



Digital Technologies in Migration

By promoting the accessibility of distant places and enabling remotely distributed forms of action, ICT usage does offer unprecedented opportunities to migrant societies, but it also involves new unexpected constraints that lead to controversial situations.

— Diminescu, 2020.

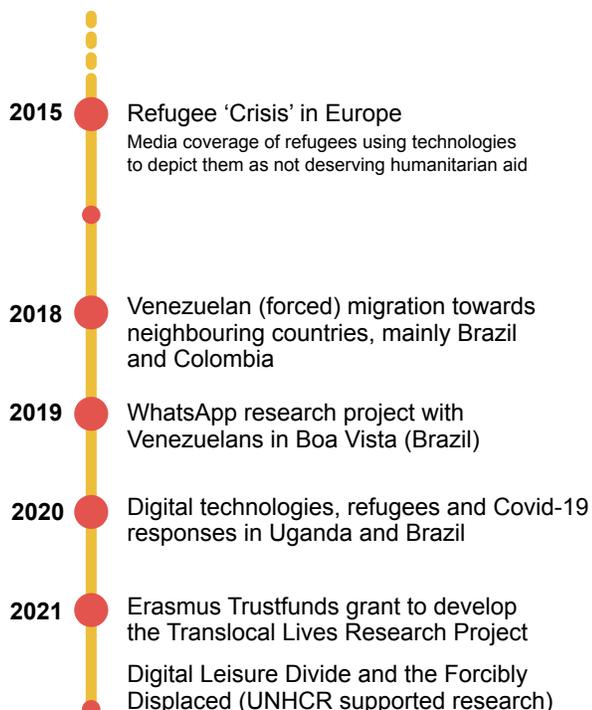
🔍 Main research question

How do technologies offer pathways for refugees to rebuild a life after displacement?

Why research this topic? While digital technologies are a powerful tool that enable refugees to rebuild their lives in host societies (for example, find a job, learn the language, make friends, move around a new city, etc.), they can also harm them in less visible ways: datafication of refugees, surveillance or gig-work precarious conditions are a few examples. However, despite the relevance of digital media in the lives of refugees, we still do not know much about how they actually engage with these technologies, their perceptions, motivations, skills, and emotions while using ICTs; How does their creative and tactical use of media shape their everyday life and place-making experiences?

📅 Timeline

Some events that have impacted this research



This research has been developed mainly in Brazil, the Netherlands, and Uganda.

🔑 Key Concepts

Refugee* Integration: a dominant set of values and behaviours that refugees are required to acquire to be integrated towards the goals and expectations set by the receiving country.

Place-making: the process of establishing multiple connections to the new surroundings as well as (re)creating practices that allow people to make a place for themselves.

'Non-media centric' approach: it allows for understanding the integration of digital technologies into migrants' everyday life. This approach decenters the focus on media and places the individual experiences of migrants as central point of departure.

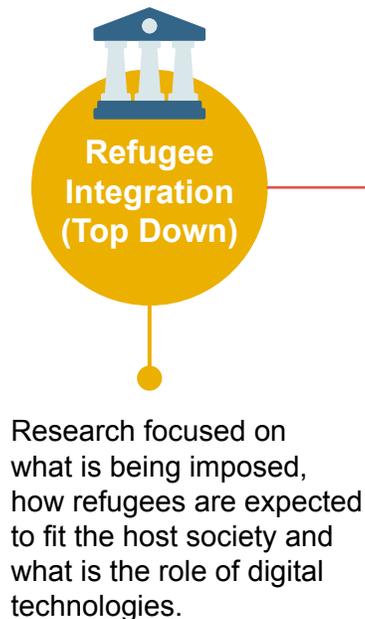
Looking ahead...

What could be researched about this topic in the near future?

Mobile money and digital livelihoods.

*This handbook utilizes the term "refugee(s)" in the broader context of forced migration and forced displacement in an effort to include as many perspectives and experiences as possible.

