Unpacking the Complex Impact of Digital Storytelling in Migration Research: An Empowering Method?

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to examine the potential empowering impact of digital storytelling (DST) as a participatory, art-based research method, particularly with young adults with migration backgrounds. Drawing on a DST workshop conducted in Luxembourg as part of a European project on migrant integration, the study explores how creative, participant-led digital storytelling can foster engagement in knowledge production and contribute to feelings of empowerment. Rather than viewing empowerment as a fixed outcome, the research highlights its processual and relational nature—emerging through reflection, narrative construction, and shared vulnerability. The analysis is based on digital stories created by three participants, as well as interviews conducted immediately after the workshop and one year later. These data reveal how participants navigated self-representation, negotiated visibility and privacy, and developed a deeper understanding of their lived experiences through the process of creating their own digital story.

Introduction

Digital storytelling (DST) is a participatory method that enables individuals to create and share personal narratives through digital media. Emerging from community art and oral history traditions, DST proposes to combine audio, video, images, and interactive platforms, to communicate personal narratives but also to reflect on the complexity and nuance of lived experiences. In its original development in the 1990s, DST mainly targeted marginalized communities, advocating for its potential in amplifying their voices and in so doing promoting their empowerment and emancipation (Lambert, 2010; McDonough & Colucci, 2021). Today, digital storytelling has gained recognition as a participatory action research and art-based method, increasingly adopted across a range of disciplines and offering rich potential for collaborative construction and multimodal representation of research findings (de Jager et al., 2017; Gubrium & DiFulvio, 2011; Gubrium & Nat Turner, 2011; Lambert, 2013; Martin et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019).

Traditional research methods in the social sciences—such as qualitative interviews or surveys—often fall short in capturing the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences. In contrast, participatory art-based research methods, such as digital storytelling, seek to actively involve participants in the research process. By supporting participants in narrating and disseminating their own stories, DST embraces the epistemological and ethical principles of reciprocity and inclusion guiding participatory approaches and working toward a democratization of knowledge production (Mata-Codesal et al., 2020; McCartan et al., 2012). Participatory art-based methods emphasize co-creation and active

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engagement, challenging conventional top-down approaches to knowledge production and actively involving participants in the processes of knowledge construction, translation, and dissemination (Dudgeon et al., 2017; Kendall et al., 2011).

Through this challenge of traditional power hierarchies and roles between the 'researcher' and the 'researched', and through the inclusion in the research arena of voices often excluded in societal debates, participatory approaches are guided by the assumption that the active involvement of participants in the research process will be experienced as empowering (Arieli et al., 2009). Indeed, empowerment is frequently invoked as a distinctive feature of participatory action research and art-based methodologies. Yet, as a concept, it is often insufficiently theorized or operationalized, and as an impact of participation is often assumed rather than systematically measured or critically assessed (Duijs et al., 2021; Montero-Sieburth, 2020).

This article sets out to critically examine the potential empowering impact that digital storytelling, as a participatory, arts-based research method, can have on its participants. Specifically, it explores how digital storytelling, as a participatory and creative method, can facilitate participants' engagement in knowledge production and how this may relate to feelings of empowerment. The analysis draws on data gathered during a digital storytelling workshop organized with young adults with migration backgrounds in Luxembourg, as part of a European project investigating integration processes among young migrants living in vulnerable conditions (MIMY).

This article seeks to make two main contributions. First, it seeks to deepen methodological insights into digital storytelling as a participatory method involving people with migration backgrounds. Through a critical and open account of our organization of a DST workshop with three young people with migration background, an analysis of the stories that were produced within it and the participants' own reflections, the article highlights the potential of this method and the possible critical aspects researchers should consider when implementing it. Secondly, this study critically questions and examines if and how, by enabling active engagement in knowledge production and by promoting self-expression, this method does foster feelings of empowerment among participants. In so doing the article contributes to broader discussions on the relationship between participatory approaches and empowerment (Duijs et al., 2021; Gilodi et al., 2025; Montero-Sieburth, 2020).

Digital Storytelling as a Method to Empower Migrants?

In discourses around migration and integration, the voices of migrant residents are often marginalized or excluded. Their experiences are frequently framed through macro-level legal or geopolitical lenses, while their personal narratives— particularly those of migrant youth—remain underrepresented (Sigona, 2014). Within migration studies, research into the experiences and perspectives of migrant groups frequently employs conventional quantitative approaches, such as surveys, as well as established qualitative methods, particularly structured or semi-structured interviews (Poleti Ćosić, 2022). While valuable, these approaches may fall short in capturing the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences. Indeed, traditional top-down research methods run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes as well as divisive and disempowering narratives, such of a 'powerful' Western *us* in oppositions to a 'vulnerable' and 'different' *them*. In contrast, participatory art-based methods like digital storytelling offer an alternative that centered the voices of participants, enabling them to narrate their own experiences in a creative and personally meaningful way. These methods have been shown to fostering self-expression, co-creation, and critical reflection among marginalized communities as well as researchers (Fish & Syed, 2021; Gillibrand et al., 2023).

In the context of migration studies, DST can serve as a dynamic method for individuals to share their migration journeys, challenges and triumphs in a personalized and meaningful way. Individuals with experiences of migration could reclaim their narratives, challenge dominant stereotypes, and foster a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding migration—not only for audiences but also for themselves (Zhuang et al., 2025). As Pandey (2024) notes, digital storytelling enables underrepresented groups to bypass traditional media channels, allowing for more authentic and emotionally resonant narratives that can mobilize empathy and social change. Similarly, Aaid (2023) highlights how digital platforms such as YouTube have become vital spaces for migrants to articulate their experiences, often blending confession and concealment to navigate both personal and political dimensions of migration. By sharing personal narratives through digital media, migrants could bridge the perceived divide between *us* and *them*, humanizing the migration experience and raising awareness about often-overlooked realities, such as those of children of migrant parents. Additionally, viewers can become emotionally engaged, gaining a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by migrants. Following these premises, DST may empower marginalized voices to become part of the conversation while fostering empathy in the audience, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and humanized discourse on migration. However, in implementing such ideals in reality, it is crucial to consider what could be the potential implication of this method as well as to critically question its theoretical premises, particularly those related to the fuzzy concept of empowerment.

