



# Digital social networks and migrant agency on the Darién route<sup>1</sup>

## Redes sociales digitales y agencia migrante en la ruta del Darién

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### Abstract

This study explores the role of digital social networks in the mobility of migrants in transit through the Darién region. A sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach was employed, centered on digital ethnography and supplemented by quantitative analysis. Data collection was conducted in 2024, focusing on the Facebook group *Migración Emprendedora* (Entrepreneurial Migration). The thematic axes examined included informed decision-making regarding migration, resistance to restrictive structures, and the emotional management of the migration journey. The findings demonstrate how digital social networks facilitate collective agency in hostile migration contexts, reconfiguring restrictive structures through practices of resistance and solidarity.

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Gender-differentiated participation challenges traditional narratives by highlighting women's leadership in sustaining the emotional dimensions of migration. These findings underscore the need to integrate community-based and digital perspectives into migration policies, prioritizing human rights over securitized approaches.

## Keywords

Digital ethnography; Digital social networks; Human mobility; Irregular migration; Migrant resilience.

## Resumen

Este estudio explora el papel de las redes sociales digitales en la movilidad de migrantes en tránsito a través del Darién. Se utiliza un enfoque mixto secuencial exploratorio centrado en la etnografía digital y el acompañamiento del análisis cuantitativo. La recopilación de la información fue en el año 2024 centrándose en el grupo de Facebook *Migración Emprendedora* y los ejes temáticos abordados fueron: decisiones informadas para migrar, la resistencia a las estructuras restrictivas y la gestión emocional de la travesía. La investigación evidencia cómo las redes sociales digitales facilitan agencia colectiva en contextos migratorios hostiles, reconfigurando estructuras restrictivas mediante prácticas de resistencia y solidaridad. La participación diferenciada por género cuestiona narrativas tradicionales, subrayando el liderazgo femenino en la sostenibilidad emocional de la migración. Estos hallazgos urgen a integrar perspectivas comunitarias y digitales en políticas migratorias, priorizando derechos humanos sobre enfoques securitizados.

## Palabras clave

Etnografía digital; Migración irregular; Movilidad humana; Redes sociales digitales; Resiliencia migrante.

## Introduction

Transit migration through Panama, particularly across the Darién Gap region, has undergone significant transformations over the past five years, marked by two key phases that reveal both migrant agency and institutional responses to this phenomenon.

Between 2021 and 2023, a massive flow of migrants was recorded, primarily from Haiti, Venezuela, and Colombia. In the absence of legal pathways and amid barriers imposed by restrictive migration policies, these groups resorted to collective strategies to navigate this route. This first phase was characterized by the appropriation of digital social networks—Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube—as tools for documenting the journey, organizing routes, managing risks, and building networks of mutual support. The use of these platforms enabled migrants not only to exchange logistical information but also to create virtual spaces for emotional support and solidarity, thereby fostering a transnational digital community.

Beginning in July 2024, however, a paradoxical shift became evident: a second phase marked by the intensification of migration externalization policies in Panama, including deportations and border controls coordinated with destination countries such as the United States. This change led many migrants in transit to opt for returning to their countries of origin. Although this study acknowledges the importance of this turning point, its analytical focus is situated within the first period, when digital practices became consolidated as tools for negotiating and resisting restrictive structures.

From this perspective, the analysis draws on three key conceptual frameworks for understanding these dynamics: Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration (1995), Michel Foucault's concept of micropower (1977), and Miranda Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice (2007). Together, these concepts make it possible to examine how migrant agency is exercised within a context of structural constraints, how power relations operate at the micro level, and how migrants' own knowledge is either recognized or silenced.

Giddens conceptualizes social structures as simultaneously enabling and constraining human action. In his theory of structuration, the duality of structure implies that social rules and resources both make action possible and limit it, functioning simultaneously as the medium and the outcome of human praxis (Giddens, 1995). Thus, migrants reproduce structures through their actions—for example, by complying with or negotiating migration laws—but they may also gradually transform those structures through repeated practices, such as creating digital networks to overcome obstacles. This perspective avoids the false dichotomy between determinism and voluntarism: structures do not exist independently of human action, nor does action occur outside of structural contexts (Ortiz, 1999).

