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Data Diasporas: Transnational Belonging in Networked Worlds

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Abstract: The digital era has significantly changed how diaspora can be understood, as transnational identities are now shaped within interconnected systems of technology, algorithms, and online platforms. This study introduces the idea of data diasporas to explore how experiences of belonging increasingly develop through digital environments rather than only through physical migration or geographic separation. It argues that online spaces function as socio-technical environments where visibility, recognition, and affiliation are influenced by data flows, surveillance practices, and computational systems. Drawing on perspectives from diaspora studies, digital culture research, and critical data studies, the analysis suggests that individuals today occupy multiple, dispersed identities across platforms, databases, and algorithm-driven spaces. These identities are formed through a combination of conscious self-presentation and automated interpretation, as predictive technologies and institutional data systems help shape how people are categorised and understood.

The discussion also shows that digital infrastructures create new opportunities for sustaining communities, preserving cultural connections, and maintaining emotional relationships across distance. At the same time, these systems can reproduce global inequalities through data extraction, algorithmic bias, and the dominance of powerful platforms. In networked societies, transnational identity can therefore be described as a form of informational mobility, where individuals exist both as social participants and as data-based subjects. Viewing diaspora in this way highlights that belonging today depends not only on physical location but also on engagement with digital systems, making it necessary to rethink established ideas of identity, citizenship, and power in contemporary culture.

Keywords: *Data diaspora; Digital identity; Transnational belonging; Algorithmic governance*

The proliferation of digital technologies has significantly transformed how identity, community, and belonging are constituted in contemporary society. Diaspora, traditionally understood as the consequence of physical displacement, migration, or exile, is now increasingly mediated through networked communication, data circulation, and platform-based infrastructures. In this context, transnational belonging cannot be fully apprehended through geographic frameworks alone. Technologically mediated environments have introduced new ways in which individuals participate in social, cultural, and affective networks, prompting a reconsideration of theoretical approaches that have historically prioritised spatial displacement as the defining condition of diaspora. Conventional scholarship has emphasised diaspora in terms of separation from a homeland, collective memory, and the preservation of cultural identity across distance. While such perspectives remain valuable for understanding historical and contemporary migratory formations, they do not sufficiently account for the transformative effects of digital connectivity. Online platforms allow individuals dispersed across multiple regions to engage simultaneously in shared cultural, linguistic, and social practices, challenging traditional distinctions between proximity and distance or presence and absence. Contemporary diaspora thus encompasses both physical dispersal and digital circulation, necessitating analytical frameworks that attend to the interplay of space, technology, and identity.

Digital networks have shifted the foundations of affiliation from territorial to networked forms. Online environments operate as socio-technical spaces in which recognition, visibility, and participation are structured through data flows, algorithmic processes, and platform architectures. “Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture” (Castells 469). Such spaces support communities that are not bound by geography yet remain socially and culturally significant. Through sustained engagement, individuals maintain collective practices, emotional bonds, and cultural expressions across borders, illustrating that belonging in the twenty-first century is increasingly organised through technological infrastructures alongside, or even beyond, physical co-presence. To explore these dynamics, this study introduces the concept of data diaspora, referring to forms of transnational belonging produced through digital infrastructures that store, process, and circulate information about individuals and communities. Data diaspora is characterised not only by physical dispersion but also by presence across databases, platforms, and algorithmic systems. Within this framework, identity emerges from the interaction between self-representation and system-based classification, as technical systems shape how individuals are recognised, categorised, and rendered visible. Conceptualising diaspora in this way foregrounds the constitutive role of digital infrastructures in contemporary subjectivity and social belonging.

Understanding digital identity beyond geography is crucial for analysing contemporary social and cultural processes. Data-driven systems increasingly influence access to resources, participation in public discourse, and recognition within institutional structures. Belonging is therefore shaped by both physical location and one's position within informational networks. "Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall 4). Approaches restricted to territorial frameworks risk overlooking these dimensions, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary scholarship that integrates digital infrastructures into diaspora studies.

