

research article

Intimacy as a competency: information-seeking practices in (marriage) migration online support groups

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This article explores the use of online social networks for seeking and sharing information about marriage migration. In Europe, since the 1990s, this migration has faced heightened scrutiny. Laws and administrative practices have added complexity to immigration procedures. Manifold screening methods gauge the authenticity of relationships aligning with the host nation's concept of a suitable family for integration. In this context, informal self-help groups emerged to offer support to those facing burdensome formalities and local administrative intricacies. Based on extensive qualitative fieldwork, this article examines the significance of these support groups, drawing on the concept of intimacy as a shared competency. Here, intimacy is conceived as an active relational skill that counterbalances the limitations of migration policies. The analysis transcends the division between online and offline modes of living, shedding new light on intimacy and *extimité* – the sharing of one's intimate self with others for validation – in doing family.

Keywords intimacy • mixed-immigration status couples • online self-help groups • competence • information-seeking practices

Key messages

- Intimacy is a shared competency.
- In marriage migration's information-seeking practices, in online self-help groups, intimacy is conceived as an active relational skill that counterbalances the limitations of migration policies.
- Online support communities transcend the division between online and offline modes of living.

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Introduction

Successive developments in national and international law have clarified the right to marriage and private and family unity. These rights should be applied uniformly regardless of nationality and reinforced in the presence of children due to jurisprudential advancements related to the child's best interests. Since the mid-1990s, and more prominently during the 2000s, the practical implementation of this right has fallen short. In Europe, family migration has faced heightened scrutiny by

state authorities. European law aligns national regulations that exhibit only slight divergence, indicating ‘family resemblance’ as a cornerstone of the overarching process of Europeanisation (Wray et al, 2014). Among the different forms of family migration, marriage migration involving a European national and an individual from a third European Union country¹ from the global south is particularly closely monitored (de Hart, 2017). In some countries, like France and Belgium, the rise of such cross-national unions has been portrayed as a means of entering the territory by circumventing increasingly restrictive migration policies. Since the 1970s, both countries have, indeed, restrained the entry of certain categories, including low-skilled workers, students and even asylum seekers. Against this background, the fundamental right to a family unit remains a highly protected aspect, one that is enshrined in the constitution and migration law for predominantly married and civil partnership couples. Nevertheless, constant changes to laws and administrative requirements have added complexity to marriage immigration procedures.² A variety of screening methods is employed to verify the authenticity of cross-national relationships and couple prospects, aligning them with an ideal of family deemed suitable for integration into the host nation.

The sociological and historical literature on family and family migration has extensively documented how the state manages entrance into the national community – described as a ‘big family’ (Ngairé, 2005) – by controlling the affective ties of nationals and non-nationals (Bonizzoni, 2018). Nowadays, these practices can result in the ‘irregularisation’ of couples’ administrative situation, the deportation of the foreign partner and/or the partners’ separation across national borders while they await the resolution of their file. Over decades, the government, ‘through’ the family (Donzelot, 1977) and its ‘domestication’ (Turner, 2020), has already justified the establishment of explicit links between family ties, social reproduction and the nation’s future. The notion of ‘domesticating’ the migrant family emphasises the means deployed to normalise and manage an ‘undesirable’ population. Family scholarship has also revealed how politics of control deployed by state institutions and other agencies regulate forms of family and parenthood that do not conform to local/institutional hegemonic norms and invite ‘subjects to reform themselves for their own good and for the good of others’ (Roux and Vozari, 2017: 1). However, there is still little attention paid to how partners and spouses navigate the immigration landscape of legal rules, further complicated by discretionary and culturally rooted local practices of migration governance. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the sociolegal practical and material knowledge circulating about French and Belgian marriage migration formalities on online self-help and grassroots groups. In this online sphere, partners cultivate specific forms of capital required to navigate the immigration process successfully and overcome uncertainty.

To counter uncertainty and disinformation in marriage migration procedures, informal online self-help groups began to emerge in the 2000s. Initially appearing in the format of forums and blogs, and more recently as closed groups on social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), these groups enable individuals to share administrative experiences, receive suggestions from peers, and sometimes simply find encouragement during drawn-out procedures, along with emotional support. Petitioners learn behaviours and performative techniques that empower them to overcome administrative hurdles. Some of these groups focus on state practices, while others are locally rooted, providing insights into administrative procedures within a more limited geographical area. Others are gendered, catering

only to European national women who are still waiting for their male partner stuck abroad. These groups grew prolifically during the exceptional closure of borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic. New groups appeared, focused more on heterogeneous transnational cross-national couples' configurations which, up to this point had been less visible, as they could easily access tourist visas to arrange temporary meetings (Odasso, 2023). Meanwhile, traditional offline grassroots groups that provide support to binational couples via regular meetings and campaigns for legal changes have opened online accounts on the most popular social networks, namely Facebook and X.

