

Navigating Identity Discontinuity: Cultural and Identity Shifts in Migration after COVID-19

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Abstract. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic causing identity rupture, migrants continued to stream into Europe. Coupled with identity performativity and assimilation issues from before, both migrants and hosts were now faced with the aspect of isolation driven by a pandemic. This study utilizes and develops Cover's (2021) assertion of COVID-19 causing "crisis and rupture" to view migration streams as case studies, highlighting new challenges in the migrant experience. We postulated it led to further crises in host populations due to reactionary behaviour, causing a chain reaction – one identity crisis leading to another. Our paper traces identity shifts amongst migrants and residents of host states during the pandemic. We utilized the cases of Syrians and Indians migrating to Germany and Italy, as they are established migrant streams. These migrants faced crises in the form of prior social identities clashing with the hosts' national identity, given the pandemic driven absence of assimilation mechanisms normally present. Migrants' reluctance to conform was met with hosts' frustration with alien communities. This exacerbated regular reactionary patterns, leading to locals further distancing themselves from refugees, gravitating towards right-wing politics. It initiated a new form of integrated identity discontinuity, causing social contradictions.

Keywords: post-covid; migration; refugee; identity; crisis; cultural identity; cultural rupture; normalcy; performativity; identity shift.

Introduction

In 2020, the world engaged in lockdown due to the rapid spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic had global socio-cultural implications beyond its impact on health by reshaping perspectives on life, work and community, consequently having a direct impact on identity and culture (Redbird, Harbridge-Yong, and Mersey 2022). This impact was directly observed in migration, being a two-way transformation in both migrants and host communities (Bhugra and Becker 2005). While states grappled with the pandemic, they enacted many policies to minimize the physical social interaction of communities; increased migration control being primary (Koinova et al. 2022). This simply meant an uptick in illegal migration as legal pathways were being blocked, with the issue itself becoming highly politicized issue on the European continent (Karageorgiou and Noll 2022).

While migrations often prove advantageous for host economies and migrant individuals, large-scale migrations can present intricate identity dilemmas. As a two-way phenomenon, migration affects both newcomers and host communities; both populations continue to metamorphosize as

they learn from one another (Kutor, Raileanu, and Simandan 2021). While the economic future of Europe is in jeopardy due to an aging crisis (Demeny 2016), many states have turned to migration to combat it. Germany has accommodated thousands of Syrian refugees (Welker 2022), injecting young individuals into the working population (Rietig 2016). In fact, European countries that undertake more immigrants might be comparatively more economically secure: immigrants provide a larger tax-base for healthcare and pensions for the aging population (Harper 2016), while migrants coming from insecure origins benefit from security and stability (Dowling 2019).

The arrival of new peoples often challenges established socio-cultural norms, potentially causing security concerns for host populations. This could lead to the conflation of migrants with increased likelihood of security issues such as terrorism and far-right tendencies in their countries (Attinà 2018). Several host populations across Europe in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Italy and Greece have considered a diversifying population dangerous for security (Poushter 2016). The argument is partly that migrant cultures are incompatible with host cultures, a conundrum as old as human society. The pandemic caused further fracture between such communities, worsening migrant perceptions. The concerns of host cultures lead to questions of inclusivity, cultural diversity and the redefinition of their own identities in the presence of newcomers; either fostering a sense of enrichment or a sense of threat. Therefore, as migration continues in the post-pandemic world, we delve into the dynamics of cultural ruptures and identity shifts, triggering cross-border identity chain reactions.

This paper thus addresses two fundamental questions concerning migration and identity to further understand identity transformations in this time. Firstly to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted existing identity performance, which is then applied onto migrants in particular. To answer these questions and consequently establish how one group's self-doubt and inability to conform can elicit a reaction by another group, this paper first defines the performance of identity and the factors impacting it, followed by the impact of the pandemic on selfhood.