Despite the growing importance of these developments, existing research has not fully theorised the role of data infrastructures in shaping transnational identities. While studies of migration, hybridity, memory, and cultural continuity are extensive, they rarely address the computational architectures through which belonging is now produced. Conversely, analyses of digital culture often neglect insights from diaspora theory. This gap underscores the necessity of a framework that combines perspectives from migration studies, media theory, and critical data scholarship. This study seeks to address that gap by theorising data diasporas as a defining condition of transnational life in networked societies. It asks: How do digital infrastructures transform the meaning and experience of diaspora? In what ways do algorithmic systems shape transnational identity? What new forms of community and exclusion emerge within platform-mediated environments? And how might these developments challenge conventional understandings of citizenship, subjectivity, and cultural affiliation? The central argument advanced is that digital networks have transformed diaspora from a primarily geographic phenomenon into a data-mediated process of identity formation. Technological infrastructures do not replace traditional diasporic experiences but reorganise them, creating new possibilities for connection while also producing novel forms of power and differentiation. Understanding diaspora today thus requires attention not only to spatial movement but also to circulation within informational systems, where belonging is increasingly produced, sustained, and contested in networked worlds.

Classical theories of diaspora have traditionally emphasised displacement from a homeland, exile, and the preservation of cultural memory across space. Such frameworks conceptualise diaspora as a response to separation from a territorial origin, in which the maintenance of cultural practices, language, and communal traditions becomes central to collective identity. The nation-state has often been treated as a primary anchor in this understanding, providing a reference point for belonging, legal recognition, and socio-political identity. Diasporic consciousness, in these models, is shaped by a tension between attachment to a homeland and the lived realities of residence elsewhere, producing a form of identity that is both reflective and territorially oriented. While classical frameworks have provided valuable insights, they are increasingly limited when applied to contemporary forms of transnational experience. Central to these limitations is the assumption that diaspora is fundamentally

territorial. Traditional models often presume that cultural identity is relatively fixed, tied to inherited practices, linguistic continuity, and historical memory associated with a specific place. “Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture” (Hall 225). Such presumptions can obscure the fluidity and multiplicity of identities in an era of globalisation and digital interconnection. They may also fail to account for the ways in which communities sustain themselves and express belonging in environments that are not geographically bounded.

The emergence of digital technologies has transformed these conditions, giving rise to what may be described as digital diaspora. Connectivity facilitated by the internet, social media, and other networked platforms increasingly replaces the need for physical proximity as the basis for community formation. Shared practices, cultural expression, and social interaction are now maintained across virtual spaces, allowing dispersed populations to sustain ties and collective identities in real time. Online communities often function as sites of belonging that are as significant to diasporic life as territorial attachment, providing platforms for communication, collaboration, and cultural continuity that transcend geographic constraints.

These developments suggest that diaspora must be reconceptualised as a networked condition. Identity and belonging are no longer determined solely by physical location or by adherence to fixed cultural models. Instead, diasporic subjects participate in distributed, digitally mediated networks that shape both individual and collective selfhood. Reframing diaspora in this manner highlights the centrality of technological infrastructures in contemporary transnational experience, emphasising that belonging is increasingly produced, performed, and recognised within networked environments rather than solely across territorial boundaries.

A clear conceptual basis is necessary to understand data diasporas as outcomes of broader structural forces in contemporary digital society. The idea of the network society proposed by Manuel Castells explains that networks have become the main form of social organisation. In such a system, power operates through the movement and control of information rather than through physical territory, meaning that identity and belonging increasingly develop within digital infrastructures. In a related way, Arjun Appadurai describes global cultural flows using terms such as ethnoscaples and technoscaples to show how people, technologies, and ideas move across borders. These movements demonstrate that identity forms through multiple global influences rather than a single place. “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (Appadurai 31).