Research Framework



The place-making experiences of refugees are constituted in interaction with and through institutionalized networks of differential power. While place-making focuses on the agency of refugees, it also recognizes the importance of capturing power relations that exist beyond the sphere of direct influence of individual refugees and that can affect their everyday lives. In particular, technological appropriations in the governance of forced migrations demonstrate the relational and highly dynamic nature of refugees' place-making experiences through and in the digital.

The role of digital media technologies in migration

Research focused on how do refugees use digital technologies to rebuild their lives and feel they belong; their subjective and localized perspective.

Place-making (Bottom-up)



Key Theories

Place-making

- Acknowledges the agency of refugees to negotiate belonging.
- Challenges essentialist views of refugees as victims or threats.
- Characterizes the ways refugees maintain connections to places left behind and articulate new connections in their host society.
- Recognizes refugees' multiple identities, social positions and aspirations.

'Non-media-centric' approach

- Decenters the focus on media and highlights the perspective of refugees.
- Considers technologies as integrated into refugees' lived experiences of place.
- Creates better opportunities for understanding everyday uses of digital media.
- Enables a subjective and localized perspective on place-making.

 Take-away #1

Technologies become a governance actor

Technologies, and specially social media, are more than a tool or a digital space; In processes of integration and/or place-making, these have a direct impact on refugees' experiences of place-making and belonging.

Increasingly, refugees become data subjects: characteristics such as nationality, gender, level of education, and more are being racialized. This has a direct impact on access and affordances, meaning data shapes the ways in which refugees build relations in the host-society, how they can find jobs, learn a new language, move around a new city, make friends, or even gain the refugee status.

This is one way in which refugees become data subjects upon their arrival:





Take-away #2

The relevance of the subjective and localized perspective on place-making

To truly understand the role of digital media in the lives of refugees, more effort needs to be put into conducting research from a localized and situated perspective. This will allow us to question the kind of identities, roles or behaviors that are imposed on refugees.

For example, what does it mean to "be a good refugee"? What is expected of them from a top-down perspective? And how do they engage with or challenge these ideas using digital technologies?

Meet Ronny (Pakistan) and Lula (Eritrea), two refugees living in The Netherlands:



"As asylum seeker you never get a chance to share your thing. And people are not interested in listening to you, because ok, everyone has the same problem. But if you transform your problems and everything you want to say into the digital, it gives you a different view, you know? (...) it's a chance, now I can show you what I want to say."

Ronny uses his social media to express the image of himself that **he** desires. His posts are full of motivational messages and his photos highlight the identity of an empowered self, not that of a victim seeking help, as host societies often expects refugees to be and behave.



Another example is that of Lula. Lula is from Eritrea and has been living in the Netherlands for 5 years. When she arrived, she had great difficulty communicating what she wanted to do in the Netherlands: study at a university. Instead, the immigration office kept trying to place her in HORECA jobs for 3 years.



"They ask you what you want to do, you say 'I want to study' and they keep pushing you to go to work. (...) They call it HORECA here, hotel, restaurants and cafes. They assume automatically that is your level, that is what you can do here. (...) I have friends who want to go to school but because of this situation they are working now and they can't go back, they lost their chance to go to school."

Visit www.translocallives.com/films to watch short films directed and produced by Ronny, Lula, and other 10 participants with a refugee background where they talk about their place-making experience!

Read more about this study:

Alencar, A., Sarria-Sanz, C., & Mawazini, J. (in preparation). Aspirational place-making and digital practices of refugees in the Netherlands.

Take-away #3

Mobile technologies for enhancing migrant knowledge

Researching refugees' everyday lives can be challenging due to the volatile conditions of their migratory trajectories and situations. Mobile messaging apps, such as WhatsApp can help researchers collect data about people's everyday lives while also providing insights into processes that are difficult to study as they happen. In our research, we demonstrated that a collaborative and spontaneous approach to the use of WhatsApp can help refugees and researchers construct new forms of knowledge production that are inclusive, sustainable, and meaningful in forced migration contexts.

Moreover, there is also an opportunity that researchers and aid agencies need to meet by engaging refugees in discussions about data collection via their mobiles phones and social media platforms.