Cover's works on Butler take the latter's gender performativity theory and adapt it to holistically to identity. Hence, Butler's own definition of identity as performance applies: "(gender) identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler 2011, 25). Consequently, through applying Butler's gender performativity theory on migrants one can argue migrants are often compelled to perform in new surroundings through the adoption of linguistic, cultural and behavioural norms as per the host society, creating a new identity for them. This performance is, of course, iterative: it occurs through institutional policy and social interaction, with the migrant either successfully embodying the host society's norms or subverting them through alternative identity performances (Hanfstingl et al. 2021). The latter outcome is seen in the concept of transnational identity and diasporic hybrid identities (Bhandari 2021). Meanwhile, assimilation becomes a performance of normalcy as defined by the locale. On the other hand, host populations construct themselves through opposition to the 'Other' i.e. migrants (Kutor, Raileanu, and Simandan 2021). Such performativity is shaped by nationalist discourses and social interaction.

As the pandemic raged on, the impact it had on such performativity mechanisms was debated. Rob Cover argued that "rupture itself has occurred for very large numbers of people in ways which fundamentally shift how identities of relationality and belonging are constituted, performed and articulated" (Cover 2021, 1); due to the inaccessibility to 'normalcy'. Such normalcy can include behaviours such as the mobility to travel, physical interaction with locales and conventional employment. Due to the pandemic, there was now a distinct lack of certain iterations

in performance, notably the physical aspects; this led to digital spaces becoming central as the stage of performativity.

This paper returns to Cover's assertions that built upon Butler's performativity theory, beginning with identification of factors that can trigger identity crises in migration patterns. This includes institutional policy social interaction, and media narratives, and how this might lead to certain narratives impacting migrant/host relations. It does so for both the host and migrant populations. Secondly, the impact of the pandemic on performativity is examined via a case study of Syrian and Indian migration to Europe. The cases of Syrians and Indians is chosen due to the expansive migration of the two populations to Europe affording the cases a rich history of past performativity for both. The two populations also constitute a large chunk of the total numbers of European immigrants. By identifying factors that led to worsening social relations between migrants and hosts, we argue the importance of certain policies in the process of 'assimilation' or formation of compatible identities.

Factors in Migrating Identities

Migration is a complex and fundamental human phenomenon. People migrate for many reasons: seeking education and livelihoods, escaping persecution, seeking refuge from natural disasters, preaching faith, or seeking adventure. Since movements of individuals and communities across geographies has social, economic and cultural implications, it also impacts identity (Bhugra 2004). The experience of border crossings leaves an impact on migrants, contributing to identity and security challenges (Wong 1989). Migrants find themselves in new cultural contexts. This clash between one's original identity and that of the new community presents an identity crisis. Migrants are unsure of which culture to identify with, and how much. As migrants undergo cultural discontinuity, they experience reshaping of identity on a physical level that may lead to individuals being ill at ease, or experience loss of self-esteem; it is a vulnerable state (Cover 2021). It is in this state that social norms might impact one's identity.

Mobility is key to interacting with the new locale. As movement across borders becomes difficult, so does the ability to interact with a community – a factor doubly applicable to illegal migrants. Greater mobility yields more interactions, providing more opportunity to perform one's identity (White and White 2004). Cheaper, publicly accessible transport options led to easier integration for migrant populations (Allen et al. 2021). Areas with greater mobility hence have greater cultural continuity, leading to a higher chance of migrant assimilating into existing communities (Liao et al. 2025). Hence, migrant populations with lower mobility options would have less interactions and face more difficulty finding a new identity to perform via iteration. Of similar importance is the presence of routine; as an individual performs repeatedly over structured timelines, their identity stabilizes further (Sharma 2013). For example, going to work at set times helps aid in the performance of one's role at work. Similarly, migrants reliant on informal employment such as the gig economy might not have consistent temporality, with the lack of structure hindering identity formation.

Key in the interaction of both abovementioned variables is rupture, which forces individuals to redefine their identities as crises occur. A prominent case is individuals with features similar to the cultural image of Muslims after 9/11 making a conscious attempt at performing differing behaviours to change their identities in order to avoid any harm (Tindongan 2011). As crises happen, routines and mobility are also impacted. This bodily insecurity leads to identity

insecurity, demanding a defensive reaction; individuals might be forced to pick polarized identities (Cover 2021).