First, researchers interested in digital storytelling (DST) as a participatory method should be aware that it is both time-consuming and resource-intensive (Lenette, 2019). The implementation of a DST workshop requires substantial time investment, as participants must first be introduced to the principles of storytelling, trained in the use of digital tools,

guided through scripting their narratives, and supported during the editing process before presenting their stories publicly. This time commitment can be burdensome for participants, who may already be managing multiple responsibilities, and for a research team. Indeed, without sufficient financial and institutional support, DST projects risk being short-lived or poorly executed, which can undermine their effectiveness and limit their long-term empowering potential (Van Dijk, 2019).

Another concern associated with DST is its potential to inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about marginalized groups, such as young adults with migration experiences. As Trimboli (2020) notes, digital stories that attract public attention may unintentionally reproduce dominant narratives—often portraying migrants primarily as victims or focusing exclusively on hardship and trauma. This tendency risks reducing the complexity of young migrants' identities to a singular narrative of suffering, which can ultimately be disempowering. This is in line with scholars who argued that empowerment cannot be taken for granted as a linear or universal outcome of participation (Cornwall, 2016; Lenette, 2019; Luttrell et al., 2009; Nunn, 2020). Taken together, such reflections push us to question how empowerment can be theoretically understood and assessed in the context of a DST workshop with young migrants.

In participatory and art-based research, particularly in work that seeks to engage marginalised groups in the co-construction of knowledge, empowerment has become a widely assumed outcome. According to Piemontese (2021), participatory visual-based research "may represent an unparalleled measure of empowerment and contribute to breaking their representation as 'vulnerable people'" (p. 180). Conducting research with children, young people, and other groups often labelled as vulnerable, such participatory processes can leverage participants' existing competencies and skills opposing narratives of vulnerability, as synonymous with powerless (Piemontese, 2021). Indeed, essentialized understandings of vulnerability in the context of migration have been criticized as potentially stigmatizing, exclusionary and disempowering (Gilodi et al., 2022). Conversely, reconceptualizing vulnerability as the product of multiple intersecting conditions encountered, to a certain extent and at certain moments, by any person but disproportionally affecting certain residents, allows us to recognize migrant residents as unique active agents while acknowledging the systemic and contingent challenges they have to face (Gilodi et al. 2022, 2023, 2024). Following this line of reasoning, through participatory and creative processes, migrant residents labelled as vulnerable may offer individualized and nuanced accounts of the experiences and conditions of vulnerability they face, while reclaiming their unique point of view as agents in their own life.

However, the term 'empowerment' is often used ambiguously, with definitions ranging from individual self-efficacy and psychological well-being to social transformation and political agency. Indeed, the concept of empowerment is broad, multifaceted and remains conceptually elusive (Úcar

Martínez et al., 2017). In psychology, empowerment is commonly understood both as a value orientation and as a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals and communities gain control over their lives. Rappaport (1981) was among the first to define empowerment as a process by which people gain mastery over issues of concern to them. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) further developed the concept of psychological empowerment, emphasizing intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural components that contribute to individuals' perceived control, critical awareness, and participatory behaviours.

Seemingly following a similar theoretical understanding, practice-oriented definitions of empowerment used by institutions such as the United Nations (2012), highlight self-realisation, agency, and participation as key aspects. On the other hand, more critical scholars like Kesby (2005) argue that empowerment is not simply a matter of amplifying a voice or fostering internal capacities - it must also contend with the spatial, structural, and symbolic dimensions of power. Indeed, as Cooke and Kothari (2001) argued in their critique of participatory paradigms, until a clear agreement exists on how and when power is and can be legitimately be expressed "the meanings ascribed to the conditions of empowerment and the claims made for it attainment for those who have been marginalized must also be subjected to further scrutiny." In the context of migration, the experiences of individuals are shaped not only by personal agency but also by broader social and structural forces embedded within systems of inequality and exclusion (Hooks, 1994; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Consequently, the authors would like to highlight that empowerment should be understood not merely as a process of individual expression, but as a contested practice that unfolds within and against these wider systemic conditions.

Goetz and Nyamu-Musembi (2008) critically examine empowerment in terms of recognition, articulation, and political presence. Their work focus on women and their voices by arguing that this cannot be reduced to measurable quantifiable indicators. Similarly, this study adopts a relational and processual view of empowerment, treating it not as a measurable outcome instead as un dynamic process negotiated through interaction, rather than a fixed state (Wåhlin-Jacobsen, 2019) shaped by several factors such as participants' expectations and prior experiences, the DST setting, and the potential constraints of public discourse. In doing so, we position digital storytelling not as an inherently empowering method, but as a potential site where empowerment - understood as recognition and articulation (Goetz & Nyamu-Musembi, 2008) - can be negotiated, felt, and sometimes disrupted. Such a positioning also requires critical reflexivity about the researcher's role in facilitating and interpreting narratives. Empowerment, in this sense, is not just what participants experience, but what is made possible in the intersubjective space of co-creation, and what remains constrained by broader socio-political dynamics.