Drawing on data and vignettes from extensive qualitative fieldwork to capture the geographies of affective (im)mobilities and online/offline interactions to enhance legal consciousness, this article explores how exchanging practical and administrative information and sharing experiences and concerns shape a *certain* intimacy within online self-help dynamics. It suggests viewing intimacy as a dynamic, cultivated and transferrable relational competency that partners develop at the intersection of online and offline modes of action, especially in the era of highly scrutinised migration. At the crossroads of intimacy and 'extimacy' (French *extimité*, the sharing or self-exposure of one's intimate self with others, see Tisseron, 2001), this article offers an insight into how ordinary people capitalise on legal-administrative know-how and counterbalance the limitations of family government. How does this happen in a globalised and interconnected world where the state still retains a circumscribed conception of what a family is and the rights that derive from this status? How does this mould the many facets of intimacy?

To delve into these topics, the article is organised as follows. First, it frames an argument proposing an approach to using technologies in affective cross-national relationships by synthesising scholarship on family migration (including its bureaucratic materiality), digital seeking practices and intimacy. Following the introduction of the research fieldwork and its ethical and empirical material, second, it delineates how intimacy, as an active competency, manifests in the dynamics of online self-help groups. Vignettes and data are used to illustrate the crucial connection between intimacy and the material aspects of marriage migration, highlighting the pivotal role played by online information-seeking practices in constructing intimacy as a traceable and shared competency. The article concludes that, through the exchange of sociolegal know-how, online social media emerges as novel spaces where interactions and performativity combine to reshape the understanding of intimacy. Through this approach, it provides fresh insights into the 'technologies-intimacy' nexus and offers a new perspective on the phenomenon of 'doing family online' (Odasso and Geoffrion, 2023), as well as on the interplay among the institutional norms and people's desire for recognition.

Technologies and intimacy to counterbalance marriage migration policies

In the field of migration, 'digital technologies act as a pharmakon (poison and remedy)' (Diminescu, 2022: 8). They consolidate already strong ties and strengthen the power of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Digital technologies reshape the forms and levels of trust, becoming an integral part of the immigration process. They bring together people who were not previously connected, working on 'latent ties' (Haythornthwaite, 2002), making it possible to acquire social capital – a bridge for developing relationships (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). Furthermore, they can foster a sense of community

and affiliation based on shared interests and emotions, thereby increasing the levels of trust, camaraderie and cohesion in the pursuit of a common goal (Chen et al, 2021).

Existing scholarship on the use of social media in the context of family migration tends to focus on four main aspects. First, much of the literature explores how transnational families maintain affective and daily relationships at a distance by constructing a form of ‘co-presence’ that ‘mediate[s] absence’ (Acedera and Yeoh, 2019), which transforms the nature of relationships. (Baldassar et al, 2016). Through smartphones and instantaneous apps, by choosing textual, verbal and visual interactions, scattered family members provide care to each other and support financial, emotional, moral, personal and communal attachment (Bakuri and Amoabeng, 2023). Nevertheless, studies investigating the effects of administrative hurdles on transnational families’ daily lives highlight that social media can only partially support the challenges of imposed distance. This starts to be documented when long waiting times for immigration formalities are at stake. While technology enables sharing a dinner online, chatting throughout the day, and more, it is also a source of dislike for separated partners (Charsley and Wray, 2023).

Second, a number of studies have addressed the use of social media to join online self-help groups for understanding and undergoing immigration practices. According to Descamps (2022), these groups constitute a grassroots form of socialisation, aiding in the development of bureaucratic expertise and coping strategies for navigating the bureaucratic, legal and personal challenges related to marriage and family reunification. Additionally, the analysis of their interactional practices has uncovered a gendered division of administrative work and highlighted the crucial role of spouses who remain abroad, often seen as passive beneficiaries of family reunification (Descamps, 2022). According to Longo (2022), in the US, online communities play a pivotal role as intermediary spaces connecting petitioners and the state, shaping citizens’ adherence to the racialised hierarchical order of that nation. Participants in these forums actively engage in self-discipline and influence others to conform to the state’s envisioned model of an ideal future nation. Essentially, they also function as ‘unofficial border police’, pre-emptively scrutinising cases before they even reach immigration officers (Longo, 2018: 471), thereby perpetuating state-endorsed morality.

Third, studies emphasise that online support groups also provide emotional support (Geoffrion, 2021). Shared online emotional and personal attitudes play a significant role in aligning the expectations of sponsor partners with institutional norms. For instance, Canadian sponsor women of foreign spouses may adopt a patient approach, as patiently awaiting immigration decisions without direct intervention implies conforming with the immigration regime (Geoffrion, 2023).