Foucault, in turn, reconceptualizes power as diffuse and relational, operating across all levels of social life. Rather than viewing power as the exclusive prerogative of state institutions, he argues that power circulates through micropowers or microphysics of power, present even within seemingly private relationships. Power is not possessed but exercised through everyday interactions, generally in ways that remain invisible (Foucault, 1977). In the migration context, micropowers materialize through military controls and surveillance practices, as well as through interactions with guides, transport providers, and other actors encountered along the migration route. At the same time, digital platforms function as spaces in which counterforces are exercised: the practical information migrants share regarding safe routes operates as a form of counterpower vis-à-vis official regulations, reducing dependence on intermediaries and challenging the vertical nature of state control.

Within this framework, Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice provides a lens for analyzing how knowledge produced by migrants is devalued or rendered invisible. This phenomenon manifests itself in two primary forms: testimonial injustice, when migrants' accounts are discredited because of prejudices associated with their condition or nationality—for example, assuming that they do not know what they are talking about; and hermeneutical injustice, when their experiences cannot be fully understood due to the absence of adequate interpretive frameworks. This concept reveals how power also operates within the realm of knowledge, determining who is able to make sense of a social experience and who is regarded as a credible knower.

Digital social networks have emerged as fundamental spaces for the reorganization of migration structures shaped by restrictive policies. Within these virtual communities, migrants in transit exchange essential information regarding routes, costs, risks, and contacts, enabling them to plan their movements more effectively and adapt quickly to changing circumstances along the way. These platforms function not only as repositories of information but also as support networks where practical advice and warnings are shared, fostering a sense of transnational community that transcends physical borders.

This dynamic illustrates how digital spaces become tools of collective empowerment, where shared knowledge functions as a resource for counteracting the limitations imposed by regulatory frameworks. Access to real-time information facilitates informed decision-making and the development of safer alternative routes, representing a form of resistance to official restrictions and the threats posed by organized crime. In this sense, digital social networks fulfill not only an instrumental role in migration logistics but also contribute to strengthening bonds of solidarity and generating autonomous forms of organization that are reshaping the migration landscape across the region.

The duality of structure explains how restrictive policies (structures) coexist with the collective agency of migrants to reinterpret and transform them; the concept of micropower directs attention to the power relations that permeate the migration process, from military controls to internal leadership dynamics within digital communities; and epistemic injustice sheds light on the biases that affect the recognition of migrant knowledge. Taken together, these three frameworks make it possible to understand how, through online practices, migrants negotiate restrictive structures at the micro level and assert their epistemic voice in the face of systems designed to exclude them.

## Digital Ethnography as a Tool for Understanding Migration Practices on Social Networks

Within the framework of this study, understanding migration practices in digital environments is essential for analyzing how migrants negotiate, resist, and reinterpret restrictive structures. To this end, digital ethnography, or netnography (Kozinets, 2019), constitutes a fundamental methodological and epistemological approach for examining dynamics within digital environments. Far from being mere extensions of physical reality, these spaces function as active sites for the production of experiences, agency, and knowledge. Contemporary netnography is defined as “a research method structured around specific practices for the collection, processing, ethical management, and dissemination of data” (p. 79), in which a participant-observational approach predominates and prioritizes the human dimension.

This perspective makes it possible to document communicative, narrative, and affective practices on social networks, highlighting their role in the reconfiguration of identities, power relations, and forms of collective organization. According to Castellanos (2023):

*It provides an ideal framework for exploring phenomena involving individuals who belong to a virtual group or community, which can be readily documented and collected by examining the shared space of this digital ecosystem. One such space is social networks, which possess specific characteristics that shape the objectives of each user despite existing within a virtual environment. (p. 291)*

Numerous studies have employed this approach to examine a wide range of phenomena, including political participation (Pérez & Corona, 2021), religious practices (Meza, 2020), feminist activism (Astudillo et al., 2023), Indigenous activism (Debo-Armenta, 2021), youth movements (Valderrama et al., 2020), and electoral processes (Flores & Zaharí, 2022). These studies consistently emphasize that social networks not only reproduce traditional social structures but can also subvert them, functioning as spaces of symbolic contestation, organization, and political action.

Within the field of migration, these perspectives are particularly relevant. Contemporary human mobility unfolds within a highly mediated environment in which digital technologies function simultaneously as spaces, tools, and mediating structures. Numerous studies have documented how migrants use social networks to obtain information, plan their journeys, build support networks, and cope with the risks associated with migration in transit (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024; Garbey, 2018; Sheller, 2018; Frank & Núñez Chaim, 2021; Forero Medina & Trompetero Vicent, 2022).