Digital Storytelling With Migrant Young Adults in Luxembourg

The potential for challenging normative narratives, for including marginalized voices in the construction of knowledge on migration and for empowering young migrants through self-representation, were the premises upon which a series of participatory art-based projects were organized across Europe in the late stages of the MIMY project. These activities were conceived as complementary to interview data collected among different groups of young people with experiences of migration and stakeholders, and as an opportunity to expand and disseminate the findings of the project in dialogue with the people it targeted. In the case study of Luxembourg, DST was chosen as a method to offer to young people a safe space and a creative tool to reflect on, construct and communicate their unique individual stories and points of view. In line with the goals and structure of the project, the implementation of DST with migrant youth was guided by the core principles and ideals of participatory art-based methods described above, including the promotion of empowerment. Yet, awareness of the complexities surrounding processes of empowerment and the implementation of participatory methods was instrumental in setting up of the workshop in Luxembourg (e.g. shaping the framing question as described below), in supporting and relating with the participants during the workshop sessions (e.g. in terms of ethical consideration) and in designing follow up activities (e.g. follow up interviews a year later to explore how participants reflection on their storytelling experience changed over time). The following section attempts to provide an open account of the key methodological, practical, and ethical choices made by the research team in setting up and following the organization of the DST process with young people with experiences of migration living in Luxembourg.

The workshop was designed and co-facilitated by two female junior researchers, both with an interest in participatory methods. One was a second-generation migrant with a background in filmmaking, and the other had a particular interest in ethically grounded approaches and a personal experience of migration. In spring 2022, three women in their early twenties agreed to take part in the workshop. Embracing the critical understanding of vulnerability adopted by the project (Gilodi et al., 2022) and the intersectional and blurred nature of migration categories and positionalities (Ryan, 2015), the workshop was not meant to target a specific group but to be open to both young people with direct experiences of migration and those with family histories of migration, with different legal and citizenship status and with different socio-economic statuses. Despite such openness, the final group of participants shared several similar characteristics, beyond gender and age: they all grew up in Luxembourg from migrant parents, only one migrating to the country as a child, they were all university graduates pursuing advanced degrees, they had similar socio-economic backgrounds, their parents had similar blue-collar jobs, and two shared the same family country of origin. Although, this was not the result of a specific recruitment strategy, upon reflection, sharing such characteristics enriched the participatory and creative process by enabling the development of deep trust and connections among the participants in a short amount of time.

Importantly, all three participants had been previously involved in the project: two were interviewed as part of a research activity collecting the experiences of second generation migrant youth, and one had become part of the research team in the role of peer-researcher, contributing to the data collection of several research tasks and informing the research team analysis and understanding (see Gilodi et al., 2025 for more information on this approach). Their previous involvement in the MIMY project facilitated two important aspects of the workshop: it contributed to framing the participants' stories in dialogue with key themes and findings of the project (e.g. relating to issues of discrimination and unequal opportunities, to process of socio-economic integration and to narratives of cultural diversity and national identity), and it facilitated the establishment of trust in the relationship between the participants and facilitators.

A key element of the setup of the DST process consists of devising a framing question as a prompt for participants to start with the construction of their personal stories (Davey & Benjaminsen, 2021). The question should provide a common point of departure from which each participant can develop personal narratives and share their own unique points of view. As such, it should be open and broad enough not to limit self-expression, while providing some boundaries to help participants navigate the plurality of their experiences and identities in constructing their story. The organization of the DST workshop within the MIMY project, already provided an overall thematic framework relative to the participants' migration background. Yet, the project wanted to challenge normative narratives of migration as a single story of struggle and suffering and encourage participants to reflect critically on their own experiences and what felt meaningful to them. Following this consideration, the following prompt was given at the start of the DST workshop: "Tell us a story about a time or a moment when you felt powerful!".

The choice of using the word 'power' reflects an attempt to promote counter-narratives that can celebrate residents with migration as active decision makers and members of society. However, it was reasoned (and openly discussed with the participants) that reflecting on power, and feeling powerful, can also allow us to consider instances in which such feelings were not present and the possible difficulties and challenges that one may have encountered previously or since. Moreover, letting participants define what they interpreted as feelings of power offered an opportunity to gain insights into personal understandings of processes of empowerment, reflecting the project's critical understanding of this fuzzy concept (see above). Finally, encouraging participants to reflect on a positive experience, without precluding the expression of sorrow, was a strategy designed to follow the ethical guiding

principles of participatory methods and DST. Indeed, facilitators felt an obligation to ensure, to the best of their abilities, that the participatory experience was not detrimental to the well-being of the participants and that they did not feel in any way patronized or exploited.

The DST process consisted of a main workshop, organized in five dedicated days across two weeks in July 2022, followed by individual editing sessions to finalize the digital stories and a round of filmed interviews with the participants to reflect and evaluate the experience. The primary objective of the workshop was to support young adults in crafting their own digital narratives—short, autobiographical films (5 to 10 minutes), combining voiceover narration with curated photographs or video footage. The workshop structure and activities were devised based on the original design of the DST process (see Lambert, 2010), its implementation in the field of migration studies (see Lenette, 2019) and the knowledge and experiences of researchers part of the research consortium. Consequently, the workshop consisted of a multitudes of activities aimed at: prompting personal and group reflection on their lived experiences as young people with migration background in Luxembourg (e.g. reflexive writing exercises, collaborative story circles), gaining knowledge on story development and cinematography (though videos, short lectures, supervised collection of audio-visual material, exercises to detect and construct visual metaphors, etc.), and acquiring practical skills in video production (including filming, story board and script development, voice-over recording, editing, etc.). More structured sessions were complemented by flexible days for writing and filming.

