Feeling unwanted: Understanding digital place-making and uncertainty in EU Settlement Scheme digital communities

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Abstract

The EU Settlement Scheme has sought to provide a legal framework for the residence of European Union citizens in post-Brexit Britain. In the meantime, digital communities have emerged, seeking to mitigate the errors, delays, and communication gaps that have plagued the scheme since its inception. Engaging with scholarship on digital place-making, this paper discusses a yearlong digital ethnography conducted in four Facebook communities and a visual analysis of the content shared by applicants. We deployed a mixed-method strategy to map group membership while analysing the language of uncertainty in posts. Results indicate a complex space of advice-seeking, reproducing much of the scheme's bureaucratic nature and weakening these spaces' potential for demonstrating alternative forms of solidarity.

Keywords: EU Settlement Scheme, Brexit, Immigration, Diaspora, Social media

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The EU Settlement Scheme (hereinafter, EUSS) is a migration scheme introduced by the UK government for millions of European citizens living in or planning to live in the UK (Thomas, 2021). Navigating the system has been a challenging experience for applicants (Barnard, Butlin & Costello, 2022), as the fragile status of European citizenship in the UK had been a reality even before the scheme began (e.g., Brändle, 2020). Since its introduction, the EUSS has featured in British and international press, primarily from the perspective of its implementation, which has resulted in an overly bureaucratic journey in some cases (Botterill et al., 2020; Abranches & Theuerkauf, 2021). This research aimed to explore notions of digital place-making in Facebook communities dedicated to providing advice on the EUSS to check whether these spaces can indeed alleviate the uncertainty generated by the scheme among applicants. We employed ethnographic, textual, and visual methods to focus on these communities, examining users' posts about their experiences during the EUSS application process.

After several attempts to limit the number of immigrants in the UK, the EUSS was introduced by a conservative-led UK government, which continued to pursue aggressive policies against foreign immigration in the UK. In 2012, Home Secretary Theresa May announced a "hostile environment for illegal migration" (Hill, 2017; Griffith and Yeo, 2021; Kirkup and Winnett, 2012). In a 2020 report, Oxford's Migration Observatory estimated that 3.4 million non-Irish citizens could be eligible to apply to the scheme. However, the number of those living with these individuals was unknown (Sumption, 2020).

The implementation was followed by a series of legal and bureaucratic obstacles, making immigration processes harder to navigate (Webber, 2019). Initially, the EUSS seemed to offer an alternative to the excessively punishing social and legal environment confronting migrants (Morris & Qureshi, 2021). The first EUSS advertisements emphasised the ease and security of the application process, with a strong focus on the automatic mobile phone results (Tomlinson, 2019). That convenience would create a sense of trust and continuity for most European citizens who are eligible (excluding Romanians and Bulgarians). These citizens were, before Brexit, likely unencumbered by bureaucratic obstacles to remaining in the UK (Home Office, 2019). By the end of 2019, the number of applications to the EUSS was already 2.9 million (Sturge & Wilkins, 2019). By September 2023, there were 7.6 million applications, from which the Home Office granted Settled or Pre-Settled status to 5.7 million (Home Office, 2023).

The consequences of the scheme for applicants are evident in the literature, ranging from gendered trauma among those unable to apply independently (Yong, 2023) to the intersectional inequalities faced by citizens who are unable to use the computerised system (Sumption & Fernandez-Reino, 2020). Besides these issues, tying the scheme to legacy EU citizenship rights may have reproduced many existing uncertainties amid an increasingly selective process of choosing who can migrate to the UK (Benson & Sigona, 2024). For example, EU citizenship remains deeply stratified and unavailable to all eligible people living on the continent (Bruzelius et al., 2017). A key issue relates to maintaining Settled Status. Once granted, the legal authorisation to live in the UK still depends on the beneficiary's long-term permanence in the country, regardless of their personal need to go abroad for extended periods. Another constraint concerns their family members, who must adhere to the same rules and undergo the same status checks as their sponsors (Barnard et al., 2021). The idea of a digital platform where users can share a pool of knowledge about their experiences seems a good way forward in supporting applicants. By focusing on the textual and visual communications of these communities, this research aimed to reveal a range of impressions that are often missing from the public discourse, some of which we review next.

The EUSS, hope, and uncertainty

Emerging media portraits help narrate uncertainties surrounding European citizens and EUSS applicants during the scheme's first years. The notion that every EU migrant starts bearing an index of "deportability" based on their status or likelihood of being granted permanent settlement is one of the scheme's blueprints (Radziwinowiczówna & Galasińska, 2021:2). At its most extreme, *uncertainty* in these stories details acute insecurities surrounding displacement, loss of rights, and deportations (Smelie, 2023). Examples of uncertainties include a French woman who lost her job because of a simple visa mistake (O'Carroll, 2024); an Italian citizen whose permanent residence was invalidated, with the result that he lost his bank account (O'Carroll, 2023); a Portuguese plumber who had lived over 20 years in the UK and faced deportation (Taylor, 2024), much like a 74 year-old French grandmother, who had spent 42 years in the UK (Hockaday, 2024). Although the UK Government has invested in supporting so-called vulnerable EUSS applications, dedicating £2.5 million in 2023 (Home Office, 2023B), media narratives on the EUSS have primarily sprung from cases in which European nationals in the UK

have found themselves alienated from fundamental rights, even after receiving confirmation of their settled status (Furseth, 2023).