Syrian & Indian Migration

Syrians are the most displaced population in the world, with 21.8 million people displaced both internally and externally across 124 countries (UNCHR 2023). This displacement is triggered by many factors, primarily security. Other factors include political, economic, social, and in the wake of COVID, psychological. Over the years of the Syrian refugee crisis, there have been many challenges faced by Syrians having to now assimilate into a culture alien to them without their express consent.

Identity crises in countries like Syria were catalysed by factors such as terrorism and the efforts to fight it, support for compliant governments, backing of proxy groups, creation of security concerns, humanitarian crises and food insecurity. The emergence of COVID exacerbated these issues, causing a collapse of the Syrian health network (Swed et al. 2022). Swed et al. (2023) discusses the impact of COVID in Syria, a country already grappling with long-standing conflicts and humanitarian crises. They explain the pandemic increased challenges to healthcare facilities, given limited vaccine availability and inadequate healthcare infrastructure. COVID exacerbated already dire conditions, with skyrocketing cases in both government-held and conflict-affected areas; overwhelming healthcare systems already dealing with outbreaks such as cholera, with women being the most affected due to violence and malnutrition (Qaddour 2021). Hence, there was cultural disruption at multiple levels.

Security and political turmoil in Syria along with COVID fuelled a sense of disruption in the identity of the population. The civil war rendered Syrians the world's largest refugee group. Under Bashar al-Assad's rule amid an ongoing proxy war, Syrians were compelled to seek refuge in foreign countries. The spread of terrorism, originating from Al-Qaeda, exacerbated security concerns across the Middle East and North Africa. This has been also responsible for creating more terrorist groups and factions in this region, including Daesh (Borum 2004). As a highly fracturing conflict, the Syrian civil war has led to great uncertainty regarding life and survival. With living conditions deteriorating during COVID, nationalistic fervour waned, especially in Syria (Abbara et al. 2022). However, potential Syrian migrants faced formidable barriers due to the civil war, including a lack of mobility, funds and security guarantees (Tobin and Al Yakoub 2022). Previously open migration corridors were closed with the pandemic cited as a reason, such as the path through Turkey (Yücel 2021).

Although India does not face a humanitarian crisis, many Indians emigrate due to challenges they face due to their religion, caste, or gender identity. This includes women fleeing to urban centres (Khou, Smith, and Fawcett 1984) and religious minorities such as Christians fleeing to Europe due to fears of persecution (Varghese 2022). For the former, it would immediately afford them greater mobility leading to an immediate identity shift. For those fleeing the caste system, an erasure of their cast status in a new land would afford them greater opportunities. In the case of Europe, Indian migrants either are generally of a higher-class background to afford it, or they access funding available to highly skilled individuals.

Many migrated due to the Indian government's response to the pandemic, as it ravaged the country. Initially, India managed to contain the number of cases in the immediate stages but soon faltered: the federal containment approach wasn't effective, with over 44 million cases in

addition to more than half a million deaths over the course of the pandemic (CSSEGISandData [2020] 2024). Certain groups experienced greater precarity than before as men were forced to stay home (Narasimhan, Chittem, and Purang 2021). Domestic violence increased (Verderber 2024), as lockdowns and unemployment hit the country (Krishnakumar and Verma 2021). The lack of bodily security in multiple dimensions led to a marked increase in migration to the EU (Raghuram 2022).

In the wake of the pandemic, a large migrant population entered the continent, and experienced great vulnerability with regards to identity amongst other factors. Syrians and Indians both have established reasons for such migration, in addition to prior communities of their respective national origins existing in host countries. They provide two differing scenarios: (a) Syrians entering as refugees forcibly displaced, and (b) Indians wishing for a different life. This leads to differing motivations in the new aspirant homeland, directly impacting such peoples' identity performances.