Fourth, studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight how interactions in online groups go beyond the simple dissemination of information, creating fertile conditions for the emergence of virtual communities (Kolbası and Rittersberger-Tılıç, 2023). Nevertheless, previously described practices contribute to an institutional levelling process of ‘normalisation’, even within those communities that aspire to challenge the legal order (Odasso, 2023). Furthermore, the aftermath of crisis temporalities also reveals the fragility of new grassroots virtual mobilisation and alliances, exemplified by social media campaigns such as #LoveIsNotTourism and #slipposin (Let Us In) in Norway (Bell et al, 2023).

These studies, according to contemporary scholarship on family migration, presuppose that, for foreign individuals, establishing legitimate kinship ties becomes

the preferred avenue for securing residence rights. In so doing, it treats the couple and the family as assumed synonyms for intimacy. Without question, the concept of family 'operates as a legal category, a (bio)political ideal, a site of intervention, and an intimate relation' (Martin, 2012: 871). But intimacy extends beyond the often-overlooked aspects of familial and affective connections. Scholarship portrays intimacy as a cluster of affects, an extraordinary form of relating to oneself and others, a subjective dimension of interiority encapsulating those elements we consciously choose not to reveal to anyone. In the realm of migration, intimacy delves into geopolitical issues (Pain and Staeheli, 2014) concretised through invasive institutional controls (meaning, influenced by liberal notions of love, D'Aoust, 2013; or suspicion, Fassin, 2013; D'Aoust, 2018) or, conversely, through a transformative 'quiet politics of encounter' (Askins, 2014).

These approaches fail to fully encompass the 'active dimension' of intimacy and the contextual foundation of the concept, which requires nuanced qualifications to be thoroughly understood.

This article addresses this gap by emphasising not only the personal but also the relational orientation of intimacy (Obert, 2016) within the intricate web of marriage migration oppression. Scholarship has captured some relational feeling states that sustain intimacy: vulnerability (Berlant, 2000), curiosity, empathy, irreducibility (Obert, 2016) and authenticity (Maskens, 2015). Research also suggests a significant connection between intimacy and citizenship by shedding light on the state's rationale regarding the blurred boundaries between public and private spheres (D'Aoust, 2013). By foregrounding the informal and performative aspects of the family migration economy, I posit that intimacy, inclusive of these relational feeling states, plays a pivotal role in shaping the agency of petitioners, too often deemed subaltern. This process – which I previously analysed outside the digital space (Odasso, 2021) – is reinforced by the informative dynamics occurring online.

Here, intimacy becomes a relational competency, or even a skill that enables those affected to live the regular life of a family or a couple. Adhering to Boltanski's (1990) perspective, social actors possess a conscious understanding of their actions and exhibit competencies that help them produce arguments, justifications and criticisms acceptable to others. To be effective, any competence 'must be adjusted to the order of the worlds to which it applies' (Boltanski, 1990: 70). This implies building a model of competence that considers the layout of situations in which people act, and that understanding how or desiring to act is insufficient; people must possess the 'convincing' capability to engage in contingent actions to effectively navigate situations.

Now, how does intimacy transform into a competency and a skill in the marriage migration field?

As previously mentioned, both intimacy and authenticity are crucial elements in administrative encounters, potentially rendering petitioners especially vulnerable. However, the interplay between the tangible aspects of administrative and emotional work conducted through 'intimate' narratives and exchanges in online social media groups introduces other key dynamics. While not necessarily discernible within the official immigration process as viewed by the state, these dynamics still bring about changes in the social realm and its layers of action regimes. Each situation necessitates individuals to align their commitment levels to mitigate the uncertainty influencing their words and actions. It is on the basis of this requirement that a person develops the capacity to prioritise the important over the insignificant

(Thévenot, 1990), and to play with it – either within or outside digital spaces, in front of the administration, within pairs or in their interpersonal relationships. Successfully claiming family rights hinges on the crucial elements of evidence and justification. Merely intending to assert a right is insufficient for its social realisation; possessing a right requires the existence of a trace, a documented record of its validity. Thus, I hypothesise that intimacy reveals itself as a competence when the intentional actions of petitioners seeking a settlement in France and Belgium intersect with the necessity to generate traces as mandated by the immigration authorities to exercise the family right, they aspire to obtain. Traces contribute to the social fabric by establishing tangible connections between individuals and facts, they exert influence on social reality and bring about modifications (Ferraris, 2012). For the administration, traces should be credible and visible: bureaucracy generates traces, requesting applicants to reciprocate by producing them, to influence behaviour. These traces, contingent on the subject, should remain objective rather than subjective. So, in light of these traces, petitioners' aspirations evolve into a (re) quest, setting in motion distinct social relationships that transform intimacy into competency. To successfully navigate stringent migration policies, couples exchange knowledge on online ad hoc communities at the edges of legal boundaries and adopt situated practices that are considered socioculturally acceptable depending on the context (Tuckett, 2018). Recognising the potential of their relationship as a powerful tool for legal integration into the national community, they tactically leverage it, along with its material expressions, to articulate their demands to the state. In so doing, they cultivate a form of *mētis* – an 'array of practical skills for responding to a changing environment', which unveils the limitations of institutional frameworks (Detienne and Vernant, 1974). The efficacy of this *mētis* relies on how couples shape and use their intimacy through specific online/offline interactions and the trust they place in others, whether experts or peers.