From a critical perspective, it is essential to recognize that these digital environments are permeated by relations of power, surveillance, exclusion, and agency. Migrants are not merely consumers of content; they are also producers of it. They share warnings, report acts of violence, recommend survival strategies, and create collective repertoires of practical knowledge. Sheller (2018) argues that digital infrastructures mediate human mobility while simultaneously co-producing forms of mobile citizenship and dispossession. Social media platforms thus operate as ambivalent technologies: instruments of control and, at the same time, mechanisms of solidarity and resistance.

An emerging field of inquiry, and one that is especially relevant to this study, concerns the use of social networks in contexts of forced migration as a means of overcoming structural barriers. Through digital ethnography, Forero Medina and Trompetero Vicent (2022) examined interactions within WhatsApp groups composed of Venezuelan migrants planning to cross the Darién Gap. They identified orientation strategies based on the relativization of information and faith, highlighting that “the narratives shared through messages, voice notes, or videos directly influence decisions regarding whether to continue along the route” (pp. 100-111).

Complementing these findings, studies by Garbey (2018) and Frank and Núñez Chaim (2021) have shown how applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram enable migrants to share information about routes, smugglers, risks, and shelters, thereby challenging the restrictions imposed by increasingly exclusionary migration policies. In this context, Busso’s (2023) concept of digital social learning is particularly valuable, as it helps explain how migrants generate collective and practical knowledge within digital communities in the absence of institutional support systems.

Telegram channels, closed Facebook groups, and WhatsApp chats function as collaborative repositories of vital information in highly dangerous settings such as the Darién Gap. These platforms do not merely accompany migration in transit; they structure and redefine it, becoming a constitutive component of the migration experience itself. In this way, forms of learning and cooperation emerge that enable migrants to anticipate risks, make strategic decisions, and exercise agency amid uncertainty.

## The Problem

Migration policies adopted by receiving states have increasingly embraced an approach known as migration externalization, which involves delegating migration management responsibilities to third countries through agreements with nations located along migration routes. These agreements combine development assistance with direct containment measures and have been widely examined in studies by De Novión (2007), Varela (2015), Treviño (2016), Edson (2020), Iturralde and Piñeiro (2021), Pereira and Clavijo (2022), Castillo (2022), Gissi Barbieri et al. (2022), París (2022), and Vega (2022). Migration externalization has led to the tightening of legal restrictions, including the imposition of visa requirements, forcing migrants to rely on alternative and increasingly dangerous routes to reach their destinations.

Within this context, the Darién Gap—an extensive and densely forested corridor covering approximately 575,000 hectares and located between eastern Panama and northwestern Colombia—has become a critical transit point for migrants traveling northward. Its rugged topography, crossed by fast-flowing rivers and swampy terrain, together with its extremely humid and hot climate, makes the crossing an immense physical and logistical challenge. Nevertheless, its strategic location as the only overland connection between South America and Central America has transformed it into an unavoidable route for thousands of people seeking to circumvent the barriers imposed by contemporary migration policies.

Beginning in 2021, the tightening of these policies—such as Mexico’s implementation of visa requirements for Venezuelan nationals in January 2022—led to a significant increase in the number of migrants choosing routes such as the Darién Gap. This shift is reflected in the dramatic rise in the number of Venezuelan migrants transiting through the region, from 69 individuals in 2020 to 328,650 in 2023 (IOM, 2023), a trend that illustrates the impact of increasingly restrictive structural and regulatory barriers on migration patterns. The dangers associated with the region, marked by the presence of armed groups, smuggling networks (Gandini, Álvarez, & Feldmann, 2024), and extreme weather conditions, are compounded by the absence of road infrastructure and basic services, thereby intensifying the risks of the journey. Consequently, the Darién Gap represents not only a geographic challenge but also a space where tensions among restrictive policies, human mobility, and survival strategies converge, linking the physical environment with the political dynamics that have shaped it into a high-risk migration corridor.

At the same time, digital social networks have transformed the migration experience, becoming essential tools for organizing and planning migration trajectories, managing risks, and building support networks. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram have facilitated the dissemination of information regarding routes, costs, and dangers, while also providing spaces for the formation of virtual communities that offer emotional support. This phenomenon has been

examined in studies by Garbey (2018); Ogayar, Muntean, and Gamella (2018); Arévalo-Martínez and del Prado Flores (2021); Frank and Núñez Chaim (2021); Navarro López (2021); Forero Medina and Trompetero Vicent (2022); Mantilla (2022); Porras (2023); Pauta and Garate (2023); Alarcón (2023); Ramírez (2023); and Córdoba (2024).