Chain Action in Identity Performance

As migrants move to other states to reconceptualise their ruptured identity, host communities face certain difficulties. With migrations comes a sense of otherness for both the migrants and the host populations. For the hosts, migration triggers reactionary concerns that impact their identity. This influx of refugees is not a novelty – Germany has been host to large Syrian migrant populations since the refugee crisis began (Vollmer and Karakayali 2018), while Italy has been an entry-point for many migrants coming to Europe (Blangiardo and Ortensi 2019). Such points of entry are the beginning of the area of migration, becoming a liminal space for refugees. Upon entering the new environments, their wounded pride and damaged identities are further challenged. Hence these groups establish strong communities in host states. Such strong communities lead to a lack of interaction with local communities, entrenching potential alternative identities that may not perfectly cohabit. The alien socio-cultural norms of the host state require adaptive steps to ease the transition for the newcomers (Adamson 2006). Locals perceive this as a rejection of their values and norms, threatening marginalisation of their own identity vis-à-vis the foreign groups (Sasaki and Baba 2024). Consequently, they intensify their commitment to their own identity as a defensive measure against perceived threats (Häberlen 2022). This was observed when Syrian refugees created communities in host states, leading to ghettoization as opposed to assimilation.

In a bid to preserve their identity, right-wing parties politicise threats to local culture calling for antiimmigrant policies (Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip 2020). About 35% of people in Germany consider immigrants to be a burden and about 54% of Italians hold the same opinion; where 58% of Germans and 61% of Italians believe the immigrants do not wish to adapt to the customs of the host country. The number of hate and xenophobic crimes increased since 2014 (Connor 2019). In 2022, the German police recorded more than 10,000 xenophobic crimes, 610 of them were Islamophobic and 1,139 included violence (“Overview of Hate Crimes: Case Number Trends” 2022). This indicates the threat to cultural identity the Germans feel from the immigrants.

Syrians entering Europe are asylum seekers and may range from highly skilled to unskilled: they are dependent on state welfare, naturalisation, and economic opportunities to re-establish themselves (Etzel 2022). Emigrating Indians are not refugees escaping from large scale humanitarian crisis; they belong to different classes, and many have sound social and economic

backgrounds coming through the legal and formal procedure for purposes such as study or work (Gautam 2013). Secondly, Germany and Italy and other West-European nations are experiencing a rise in anti-migrant Islamophobia (Perocco 2018) which affects the migrating Syrians.

The Indian community's case is different: it is a large population that has been migrating to all corners of the globe since global travel became possible (Oonk 2007) and Germany has remained a key destination for them. The number of Indians migrating to Germany increased from 31,877 in 1990 to 89,704 in 2019 right before the pandemic (ICMPD 2020). With the cultural diplomacy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, the Indian diaspora in Europe underwent an identity change with Hindus and upper-caste individuals leaning towards government messaging, as minorities shied away from identifying with modern India (Srinivas 2019). Indian migrants belong to different classes and experience different forms of migrant life, aiding them in settling within European society better (Goel 2008). This was exacerbated due to the COVID's economic impact, with a certain class being able to emigrate to Global North, not being limited to closer regions in Asia (Gupta and Bapuji 2024). Due to these occupational differences, the general outlook towards Indian migrants is varied, with disparities in skilled and unskilled migrants (Indelicato and Martin 2024). Despite many German people disapproving of many other migrants (Hartmann 2016), there seems to be no disapproval of the Indian immigrants. Due to lack of perceived threat, Indian migrants' presence in Germany is not securitized or politicised at all, even during elections.