Fieldwork and methods

The article relies on an online ethnography fieldwork initiated in 2020, building on my extensive research into the experiences of mixed immigration status couples with migration bureaucracy and law. The pandemic accelerated online skill-building peer tactics for couples to navigate legal-administrative processes. This pivotal moment, combined with the structural challenges of social distancing, prompted adjustments in my research design, aligning with recent developments in migration studies (Leurs and Prabhakar, 2018; Alinejad and Ponzanesi, 2020). I joined four closed Facebook self-help groups, all established in the spring of 2020, primarily led by national partners and ranging in size from 6.9 thousand to only 237. One is no longer active and another has changed its name three times. Like all new members, I had to agree to a set of rules for joining. I presented myself as an engaged researcher. I explicitly shared with the groups' leaders and moderators my intentions so that they would consent to my online participation. I reached out to them through an informant, an activist involved with a former association in the domain. Simultaneously, I continued to be involved with two grassroots associative groups by monitoring their existing Facebook pages (one with 2,000 and the other with 10,000 followers). On these pages, it is the coordinators who post couples' (un)typical histories and political-legal updates; these are commented on by followers and ideas are exchanged.

To adhere to ethical considerations, I opted not to web-scrape data. However, I have been scrolling these pages and making observations since the spring of 2020. Each group comprises mostly French and Belgian nationals petitioning for permanent residency on behalf of intimate partners from the Global South. Notably, one group predominantly comprised women sponsoring North African men. While I aimed to include a diverse range of nationalities, the potential country of residence for the couples (France and Belgium) resulted in a higher representation of North African and Sub-Saharan men. However, my dataset also encompasses information about women from Asia and the Caucasus, as well as both men and women from South America, with a smaller representation from North America. They are concentrated in the more heterogeneous group of the sample. This distribution – generated from minor conflicts about the repertoire of action and slightly different claims based on national origin (for example, in France, Algerians are governed by a migration code) – limits inappropriate comments. Posts are not systematically reviewed before publication, but moderators can intervene if racial, sexist or conflictual comments are made, either deleting them or requesting that the person in question adopt a more peaceful approach. However, heated debates and controversial positions remain visible.

Additionally, following careful informant consent, I interviewed around twenty-four active members, some of whom are regarded as experts. These individuals often seek information offline from legal experts or actively engage in both online and offline lobbying actions. Due to lockdown restrictions, the interviews were conducted online via Zoom or WhatsApp with cameras switched on. Methodologically, I experience a similar pivotal shift in the temporal space as my interlocutors, finding myself compelled to nurture long-distance relationships online. Some participants opted not to remain anonymous, viewing their involvement as a civic testimony. Nevertheless, to protect their privacy, the names of the partners and details that could potentially disclose the identity of the couples were altered to minimise the risk of identification. Special consideration was given to couples who were actively in the process of applying for residency.

Thematically, I inductively document intimacy through digital observations and interviews, identifying and distinguishing various aspects: types of formalities, their practicalities, the administrative traces requested by the authorities, the pathways of their production, and the intensity of exchanges on specific topics. I also consider nationality, gender (and age when possible), the level of participation (that is, posts or likes), the location of the member and personal disclosures (for example, administrative doubts, experiences, failures and successes, as well as changes in the couple's life such as breakups and separations). These methods ran concurrently with the analysis of grey literature, parliamentary debates, legal documentation and ongoing media coverage of marriage migration phenomena. I monitored political and media treatment of mixed-status couples during different periods: pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic.

In the following section, I concentrate on a qualitative, in-depth presentation featuring a limited number of select ideal-typical configurational examples. Gender and nationality, as well as individual and collective claims, illuminate the challenges posed by immigration formalities, the intricacies of local administration, the couples' intentional decision making and feelings, and the exchange of advice. Only through this comprehensive analysis of long-term, interrelated dynamics of legible and performative intimacy, mutual support and know-how can we establish the groundwork for a new conceptualisation of intimacy.