The handling of uncertainty in everyday life has attracted scholarly interest in recent years (Zinn, 2008; Brown, 2015). More recent analyses have focused on the role of institutions, groups, and interactions in dealing with uncertainty (Zinn, 2016; Brown, 2016). Our study of digital place-making in the wake of EUSS affords new insights into the negotiated and collective handling of uncertain futures through emotions (specifically, hope). Hope, taking form and nurtured relationally in the context of the EUSS, is oriented and signalled by the temporal relationship between present experience and future aspirations (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). Hope provides resources for coping, allows agency for acting in the future (Alacovska, 2018). The emotional investment in the EUSS through these digital communities may emerge as "dynamic and implicated in a process of becoming," which is inherently relational and institutionally shaped (Cook and Cuervo, 2019: 1106).

Beyond the general frustration with delays in the EUSS, associated with its large-scale rollout, we sought to investigate the ongoing sense of uncertainty that accompanies the application process and the lack of news that follows after the application. The fact that the number of applications to the EUSS fell by 37% in 2023 (Shabani, 2023) as the UK government substantially increased the income threshold for bringing non-UK family members to live in the country (Jorgensen, 2024) highlights the scale of ongoing uncertainties. The recent conservative government's efforts to move asylum-seekers to a Rwandan processing facility (Mallinder, 2024), although shelved by an incoming Labour government in 2024, were echoed by the recent visit by government representatives to facilities in Albania. If this policy were to continue, it could further undermine the sense of certainty and security among EUSS applicants.

On the one hand, the EUSS was designed as a compliance programme for European citizens, but it has also attracted individuals from non-European and non-Western backgrounds (Turgatti & Vargas-Silva, 2022). On the other hand, as Thomas (2021:2-3) points out, this scheme has been "the best or the worst of times" for migrants, depending on individual affordances. The case of the Windrush generation, comprising those who arrived in Britain in 1948-1971, has set a benchmark for how initially undesirable migrants can become, over time, forgotten by the Home Office (Taylor, 2020). Linking the status of some members of the Windrush generation to the post-Brexit hostile environment for European citizens, Quille (2018) perceived continuity in

government discourses that linked migration to crime or racialised difference. Such factors, combined with the fear of engaging with the scheme's requirements, may take an enormous emotional toll, which we investigate through the study of uncertainty in digital communities.

Our research examines the extent to which digital communities can serve as spaces where uncertainties are handled collaboratively, emotionally, and are relationally constituted (Ahmed 2004; Harding & Pribram, 2009). It also considers the salience of concepts such as "embedding" and "anchoring," which cogently base past migration studies in the UK (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Ryan, 2022). Both ideas depict migrant individuals voicing, often subtly or unexpectedly, concerns about security and stability as they attempt to integrate into the new country. In addition, scholarship on digital place-making offers a wealth of possibilities for bottom-up spaces of coexistence and expression (e.g., Pavlovskaya, 2016). We explored, for instance, how digital communities have helped applicants understand all the government's criteria and cope with the uncertainty generated by the scheme's multiple changes over time.

Digital place-making on Facebook

The advent of digital spaces for migrant communities has engaged scholars for over a decade (Leurs & Witteborn, 2021). We mainly draw on the extensive theoretical framework that discusses the possibilities of digital and creative place-making as tools for building and conveying a "'sense of place', migration, identity, green place-making and counter-narrative" (Basaraba, 2023:1472). Digital place-making may be critical for refugees, for example. It enables them to practise an ethics of care "near and far" through contacting people, sharing their current location, and live-streaming from afar. (Palmberger 2022:788). Such techniques may also be used by EUSS applicants when addressing a moment of sudden and, often, forced, change (e.g., Shin & Gutierrez, 2024). However, in our case, individuals face a different legal scenario from that of refugees and also engage with message exchanges that seem less urgent or precarious, with more time to develop a more direct citizen-to-citizen connectedness.

Examining Facebook, we explore the digital place-making possibilities for managing uncertainty through conversation threads, posted pictures, and expressed interests in the stream of postings. For example, in the "tension" between navigating digital places versus the reality of physical spaces, the differences between a page about a professional practice and working as a professional in the host country are highlighted. In this process, migrants may find in the digital

experience an “elusive embeddedness” (Zhang & Chib, 2024). Similarly, as Witteborn (2021:681) warns, migrants can also suffer in “datafied” environments regulated by the state, where the “locus of agency” may lead them to repeat the platforms’ divides or be subject to illegal surveillance.

In our study, while people interacting through the EUSS digital communities encounter many issues, our scope is limited to how digital place-making activities can afford 1) a liminal space that brokers a preparation for the move, assessing qualitative aspects of the information exchanged between groups and the way they relate to one another, seen in border studies, for example (e.g., Labayen & Gutierrez, 2021) and 2) a space for practising an ethics of care (Palmberger, 2022), especially regarding emotional and affective responses to the challenges lived in the EUSS (e.g., Hurley, 2023). As we explain next, we mapped these interactions by developing a digital ethnography focused on the actors involved, their spatial interactions and notions of power.

Conducting a digital ethnography

As Postill (2017) clarifies, conducting digital ethnography requires an understanding of the processual underpinnings of the communications established by community members. Marino (2015:5) observed migrant communities exhibiting “digital togetherness” on social media, where “diasporic experiences and transnational identities are constructed and negotiated,” echoing Ponzanesi's (2020:978) description of more than just “connected users.” According to the author, “digital diasporas” comprise specificities that are “political, historical, and geographical.” We reviewed investigations into how digital discussions generate a complex web of connected lifestyles, enabling participants to develop a “transnational habitus” (Nedelcu, 2012). We explored how EUSS applicants navigate the application process, considering chats and images as standalone ways to “digitally settle” before the conclusion of the legal procedures (Levy, 2023:17).