Within this context, several virtual communities—including the Facebook group *Migración Emprendedora* (Entrepreneurial Migration), which has more than 480,000 members—have become key nodes for the exchange of experiences and strategies aimed at addressing the challenges of migration in transit, particularly along the Darién route. These spaces, together with migrant-created content on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, provide valuable opportunities to observe how support networks, information flows, and forms of collective resistance are organized in response to restrictive migration policies.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- ▶ How do migrants in transit use virtual communities on digital social networks to reconfigure migration structures imposed by restrictive policies through practices of informed decision-making, collective resistance, and emotional management during their journeys across the Darién Gap?
- ▶ How do sociodemographic differences, such as gender, influence migrant agency in interactions within virtual communities on social networks, and how are these differences reflected in the most popular topics and posts, revealing collective priorities and strategies for challenging migration restrictions?

These questions seek to explore the practical and social dimensions of migration by examining how digital communities become key tools for addressing the challenges associated with the migration process. This study advances understanding of how such communities reshape migration dynamics within contexts characterized by restrictive policies, offering an innovative perspective on the intersection of technology, migration, and public policy. Furthermore, it provides valuable insights for the development of more informed and humane migration policies by recognizing the role of digital social networks in contemporary migration experiences.

## Methodology

The study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), with a qualitative phase supported by quantitative analysis, grounded in Bárcenas Barajas and Preza Carreño (2019). Digital ethnography serves as the central analytical axis for examining

how migrants construct social practices within the Facebook group *Migración Emprendedora* (Entrepreneurial Migration). The study was guided by Kozinets's (2019) principles of ethical immersion in online communities, ethnographic methods adapted to digital environments, and an emphasis on agency and participatory culture.

The analysis was limited to the group, which in 2024 had 484.1 thousand members. A total of 80 posts and 5,474 comments were selected through a three-stage process.

First, a criterion of thematic relevance was applied, prioritizing posts related to the three central axes of the study: (a) informed decision-making; (b) resistance to restrictive migration structures; and (c) emotional management and gender roles in migration in transit. This thematic filtering is consistent with the recommendations of Piñuel Raigada (2002) and with qualitative approaches that emphasize alignment between the corpus and the research objectives (Bardin, 1986).

Second, the level of interaction was considered as an indicator of centrality and influence within the virtual community. Minimum thresholds of 50 “likes” and 30 comments were established after an exploratory review of the distribution of interactions within the group. This procedure follows methodological guidelines in the analysis of digital networks and communities, where high participation is used to identify content with greater capacity to generate conversation (Ardèvol et al., 2003).

Third, following Strauss and Corbin (2016), the criterion of theoretical saturation was applied, discontinuing the inclusion of new posts once the analysis of additional narratives no longer contributed new concepts or interpretive patterns. This approach, widely documented in qualitative research, ensures that the corpus is sufficiently robust to answer the research questions without relying on repetitive data.

Finally, posts deemed irrelevant to the analysis, such as advertisements or duplicate content, were excluded in order to ensure the relevance and thematic coherence of the corpus. Overall, this process seeks to strengthen the transparency, traceability, and replicability of the methodological design. Nevertheless, this procedure may introduce certain biases, as prioritizing posts with high levels of interaction may exclude less visible narratives. This aspect is acknowledged as a limitation, and future studies are encouraged to incorporate sampling techniques that also include low-interaction content in order to broaden the diversity of perspectives.

Data collection extended from January to October 2024, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and emerging themes through prolonged observation. Kozinets (2019) emphasizes that time spent in the field is crucial for capturing the evolution of interactions and social dynamics in a changing digital context.

The study was developed in three phases:

- ▶ Qualitative phase: Exploratory and systematic observations of interactions within the group were conducted, including the analysis of posts, comments, and interaction patterns. This phase focused on understanding migrants' practices within a context of international mobility in order to identify key elements related to decision-making and support networks.
- ▶ Quantitative phase: Data analysis techniques were applied to confirm the frequency and distribution of the patterns identified during the qualitative phase. This phase made it possible to validate and strengthen the findings obtained through direct observation.
- ▶ Integrated analysis phase: Qualitative and quantitative findings were combined to obtain a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This integrative approach makes it possible to observe the connections between social structures and individual practices, thereby facilitating a deeper analysis of the migration phenomenon within digital spaces.

