiring migrants created new communities on Facebook –



with no sign of diminished interest in social media networking. Researching Facebook groups of Brazilians in Sweden, Laura Foletto (2018) reports groups with over 1.7000 participants and a mean of 66 monthly posts – growing amounts have been identified more recently in groups of Brazilians in Germany (Dedecek Gertz & Süßer, 2022). Hence, the main feature of such networks established online is information exchange and mutual support in the migration process, as well as in terms of education-related strategies and requirements (Dedecek Gertz, 2023; Jayadeva, 2020).

## **5. Content Creators and Aspirational Labour**

In this paper, we describe actors participating in such latent ties' networks, compile information about educational opportunities in Germany, and publish it on social media as pictures, videos, and texts. They also engage in discussions on Facebook groups of Brazilian migrants and answer questions posed on these groups or on their accounts on other platforms, such as Instagram. We define these actors as “content creators”: social media users who create and circulate texts and audio-visual material on different platforms, oftentimes “driven by an entrepreneurial spirit” (Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020, 1).

Some content creators perform “aspirational labour” (Duffy 2017), a concept that describes unpaid or underpaid activities, such as advertising products or services. The term “aspirational” is attached to this activity because people performing it hope their work will eventually pay off financially or serve as a portfolio to land them a job (Duffy 2017). Such activities are mostly associated with young people who strive to depict a branded lifestyle, attempting to present a polished, successful image of themselves (Abidin 2018; Duffy 2017; Hund 2023). A sense of “authenticity” is an important feature of how these content creators present themselves online: what they publish, how they interact with audiences, and how they depict their daily lives should be perceived by the audience as resembling their genuine beliefs, attitudes, and daily activities (Hund, 2023, p. 7). Being “authentic” functions as a form of distinction from traditional media celebrities, such as famous actors in wealthy circumstances (Duffy 2017).

## **6. Research design**

We collected data through digital ethnography (Hine 2015). The leading question at the start was, “How are social media used in transnational educational trajectories between Brazil and Germany?” and the entry points into the field were Facebook groups of “Brazilians in Germany” because these are highly used among Brazilian migrants (Foletto, 2018; Dedecek Gertz & Süßer, 2022).

During three months in 2020, we read posts in these groups. Through direct messages, we invited for interviews- some group participants who posed questions about educational opportunities in Germany or answered questions about it from 22 other people agreed to be interviewed and were added to the “friends” list of the first author’s Facebook profile, granting access to private posts. Some participants of these Facebook groups stood out as particularly active across groups and social media platforms. They engaged in providing detailed replies to newcomer or aspiring migrants who asked about the requirements and possibilities of pursuing a degree in Germany. These replies were tailored toward the situation described by the person posing the question in the group. Hence, they were not ready-made replies with information about, for instance, what documents one has to provide to enrol in

a VET course. These same group participants also shared links in the groups: they announced when they published new posts on Instagram, YouTube on their blogs; when a group participant asked about documents needed to request a student visa, the content creators invited them to check their video or blog post where the question was answered. Having identified this particular media use, the focus was set on three group participants who actively produced and circulated information about educational aspects as well as about lifestyle and migratory experiences in Germany. These three group participants received the pseudonyms of Antônia, Joana, and Mariele. Their cases were selected due to the commonality of their pathways and the focus of their content.

We read pictures, videos, and written interactions across the social media platforms of these three content creators and made screenshots of posts involving education. This social media data was useful for understanding the information and strategies associated with education these migrants share as well as their motivations to perform “aspirational labour” (Duffy, 2017). The three content creators were also interviewed about their upbringing, family, and educational pathways in Brazil, their migratory decisions and experiences in Germany, and their media use. The interviews were conducted in Brazilian Portuguese and analysed with a deductive/inductive coding structure which included their socioeconomic positionality prior to and after migration (e.g., educational attainment in Brazil, work situation of parents, interviewees’ work situation in Germany), their migratory reasons and pathways (e.g., coming directly to enter university, migrating as an Au Pair), the kind of content they create (e.g., educational opportunities, vacation pictures), the “latent tie” character of their online presence (e.g., replying to people on Facebook groups or to direct messages on their other online profiles), their reasons to perform such activities (e.g., “helping others”, to show their lifestyle), and “aspirational labour” (Duffy 2017) (e.g., outcome expectations of their online activity).