The first step was to locate suitable EUSS digital spaces on popular platforms. We chose Facebook because of its widespread use among diasporic communities (e.g., Mpofu, Asak& Salawu, 2022). We employed a snowballing approach to sampling, in which we examined users and their recommendations to other users and communities, acknowledging the potential issues of algorithm-biased results (Ribeiro et al., 2020; Acerbi, 2022). Besides being a

recommended strategy on social media (Wagner et al., 2017), snowballing allowed us to discover over 20 communities related to the EUSS. Aware that some of these spaces may have multiple purposes, we selected and joined four well-established groups (Table 1) with distinct owners, some of which are private. In contrast, others gather charities operating in the sector. In this way, not only did we avoid algorithmic search bias, but we could also engage with different kinds of agencies regarding the EUSS, e.g., some focused on the application process, while others framed themselves as activists.

We sought the consent of these groups to access and study their interactions. Besides formal consent sent to administrators, we have made ourselves visible in several moments within the communal environment, first by being approved as group members on a page specifically designed for the research project, which bears its title. Second, we made our presence in the groups visible by posting publicly about our project. Third, we interacted with active members to pursue their accounts on the topics explored here. We employed lurking methods (Tagarelli & Interdonato, 2014) to interact with the content of the pages, followed by a multimodal discourse analysis focused on the interaction between text and images on Facebook (Einsenlauer, 2014). We used additional insight from conversation analysis techniques (Paulus, Warren & Lester, 2016), and what Kress and van Leeuwen (2001:150) suggest on "articulating social and professional lives" as part of users' discourse.

Once sampling was over, we observed over 5,000 discussions among members for twelve months, without participating in any of these discussions for the research's neutrality. The digital ethnography method is a well-known approach to tracing digitally mediated conversations. We set out to map everyday interactions, taking note of main terms and dynamics between members (Hine, 2020:14). We delved into the daily posting of questions and answers about the EUSS project, capturing samples of text and images as possible. We also examined links shared, reports of dealings with the government, and general information about events and legislative changes. This helped to reconstruct a trail detailing their first-hand visual and oral testimonials to forge visual narratives (Abranches & Theuerkauf, 2021).

Aware of the limitations of digital ethnographies (e.g., Masullo & Coppola, 2023), including the physical distance from participants and lack of further context, we coded the dynamics of participation based on how users interacted with one another, also assessing the complexity of their queries. We also relied on the review of these interactions by another colleague to

minimise personal bias in selecting the quotes extracted for analysis. Furthermore, we interacted with group participants who appeared more prolific in replying to one another. This brief interaction offered insights into experiences that might otherwise have been overlooked in public replies or media reports.

In the multimodal discourse analysis, the data emerging from the four groups studied allowed insights into two main fronts. First, we examined the membership of these groups, their postings, and the images they produced. After scraping the necessary text for analysis, we also utilised API-sourced pictures from Facebook. We analysed them using Google's Cloud Vision algorithm (Google, 2024), a form of computer vision that extracts properties such as labels, faces, and text from the image. Recent research has shown how snapshots can visually record complex digital interactions (Inwood & Zappavigna, 2024). We built our analysis around both pictures and texts found in them, from which repeated terms helped form (e.g., Bakharia & Corrin, 2019), creating graphs that show word saliences, which helped base interpretations of the emphasised words and expressions in both contextual and representational functions (Boguraev, 1997). We were also alerted to emphasised words that could channel collective emotions (Bericat, 2016; Lupton, 2013; Harding & Pribram, 2009). For example, we could add the anger felt at the decision-making process or the joy of showing residence cards and passports.

The EUSS community as a place for advice

In our quest to understand place-making among the EUSS community, we first focused on analysing the routine of seeking community advice. Following previous research on digital place-making (Pavlovskaya, 2016), we categorise these kinds of discussion into three areas: *actors* (members and users), *socio-spatial dynamics* (space affordances and usages), and *power relations* (hierarchies and priorities). The use of these categories aims to convey the general settings of a digital place, where one bridges complex interactions through chats into a common and continuous conversation. These three aspects are also likely to explain users' orientation in the space and their expression about hope and uncertainty. We do not further explore the meaning of these categories beyond that.

Actors

As the first step in our digital ethnography, we highlighted the profiles, replies, and user-generated media (UGM) of the most active members. Those were a range of individuals who were not tied to the scheme in any personal capacity (e.g., solicitors, dispatchers, family lawyers, etc.). The largest of the groups, *Group 1*, was created by a professional man based in London and working in the technology sector. Considering their group affiliations, languages, and interests, most users appeared linked to the Middle East or Asia. Together with group administrators and moderators, there are Facebook tags for *top contributors* or users who accumulate *stars* as they interact within the group. Most top contributors achieve this status due to their frequent responses to various cases presented in the postings.

Due to the various elements that automate and falsify human-centric agency on Facebook (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022), we initially chose to characterise user profiles observed across platforms (Ruas et al., 2019), without delving further into cross-checking for privacy protection. Instead, we collected information from the *about* field, from which we could interpret the information users provide on what defines them the most, such as their cities or occupations. Based on the percentage of group membership information, it was possible to observe their diversity, the replication of the same profiles, or variations, as the word cloud (Figure 1) illustrates these emphases.

Apart from the word '*London',* the central city for most users and therefore removed from the illustration, the vocabulary relates to occupations and professional affiliations. Specific keywords such as *works, manager, self-employed, school, college, owner* or *CEO, business, director,* and *assistant* appeared to assert relative authority for users in the group. These terms may suggest other connections with their immigration goals. Erving Goffman (1959:225) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, defends the idea that individuals may choose "personal fronts" to confirm their "appearance and manner", and "social performance." The page about an immigration scheme soon becomes a highly occupation-related space, with the majority of references pointing to keywords such as *college, self-employed,* and *business*. In terms of dealing with uncertainty, this is an essential element in demonstrating society's expectations of success and integration (displayed through work and study). To some extent, these descriptors may shield them from the negative public discourse surrounding welfare benefits and immigration that has emerged in recent years.