## PHASE 1. Digital Ethnography (Qualitative)

In this phase, a nonintrusive approach was adopted, avoiding direct participation by the researchers in group interactions. Following Ramos (2025), digital ethnography offers an appropriate framework for exploring social dynamics in virtual environments and is especially useful in the study of digital communities linked to migration. Under this premise, nonparticipant observation was prioritized as a methodological strategy, as proposed by Urbanik and Roks (2020), who describe Facebook groups as a kind of one-way mirror, “a space where researchers can observe and interpret interactions without necessarily participating” (p. 224). This approach made it possible to capture interactions while respecting members' privacy and avoiding any alteration of the community's communicative flow.

To ensure participant confidentiality, an ethical coding protocol was implemented that removed all identifiable information, assigning each user a unique code. Information was collected through screenshots of public interactions, analysis of conversational threads, and systematic recording of posts. This data corpus made it possible to identify thematic patterns and recurring structures in the discourse, connecting communicative practices with the broader context of migration routes and transit strategies.

To guide the analysis, three interrelated operational categories were established:

- ▶ Informed decision-making: decision-making processes based on shared information regarding routes, costs, and risks associated with the crossing.
- ▶ Resistance to restrictive structures: actions aimed at circumventing controls, challenging regulations, or negotiating physical and legal barriers.
- ▶ Emotional management and gender roles: forms of emotional and affective support, differentiated by gender, that reinforce group cohesion.

Data were analyzed through a thematic analysis that integrated open coding and the inductive identification of significant excerpts, with the objective of developing a coherent analytical narrative. This narrative not only systematizes the findings but also continuously contrasts them with the conceptual framework, ensuring that the analytical categories emerge from the interaction between empirical observation and theoretical interpretation.

## PHASE 2. Quantitative Analysis

As a complement to the qualitative phase, the quantitative analysis measured the frequency of posts by gender and level of interaction. To assess differences in interaction levels by gender, the Mann–Whitney U test was applied, as it is appropriate for comparing independent groups with non-normally distributed data. The data did not satisfy the assumption of normality, according to the Shapiro–Wilk test ( $p < .05$ ).

Interaction levels were compared according to the author of each post. Gender (men vs. women) was treated as the independent variable, while the level of interaction—operationalized as the number of comments per post—served as the dependent variable. As part of the procedure, six anonymous posts were excluded to ensure a valid comparison.

All observations (number of comments per post) were ranked from lowest to highest, and ranks were assigned accordingly. Rank sums were then calculated for each group. The U statistic was obtained using the formula:  $U = R - [n(n + 1) / 2]$ ; where  $n_1 = 45$  and  $n_2 = 19$ . The smaller of the calculated values was reported, yielding  $U = 284$ .

## Ethical considerations and limitations

Participant confidentiality was ensured through user coding (e.g., User001) and the omission of any identifiable information. Observation was conducted in a nonintrusive manner, following the ethical principles of digital ethnography. Although the Facebook group Migración Emprendedora is publicly accessible, a precautionary stance was adopted due to the vulnerable status of its members. Accordingly, the principle of nonmaleficence was applied to avoid exposing content that could compromise participants' safety.

During the analysis, several posts containing sexually explicit content were identified that were unrelated to the migration phenomenon under study. These posts were excluded because they were considered peripheral elements, attributable either to limited group moderation or to the circulation of spam. Their exclusion was justified both on ethical grounds and by the need to maintain analytical focus on digital practices relevant to migration in transit.

Among the principal limitations of the study is a bias toward users who are more active on social media, which may exclude migrants with limited access to digital platforms. The analysis of 80 posts prioritized interpretive depth over statistical representativeness. Nevertheless, this approach made it possible to demonstrate how digital practices reconfigure migrant agency and provide empirical foundations for public policies aimed at fostering collective resilience.

## Results

The analysis reveals a complex dynamic of information exchange, support, and resistance in response to the challenges associated with migration in transit. These findings not only provide insight into the organizational mechanisms and survival strategies employed by migrants, but can also be understood through Giddens's (1995) theory of structure and agency, which makes it possible to examine how migrants, although influenced by power structures (states, border surveillance systems, and criminal organizations), identify openings through which they can exercise agency and redefine their migration trajectories, reflecting what Foucault (1977) described as struggles against forms of subjection.