## 7. Findings

The results are presented in four subsections that reconstruct how the three migrants and content creators contribute to the transnationalisation of education and what the motivations for their online activity are. In the first section, we describe the social positionality of the three creators interviewed. The second section describes the social media content they create, highlighting education-related themes. In the third section, we analyse how the three content creators may serve as nodes of latent tie connections (Haythornthwaite 2002) to audiences whose backgrounds and migratory aspirations are similar to theirs. Finally, the fourth section presents the motivations for performing such online activities.

### 7.1. Social positionality: Who are these migrants and content creators?

Antônia (aged 25), Joana (28), and Mariele (33) share similar socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. They completed their school degrees partially in public and partially in private schools for which they were either granted a stipend or which had affordable tuition fees. Antônia and Mariele both obtained their BA degrees from private universities while working part-time and receiving partial stipends to cover tuition fees. Joana, on the other hand, completed her BA at a prestigious public university. To keep costs of living and studying low, all three lived with their parents during their studies. The three come from a socioeconomic stratum in which people at a very young age usually have to combine studying with working,





sometimes full-time jobs in precarious and poorly paid areas (Pochmann 2012), making it unaffordable for young people to leave their family's house.

After finishing their studies, Antônia, Joana, and Mariele sought opportunities to gain international experience and study in Europe. They first moved abroad as Au Pairs, which provided them with legal entry, a residence permit, and around 280 Euros pocket money for one year while they acquired proficiency in German and searched for further opportunities to remain in Germany. Following that year, they pursued different pathways. Joana participated in a paid volunteer program and subsequently began a VET in her field of study. Antônia began working in a field unrelated to her BA studies and aspired to complete a MA in her field at a German university. Mariele, after her Au Pair year in Belgium<sup>4</sup>, was admitted to an English-taught MA in social sciences at an applied sciences university in Germany and worked part-time during the semester to finance her studies and living expenses. Staying in Belgium, as she intended, was not possible because, to her, “it is extremely, very expensive”<sup>5</sup>. All three interviewees hoped to continue their university education in Germany after the Au Pair year. This was motivated by an aspiration to continue the specialisation in their field of study while fulfilling the requirements for a visa in Germany at the same time.

Thus, all three came from lower socioeconomic classes, migrated to Germany looking for an opportunity to gain international experience, and were motivated by educational aspirations. Their migration supports the claim that migrants from lower socioeconomic classes can participate in the transnationalisation of education (cf. Carnicer & Fürstenau, 2021; Fürstenau, 2019). They also contribute to that phenomenon through their activity as content creators.

## **7.2. Content: What do they do online?**

Antônia, Joana, and Mariele use the same online platforms to depict their migration experiences and disseminate educational information. They are particularly active on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube; Facebook is mainly used to circulate their content in groups of “Brazilians in Germany.” In addition, they manage WhatsApp or Telegram groups in which newcomer and aspiring migrants share information and experiences. Joana is also an active participant in Facebook groups, answering questions on topics such as the validation of Brazilian certificates in Germany and the requirements for enrolling in VET. All three have authored manuals, which they call eBooks, detailing their migratory pathway, strategies for learning German, securing a VET placement or an internship, applying for visas, types of degrees available in German universities, and other aspects of the German educational system. These eBook contents are comparable to what they post on their social media platforms, where they focus on a curated visual display and promote their paid individual consultancy services. These eBooks, consultancy services, and social media curation can be useful for aspiring migrants since there is trust in education-related information shared online, particularly if it includes personal experiences (Dedecek Gertz, 2023; Jayadeva 2020).

Antônia's content focuses on the association of learning outcomes, particularly language learning, with entering the job market through internships and fulfilling requirements for permanent residency in Germany. Those who purchase her eBook gain access to a private WhatsApp group, receive a guide on how to write a CV in German, and can book an online

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymised country.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from interviews were translated from Brazilian Portuguese.

consultancy appointment with her. On Instagram, where she has approximately six thousand followers, Antônia posts pictures of herself in various settings, such as cafes and historical sites, accompanied by reflections on life as a migrant and information about au pairing, including visas and Au Pairs' purchasing power. Her education-related content focuses on language learning. She shares pictures of certificates commemorating her advancement to higher levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, acknowledges the challenges of learning German, and describes feeling overwhelmed. Nevertheless, she also finds humour in her struggles and vents her frustrations. For instance, she posts a picture of an empty classroom with a green chalkboard covered in German text and comments on the frustration of learning the language: "I'm steaming off here for you to see that you're not alone in this [learning German]".