From intention to materiality: implemented intimacy online

Belgian and French family migration laws prescribe procedures related to meeting administrative criteria and a ‘burden of proof’. To formalise the union, couples need to prove the genuineness of their relationship through administrative documents and unrelated materials such as personal photos, travel certificates and personal chat or message threads that should attest to the existence of a ‘real’ matrimonial intention. Both within Europe and at consular posts abroad, immigration authorities conduct individual intimate interviews with each partner to scrutinise the couple’s relationship and their plans. This passage may be particularly difficult for those partners who recently became a couple and for those couples formed by an irregular or still-abroad migrant. However, a residence permit is no longer guaranteed, even on obtaining the union’s institutionalisation. Another petitioning formality that must be met involves proving the continuity and (potential) solidity of the union. This procedure varies slightly by country. To obtain the right to legally reside in Belgian territory, partners must meet conditions related to age, and the Belgian partner must prove their housing stability, that they have health insurance and a minimum income. They must prove that they meet this criterion of having a ‘regular, stable and sufficient income’ corresponding to 120 per cent of the social minimum income consistently over five years.³ Notably, this threshold does not take various social allowances into account and thus results in the exclusion of several applicants (Odasso, 2024). In France, for now,⁴ the law does not elicit similar conditions. For the issuance and annual renewal of the residence permit, immigration agents request new tangible evidence demonstrating the continuity of the couple’s life. At the authorities’ discretion, a residence permit may transition into a multi-year document after two years. These legal coordinates fail to adequately capture the complexity faced by a couple. Paperwork and bureaucratic demands can take on unexpected proportions and, daily, turn immigration policy into a ‘right of restriction and exclusion’ (Julien-Laferrrière, 2000). Petitioners who desire a mixed-status family life navigate the hurdles of this process in an attempt to secure the recognition of their rights. By exposing their intimacy and converting it in the form of legible administrative instruments, they translate their intentionality into social actions. This intimacy does not necessarily correspond to their intimate relations but rather, is a multilayered competence, an array of skills, an ‘art of doing’ (de Certeau, 1984). In so doing, intimacy also becomes a manifestation of infra-political resistance against immigration structures, enacted by ordinary people within the spaces shaped and regulated by a prevailing family and intimacy logic.

Transforming intentionality: extimacy as a tactic

When I met my Malian spouse, I had not imagined the obstacles that would stand in our way. To be able to live together, the procedure is long and complex, it can last for years. All these years of waiting, uncertainty ultimately create an inability for us to project ourselves. We are in total uncertainty. The processing times are long, far too long for a couple’s intimate life ...

Anne (French, 35 years old) encapsulates her current complex experiences linked to the immigration procedure and affective life shared with a Malian partner with these words. Anne and Samba met in France in 2018 and married in Mali two years later, following an investigation by the public prosecutor. Their marriage was officially registered with the French government in February 2022, and they applied for a spousal visa for Samba in March. However, Samba's visa was inexplicably rejected three times. The case was taken to the Administrative Court, which ruled in their favour and ordered the issuance of the visa in June 2023. When Anne published her post in 2023, administrative hurdles had grown due to the diplomatic tensions between France and Mali. France has stopped issuing visas for Malians, adding to the couple's relationship stress and frustration. They continue to endure separation. Lengthy delays test Anne and Samba's relationship. Uncertainty and unclear deadlines are affecting the couple's ability to plan for the future, creating much anguish. Their case seems very specific, but by sharing her intimate concern in a post, Anne paves the way for more testimonials from couples. Several couples made up of a French partner and a Sub-Saharan African partner, one from Mali, one from Niger and another from Burkina Faso are also dealing with similar challenges – migration screening and diplomatic problems.

This broadly applicable example illustrates that the desire to establish a legitimate family life often involves facing immigration obstacles. These challenges compel couples to temporarily set aside their intimate, purely affective relationship as they grapple with state-led interventions into the privacy of their personal lives, enforced by the immigration authorities. However, engaging in online communities allows them to realise that, despite the unique trajectory of each emotional couple's journey, they manage to overcome similar challenges. These spaces serve as encouraging and valuable relational support networks, with the content being continuously updated through shared day-to-day experiences. While many members benefit from the group without divulging personal details, a subset of individuals – the main sample of this study – chooses to disclose their emotions and their unexpected vulnerability, as well as aspects of their couple's life by actively posting about personal and pivotal administrative moments.