At the heart of this interplay, giving and receiving advice become the foundations of a space of transition, where second or third users dialogue with individuals entering the application process, whether the former identify as qualified professionals or not. Due to the transactional nature of their interactions (Ha et al, 2017), most postings delve deeply into the details of each application, carrying personally sensitive information, in which attached images corroborate their claims. Especially among *Top Contributors,* there is no direct correlation between who responds to what, or who is from a specific place or another in their bio. In all situations, user status or occupation mattered little to the feedback or advice they offered.

On the other hand, it is also unclear whether group members are located in the UK or abroad. This information could help us understand an individual's motivations or urgencies in group engagement. One user we consulted (*Diana),* who has exceeded the *all-time level* to become an *All-Star Contributor,* replied when we asked that she was leaving the UK and did not want to develop her interest in the page. After our questioning, Diana continued to be engaged in these EUSS-themed conversations throughout the time we were active in the group. Another *All-Star Contributor* (*Mary*) disclosed that she is a Project Coordinator at a website advising potential applicants.

In such cases, we can infer that the high incidence of professional positions, college names, and occupational statuses creates a place where actors are constantly self-represented as deepening their ties with the UK and, consequently, with the EUSS. These markers suggest a broader impact of the EUSS on how people choose to handle uncertainty, by holding onto titles or positions related to the scheme's requirements, or by their proximity to it. Those in a position to give advice, namely the *Top Contributors,* have demonstrated this more clearly by using Facebook labels or being active members. If not personally profiting from their interventions, these prominent actors have helped the digital community to *anchor* a sense of certainty in the face of the constant stream of questions and comments.

Social-spatial dynamics

To understand the social-spatial dynamics of this Facebook community, it is necessary to analyse the content these actors exchanged, particularly their emphasis on legal deadlines or routes for sending documents. Cues in each group confirm that posting, replying, and resolving questions or comments provide a path to compliance, either by challenging their

misconceptions of the scheme or validating the procedures they have taken. Uncertainty and associated emotions come through the confirmation of whether users have proceeded *correctly,* as confirmed by most users. These interventions constitute a space where one can imagine their situation based on others' experiences. On the one hand, doubtful applicants seek advice; on the other, successful applicants return to the group to have their knowledge or understanding of the process validated in these interactions.

While most interactions have roots in personal or acquaintances' experiences, no matter how first or second-hand the information shared is, this social-spatial dynamics extends beyond advice seeking. The top-mentioned words (Figure 2), *passport, status, settled,* followed by *citizenship, British, application, need, apply, and everyone* suggest how the uncertainty/certainty around their present status or action, e.g., whether to move or not, pay for tuition fees or not, embeds this sense of urgency, also extending to the applicant's continuation after the EUSS results. The world cloud reveals subtle cues in conversations that seek various assurances. There is as well an interesting dynamic of entrances/exits of each other's space: some users are those always *in* the space of conversation, reacting promptly to comments and pointing to repeated threads, as new users *pop* into specific discussions, sometimes diverting them to something personal, affecting not only the meaning of the exchange, but the sense of certainty one gets from the responses, as in the exchange below.

In Figure 3, a rebuke signalled an emotionally charged exchange, comprising discomfort at perceived aggression and an exacerbated sense of uncertainty for the inquirer, as hope for the future and solidarity can be seen as being casually dashed. In addition, instability (*need, apply, everyone, anyone*), as well as salient words such as *settled* (and not *settling or unsettled*), direct the call to an ideal outcome, which is echoed by the frequency with which the terms' *citizen'* or '*partner'* come to the fore. In other instances, the recurrence of '*apply'* in various verbal tenses (applied, applying) also carries this tentative sense of a compliance-focused action, necessary but not always understood by others. In this space of exchange, less frequently occurring words still *anchor* the same uncertainty/certainty binary, as echoed in the mention of family members or personal details, such as words like *husband, documents, thanks, here, anyone, visa, name, got,* and *help*.

In these exchanges, language-specificities suggest a larger social-spatial and emotionally charged reality in which certainty/uncertainty depend on how each member navigates personal

affordances to achieve their goals and demonstrate this to others, as well as the oscillations of relationally constituted hope and doubt. Williams & Baláž (2012) reflected on the differences between risk and uncertainty, arguing that contemporary migration is more closely connected to uncertainty than to risk due to the level of general information considered when deciding to move. Uncertainty, instead, springs from two sources: first, the "imperfect knowledge about current conditions" and second, the "unpredictability of the future" (Ibid, 2012: 168). The emphases in the word cloud suggest both "imperfect knowledge" of their situation by displaying, for example, the sense of ongoing doubt (*before* some event*, days* until some event*, documents* to prove something*),* added to the unpredictability of the process (*please, advice, question*). The social-spatial dynamics, therefore, through a variety of text cues and response patterns found in the interactions, convey a central space where applicants enter to face both risk and uncertainty (such as passports, visas, and citizenship statuses), being responsible for responding to several reactive stances from others. Below, we continue this discussion by examining how the dialogue about these deliverables also produces specific emotions and power relations within the group.