The view of identity as something produced over time is shaped by Stuart Hall, who argues that cultural identity is created through representation, discourse, and social interaction instead of being fixed at birth. This approach helps explain digital contexts in which selfhood is shaped through online expression and platform structures. The work of Michel Foucault further clarifies how modern systems of power depend on observation and classification. Databases and algorithmic systems extend these processes by organising individuals according to data categories.

The economic dimension of these conditions is analysed by Shoshana Zuboff, who shows that personal data functions as a valuable commodity within data capitalism, while users become sources of extractable behavioural information. “Surveillance capitalism claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data” (Zuboff 8). Together, these perspectives demonstrate that data diasporas arise from interconnected technological, cultural, political, and economic structures, indicating that they are systematic formations produced by contemporary networked society rather than accidental effects of technological change.

In the digital era, platforms function as environments where identity is both expressed and structured. Social media and networking systems do more than enable communication; their architectures, interfaces, and computational logics shape how individuals present themselves, interact, and become visible within social systems. Digital profiles operate as central identity containers, compiling personal data, activity records, and behavioural traces into curated representations that are interpreted by both human audiences and algorithmic processes. As a result, identity becomes formatted in ways legible to technical systems as well as social observers. Algorithmic sorting further influences belonging by classifying users, regulating visibility, and creating hierarchies of recognition. “Visibility is a trap” (Foucault 200). These processes do not merely mirror existing social realities but actively produce norms and relational patterns within digital environments. Interface design and platform affordances also guide self-expression by privileging certain communicative forms and interaction styles. In addition, metadata such as location, timestamps, and interaction histories contributes to computational representations of users. Contemporary identity therefore emerges through an interaction between personal expression and technical infrastructures, indicating that selfhood in networked spaces is co-constituted by systemic digital processes rather than solely by individual intention.

Digital platforms have become important symbolic spaces that act like modern homelands for diasporic communities. Social media, networking sites, and online groups allow people living far from their place of origin to stay connected to their culture, traditions, and community. Although these spaces are not physical locations, they still create a strong sense of belonging and shared identity. “Electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project” (Appadurai 3). People separated by distance can take part in common activities, conversations, and cultural

expressions that help preserve collective memory. Online environments also help communities maintain language, customs, and social values. Many language groups use messaging apps, forums, and social networks to continue speaking and writing in their native language, especially when daily life in another country does not support it. Diaspora-focused groups on platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp often function like small communities, where members share news, discuss cultural topics, and organise events. These digital interactions help individuals strengthen their identity and maintain social ties despite physical separation.

Rituals and celebrations held online further support this sense of shared homeland. Livestreamed religious services, festivals, and community programmes allow people across different countries to participate together at the same time. Such shared experiences recreate feelings of togetherness usually associated with being physically present. “It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6). Through these digital practices, individuals keep emotional connections with their traditions and pass cultural knowledge to younger generations. These examples show that digital platforms are not just communication tools. They serve as structured social spaces that hold cultural meaning and support community life. By offering a place for shared memory, interaction, and expression, they allow dispersed populations to remain connected and culturally active without needing a single physical territory. Understanding diaspora today therefore requires recognising that belonging can also be created and sustained through digital environments, which increasingly shape how communities experience identity, culture, and collective life.

In today’s digital environments, identity is strongly shaped by automated systems that classify and interpret people’s behaviour. Online platforms and institutions use computational tools to sort users into categories, creating what can be called algorithmic identities. These exist alongside self-defined identities and sometimes conflict with them. Such systems examine digital traces such as interactions, preferences, browsing patterns, and metadata to build structured profiles. These processes are not neutral because they influence visibility, access, and social status within digital spaces, shaping how individuals are understood by both people and machines. “Algorithms are opinions embedded in code” (Cathy O’Neil 21). Predictive profiling is a key way these systems affect identity. By analysing past and real-time data, platforms generate predictions about a person’s interests, habits, or possible actions. These predictions guide recommendations, advertisements, risk evaluations, and even administrative decisions. As a result, individuals become data subjects whose identities are constantly assessed and interpreted through automated processes, extending technological influence into social and institutional life.