In this sense, the dominant thematic axes found in the Facebook group's posts illustrate how migrants, despite the structural difficulties they face, are able to make informed decisions and organize collectively to address these challenges.

## Ethnographic Narrative: Voices from the Darién Gap in *Migración Emprendedora* (Qualitative Phase)

The analysis demonstrates how migrants manage their journeys through the Darién Gap, using digital social networks not only as sources of information but also as mechanisms for making informed decisions, resisting structural barriers imposed by states and other informal actors, and managing emotions throughout the migration process.

### Informed Decision-Making

The preparation phase emerged as a key element for migrants, who turn to the group to make informed decisions regarding routes, costs, and risks associated with crossing the jungle. Through these interactions, participants exchange up-to-date information about changing migration route conditions, enabling group members to optimize the planning of their itineraries. For example, User006 inquires about “updated boat fares,” inviting others to share recent experiences. User012 responds with a temporally situated account: “When I crossed, I only paid for the boat from Necoclí and \$20. That was two years ago; now I understand the cost is higher.” This collaborative exchange reduces uncertainty, allowing for safer decisions and minimizing exposure to risk. Moreover, the information shared often takes on a preventive function, as illustrated by User033’s warning regarding unauthorized guides: “No one will accompany you... just follow the blue bags.” This statement demonstrates how the group functions as a protective mechanism against external threats.

Route selection and cost management emerge as processes grounded in collective experiences, yet shaped by the volatility of available information. User031 asks: “Can someone please explain the Carreto route to me? What do you have to go through? What are its advantages and disadvantages? And do you absolutely have to pay a guide? Can someone explain it and provide reliable information, please?” In response, User057 states:

Friend, the only good thing about the Carreto route is that there’s less chance of being robbed or having something happen to you. Everything else they tell you is a lie. You still have to walk. It’s not true that you get out of the jungle in a day and a half. But remember, everyone has a different experience. I came through that route myself.

Costs emerge as a critical factor, although their interpretation varies. User032 details package prices of \$350.00, while User010 notes:

The best thing is to negotiate the \$350.00 package price so you can save the canoe fee. Everyone selling packages will tell you they take you all the way to the Panama camp, but that's not true. They only go as far as the flag site. Beyond that point they don't continue, and the canoe is separate—\$25.00 for a five-hour trip along the river.

Interpretive frameworks within the group are largely self-generated. While User065 “claims to have crossed with only \$40.00, challenging conventional economic expectations,” misinformation continues to circulate, as reflected in User019’s warning:

“Don’t pay guides; just follow the blue bags tied to the trees.” Thus, decision-making is informed both by personal testimonies and by an active skepticism toward potential deception. As part of the preparation process, User001 offers another recommendation: “Please bring plenty of anti-inflammatory medication for your feet, socks that cover your ankles, food, cookies, and a tent—it’s very important. Take good care of yourselves.” This exchange of advice and warnings reflects what Fricker (2017) describes as a process in which individuals’ interpretive frameworks are shaped by the need to negotiate credibility and trust, both of which are essential in contexts of uncertainty. Misinformation and contradictory recommendations constitute manifestations of what Fricker terms hermeneutical injustice, whereby migrants, immersed in conditions of heightened vulnerability, not only lack adequate interpretive resources to understand their circumstances but also face the continual devaluation of their testimonies within the power structures that organize migration flows.

The strategic use of digital social networks enables migrants to construct a form of collective agency that mitigates risks associated with informal actors, even before departure. Here, power does not reside solely in hierarchical structures but is exercised diffusely through everyday practices and interpersonal relationships. Warnings such as User033’s instruction to “follow the blue bags” operate as decentralized mechanisms of control, through which the group assumes disciplinary functions traditionally associated with formal institutions. By sharing information about safe routes or exposing fraudulent guides, migrants deploy a form of microphysical power capable of regulating behavior and shaping collective action.

In planning their journeys, migrants also connect with fellow travelers, creating mutual support networks that are essential for coping with the challenges of the route. In this regard, User011 writes: “Good morning. I’m trying to put together a group so we can all travel together. I’m Peruvian and looking for people with good intentions. Anyone interested, let me know so we can leave as soon as possible. Have a great day.” These types of posts are often leveraged by individuals who offer “guiding services.” User038 responds: “Good morning. I’m a guide and I have people coming around that time. If you’re interested, come to Necoclí and I’ll connect you with my group.”