Chain Reaction

The pandemic led to great changes in the experiences of immigrants and host nations. It led to discontinuity of normalcy, with job losses and health crises. This caused anxiety and frustration at the government response, in addition to a lockdown where mobility and social interaction were limited despite migration continuing. Far-right groups pounced upon this influx of migrants despite their lack of mobility, citing the presence of such migrants as a reason for loss of 'cultural values' among host nations (Zavershinskaia 2024). The sense of damaged identity due to economic concerns is prevalent in European societies. Davis and Deole (2017) linked the rise of right-wing politics to the migrant influx in European society. Increased loyalty for right-wing parties have been seen in both Germany and Italy, especially after COVID (Mudde 2024). Right-wing rhetoric has led to increased violence against the Asian community both in Europe and North America (Wenger, Lantz, and Gallardo 2022). In Italy, hate crimes were specifically observed in areas of unemployment (de Groot 2021).

Migrants entering host countries during the pandemic's unemployment crisis cannot successfully join the labour markets immediately due to low labour demand (Falkenhain et al. 2021). Due to lockdowns, their mobility was reduced, and they were forced to stay in communities where they were discriminated against, whether due to COVID related sentiments or otherwise (Dollmann and Kogan 2021). Those that worked could not experience cultural social norms due to limited interaction with the locals in wake of COVID health concerns. Thus, they were alienated further than if the pandemic had not occurred, worsening differences between them and the host population (Bogoeski 2022). This results in discrimination as strong migrant communities form, separate from the locals. The hosts also have different reactions to this ruptured identity. In the case of developed nations like Germany and Italy, the state has resources to help migrants assimilate better – but during the pandemic, the immediate concern was containment of the virus

and maintenance of economic activity. Institutional aids such as welfare and community initiatives were severely handicapped, with attempts to maintain them drawing ire from host populations considering it to be surplus expenditure (Ebbinghaus, Lehner, and Naumann 2022).

Immediately following a return to normalcy post-pandemic, host societies experience a sudden unexpected perceived increase in physical migrant performativity. Based off pandemic-era narratives causing identity entrenchment, this would have led to a stark incapacity to adapt for either side, leading to such communities being further fractured. This disintegration of society becomes part of a vicious identity cycle, as individuals and groups shunned would be placed in yet another crisis demanding polarized identity change.

As established by Cover's (2021) elaboration on Butler's (2011) performativity mechanisms, the COVID-19 pandemic is unique in the sense that it was a crisis of global proportions. The impact on such migrant and host communities was immediately apparent. We argue that the political realities post-pandemic is largely due to many missteps during the earlier years of the pandemic. These lapses necessitated policymaking changes to accelerate policies helping communities integrate to attempt offsetting the deceleration (and entrenchment) of identity formation; yet, they were left unaddressed.

Conclusion

The arrival of the other who maintain a strong connection to their cultural identity within the host country can catalyse a complex and multifaceted chain reaction of security and identity related challenges among the host population. This phenomenon often manifests as a sense of displacement and loss of cultural identity. As a result, segments of the host society may challenge the perceived threat to their identity, hostility against minority groups and newcomers, and an increased support for right-wing ideologies and nationalistic politics. COVID-19 was an event that changed material and social realities for many. As they found themselves in new surroundings, their identities were challenged – as were the identities of the host nations. This intricate interplay underscores the importance of fostering inclusive dialogue, understanding, and policies that address the concerns and fears associated with cultural change, promoting a more harmonious coexistence within diverse societies.

Identity is important element of a nation's integrity. The post-COVID world brought not only economic, political and security challenges to the world but also intensified the identity dilemmas among the populations across the globe. This paper shows that introducing turmoil and uncertainty of any kind causes disruption in normalcy, forcing a change in performativity to adapt. This leads to identity shifts. This rupture of identity caused by COVID took the form of a chain reaction, moving across boundaries to host nations. Upon entering host communities, refugees held onto their original identity causing a chain reaction of identity threat and rupture among the host nations. These nations lean to right-wing politics and hostility to fight this threat and uphold their collective identity. It causes cultural discontinuity, leading to social disorder. This idea can further be researched to understand its circular repetitive nature. Questions like whether and how this identity crisis makes it the moral obligation of host nations to participate in the politics of refugee states can be answered upon further research. It can also be used to identify ways in which this expansion of identity crisis can be reduced, to ensure a peaceful international environment and promote peace, harmony, and inclusivity among all nations.

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