Biometric technologies deepen this connection between identity and computation. Tools such as facial recognition, fingerprint scanning, and voice analysis convert bodily features into digital data that can be stored, compared, and tracked. This approach treats identity as measurable and standardised, allowing systems to verify and monitor individuals across different contexts. “Surveillance is the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (Lyon 14). In doing so, machine systems gain increasing authority over processes of identification that were once primarily personal or social. A tension therefore emerges between how people define themselves and how systems define them. Individuals may present themselves online in particular ways, yet algorithms continuously reinterpret and reshape those representations. Identity in digital environments thus becomes a hybrid formation produced through both personal expression and automated classification. This shows that contemporary identity is not formed solely through individual choice but also through the technical systems that organise, evaluate, and represent people within networked societies.

The expansion of digital infrastructures has produced new forms of economic and cultural asymmetry, often framed as data colonialism. “Data colonialism is an emerging order for the appropriation of human life so that data can be continuously extracted from it for profit” (Couldry and Mejias 12). The extraction of personal and collective data from users in developing regions mirrors historical patterns of resource exploitation. Individuals and communities generate vast quantities of behavioural, social, and biometric information through everyday interactions with digital platforms, which is then captured, analysed, and monetised primarily by corporations based in technologically advanced economies. This creates structural imbalances in the control, ownership, and circulation of informational resources. Corporate dominance of global information flows further entrenches these inequalities. Multinational technology companies possess the infrastructure, algorithms, and legal frameworks necessary to centralise and profit from data, allowing a limited number of actors to shape economic, social, and cultural processes. This concentration of power reproduces structures reminiscent of historical colonialism, where the extraction of resources—now informational rather than material—reinforces asymmetric relationships between regions and populations.

Algorithmic systems amplify these disparities through linguistic, cultural, and epistemic biases. Models trained on data from dominant languages and sociocultural contexts privilege certain communities while marginalising others, affecting content visibility, recommendations, and predictive assessments. These biases extend beyond technical systems to influence recognition, participation, and opportunity within digital spaces. Together, these dynamics demonstrate that digital infrastructures are not neutral tools but active agents in reproducing global hierarchies. “Data is never raw; it is always already ‘cooked’” (Gitelman 2). Digital diasporas operate within these structures, where belonging, visibility, and recognition are mediated by technological design, corporate control, and algorithmic

bias. Contemporary diasporic life is therefore inseparable from the power asymmetries embedded in the architecture of networked worlds.

Contemporary digital environments facilitate the emergence of multiple, context-dependent identities that are distributed across a variety of platforms. Individuals often maintain distinct profiles on social media sites, professional networks, messaging applications, and interest-based communities, each tailored to specific audiences, purposes, and social expectations. These multiple digital identities reflect strategic acts of self-presentation, whereby users emphasise or suppress aspects of personality, affiliation, or cultural background depending on the affordances of the platform and the anticipated audience. As a result, the modern self is increasingly experienced as fragmented, dispersed across technical infrastructures rather than unified within a singular, coherent narrative. “The self is not singular but multiple, not so much fragmented as distributed” (Turkle 178). This platform multiplicity produces a form of dispersed subjectivity in which belonging, visibility, and recognition are contingent on engagement within diverse digital contexts.

Each platform imposes its own structural constraints, interface design, and algorithmic logic, shaping how individuals can represent themselves and interact with others. Consequently, identity in digital diasporas is performative and relational, emerging through interactions within and across these networked spaces. Users’ self-conceptions are continuously negotiated, evaluated, and reconfigured in response to platform-specific norms, algorithmic interpretations, and social feedback, highlighting the dynamic and contingent nature of contemporary identity.

From a theoretical perspective, the distribution of selves across digital platforms challenges classical models of coherent, territorially grounded identity. The modern diasporic subject inhabits a networked field of multiplicity, where selfhood is co-produced by both human agency and technological mediation. Recognition, affiliation, and belonging are therefore mediated by the affordances and constraints of platforms, producing an experience of self that is inherently fragmented yet functionally adaptive. Understanding diasporic identity in the digital age thus requires attention to these dispersed and platform-specific formations, revealing the complex interplay between technological architectures and the performance of contemporary transnational subjectivity.