Overall, the goal was to promote the construction of deeply personal and individualized stories by encouraging critical self-reflection and communication as well as by fostering their creative expression, expanding participants' artistic and technical tools. To support this second aspect, participants were offered the option to incorporate original filmed footage (in addition to voiceover and still images commonly used in DST), and were provided with HD cameras, tripods, editing computers, and post-workshop technical support to realize their vision. As some films were not completed within the initial timeframe, two participants returned after the summer break to finalize their projects with support from one of the facilitators. It is important to acknowledge that while such choices followed the principles guiding participatory art-based methods, supporting the creative self-expression of the participant, they required more time investment from both the research team and participants, as well as more material and financial resources than initially forecasted. The small size of the group, the commitment of the facilitators and the availability of material and financial resources at our institution allowed such accommodation but we caution researchers engaging with DST in the future to carefully consider these aspects in the design phase of their project.

Finally, a screening event was organized in October 2022, within an art exhibition on topics of migration and exile, to show the stories and enable an exchange between the young directors and the audience. The screening of the stories was a key component of the development of the DST workshop and of the creative process. As explained above, DST is designed to offer a space of reflection where participants can safely explore and construct their own narratives, as well as a tool for challenging normative understandings and including marginalized voices in societal debates. In the context of our workshop, the focus was on the co-construction of the stories and their potential as a source of knowledge, rather than on the broader impact they may have on society. However, the knowledge that the stories would be seen by others was a crucial part of their construction for the participants and of the ethical facilitation of the process for the researchers. One of the main ethical dilemmas encountered during the process was how to guide the storytellers in finding a balance between achieving recognition for themselves and safeguarding their privacy. Indeed, facilitators cannot control the way in which each viewer will perceive and react to the story they encouraged their participants to share. Thus, throughout the production of the digital stories, the facilitators continuously discussed the potential positive and negative implications of sharing aspects of their stories, of themselves and of owning those narratives publicly, and encouraged each participant to negotiate their own individual boundaries and strategies (e.g. using their real name or a pen name, include or not images that could clearly identify them, being explicit or metaphorical in the description of memories and experiences etc.).

After the completion of the workshop but before the screening, the participants' accounts and experiences of the DST process were collected through filmed interviews conducted with one of the facilitators. The interviews served to inform a methodological evaluation of the process for the research team, as a moment of reflection and closure of the individual development process for the participant, and as a way to collect material for a behind-the-scenes video, which was shown during the screening event after the short stories. After the official conclusion of the project, the participants and facilitators remained in contact and wanting to explore the long-term consequences of their participation and the 'empowering' potential of DST, a second round of interviews was organized one year after the screening (October 2023). After some initial questions about the memories and impact of the participatory creative experience, the participant and interviewer watched again the digital story and the consequent reflections and emotional reactions are captured in a second part of the interview.

The next section proposes some reflections on the production process and content of the digital stories created by the three participants in the workshop, focusing on how participants differently constructed their narratives of power. We integrate such analytical reflections with interview data collected at the end of the workshop and a year later with the participants, to explore the temporal evolution of the DST process' impact on the storytellers.

The Digital Stories and Its Process: Taking Ownership and Assigning a Meaning to the Process and the Story

At the outset, none of the participants held defined expectations regarding the workshop's outcomes or the resulting digital stories. In post-workshop interviews, Ebony[1] recalled anticipating a light, creative activity; Billie expressed curiosity and enthusiasm about hearing others' experiences; and Inèdita described her initial participation as characterised by a casual mindset, stating: *"I guess when I signed up to do the workshop, I didn't really have expectations. I was like: 'Let's do this! Just let it come to me!'."*

Despite these perhaps tentative initial motivations, all three participants reported being unexpectedly moved by the emotional and intellectual depth of the process. They each assumed ownership of their narratives rather quickly, shaped by a flexible workshop structure that supported both collective exchange (e.g. through 'story circles') and individualized reflection. All three participants underlined the importance of the atmosphere in the interviews, arguing that the safe, collaborative environment fostered mutual feedback and encouraged reflecting on and sharing vulnerable experiences. As Ebony remembers:

> We had that reflection time where we got to think about [where] it is that we stand and what it is that we want to say. And because we are sharing our stories, they also got to put us in perspective to others: where they are, where our stories actually, you know, merge, where they separate. […] not that we have to compare each other…. but it just… […] it helped me to know that other people kind of experience the same thing.

Ultimately, the narratives of each digital story integrate a temporal dimension, enabling participants to weave together past, present, and future perspectives. Structurally, they follow a classical arc—introducing the protagonist's background (setup), confronting internal or external conflict (climax), and culminating in a form of resolution that reflects personal resilience. Yet, each storyteller also creatively and subjectively engaged with the temporal dimension of their stories during the video-making process, as Inèdita recalls: "[…] at some point I was lost and found at the same time because I said I would start with the end and finish with the beginning…"

The following section presents each digital story and offers some interpretations of its content in terms of constructing narratives of power within a DST workshop with young people with a migration background.[2] The full stories are available on the project website, at this link: https://www.mimy-project.eu/outcomes/online-exhibition/digital-storytelling/uni-luxembourg-02.

Inèdita's Story and the Therapeutical and Artistic Assignation

Synopsis: *"Dare to Look at Yourself in the Mirror!"* is an 8'43" digital story by Inèdita, a woman in her early twenties and, in her own words, "the oldest child of a migrant Portuguese couple". Her story revolves around the description of a complex identity construction that is shaped by significant challenges, deeply intertwined with experiences of discrimination and the burden of serious health problems in her direct family. Through metaphors and introspection, the film explores identity, discrimination, and healing. The narrative centres on confronting internalized negativity and embracing authentic selfhood.