Some insights into our experience using Whatsapp as a research tool in the project 'Conexión sin Fronteras':



Message 1 (from a group member): Good afternoon, God bless. That's part of what I'm doing with my phone, I'm collecting information and sharing as well. If you want to see some videos of the interviews, I can send them to you here (the only issue is that they are a bit long) [smiling face]. That's why I only share them on Facebook and recommend them via Instagram in case you want to see them.

Message 2: These videos are only video presentations.

Message 3: These*

[Video caption: Necessary documents to live in Brazil]

The WhatsApp group revealed relevant insights into relationship-building in a group context and beyond the digital chat. It allowed us to engage with the agency of participants to reach out to each other to request and provide help as they resettled. The WhatsApp group became a relevant space that participants used to obtain and share all kinds of information.



Message 3 (from a group member): Wish you the best of luck, don't worry, everything will be alright. Let's go! (Participant name) [contentment face]

Acknowledgement of limitations regarding Internet access is key to understanding the data that are produced in projects involving the use of mobile phones with marginalized and vulnerable communities.

Read more about this study:

Alencar, A.; Camargo, J. (2022). WhatsApp as a tool for researching the everyday lives of Venezuelan refugees settling in Brazil. *Media and Communication*, 10(3), 261-272.

 Take-away #4

Disconnected imaginaries of connectivity in refugee settings

There are multiple complex and nuanced factors that can lead to digital inequalities for refugees, ranging from inadequate infrastructures, access and cost problems, a lack of skills or literacy to sociocultural and linguistic barriers.

These factors are often undermined by governance actors who still adopt an overly simplistic view of refugees’ digital inclusion, ignoring the complexity of issues that mediate access to and use of technology among them. Consequently, there is a mismatch between (top-down) digital initiatives such as hackathons or tech-company supported apps, and the actual adoption of technologies by refugees.

Let’s take a look at some digital initiatives. Are these inclusive?



Flyer of an online business course: “Migrants who wish to increase their sales in Brazil.”

Chatbot initiative for migrants in Brazil: “Gigante is a friendly robot that can help you with your new life in Brazil.”



Lucy, 54, Venezuela

“The group did not look good because we need to know a lot of things and want to ask them... I also left the group because I don’t have much phone data and I need to choose what I download.”

“I have seen an administration course for refugees offered by the Jesuit Service, but I don’t have a smartphone or a computer. I think a lot of people were interested in the course but, because of these inconveniences, they won’t do it either. Some have a phone but no internet, others have internet but no good phone.”

Leonansky, 23, Venezuela

What to do instead?



Co-create with the community!

In the “Refugee Voice” project, supported by UNHCR and IOM, Venezuelans received adequate training to produce podcasts about the issues affecting the community. This project represents an opportunity to shape the radio production process in order to provide the Venezuelan community in the shelters with quality information as a fundamental right.

In the ‘Conexión Sin Fronteras’ WhatsApp Group, Venezuelans were provided with phones and data to use the Internet every month while engaging in the group. Research must be mutually beneficial for both researchers and the local communities and consider participants’ voices, needs and goals.

Read more about this study:

Camargo, J., Cogo, D., & Alencar, A. (2022). Venezuelan Refugees in Brazil: Communication Rights and Digital Inequalities During the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Media and Communication*, 10(2), 230-340.

 Take-away #5

The neo-liberal mindset shifts the responsibility from the institutions to the refugees

The neo-liberal mentality imposes a great burden on refugees: they seem to have to become "digital entrepreneurs" and prove that they are equipped to work for the opportunities that the market apparently makes available to them. Consequently, the responsibility for their well-being falls on them and no longer on the government or the state.

This ideology is also permeating the Global South, where access to technology is less available, creating false expectations of how refugees can be entrepreneurs, sell their products, work in gig-jobs, and so on.