In so doing, their utilisation of online spaces manifests a specific type of extimacy. They expose and reveal their intimate choices not solely for validation purposes, as often sought offline in interactions with the immigration authorities. Instead, their choice of extimacy is a deliberate tactic to acquire relevant knowledge and to alleviate their emotional situation. To collect accurate information on specific procedures, even regarding their implementation in a particular geographical area, openness, precision and a proactive approach are crucial. If needed, additional details are provided to ensure comprehensive understanding. This practice creates unexpected connections and closeness among members, fostering increased intimacy – intended here as a space to disclose one's vulnerability – between them. Conversely, this intimacy produces extimacy and fuels the circulation of information.

The degree of extimacy varies among members and appears to be influenced by group-specific or regional-specific cultures; the more similar socio-personal characteristics members share, the more they tend to disclose. Certainly, the practices of each group also differ, with extimacy being more pronounced in digitally native groups. Due to their format, groups initially formed in offline spaces provide a more restricted platform for self-disclosure. Nevertheless, what is common to all groups is

that active members place trust in both the solidarity of peer couples, even if their knowledge is not always accurate, and in their use of performative intimate authenticity as a potential resource for gaining elements to correctly enter into the nation. The posts of Xiao, a Chinese woman in a couple with a French national, capture this well,

Just a quick message:

of solidarity and courage for those of you who, like me, have not yet been able to celebrate your first reunion since the start of the COVID-19. And to use an expression that I'm very fond of, I'm sending lots of 'buenas ondas'⁵ to all those who need them.

Xiao is still separated from her lover and has been in this situation for four years. The couple hopes to reunite in 2024. Xiao is actively engaged in a self-help group that originated from a branch of *#LoveIsNotTourism*. She alternates between posting queries (for example, 'Should I photocopy all the pages of my passport for consular practices?'), sharing useful information for all members (for example, 'China's accession to the Hague Convention of 5 October 1961 abolishing the requirement for double legalisation of foreign public documents, effective from 7 November 2023'), providing personal updates about the progress of her couple's formalities, and offering supportive posts, including occasional songs. She utilises the online community as a safe space. The content of her posts, as almost everyone observed, seamlessly reflects the ongoing realities of the couple offline.

Normativity and intimate citizenship

Online and offline modes of living are no longer in conflict (Vivienne, 2015); rather, they represent a continuum that brings the private into the public stage online. But unlike what happens in the state encounters, in self-help groups, the public impinges into the private sphere not to assess, but to advise. This difference is substantial in its impact on the intimacy of individuals striving for success in their affective relationships. Self-help groups – as part of the internet, intended as a social institution (Longo, 2023) – provide advice, recommendations, standardisation of needs, and liberal as well as more subtle forms of norms. They may generate normative overload and confrontations and partake in the politicisation of the intimate. Members discuss 'good' intimacy, integrating and contesting state conception of authenticity, and become experts. Unattended, this normative profusion fosters a sense of recognition among couples and the individual's belief in intimate justice for themselves and their partner as a couple. By engaging in collaborative but individualistic dynamics both upstream and on the periphery of the administrative process, members cultivate a newfound ability to shape their own destinies.

Julien, a Belgian in his thirties, is in a relationship with Beatriz. They met at university and decided to formalise their commitment through a civil partnership when Beatriz's student visa expired. While the civil union procedure went smoothly, obtaining a residence permit for Beatriz has proven extremely challenging. Because he is self-employed, Julien does not meet the necessary conditions, and the law is particularly stringent for individuals like him. This category faces greater difficulty in proving the stability of their income, as Julien points out:

2011 law discriminates against many people, including myself, who are self-employed. The state deems our income unstable. [...] In Belgium, the law places the entire burden on Belgians, who must support their foreign partners. This has put us in a ridiculous situation. Beatriz has a permanent contract, we both studied in Belgium, and I've established my own business. ... we have no financial problems. We are young people just starting out in life, but despite this, it's difficult to assert our rights.

The obstacles Julien describes reflect his situation within the broader panorama of immigration practices. His posts, like some others whose narrative fragments punctuate the walls of online groups, express that, *de facto*, the state is impeding their family life – in this case, demanding specific evidence. Julien's post, advocating for the rights of his – and even others' – relationship, appeared online in support of an online campaign opposing the Belgian 2011 law that introduced income requirements. The post and Julien's position can be viewed through the lens of 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003). This perspective emphasises the performative influence of intimacy in advocating for a fairer and more inclusive understanding of citizenship, not merely as a status, but as a series of actions aimed at asserting rights.

The examples of Anne, Xiao and Julien reveal not just unmet intentions of individuals grappling with immigration authorities' requests and uncertainty but also manifestations of intimacy as a tactic to garner support, gather new aspirations and related practicalities, and as a form of performative citizenship. These interpretations of intimacy converge, then, in the material culture of marriage migration bureaucracy.