Joana focuses on the link between educational opportunities and legal issues around migration. She also uses her Instagram account, which boasts around five thousand followers, to post pictures of her daily life in Germany, along with reflections about living abroad. In her content, she features pictures of herself or videos in which she presents visa options, life expenses and shopping in Germany, job markets for different professions, and educational opportunities in the country. Regarding the latter, Joana emphasizes how educational pathways are "more likely to lead to a secure status" in the country after degree completion. She addresses common questions such as "When is the best time to apply for VET?" and "Are all VET paid?" making lists of study-related visas in Germany and explaining the requirements for most VET and university degrees. Additionally, she presents stipend options for university students, highlights that enrolling in a language course can also be used to obtain a visa and emphasizes that language proficiency is required for most degrees and certain visas.

Mariele also focuses on accessing educational institutions in Germany and pursuing a degree as a strategy to be granted a visa. Her eight thousand Instagram followers are additionally informed about racism and elections in Germany, travel destinations, the educational system, and educational opportunities for migrants. Her education-related posts are presented in list formats that include information on the courses offered by various universities their admission requirements, as well as rankings for the best institutions for specific subjects. Further, she provides lists of VET degrees related to areas more commonly associated with university courses, such as law or dentistry. Mariele also maintains a blog, a YouTube channel, and a podcast in which she discusses her migratory experience, describes housing and work, provides information on available study fields for VET and their requirements, and how to finance studies.

Having German degrees and being proficient in German are central themes in the content curation of all three. These aspects are presented as part of their migratory pathways, together with pictures of international vacations, purchased goods, and comments about living expenses, for instance. In that sense, degrees and language learning are associated with a promise of upward mobility for aspiring migrants of similar backgrounds as theirs. Talking about their experiences (including achievements and frustrations) and showing their routines and interests also serves as a way to attribute "authenticity" to their content (Duffy 2017). They do not try to depict their lives as unreachable or available only for those from wealthy backgrounds. Instead, they describe their trajectories, migrating first as Au Pairs, and expose situations in which they feel overwhelmed. This depiction of their lifestyle in Germany associated with the presentation of their knowledge about requirements to migrate and the





educational system serves to build their presence as authentic and trustworthy sources of information about education and migration to Germany, thereby attributing value to the consultancy services they offer and engaging followers to interact with them.

### **7.3. Content Creators as Latent Ties: What is Their Role Online?**

Apart from providing information on educational opportunities in Germany, Antônia, Joana, and Mariele's online activities serve as an inspiration to the many aspiring migrants who follow them. Their respective number of followers is similar to or even exceeds the number of participants in some Facebook groups of Brazilians in Germany. To Mariele, the demand is so high that she prefers not to interact that often with followers: "I'm not really active in the [Facebook] groups, helping people and so on. Otherwise, I don't do anything else in life (laughs)". Differently, Joana offers detailed replies to questions posed by newcomers or aspiring migrants on Facebook groups. She says that this behaviour of hers caught attention and, with an increasing amount of questions and realising these were mostly repeated, she started recording videos with her answers: "I always explained the same things. So, my idea is, when someone asks me something, I simply send the video". They became content creators after observing that there is a demand for information about educational opportunities.