Meet Neumary, a single mother from Venezuela, trying to make a living through gig-work in Brazil:

Neumary is 42. She is a cook from Venezuela, now looking for a job in Brazil after being forced to leave her country. She described the use of ICTs as a complement or a form of dissemination of her work in Brazil:

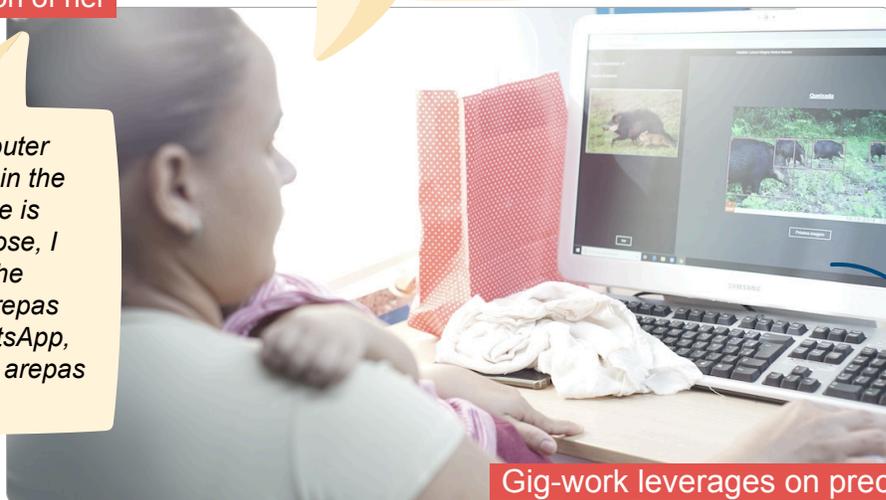
“I barely used the computer in Venezuela, I worked in the kitchen, what I really like is cooking. If I had to choose, I would want to work in the kitchen. I even made arepas and sold them via WhatsApp, but Brazilians don't like arepas very much.”

“Digital work is a possible task to carry out because I can do it with my baby on my lap.”

“I am willing to stop sleeping in order to earn some income through digital work.”

Joscarle, 22, unemployed, mother of 1

Like Neumary, hundreds of single mothers place their hope on gig-work platforms to make a living in Brazil.



Gig-work leverages on precarity to sell scenarios of success and wealth that are not feasible for the vast majority of refugees in the Global South.

Read more about this study:

Alencar, A.; Camargo, J. (2023). Spatial imaginaries of digital refugee livelihoods. *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 4(3), 22-30.

Who is it for?

Humanitarian and development organizations, the tech sector, policymakers, civil society actors who work with refugee communities.

What you will need:

- Information about your digital project (proof of concept, design proposal, validation reports)
- Pen or pencil
- This template

Activity #1

Building inclusive digital initiatives

A reflexive exercise

Group activity | 45 minutes

This activity is designed to help organizations reflect critically on the approach they adopt for building digital initiatives in refugee settings. It serves as a guidance for the development of digital programming with a humanitarian, development or social impact orientation.

Regardless of the stage your digital initiative is in (ideation, prototyping, validation, or in use) consider each of the following points and discuss them with your team.

- 1 What is the area of development (health, employment, education, well-being, legal and practical matters, etc.)?
- 2 What is the context/space of development (refugee camps/shelter, organizations, community, neighborhood, city, etc.)?
- 3 Who are involved in the development of the digital initiative?
- 4 To what extent does your digital project involve refugees? (For example, in the design, development, implementation processes).
- 5 How are refugees involved in these three processes? Are they welcome as key partners, consulted about the goals and usability of the digital initiative?
- 6 Does your digital initiative adopt participatory approaches in its design, development, implementation or evaluation?
- 7 How is your digital initiative linked to the needs and preferences of refugees and their community?
- 8 How is your digital initiative recognizing refugees' daily lives and digital practices and literacies?

Who is it for?

Refugees or refugee led organizations that want to reflect on their data sharing practices.