The group plays a fundamental role in the formation of travel groups and the coordination of collective efforts. This enables migrants to organize more effectively and share information regarding routes, costs, travel companions, and meeting points. As Giddens (1995) argues, structures do not operate solely as constraints but also as resources through which social practices are enacted. Within this digital space, migrants do not merely adapt to existing conditions; they navigate and transform prevailing structures.

This dynamic is further illuminated through Foucault's (1977) perspective: the group functions as a dispositif of micropower in which shared knowledge serves simultaneously as a tool of self-management and as a form of resistance to oppressive systems (such as route militarization and migrant smuggling networks). Thus, the exchange of information—with its contradictions and areas of consensus—reconfigures the practical possibilities of the journey, demonstrating how power and agency become intertwined at both macro and micro levels.

## Resistance to Restrictive Structures

Once the journey begins, migrants confront a range of challenges stemming from restrictive structures imposed by states. Migration policies and border regulations are perceived as obstacles that migrants seek to circumvent through informal tactics. In this regard, User029 recounts crossing with only a national identification card, stating: "I crossed with just my ID card... nothing happened." In doing so, the user challenges the legal framework requiring a passport for border crossings.

From the very points of departure, strategies emerge for evading controls and avoiding excessive costs. User028 advises: "Get to Turbo or Necoclí. Don't pay guides... just buy your ticket, and when you arrive in Acandí or Capurganá, the shelter staff will advise you... People get deceived. You can get there without guides too... they're bloodsuckers!" Similarly, User063 denounces corrupt practices that affect travel planning: "The guides are bought off starting in Necoclí."

Once inside the jungle, migration becomes configured as an act of resistance against hostile policies and inhumane conditions. User057 asks: "Will we still be able to cross now that the new president of Panama wants to shut everything down?" Meanwhile, User049 observes: "They closed several routes, but left one open. It's just so they can have more control over the people crossing." To this, User050 responds with irony regarding physical restrictions: "They'll never close the jungle... it's a jungle. That's like asking whether one day they'll close the ocean."

Within this context, migrants develop multiple forms of circumvention. User039 recounts: “The guide only takes us to the border ... after that, we crossed with God and the Virgin.” While User053 challenges idealized versions of the journey: “People, don’t believe that. Those of us who crossed that jungle know that guides only go as far as the area before the Flags. They can’t cross into the Panamanian side.”

Risk does not deter those who regard the journey as their only option. User033 issues warnings about heavy rains and swollen rivers, yet such warnings do not discourage others, such as User015, who states: “You have to walk through the jungle with total concentration. Whoever falls is in trouble—I saw it myself, and that’s exactly what happened. If someone falls behind, they shouldn’t panic; there will always be more people coming behind, even if they’re not part of your group.”

In addition, migrants share both practical and emotional advice, such as User052’s recommendation: “Walk at your own pace.” These exchanges are not only useful for planning the journey but also provide an emotional dimension that helps migrants cope with the anxiety and stress generated by the experience. Giddens (1991) argues that networks of interaction are not entities existing outside individuals; rather, they are constituted through social practices and within them. This highlights how migrants, through their interactions in these digital spaces, create support structures that enable them to manage both the emotional and physical risks associated with the journey.

The narrative is collectively constructed, reinterpreting dangers through mutual support and faith. This is illustrated by User054, who recounts an extensive and detailed experience:

We were a group of 85 adults and 3 children. We entered through the Capurganá route. Our guide explained that the journey would take six days (it ultimately took eight). Along the way, in Armila, my sister became ill and almost fainted, so we had to spend a night resting so she could recover, and she felt better afterward. The next day, my brother-in-law also became ill in Ana Chucuna. We had to stay there for two nights while he recovered. After that, we faced the most difficult section: Las Banderas and the long-awaited arrival at Grandpa’s Camp. What I mean by all this is that if you feel sick along the route, it is better to take time to recover at the camps and then continue. There is no need to rush; you just need to keep moving steadily. Bring good food (everything that weighs down your bag or backpack should be food, candy, and water), follow the instructions of your guides, and entrust your journey to the Lord Jesus. If you develop strategies before entering the Darién jungle, you will come out alive. If you go in recklessly, the risk is extremely high. No energy drinks. I saw two people die after consuming them. P.S. Before we entered, the guide known as ‘El Paisa’ explained that he would accompany us only up to the entrance of Las Banderas mountain, approximately on the third day. Beyond that point, we did not need a guide—only God.