The three seem to have a primarily female audience, hence they sometimes refer to their followers as "elas" (the Portuguese word for "they" in the feminine form) or use a generic "folks" or "people", but never "eles" ("they" in the masculine form). They also seem to have an audience in mind that belongs to a similar socioeconomic class as themselves and is interested in Au Pairing in Germany as a way to migrate and look for further opportunities once they are in the country. What they suggest as further opportunities is based on their experiences, namely enrolling in a degree or language course. Antônia describes that her followers come to her social media profiles because they "want to see [her] life in Germany" and that these followers are usually "interested in coming [to Germany] to do Au Pair and want to know what there is to do after it". Mariele is interested in producing content for an audience aligned with her values. Hence, she posts about racism and anti-racism and became rather inactive on Facebook groups of Brazilians in Germany, where she claims a lot of discriminatory discourses were reproduced: "It was very heavy for me psychologically", she says. She limits her participation in these groups by announcing new posts she has published on her Instagram account or blog and does not answer questions. This attitude is, first of all, a way to protect herself from the hateful and degrading content she identified in these groups. That decision might make her social media reach smaller; however, she seems more interested in attracting a specific audience than in making her online activity a main income source.. This way, her content creation stays authentic to her values and beliefs (Duffy, 2017).

Catering for an audience similar to themselves, the three content creators here have identified a niche demand for migration: people, most probably young women, for whom migrating first as Au Pair and then accessing education in Germany seems to work well as a strategy. The three depict themselves as successful examples of that and, given their number of followers and the intensity of interaction with them, seem successful in convincing others that the pathway they describe is a feasible one for those in similar socioeconomic conditions as they had in Brazil. This way, they show possibilities to access education by migrating and serve as an inspiration to young women who come from similar backgrounds.

Latent ties (Haythornthwaite 2002) can be activated when an aspiring migrant posts a question on a Facebook group and receives replies from other participants, in a many-to-many communication flow. Since the three content creators presented here have a high number of followers and interactions, they concentrate a flow of latent ties on them, thus serving as nodes of such mediatised networks. That happens because their content depicts feasible migration options: they present an “authentic” (Duffy 2017) version of their pathways and current situation by talking about their background before migration, their lifestyle, feelings, and experiences after migration. The fact that migrants seem to trust information about educational experiences shared online (Dedecek Gertz, 2023; Jayadeva, 2020) probably also contributes to this centralisation of latent ties.

#### **7.4. Enjoyment, Usefulness, and Aspirational Labour: Why Do They Do What They Do?**

Three aspects motivate Antônia, Joana, and Mariele in their online activity: an enjoyment of using social media, the sense of fulfilment when they learn that their content was useful for someone aspiring to migrate, and having some expectation that what they do will pay off some day.

All three were already frequent social media users before starting to publish content about migration. This enjoyment prevails, and is even more important than their interest in generating an income as content creators. As Antônia puts it: “I don't live off my Instagram, but I don't live without it”. Similarly, Joana says she uses social media “all the time”. They regularly use social media to post about their experiences, and since migration and accessing education in Germany is part of that, they regularly share these insights into their lives. They also enjoy interacting with their followers, which contributes to building their image as people willing to share information and opinions about migrating.

Their followers sometimes send feedback about how their information and support were helpful in their migratory journeys, as Antônia says:

They [“elas”, the women who follow Antônia online] would check my Instagram and send me: “Thank you so much for your help! Your videos are amazing! You helped me a lot to do my international exchange<sup>6</sup>! I'm already here in Germany!” And then I was very happy! (Antônia)

This positive feedback also motivates Mariele, whose main goal is to “make information available for people who want to study and do research in Germany”. In their migration, the three themselves have also relied on information shared by other migrants on social media. Based on the feedback they receive and on their own experience, they know that aspiring migrants in situations similar to their own in the past seek information from latent ties. As Mariele says: “Facebook ... had a very big impact on decision and plans ... when I sought access to information, for study, for work, for everything”. Joana had a similar experience: “The [Facebook] groups helped me ... helped me very, very much”. The three have first-hand experience with the usefulness of social media for aspiring migrants, and based on that knowledge, they tailor their content to those with similar socioeconomic conditions and aspirations as themselves. When these followers send positive feedback, Antônia, Joana, and

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<sup>6</sup> These content creators and their followers commonly refer to Au Pairing as “international exchange”.



Mariele reports a sense of fulfilment in providing helpful information and support to others. That, combined with a feeling of reciprocity, of giving back what once helped themselves, is another motivation for them.