What you will need:

- Your mobile phone or preferred device you use for social media
- Pen or pencil
- This template

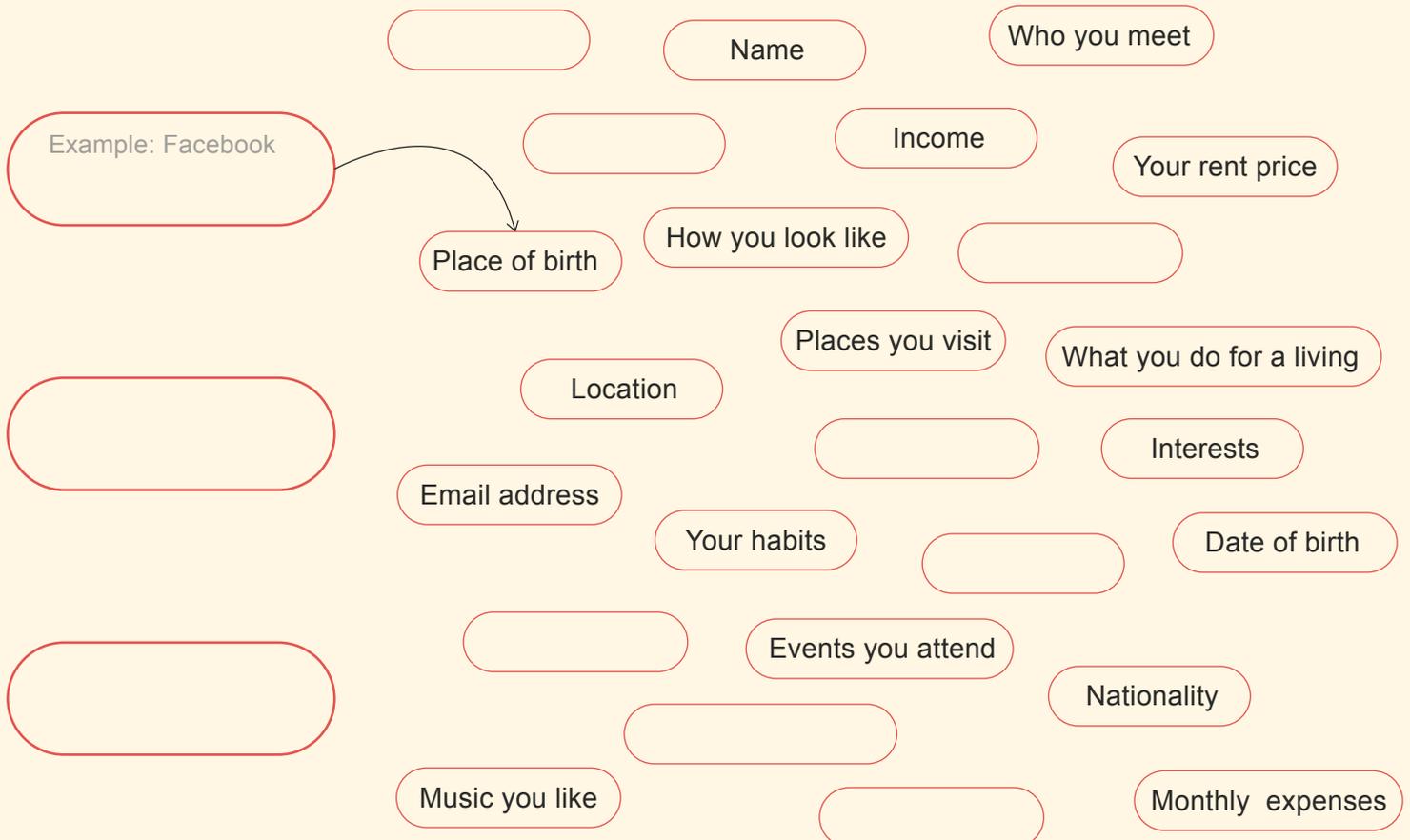
Activity #2

Media map: Awareness of your data sharing practices

Individual activity | 15 minutes

This activity is designed to help participants reflect on data sharing practices. By identifying, analyzing and challenging your data practices, you are more prepared to take a more active role in the processes where your data is potentially used by third parties, especially those that can affect your settlement processes in a host society.

- 1 Browse through your phone and select the three main social media apps that you use in your daily life and write them in the main boxes below.
- 2 Connect the apps with the types of personal data that you think might be collected online from you when you use each of them.
- 3 You can add more types of data in the empty boxes as well. What conclusions can you make from your data sharing practices? How do you think organizations use your data?



Digital Handbook

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