Power relations

Here, power relations are far removed from conventional displays of hope and solidarity that have inspired other studies on digital place-making discussed earlier. In Figure 4, users reflect on a case exposed in the group with a potential Home Office error. In a second example (Figure 5), a BBC News article denouncing the removal of a family due to an alleged error in their application analysis, which is shared as a posting, triggering a disagreement with the story and its overall tone:

The two cases, the threads and their replies, and the confrontational tone users adopted, demonstrate how power relations are, above all, intertwined with a user's familiarity with the EUSS application process, as well as their empathy for the case at stake. The cases discussed in Figures 3 and 4 show that interpreting uncertainty may or may not take the applicants' side, as well as the number of rebukes received online. Depending on their fluency in the process, users may rush to point out Home Office shortcomings and invite the user to appeal against their result or, otherwise, embark on a criticism against the applicant family. These exchanges imply that power is exercised through approval, support, and thus bolstering an apparent situation based on emotional factors. Overall, users side with those cases that prioritise

obtaining passports and status guarantees, as far as they dismiss those who do not demonstrate resilience during the process. This corrective tone toward users' non-compliance echoes the government's hardline stance. In this case, the power relations not only *embed* the government's line, as it *anchors* a corrective authority in a space between the Home Office and what could be a group of like-minded citizens.

Understanding visual data

The practice of rendering text into visual pieces has engendered both positive and negative consequences for public information (e.g., Yan, Davis, & Hindman, 2023). In our research, whenever users posted questions about the EUSS, they frequently transformed their text into a banner or a colourful image with text. While there might be many limitations to this visual-first approach (e.g., failure to understand the background of image creation), the colourful renderings of personal pictures, certificates, screenshots, and protest photos show sensorial and emotional properties (e.g., Harbin & O'Callaghan, 2016). Here, users have created a space where images can serve as a mechanism for emotionally connecting with a vast amount of application evidence (e.g., passports, forms, queues). Users also did so by assembling news articles with images of their documents. Picture posting has fulfilled celebratory intents such as the memorialisation of events, the encouragement of individuals involved in the settlement process, or the mockery of politicians. The recurrence of *white* in the bulk of images collected referred to the screenshots of Home Office communications. It relates only as a corollary of some level of uncertainty, as it corroborates the *anchoring* and *embedding* (Grzymala-Kazlowska & Ryan, 2022) of an advice-asking dynamic assessed earlier.

As further evidence of this embedding and anchoring of larger processes into a more visual language, we find messages that register the passage of time and its emotional costs for participants. In the first case, *Stuart* (Figure 6) provides a table with emojis detailing the timeline, including steps and durations, of his journey from applicant to British citizenship over a seven-and-a-half-year period. Stuart, contrariwise, hints at the *lack* of uncertainty by suggesting he did 'everything' and didn't use a solicitor. He conveys a sense of jubilation and triumph in obtaining the British passport (emphasised through smiley faces and national flags). While Stuart does not open space for the in-betweenness and uncertainty seen before, this timeline could still be associated with negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and doubt, which he seems to contradict in his explanation of the steps taken.

In the second case, *Brian* (Figure 7) also follows the same path to citizenship. However, in the post below, he is still awaiting an update on the progress of his application. He conveys a strong sense of being in limbo, enduring the heightened stress of living with uncertainty while quietly nurturing hope. Brian's text follows a pattern of vivid colour and images. His chosen imagery (two emojis) and colour palette (natural patterns) juxtapose an affective state of hanging on, attempting to stay calm, and waiting for a hoped-for future, as the expressionless emoji expressed being unimpressed. At the same time, pastel colours (pale yellows, greens, blues, and reds) and depiction of flora and fauna evoke, at first, a sense of spring (beginnings, lightness, opening, flourishing) and, hence, optimism.

Both cases help us illustrate the alternation between certainty and uncertainty when users seek to represent their experiences through visual resources. As current studies show, emojis and pre-formatted templates can convey more agency in navigating uncertainty (or the lack thereof) in the broader context of creativity in digital place-making (Basaraba, 2023), which also includes the use of photographs (García-Esparza & Nikšič, 2024).

In addition to this analysis, we reassessed the colour patterns obtained from photographs posted (n = 4,199) to confirm the unequivocal prominence of *white*, *green*, *blue*, and *red* patterns. While this analysis only superficially approaches the frequency of colour as it comes on the surface of each picture, e.g., the repetition of the colour *white in the histogram* shows screenshots (Figure 8), beyond computer or cell phone screenshots, also corresponds to *embedding* user's status or responses to conventional papers, documents, and waiting rooms, broadening this spectrum of online/offline references. Instead, *blue* is inexorably tied to Facebook's colour, British passport colours, the Home Office website, the EU flag, and the sky seen in marches or other external events. The high incidence of *green* denotes not only the confirmation menu in the application process, but also a variety of passport covers, such as those from Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries, posted as part of the evidence of identity or at the application stage.

Lastly, we also discuss the hashtags extracted from the images. Most images echoed jargon seen in activist groups, such as #bargainingchips or #righttostay. These hashtags represent (in their many variations) (Figure 9) a more concerted effort to campaign for EU citizens' rights,

which deserves further analysis not conducted here. Using hashtags has advanced a more proactive stance against uncertainty. This topic deserves a separate study, especially in light of the growing scholarship on hashtag activism and online forms of expression.

For place-making purposes, these colour patterns demonstrate the Facebook community as encompassing a whole dynamic of evidencing and counter-evidencing that embeds users' communication about their applications, most of which involves image posting, resulting from a call for more predictability as well as to vent citizens' frustrations and demonstrate compliance. Next, we discuss tentative conclusions based on the exploratory intent of this research.