The opening of Inèdita's story provides an initial indication that the narrative will address issues pertaining to identity, discrimination and mental health. Inèdita has decided to situate the most difficult moment of her story at the very beginning of the video, thereby functioning as a prologue that precedes the title. She elected to present what she terms "the chaos" at the beginning and to do so with a powerful initial scene, which simultaneously works as a moment of affirmation as well as confrontation with the public. In this initial sequence, she gives the audience immediate access to her most intimate negative inner voice, which she refers to as "the little devil inside your head". This voice provides diminishing statements in Luxembourgish and in English, most of which were directed at her at various points in her life. Thus, from the beginning, she opens up about the contours of her psychological landscape and bravely offers insights into her struggles and insecurities. She discloses her identity and simultaneously discloses the discrimination she has endured since childhood on its basis, growing up in Luxembourg as the child of Portuguese migrants, and the burden of this experience on her feelings of self-worth. One year later, upon rewatching her film, Inèdita reflects on its opening sequence, stating:

> It's a reality with which I no longer identify, because, now, I'm towards the end of the film and I'm trying to get on with my "Best Life" (...) it's like 'The end is the beginning' And so that's what it is, in fact. The end is actually… it's my new beginning.

The digital story continues with filming of herself drawing a tree – first in dark and later brighter colours reflecting the changes in her life. The narrative seems to focus on an internal journey of transformation, climbing into the "light" from a dark bottom, conveyed through a series of symbols (such as the mirror referred to in the title) and metaphors. The conclusion of her narrative is optimistic, again addressing the viewer and encouraging them to "not worry about the gossip and live your best life". Yet, the ending remains open-ended, suggesting that new stories will continue to unfold and that the narrative of her story will continue to evolve.

In the follow-up interview conducted one year after the screening, Inèdita reflected on the experience as a turning point, noting that her participation contributed to a more positive outlook on life and a marked increase in self-confidence. When asked whether she had rewatched the film over the past year, she acknowledged that she has viewed it multiple times. She explained that revisiting the film served

as a source of reassurance during difficult moments, reminding her of the obstacles she had overcome and reinforcing the idea that life is composed of both highs and lows:

> Honestly, this project is like therapy for me. I think art too, it's something that is creative, that can be used to help people out of certain things and for me, it was really something that really helped me out of a certain phase of my life.

Interestingly, she also explained that what motivated her to invest a lot of time into making and finalizing the video was realizing that her story could help someone else in a similar situation. In line with this, she reported feeling the most empowered directly after the screening. Thus, for Inèdita, the process of creating her digital story functioned as a catalyst for personal transformation, contributing to meaningful positive changes in her life. The final product serves as a sustained source of empowerment—a narrative artifact she can revisit during challenging moments, but that can also be shared to help others climb out of difficult moments.

Ebony's Story: The Power and Pain of a Confrontational Process

Synopsis: "Hunger" follows the story of Ebony, a young woman who migrated from Cameroon to Luxembourg at an early age. The film highlights her struggle and pressure to construct a meaningful and 'successful' life as a an 'immigrant' woman of colour, constantly striving to meet or defy expectations imposed on her. By cleverly putting her personal experiences, ambitions and opportunities in dialogue with the ones of her peers and broader society's expectations, Ebony's journey offers powerful reflections on racism, identity, and social justice. Length: 11'14"

The digital story drafted by Ebony can be described as the most confrontational and political of the group, with the potential of creating deep reactions in the audience. An audience that is explicitly identified and addressed in the video toward the beginning of the story, stating "Dear White people, let me explain to you some things you don't understand because you will never know". With one sentence, Ebony clearly positions herself and her audience and boldly declares her ambitious goal: to use her own experiences, thoughts and emotions to try to bridge and simultaneously expose the racial gap affecting realities of different residents within one country. As she commented in the interview at the end of the workshop:

> When you get to put yourself in front of the camera and talk about you, your life, your struggles, it obviously puts you in….in the forefront, where people get to see you, get to actually know you. And you can help make – not all of it – but you can help deconstruct a lot of stereotypes that are just circulating, maybe

among a specific community, about this specific religion, about people from a specific colour. So basically, talking and letting people know you - or as much as you want to share - is already a way to connect with them.

It is important to note that Ebony, who found herself in a moment of transition in her academic and professional life, was involved as a 'peer researcher' in the MIMY project for several months prior to the start of the DST workshop (see Gilodi et al., 2025 for more information on this approach). Thus, her digital story can be seen as the product of a broader process, where the knowledge acquired throughout the project about the lived conditions and experiences of migrant communities in Europe was put into dialogue with her own experiences and a renewed commitment to social justice. Reflecting on her personal motivation during the workshop, one year later Ebony explained:

> For me, the [DST] process was about going back into my memories, going back into my inner psyche, telling my story, and mainly confronting myself with all the negative emotions I had experienced and really going back over everything that had led me not only to commit to the project (…) And to tell myself that no, I really refuse to be the product of "you're black".

Thus, her digital story was profoundly personal and yet marked by a clear social agenda: she explicitly situates her personal narrative within a broader socio-political context, framing her experiences as part of the systemic discrimination faced by Black individuals. Such complexity is reflected also in the film's layered visuals, sound design, and the use of diverse materials—including filmed footage, photographs, stock video, and custom animations – meant to deepen the video's emotional resonance. As she explained:

> It's not about being a professional film maker, it's really just telling your story the way you feel it. So if you have a specific angle you want to take that shot, or if you want to draw that image in a certain way, or if you want to have a dark music… […] it should reflect what it is you want to share and how you feel and … how you see yourself.

However, this also meant that Ebony invested more time than any other participant in completing her film, encountering technical challenges in structuring the narrative and integrating different media but also emotional challenges of negotiating her own "exposure" while wanting to reach her audience and make an impact. For example, Ebony explained that she was very careful in selecting which images and footage to use and often opted for public pictures rather than private ones in order to create a distance from partly painful memories as well as to protect her privacy.