Traces: performing intimacy, inhabiting the norms

Hello, second visa application lodged today. In the file, we put the papers requested on the list + (70 photos, conversations and Messenger [*sic*] calls, my identity card with my married name + passport with married name + letter of establishment and attestation on honour). The woman at TLS [the company that collects and processes visa applications for France on behalf of the French government] didn't want to take the photos and conversations but my husband insisted, so she put them in the file and closed it in front of him, telling him, 'You won't complain if you get a refusal because these documents weren't requested.' He replied that with a refusal for reason [not providing proof of your family life's intention], how could we prove that the consular agents were wrong about their first refusal?!!! In short, the file was submitted today and now we're waiting for a reply ...

Maia, a 34-year-old French woman, is married to Omar, a Tunisian man of the same age. At the time of formalising their union, Omar was undocumented and unable to prove a legal entry into France. Consequently, according to French migration law, he is required to return to Tunisia and submit a new application for a long-term visa as the spouse of a French citizen to re-enter France and obtain a residence permit. This procedure is complex and often leads to extended waiting periods for the respective partners, as the visa is not granted automatically but is issued at the discretion of

the consulate based on the submitted documents. In practice, the couple undergoes additional scrutiny after the marriage. In response to these challenges, a group of French women has created an online self-help group specifically called ‘the women separated from their husbands’. It is not uncommon for specific country-specific hurdles to arise due to consular practices, as in the case of Tunisia in 2021 and 2022⁶.

Maia’s situation is an excellent example of the discrepancies between the process of ‘intentionality, extimacy and materiality’ as conceived by the administration, and by the couple. Like many couples, Maia and Omar faced a visa refusal based on what is commonly referred to in the group and administrative-legal jargon as ‘reason 7’. The official visa refusal document states: ‘7. you have not provided proof of your *intention* to live together with your French spouse’. Throughout the various stages of marriage migration, including reunification and even later when the foreign partner applies for citizenship, the administration evaluates the partners’ ‘intention’. Administrative actors bear the responsibility of assessing the migration risk associated with marriage and must validate (or not) the authenticity of the intimacy the couple presents to them via their files.

Examining the threads in Maia’s posts provides an excellent perspective on how couples typically learn to inhabit the legal-administrative system governing mixed-immigration status unions. It allows for the identification of moments when couples become aware of the state logic regarding what is considered ‘good intimacy’ and ‘family’, which has evolved into an ‘implicit norm’ to which couples are subject.

There were approximately thirty-five posts in response to Maia’s post, many of which she replied to. Some of the posts express surprise (‘I’m guessing there’ll be a refusal because we’re putting in evidence’; ‘But what does she know about the procedure, whereas when you only put in the documents that are strictly required, you get a refusal!’ and so on) and show genuine support for Maia’s choice to include photos, even though the consular officer did not seem to want them (for example, ‘Well done! Normally they also ask for documents proving they share a home. Personally, I think that the more documents and evidence we add, the better. I was thinking of using Google geolocation to prove that we share a home ...’). Other posts offer advice about enhancing the photos with details, such as dates, and putting them in chronological order. Some enquire whether Maia and Omar have reapplied after the initial refusal. Several replies suggest that lodging an appeal for annulment may be more appropriate if the foreign partner has received a deportation order, especially when coupled with the prohibition to re-enter France for a specified number of years. The posts then go on to discuss the time spent waiting for a reply, after which a discussion ensues regarding the need for a lawyer and the associated costs.

The threads of the posts are noteworthy because of the tone used by those who intervene. All the posts reveal an assertive knowledge of administrative practicalities, valid at least at the moment of the exchanges, and a certain alignment with state rationale. Within the self-help groups, I interpret this as a pragmatic choice of ‘inhabiting the norms’ (Mahmood, 2005). Departing from a binary framework that categorises norms as either imposed or subverted, I perceived the compliance of certain individuals not as a complete loss of autonomy, but rather as a capacity for action that unfolds – and can only unfold – within a specific network of subordination. Central to this perspective is the idea that couples ‘inhabit’ the standards of authenticity that exert pressure on them; petitioners must learn to respond to these at times contradictory demands. The proactive materialisation of evidence demonstrates how performing intimacy through paperwork is a crucial competence in securing their rights. Rather

than adopting a submissive stance toward the state, couples, through evidence production, become agents shaping the future of their intimate relationships. Their agency is grounded in their ability to navigate the legal landscape by constructing intimacy in a manner they find most convincing based on their acquired knowledge in the field. Seen like a state, intimacy is laden with vulnerability, while from the perspective of subalterns, such as mixed-status couples, intimacy becomes a *mētis*, a competence used to counter 'state techne' (Scott, 1998).