The impacts of the EUSS and feeling unwanted

Exploring the language of uncertainty in EUSS digital communities remains incomplete because of numerous cohort complexities. For example, the users' gender distribution, the use of official language, the reproduction of memes and photographs, and the binary between acting in compliance and non-compliance remain all under-explored aspects. We are aware that the EUSS has disproportionately affected people. The Roma community, for example, has found it particularly difficult to obtain pre-settled status (Parker, 2024). New controls at the UK border for people with pre-settled status exacerbate this environment of suffering and uncertainty (Etias.com, 2024; Restelica, 2024), which was compounded by a failing and primarily digital identification system (Trendall, 2024). Recent changes to the EUSS under the Labour government may have posed new challenges for applicants.

The practice of digital place-making has offered varying degrees of anchoring and embedding in the applicants' routines, either when users act as translators, advice-givers, or opinion leaders. However, the EUSS digital communities do not embed the level of care observed in other studies, in which significant social relations were formed (Lintelo, Hernandez & Lakshman, 2024) or individuals felt they had people who care for them (Palmerger, 2021). The scheme's strict list of requirements has prompted users to limit themselves to the officials' bureaucratic language. Our research provides some insight into how digital place-making is informed by a collective negotiation of how users handle uncertainties in which we argue that *feeling unwanted* is both the motivation for such an intense dynamic of evidencing and debating the many obstacles of the process. We argue that, as far as these groups anchor hope for a successful outcome in their EUSS application, the groups have also embedded *unwantedness*

in the language users employed, the actor, socio-spatial, and power dynamics perceived, and the images produced.

Instead of nurturing and rewarding hope, we surmise that the digital communities as places created in the aftermath of EUSS implementation reflect how the scheme has broadly triggered more uncertainties regarding migration to the UK. The persistent anxiety about compliance and the constant need for validation among fellow community users evidences this dynamic. While these ongoing changes in the scheme contribute to renewed rituals of evidencing and counter-evidencing, which, in turn, may suggest a helpful digital space, the scheme's weight on applicants also prevents these communities from flourishing as a space of solidarity, despite some of the actors' genuine efforts to help one another. Future research should explore other personal and collective affordances, or the lack thereof, in the context of immaterial impacts of the EUSS on the applicant community and their beneficiaries.

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Tables and figures

Table 1. Facebook groups in scope

The Facebook group's name	Membership
Group 1	54.7 K
Group 2	44.8 K
Group 3	9.9 K
Group 4	1.3 K

Figure 1 – Word cloud with member self-description on selected Facebook groups (n=2731)

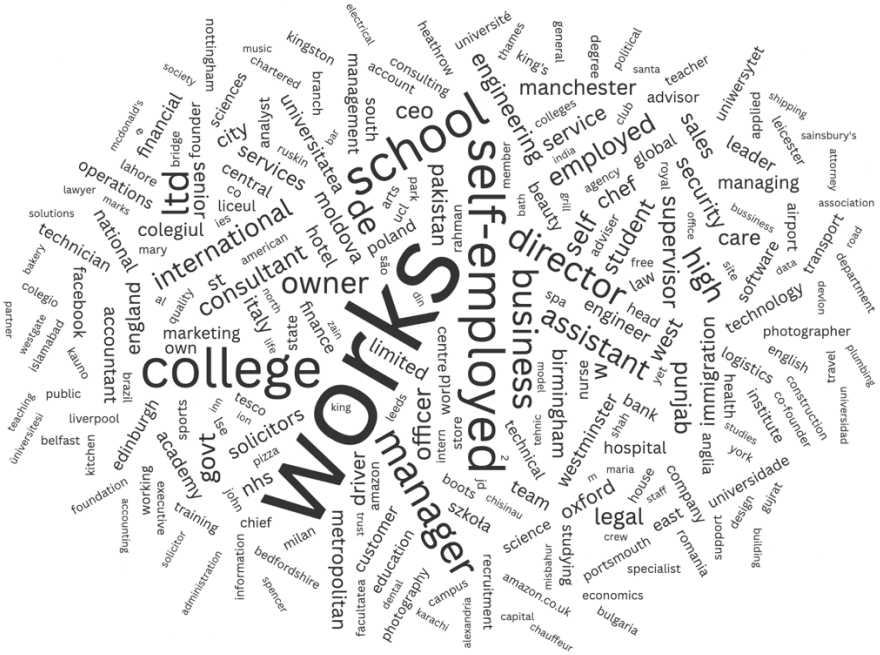

Figure 2 – Word cloud with Facebook original messages (n=29,766)

Figure 3 – Facebook exchange demonstrating the use of particular words in their original context