She reflected in the follow-up interview that in confronting difficult topics, memories, realities, "[DST] became a painful therapeutic process." Writing the script forced her to confront

memories she had long avoided, which she described as "opening a box I didn't want to open". Ebony, openly shared in both interviews how reflecting on the contents of such 'box' and, perhaps more importantly, sharing those painful reflections in the group and then in the film, made her feel vulnerable and exposed:

> It always is a bit scary when you actually show yourself to be vulnerable towards people who don't know you and we're not sure whether or not they would care enough to listen, if they would care enough to even remember.

The tension between wanting to expose and explain her experience of the world as a young immigrant black woman building her future, on the one hand, and the need to protect herself and her future from the possible reactions an audience may have to her story, on the other, characterized Ebony experience during the workshop, as discussed multiple times with the facilitators, as well as after the process had officially ended. As she explained a year after the end of the workshop:

> I was so apprehensive about the film and I was sure that I had said so many things that I shouldn't have said, that I had presented it in a way that was too… too… too personal. And that perhaps there was, finally, this fear of saying too much, of revealing too much.

Indeed, right after the workshop, Ebony was the only participant who expressed conflicted feelings about her video, stating: "… at the end I feel, I don't quite like it because it is charged with a lot of draining emotions. Not negative emotions, but draining emotions". Significantly, the fears and "draining emotions" tied to the DST experience meant Ebony avoided rewatching her digital story after the final screening event. Yet, upon rewatching the video during the follow-up interview, she reportedly appreciated the balance she had achieved between personal narrative and broader societal critique:

> I can see that I was able to strike a balance between being personal without getting too personal, while at the same time remaining fairly observant of the way in which my experience related to the experience of discrimination, immigration and racism.

Over one year after the DST process, Ebony also reported re-evaluating the process and the story as a painful but necessary "confrontation", which aided her in reclaiming her narrative and rejecting the reductive labels imposed on her. As she explained when discussing the impact of DST in her life: "The most important impact is to allow myself to see myself in a slightly more human way… not as an identity, but just as a human being."

Yet, in terms of power and empowerment, Ebony offers a more nuanced account of her experience:

> There were quite a few moments when I felt powerful, but I confess that powerful is a term counterbalanced by broken. I feel like every time I felt powerful and strong and with… always, it was always counterbalancing an emotion of vulnerability. It was necessary for me to overcome an emotion of vulnerability in order to feel powerful.

To sum up, Ebony's digital story was designed as a powerful artifact of personal and societal transformation—one that helped her articulate her goals on her own terms and reject imposed societal roles. Yet, the construction of the story and the relationship between the story and the storyteller after the end of the workshop was marked by painful tensions and negotiations, which point to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between empowerment, storytelling and emancipation.

Billie's Story, a Time for Listening and Reflection

Synopsis: "Conflicting Souls" is a 7'57" digital story by Billie, a young woman of Portuguese descent growing up in Luxembourg. The film traces her journey from joyful childhood memories of summers in Portugal to the identity struggles of adolescence, marked by subtle prejudice and internalized shame. It culminates in a declaration of self-acceptance and the embrace of her bicultural identity.

For Billie, the DST workshop constituted a moment of self-reflection, remembering her childhood and adolescence and the struggles that she has faced and has overcome in constructing her own identity. In her own words, creating the video meant:

> Being able to put words to how I was feeling and to also see that I have come very far from that place […] it helped to reaffirm again that I am in a good place and I'm very happy how things are, which I didn't before. […] I definitely think that I was somewhere talking to my inner child.

As indicated by this last sentence, Billie's video is constructed as an inward and backward reflection, where the main audience seems to be her insecure and confused adolescent self.

In terms of the video-development process, she emphasized the importance of the preparatory stages, including group discussions and the creation of a safe space, which enabled "to be vulnerable in the way we were". Indeed, Billie explained that she struggled initially in the process, wondering: "how should I start telling the story and also how would it make sense for like people that don't know me?" But ultimately, she attributes her success in expressing and communicating her feelings and story to the group setting and interactions:

> If I would have been alone, I don't think I would have managed to be so open about it. […] I definitely think that it contributed for me to be like comfortable and to feel also safe, because I saw that the other ones also felt that way. So [it] definitely [showed me] how to make it more personal and also authentic.

The process helped her confront difficult emotions, particularly the shame she once felt about her Portuguese heritage and the same she feels now in admitting it. While this vulnerability was challenging—especially during the screening—she recognized the value of expressing it. The act of sharing, and knowing it might resonate with others, gave the process a deeper meaning. Commenting on her video a year later, she remarks,

> One scene that's always difficult for me, is the [part] in the film where I say that I actually felt shame for my nationality. I think, although it's a feeling that was very real, it's something I still struggle with, maybe sometimes. Even if I forgive myself for feeling that way or having those feelings, it was at a time when it was legitimate, and that's the reality, unfortunately.

Unlike others who experienced a transformative shift, Billie described the process as a reaffirmation of her current self—an acknowledgment of how far she had come in reconciling her dual identity: "It enabled me to really listen to myself and to really reflect on what had happened, what influence it had on me."

The digital story of Billie ends with a powerful affirmation: "I can be both Portuguese and Luxembourgish. Above all, I can be myself." However, in a follow-up interview one year later, Billie reflected on the limitations of this conclusion. She acknowledged that while the message was empowering, it simplified the ongoing complexity of identity formation. The digital story, she noted, captured a moment in time but not the full depth of her evolving experience: "It's a simplified way of putting it… it goes beyond what I've just presented in the video."

Billie rarely rewatched the film, citing emotional vulnerability and concern over how others might perceive it. Yet, she remained proud of the story's potential to impact others, especially those navigating similar identity struggles: "If it were just one person who felt in the same situation… that could have a very real impact."

In contrast to Inèdita and Ebony, who attributed a deeper transformative significance to their digital storytelling process and narrative, Billie approached the process primarily as a reflective pause in her life. Through this experience, she reaffirmed her position in society and gained a deeper awareness of the experiences she had undergone. She emphasized that a digital story represents a temporally bound expression of her perspectives during the workshop, acknowledging that personal reflections and interpretations are subject to change over time and should be understood as such.