They also have professional or income expectations regarding their social media activity. Antônia and Mariele have experience in (social) media-related subjects and use their accounts in a career-oriented way. They cannot generate stable income from their content creation yet, but for Antônia that is a goal: “I don’t take it off my list of things that I want to live on in the future”. For Mariele, creating content serves as a way to showcase her abilities in social media management and communication: “I use it [Instagram] more ... to strengthen my image because I want to work in this area”. On the other hand, Joana has neither studied nor had prior work experience in media-related subjects. She is also not interested in having her main income anchored on her online activity. Nevertheless, she also uses social media to showcase her knowledge about migration and education in Germany and to indicate that she offers consultancy services and her eBook, similar to Antônia and Mariele. These activities are not a relevant source of income for them; however, it reveals that they have some interest in monetising their social media activity. They are not interested in becoming internet celebrities (Abidin 2018). Still, they either have some income expectation from the consultancy services and eBooks they offer or, as in the case of Antônia and Mariele, they build a portfolio of their media skills that may help them land a job in the fields they graduated from. Therefore, a third motivation for their online activity is based on “aspirational labour” (Duffy 2017).

## **8. Conclusion**

The content produced by Antônia, Joana, and Mariele combines posts about educational opportunities in Germany with a diverse range of topics related to migration and lifestyle abroad. These content creators assume that their audience is in similar situations as they once were: young women aspiring to migrate or newly arrived from lower socioeconomic classes without network connections that could contribute to affording expenses and fulfilling requirements to obtain a university student visa in Germany. With this audience in mind, they provide information on legal migration procedures and accessing education as well as strategies for maintaining oneself financially abroad. These strategies include migrating first as Au Pairs, working part-time while studying, or enrolling in paid VET programs. These content creators also offer motivational messages to their followers, highlighting the challenges of migrant life and providing quotes on how to overcome them. Education and learning are portrayed both as means to attain a secure status as a migrant and to live an exciting international experience. Through insights into their lifestyle and into problems they experience in Germany, these content creators create a sense of “authenticity” (Hund 2023), as they show that they are neither internet celebrities nor wealthy migrants, but young women who migrated as Au Pairs and later on achieved a certain upward mobility and a stable migratory status.

Research on transnational education has been focusing on the international mobility of university students, often within the context of upper-middle-class migration (Beech, 2015; Brooks & Waters, 2010; Waters, 2015). Although university education is also a topic covered by Antônia, Joana, and Mariele, they highlight alternative educational pathways to their followers. This reveals that they have identified a demand for information about educational opportunities through the paid VET degrees in Germany, which can be more financially

accessible to migrants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For other migrants who were not yet aware of these educational opportunities but were interested in migrating and accessing education abroad, the content created by Antônia, Joana, and Mariele can be a first source of information about it.

As they collected information on social media when planning their own migration, they know that circulating information about such alternative pathways is helpful for aspiring migrants. Hence, they share details about educational opportunities and migratory requirements in Germany and motivate aspiring or newcomer migrants by showcasing their own pathway and their knowledge. Doing so, they attracted so many followers that they can be seen as nodes of networks based on latent ties (Haythornthwaite 2002), particularly for migrants without other connections. Hence, these content creators serve as surrogates when other kinds of networks or resources are unavailable. Furthermore, their high number of followers indicates the existence of a demand for educational opportunities abroad and beyond university levels.

These content creators are motivated to function as nodes of latent tie networks in three ways: they enjoy using social media, feel happy or fulfilled for providing helpful information to others, and hope that this online activity may pay off in the future. The latter point implies that “aspirational labour” (Duffy 2017) is also a phenomenon in the field of migration and education. Antônia, Joana, and Mariele use online presences to showcase their skills and occasionally generate some income. However, unlike content creators who strive for celebrity status or seek to make their online presence their primary source of income, they focus on sharing information deemed valuable for their audience. Still, they follow a similar logic to content creators who advertise branded products or services: they build a sense of authenticity by presenting their struggles and daily lives (Duffy, 2017; Hund, 2023). Hence, they perform “aspirational labour” (Duffy, 2017) associated with educational opportunities while circulating valuable information to aspiring migrants.

This study highlights a still relatively unexplored role that migrants can play in transnational education environments. Serving as nodes for latent tie networks, these migrants provide information and inspiration to individuals pursuing migratory and educational aspirations under similar conditions. Further research could look into the composition of their audiences and the impacts of their activity.

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