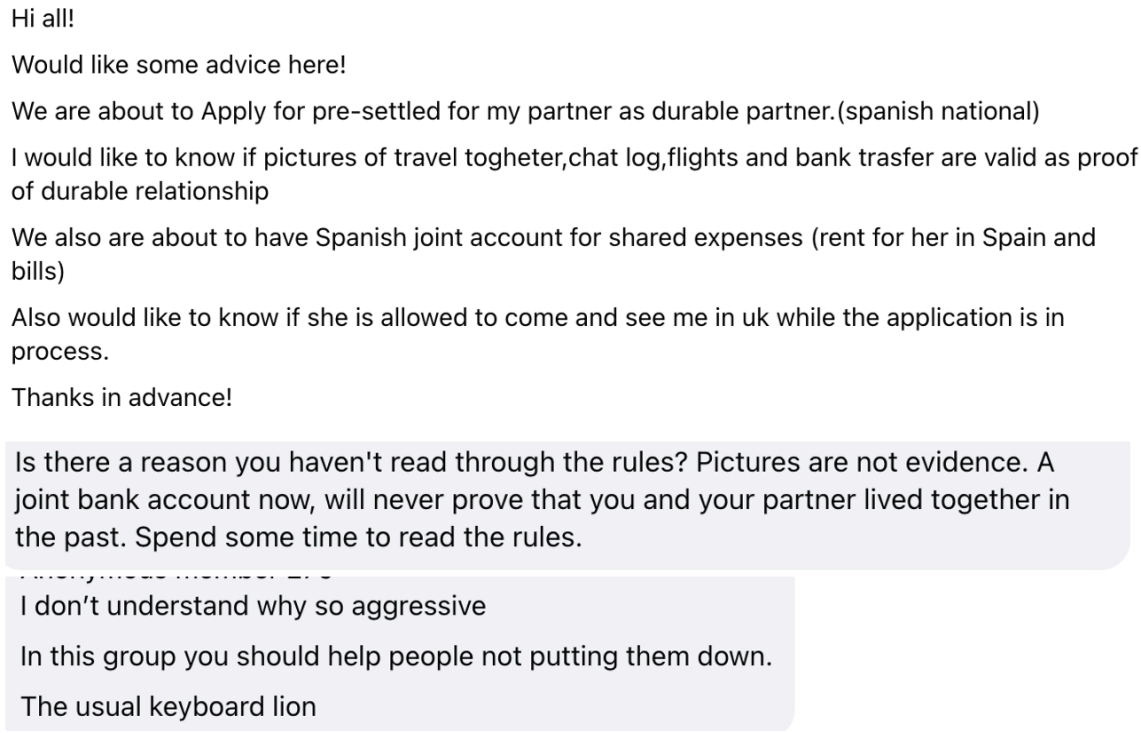

Figure 4 – Facebook group exchange based on a EUSS case

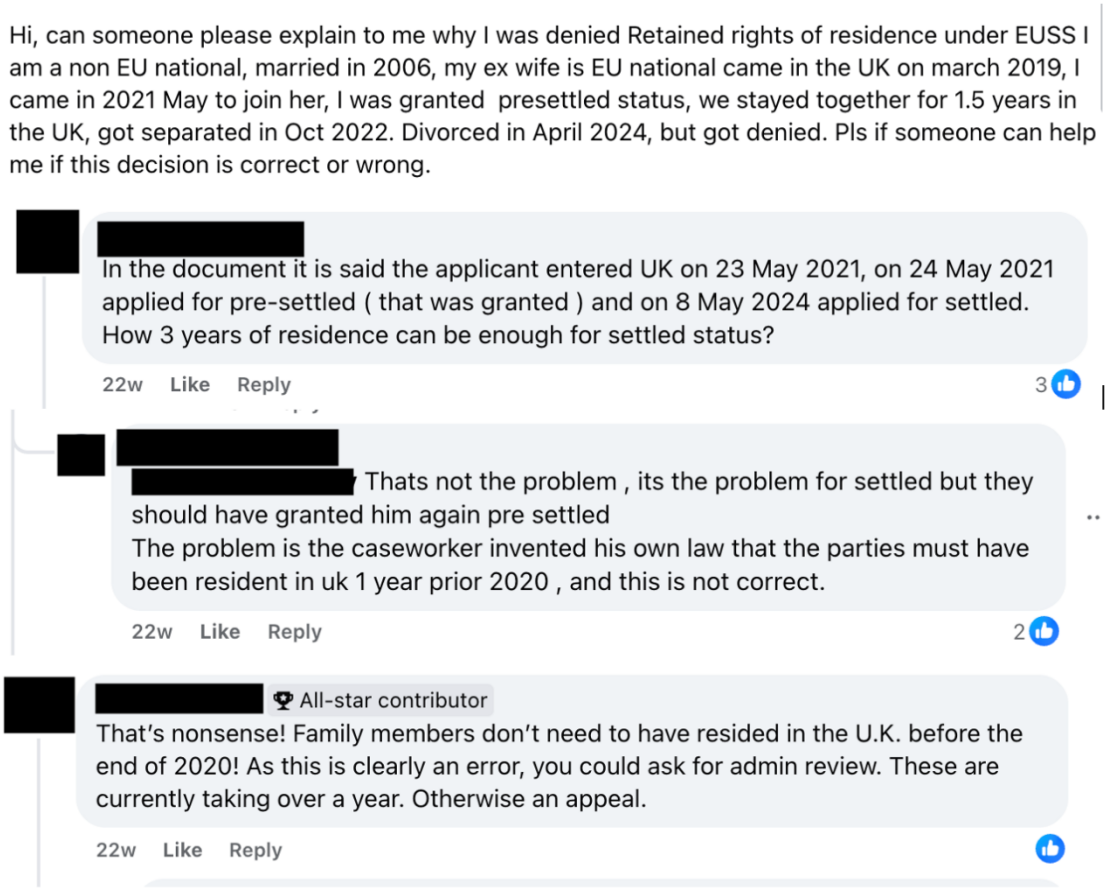

Figure 5 – Group exchange about a BBC story related to the EUSS

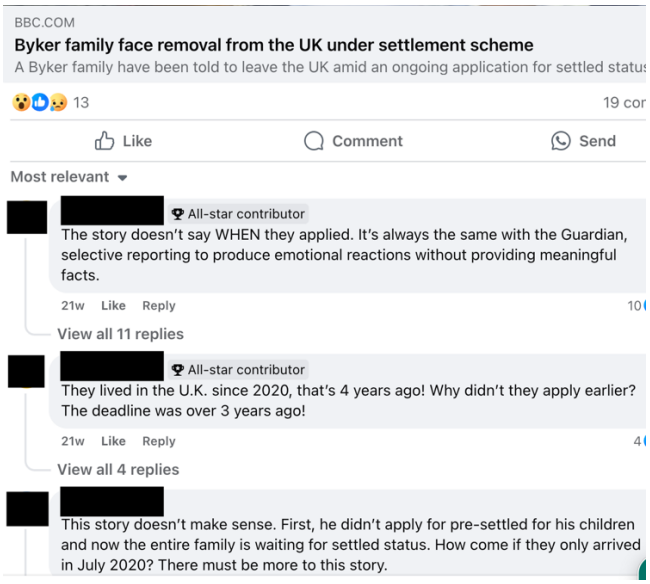

Figure 6 – Snapshot of a Facebook post describing the application timeline (personal details redacted)