The Potential Multilayered Impact of Digital Stories

Digital storytelling is increasingly recognized as a powerful method for exploring the lived experiences of marginalized groups (Svendsen et al., 2021). By including participants as authors of their own narratives, it grants them control over both content and disclosure, fostering agency often lacking in traditional research. Billie, who had also taken part in a prior interview part of the project, reflected on this contrast: *"In an interview, there's a distance and power dynamic… but with DST, you control what to share, how to share it, and can be more creative."* Her insight highlights DST's potential to shift power dynamics and promote participant-led storytelling.

Moreover, DST can help to counter dominant stereotypical and dehumanizing portrayals of migration. As Ebony argues:

> It's always easy to talk about immigrants, but the word itself doesn't mean anything. When you say immigrants, you cannot point to something, you don't know exactly what it is, you don't know exactly who you're talking about because there are so many people who migrate from different countries and different places for different reasons.

DST can offer a platform for people labelled as 'migrants' to share authentic and unique stories, humanizing and normalizing stories of migration on digital platforms and promoting knowledge. As Inèdita argues:

> … some people, they are so obsessed with digital media, but in a negative sense. And I think using [DST] is like a really positive way of actually developing curiosity.

Beyond, informing public discourses on migration by amplifying marginalized voices, DST can also provide a meaningful platform to denounce instances of social injustice (Lenette et al., 2015). Ebony's story, *Hunger,* is a perfect example of challenging an unequal system by showing how it has personally affected you, as she articulates in her video:

> All professions are admirable, but when we're expected to work in a specific field solely because of our skin colour or ethnic background, it hurts and it's not fair!

Her narrative critiques systemic bias and calls for change, while 'packing an emotional punch', which can become a powerful tool for advocacy when shared publicly. Exposing and challenging inequality in the wider society or 'educating' non-migrant residents is not the only potential societal impact of DST in the context of migration. Digital stories authored by migrant storytellers can have another meaningful audience: other people with a migration background. Especially for Billie, this is a great potential of DST:

> It can help people, or it can be a little bit of a guideway. Like if there was someone in the same position who sees it [and says]: 'ok, how did they overcome [this]?' Or: 'they have the same story as I have!' Or: 'I feel quite the same way.' Yeah, it can definitely help these people think about their own story and their place here, and yeah, maybe inspire the one or the other.

Indeed, all digital stories (and Billie's especially) touch upon the complex processes of identity formation, which are particularly salient during emerging adulthood, a developmental stage marked by identity exploration and sociocultural transition (Arnett, 2015; Oliveira et al., 2024). Yet, for young people with a migration background, this process involves navigating the cultural boundaries between their heritage and the sociocultural expectations of the society where they live. This can be accompanied by negative emotions, such as shame, as Billie's story clearly shows, especially if such narratives are not part of the public debate and are believed to be unique. Yet, in the context of a country like Luxembourg, where 47.2% of residents are not citizens and 73.7% have a direct or indirect migration background (STATEC, 2024), one can assume that many young adults have faced similar challenges in constructing their bi- or multicultural identity. Thus, such stories can resonate with a significant part of the population, potentially promoting not only changes in discourse but also making a more individualized impact. As Inèdita shared, when reflecting on the impact of listening to others' stories within the group:

> Identifying with other people's stories […] and knowing what they went through and [that they] managed to actually overcome it, like overcoming all those obstacles... It's inspiring.

While DST can bring great impact to our societies in multiple ways, public sharing of marginalized voices carries risks of misinterpretation and targeting for the storytellers (Zhuang et al., 2025). Indeed, negotiating the boundaries between recognition and privacy emerged as a key tension for all participants in the workshop and one of the main ethical challenges for the facilitators. Aware of the ethical complexities linked to the sensitive topics discussed and the participants' background, a reflexive, ongoing consent model (Klykken, 2022) was established from the onset, to allow participants to adjust their level of disclosure throughout the workshop. Decisions around names, imagery, and dissemination were revisited and discussed with each participant and in the group repeatedly. Many of these discussions revolved around the potential risks related to sharing the videos with an audience once finished but, in some instances, negotiating the level of exposure pertained to the risks of the DST process itself, such as re-traumatization (Lenette, 2019; McDonough & Colucci, 2021). As Inèdita recalls:

> I didn't like being actually filmed [she refers to one specific scene]. I didn't feel comfortable at all with it. Because I could really identify with it and I didn't want to revisit that moment again. It was quite too much.

Ultimately, Inèdita decided not to use this specific filmed scene in her digital story, but reportedly remembers this decision process as "a transformative moment" of her video-making journey.

At the end, all three participants signed their work with pseudonyms and agreed with the facilitators that the videos would be uploaded on the project website, but not on social media, and could be shared in educational and academic contexts. Additionally, they all used only partial or old images of themselves to protect their identity, and they engaged with multimodal tools—such as text, imagery, sound, and video—to express complex emotions and identities beyond words. For instance, Ebony's use of layered sound effects and graphics helped to convey emotions, while the introduction of abstract imagery and 'public photos' can be seen as creating distance from her personal story and addressing broader societal structures. On the other hand, Inèdita and Billie used symbolic visuals and drawings to represent their emotional journey and in a later interview, Inèdita emphasized the importance of the integration of these different art forms as well as language-switching in conveying her experience.