Conclusion

Contemporary immigration policies reify the state's role in shaping families through intrusive measures. To assess eligibility for entry into the nation, administrations meticulously examine individuals' personal and migration history, delving into their lives and transcending the boundaries of traditionally intimate spaces. This culture of suspicion leaves summoned partners (and even citizens) vulnerable, as they are required to provide the immigration authorities with evidence substantiating their relationship and shared family life.

For couples, this governance mechanism through the family (Martin, 2012) shapes the specific manner in which they invest in social media to learn how to negotiate immigration regimes. While authorities exercise control over families and family ties, these elements also serve as 'resource criteria' that individuals can mobilise.

Petitioners recognise the significance of authentic intimacy in securing family residence rights. Intimacy plays a pivotal role in the intricate interplay between state directives and relationships among citizens and non-citizens far from the immigration administration's eyes. These interactions – and the key competence developed within – contribute to shaping individuals' plural identities and their ability to construct them. Literature overlooks this alignment between the state's hegemonic concept of family and the practices of couples that are reduced to merely 'crafting a convincing couple portrait for the state'. Such an analysis obscures the pragmatic micro-sociological acts undertaken by petitioners to be recognised as legitimate couples.

This article explores these mechanisms within online self-help and support groups and argues for the reconceptualisation of intimacy as a (shared) competence. Until now, marriage migration scholars have constructed intimacy as a static state unique to the family or within the confines of a couple's relationship. This article proposes to conceive intimacy as a dynamic, cultivated, and transferable competence. Intimacy thus covers a spectrum of relational skills that are traceable in online interactions. An intimacy-extimacy dynamic of disclosure and proximity in self-help groups permits more active members to perceive solidarity and obtain more recommendations and support. Exposing themselves online is a way to embody their intentionality and stack the odds in favour of its realisation. This may imply partaking in acts of intimate citizenship, to assert not only one's rights as a couple but also intimate choices as a matter of collective justice. Finally, intimacy turns into competence when couples' intentionality translates into viable traces. Through this performative display of intimacy for assessment, couples prove that by inhabiting the norms their actions produce identity change but not normative subversion.

Through emotional support and material expressions, couples swing between intimacy as a relationship and an affective modality and intimacy as a competency. The 'weaker' ties (Granovetter, 1973) and the delicate yet emerging intimate space within online groups illustrate that intimacy involves a range of attitudes, tactics and know-how that empower

partners to navigate bureaucratic formalities successfully. Furthermore, as these skills are developed within the socialisation dynamics of virtual online communities, tested and applied in offline interactions, the practice of intimacy evolves into a shared relational skill, significantly influenced by the contemporary social institution that is affected by the social institution that is the internet. This process implies a different form of normativity and validation compared with the one the couples experience in administrative encounters. Technology and social media are more about counselling but still produce a normative overload and place a demand on couples to choose how to mobilise intimacy to succeed. The analysis transcends the traditional division between imposed and subverted norms, online and offline modes of living, and offers a fresh insight into the dynamics of intimacy and extimacy in the process of entering a nation for family reasons.

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Notes

- ¹ A country that is not a member of the European Union as well as a country or territory whose citizens do not enjoy the European Union right to free movement (cf. art. 2(5), Schengen Borders Code, Regulation EU 2016/399).
- ² At the European level, see the resolution on the harmonization of national policies on family reunification adopted in June 1993 in Copenhagen and the resolution on the combating of marriages of convenience, 4 December 1997 (97/C 382/01). In France, the reform process commenced in the mid-1990s, notably in 1997, followed by subsequent milestones in 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2011 and 2013. These legislative measures modified the parameters of continuous community family life, the legal entry process, and the duration of family life after marriage for acquiring residence rights. They also addressed access to nationality, introducing concepts such as marriage of convenience and 'grey marriage' (Salcedo Robledo, 2018). In Belgium, reforms targeting mixed unions began in 1999, marked by a circular aimed at identifying marriages of convenience. Subsequently, laws in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2011 and 2013 imposed additional conditions for marrying abroad, accessing residence rights and acquiring nationalities (see Mascia and Odasso, 2015: 48; Sarolea and Merla, 2020).
- ³ According to articles 10, 12*bis* and 40*ter*, the law of 15 December 1980 – as modified by the 2011 law.
- ⁴ The ongoing reform of French migration law includes the proposal to introduce an income condition.
- ⁵ Good vibes in Spanish, already as such in the post.
- ⁶ In September 2021, the French government announced its decision to restrict the issuance of visas to individuals from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. The stated objective was to reduce visa quotas by 50% for Morocco and Algeria, and by 30% for Tunisia. This measure was implemented due to the lack of cooperation from the governments of these countries in facilitating the return of their nationals who were illegally present on French soil by not issuing laissez-passer documents. By the end of the summer of 2022, France reinstated its standard procedures for issuing visas in Tunisia.

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Conflict of interest

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