- Moved to the UK from my birthplace [redacted](EU): 8/Feb/2017
- Pre-settled status granted: 30/Oct/2019
- Settled status granted: 21/May/2022

ℹ️At this point I start researching and considering the British citizenship. I make the final decision to go through with it at around mid-2023

- B1 test passed: 23/Aug/2023
- "Life in The UK" test passed: 12/Dec/2023
- Both referee's declarations signed by them: January 2024
- Application finished and submitted online (no solicitor, did everything myself, it is really not difficult 👍🙂): 5/Feb/2024
- Additional document-scans uploaded on the UKVCAS website (residency evidence, cover letter, passport scan, ref. declarations etc.): during February 2024
- Biometric appointment : 29/Feb/2024 (paid £0 as I booked it 4 weeks in advance)
- E-mail sent to Home Office asking about my application status: 4/May/2024
- Response from Home Office CONFIRMING that my application has been successful: 7/May/2024
- Official Home Office 'Atlas' e-mail (official confirmation) received: 13/May/2024
- 😹 Ceremony ([redacted]): 26/June/2024 - attended, got the naturalisation certificate
- Request made online for British passport: 29/June/2024
- Documents (my EU passport + naturalisation certificate) sent by post to the Passport Office: 1/July/2024
- Passport Office confirming they received my documents: 3/July/2024
- Passport printed: 13/July/2024

◼️ My British passport received by post: 16/July/2024🇬🇧 (I also got my documents back the same day in a separate envelope!)

Figure 7 – Posting on Facebook by Brian

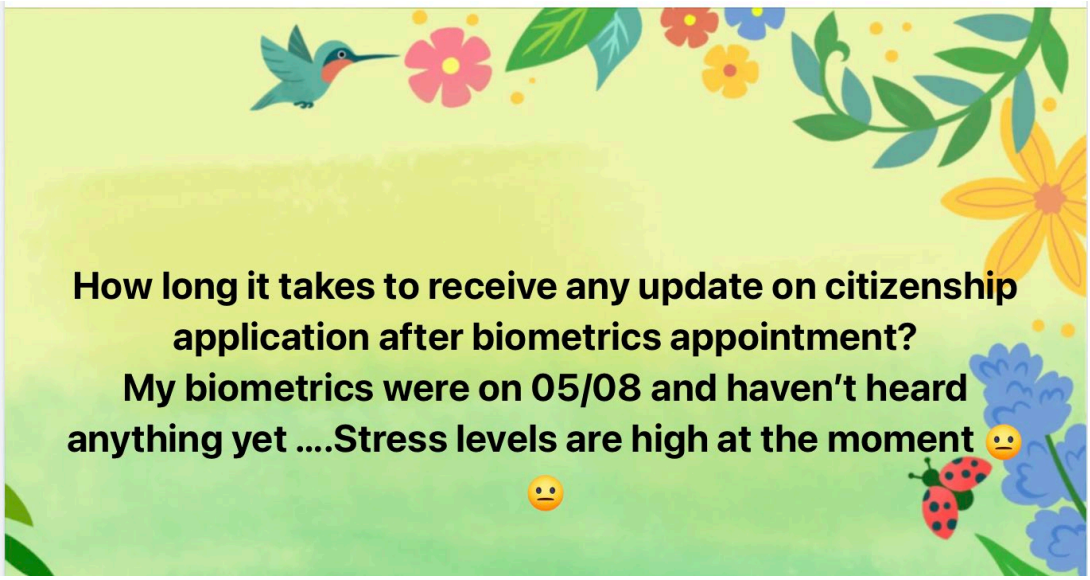

Figure 8- Histogram of images posted in the four EUSS groups on Facebook and their colour scheme (n=4,199)

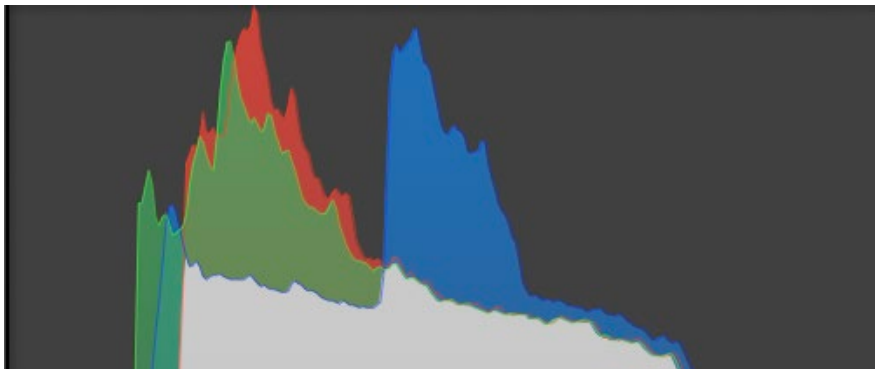

Figure 9 – Word cloud for frequent terms in hashtags published in group-posted images