Despite the perceived openness of cyberspace, digital infrastructures are increasingly shaped by national regulatory frameworks. Geo-blocking, content restrictions, and platform-specific compliance measures enforce the territorial logic of nation-states in online environments. Digital censorship and government-mandated platform regulations structure access, visibility, and participation, producing differentiated experiences for users based on location. These mechanisms illustrate that cyberspace does not erase borders but rather redesigns them, embedding jurisdictional authority and national interests into technical architectures. “The Internet is not unregulable; it is not borderless; and it is not

free from the laws of governments” (Goldsmith and Wu 1). Consequently, transnational engagement is mediated not only by networks and platforms but also by algorithmically enforced territorial constraints that shape the contours of digital belonging.

Digital platforms mediate the emotional experiences of diasporic communities, enabling practices such as online mourning, remote caregiving, and participation in ritual and festival livestreams. These mediated interactions allow individuals to sustain affective connections with family, community, and cultural heritage despite geographic separation. Digital nostalgia further reinforces ties to remembered homelands, as archival media, photographs, and shared narratives evoke collective memory. Such practices demonstrate that technology shapes not only social and cultural belonging but also the emotional dimensions of diasporic life, highlighting how affect, memory, and attachment are increasingly produced, circulated, and experienced within networked spaces. Contemporary governance increasingly links legal identity and citizenship to biometric data stored in state-managed databases. Fingerprints, facial recognition, and other biometric markers serve as primary identifiers, enabling access to services, documentation, and civic participation. “Surveillance is the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (Lyon 14). Reliance on such systems, however, creates risks of digital exclusion, as individuals whose data is missing, misrecorded, or corrupted may be denied recognition or legal rights. In this context, the loss or inaccessibility of biometric information can effectively result in the erasure of one’s legal existence. Biometric citizenship thus underscores the profound entanglement of technological infrastructure, governance, and access to rights in networked societies.

The rapid expansion of digital infrastructures generates pressing ethical and political issues related to privacy, data ownership, algorithmic discrimination, and surveillance. Personal information belonging to individuals is gathered, processed, and commercially exploited, frequently without clear consent, while automated systems can replicate existing social, cultural, and economic inequalities. These dynamics contribute to forms of digital statelessness, where access to rights and recognition is contingent upon participation in networked systems. Consequently, governance of data has become central to debates on human rights, citizenship, and justice. Ensuring equitable, transparent, and accountable data practices is essential to safeguard the dignity, autonomy, and security of individuals in transnational digital spaces. Emerging technologies are poised to reshape transnational identity in unprecedented ways. AI-mediated systems may increasingly interpret, predict, and influence self-representation, while digital citizenship models offer new frameworks for rights, recognition, and participation beyond territorial states. Metaverse-like environments will enable immersive, persistent spaces for social, cultural, and economic engagement, fostering complex forms of virtual community. Additionally, blockchain-based identity systems promise decentralised, secure mechanisms for verifying identity and maintaining agency over personal data. Collectively, these developments suggest

that transnational belonging will become increasingly technologically mediated, distributed, and codified, requiring critical attention to governance, ethics, and equity in digital societies.

Digital networks have fundamentally transformed the understanding of diaspora, shifting the focus from territorial displacement to data-mediated forms of belonging. Identity is increasingly shaped by algorithmic processes, platform architectures, and informational infrastructures, with digital profiles serving as central sites of self-expression, recognition, and affiliation. Platforms function as social territories where cultural, emotional, and civic engagements are performed and regulated. Power in these environments resides in the control of information flows, databases, and algorithmic systems. Ultimately, contemporary identity is no longer defined primarily by physical location but by how individuals exist, participate, and are represented within digital and computational frameworks, marking a profound reconfiguration of transnational belonging.

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