Nevertheless, all participants were apprehensive on the eve of the public screening—concerned about how their stories might be received. All stories were very well received by the public in attendance (somewhat curated by the facilitators), with the Q&A clearly highlighting the potential of stories to resonate with others facing similar challenges and of positive audience feedback to reinforce a sense of agency and empowerment for the authors, expressed by both Billie and Inèdita after the event. As Billie explained: "*That was the moment when I felt the most empowered… a final product I'm proud of.*" Yet, Ebony's experience was more layered and complex, marked by feelings of vulnerability and fear of *"revealing too much".*

Concluding, DST can contribute to emancipation and social justice through the individualization of broad social phenomena like migration. It allows to 'put a face to a label, tell the (or a) 'story behind the headline', show who 'the system leaves at the margins'. Additionally, it allows to normalize stories of migration, remove stigmas and taboos, and form solidarity within the migrant community and across society. Our own experience with DST seems to confirm the potential societal impact of this method. However, it has also highlighted the complexities in terms of impact on the storytellers. When we encourage members of marginalized and discriminated groups to speak out, it is pivotal to acknowledge that while their digital stories can bring positive recognition and validation to the group, it also increases their visibility to an audience made in part of people who will continue to actively discriminate and stigmatize them. In other words, there is a price to pay for exposure and researchers have an ethical responsibility to safeguard the well-being of their participants not only in the moment of the workshop but also beyond it.

Concluding Thoughts on the Empowering Impact of DST

This study has critically examined how digital storytelling (DST) can function as a participatory and empowering

methodology for young adults with migration backgrounds. This methodological inquiry was grounded in a critique of assumptions of empowerment as an automatic by-product of creative expression and a fixed outcome participatory arts-based method (Duijs et al., 2021; Montero-Sieburth, 2020). On the contrary, we adopted an understanding of empowerment as a contingent effect, one that is shaped by individual trajectories, institutional access, and broader social structures (Luttrell et al., 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Applying this theoretical lens, the paper has considered and problematized the potential for empowerment within the DST space, including: the setup of the workshop, the digital stories produced and the impact such process had on the participants, as described by the storytellers immediately after their participation and one year later. Overall, our findings suggest that while participants experienced the digital storytelling process as personally meaningful, reflective, and emotionally resonant, the notion of "empowerment" in this context must be approached with caution, as it emerged in nuanced and at times contradicting ways.

In the setup of the workshops, empowerment was articulated less in terms of political mobilisation and more as a sense of being heard, feeling validated, and reflecting on one's own journey. Indeed, for participants, empowerment was rooted not just in the final product, but in the dialogical and iterative process of storytelling. The workshop offered a space for revisiting past experiences, negotiating identity, and expressing their own voice on their own terms—supported by trust, shared vulnerability, and mutual recognition. These are not trivial effects. As bell Hooks (1994) argues, acts of narrative self-expression can carry significant political and ethical weight, particularly when they are offered in spaces that have historically silenced or erased migrant voices.

However, not all participants' expressions could be rendered public without risk or discomfort. While the DST process provided a space for personal reconfiguration of migrant identity and a platform to share their stories with the broader public, it also operated within certain socio-political systems and discourses surrounding migration (Zhuang et al., 2025). Participants' shifting perspectives during and after the workshop seem to point to this tension between the individual and the structural level, the safety of the DST space and the uncertainty of the world beyond it. Facilitators actively worked to maintain a safe environment within the workshop, but it was challenging to consider the potential long-term impact of storytelling and the need to balance recognition with protection. Decisions around self-representation and public sharing were continuously re-evaluated, raising important ethical considerations around visibility, privacy, and consent but also shaping experiences of empowerment as dynamic and evolving.

In this sense, empowerment was also about navigating thresholds - what can be said, to whom, and at what costs. These tensions highlight the double bind of visibility for migrant women: the pressure to speak "authentically" and the risk of being misunderstood, essentialised, or co-opted (Spivak, 1988). While we can affirm with some confidence that the DST workshop organised in Luxembourg promoted participants' reflections on their own experiences and has encouraged at least some members of the audience to engage with migrant narratives in more nuanced ways, this form of expressive empowerment should not be mistaken for structural transformation. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) had cautioned, already over twenty years ago, there is a danger in framing empowerment as something individuals achieve internally while leaving the external conditions of marginalisation untouched.

Empowerment, then, is not a stable endpoint but a fluctuating process - experienced differently across time, space, and social location. Within the DST process, it emerged in moments of narrative flow, shared laughter, emotional resonance, and artistic experimentation, but it was also shaped by absences: the stories not told, the audiences imagined but never reached, the intercultural dialogues that never took place due to institutional or contextual constraints. A critical understanding of empowerment acknowledges both: the potential for agency and recognition, and the structural conditions that limit or mediate that potential.

Ultimately, DST proved to be more than a storytelling tool or a data-gathering method: it was a space for the participants (and the facilitators) to reflect, construct, challenge and share. Its true impact cannot be described simply as a positive or negative experience of participation or quantified as a tool for individual empowerment or social change. It lies in the future stories these storytellers will construct and share and the ones of those who listened. We are glad we listened and that we could share this story. The greatest acknowledgment is owed to the creators of the digital stories and the facilitators, without whom this article would not have been possible.

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Ethical Consideration

The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Review Panel of the University of Luxembourg (ERP 19–055 MIMY, 6 March 2020).

Consent to Participate

Informed consent statements have been signed by the participants.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The digital stories generated during the project are publicly accessible via the project website. However, the raw interview transcripts and workshop materials are not available for sharing. In accordance with the Consortium's decision under the Horizon 2020 project, access to these materials is restricted.

Notes

1. In the text the participants are referred to by the pen names they themselves chose to sign their digital stories. The decision of using their real names or pen names was discussed and reflected upon repeatedly together with the facilitators throughout the workshop (see above).
2. It is important to note that the interpretations offered on the meaning of the story have been crafted by the authors on the basis of ran analysis of the digital stories as well as insights gathered by the facilitators throughout the workshop and the interviews conducted with the participants about their experience after the screening and one year later.

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