Throughout the journey, migrants also resist the dominant discourse that criminalizes migration and exaggerates the dangers of the route. User012 states emphatically: “Stop believing everything you hear... luck is not the same for everyone.” Such expressions demonstrate how migrants, through language, resist the criminalization of migration and construct a space for collective

agency. As Giddens (1995) argues, social structure exists both within the domain of human action and as its outcome. It is simultaneously the medium and the result of social action, highlighting how migrants reconfigure structures of control through their everyday practices.

## Emotional Management and Gender Roles

The journey through the jungle represents one of the most critical stages of the migration process. During this passage, migrants confront not only physical dangers but also the emotional challenges that arise in a context of extreme uncertainty. This dual burden manifests differently according to gender roles, with women in particular facing specific challenges when traveling with dependent children.

User026, a mother traveling with six children, describes her anxiety and strategy of resilience: “I have four girls and two boys... can someone advise me? I have no money; only faith in God is accompanying us.” Her testimony illustrates how motherhood in migration contexts requires emotional management centered on protection and hope, even in the absence of resources. Similar concerns are expressed by other women. User066 asks with both practical and emotional concern: “How much money would I need to cross the jungle with my five-year-old son?” Meanwhile, User062 seeks collective guidance to minimize risks: “Hello friends, I’m about to leave with my six-year-old daughter. I don’t know which route to take, Carreto or Acandí. Which one would you recommend?” Economic uncertainty is reflected in User021’s question: “Do you think a woman with two children, aged ten and two, can cross the jungle with \$600?” Likewise, User064, a single mother without documentation, questions her realistic chances of survival:

Good evening, friends in the group. Greetings to everyone. I also want to go to the United States through the jungle. Of course, I'm a single mother with a two-year-old son. I'm Venezuelan, and my son is Colombian. The problem is that I don't have any documents. A few days ago, I lost all my paperwork, and I'm in the process of replacing it. Any advice for me?

These accounts highlight the emotional burden women carry as primary caregivers for their children under such adverse conditions. This type of narrative underscores the fundamental role women play in family care and in the emotional management of the migration journey.

Men, by contrast, also express emotions, but often from the perspective of strength and physical endurance. User015, for example, advises: “You have to walk through the jungle with concentration... whoever falls is in trouble.” This statement reinforces the notion that physical resilience is associated with masculine roles within the migration context. Similarly, User065 emphasizes self-reliance, stating: “I crossed with \$40.” This reflects how men, in particular, are often under constant pressure to ensure economic survival during the journey.

These narratives reveal a clear pattern: women assume caregiving responsibilities that require them to calculate risks with precision—evaluating routes, costs, and safety—while simultaneously providing emotional support to their children. Unlike male narratives, which frequently emphasize physical endurance, women's accounts prioritize the protection of life under conditions of extreme precarity. In this sense, the jungle is not merely a geographic obstacle but a space in which gender dynamics are renegotiated and the agency of women becomes visible in the face of structures that obscure their dual burden: migrating and mothering amid chaos.

Throughout their journeys, migrants confront not only obstacles imposed by political, economic, and social structures but also transform those structures through their digital interactions and collective practices of resistance, collaboration, and adaptation. As Giddens (1991) argues, social structures are continuously produced through human practices and are simultaneously the outcome of those practices. By transforming structural barriers, migrants demonstrate that they are active agents who do not merely navigate existing structures but alter them to meet their needs, thereby becoming agents of change within the migration process.

## Analysis of Interactions Within the Group (Quantitative Phase)

Analysis of participant profiles revealed that, despite gender differences—men accounting for 56% of participants compared to 44% for women—and despite constraints imposed by social structures, migrants act strategically in seeking information, support, and cooperation. The higher level of male participation may be interpreted within gender structures that shape roles and visibility on social media platforms. However, although women are less visible in terms of posting activity, they play crucial roles in emotional management and in maintaining relationships within the group.

The quantitative analysis of posts within the group highlights different forms of digital participation and interaction, providing evidence of the practices and strategies of collective agency among migrants in transit. The thematic category Informed Decision-Making for Migration accounted for the highest number of posts ( $n = 32$ ) and the largest total volume of comments (2,373), indicating that logistical planning—including routes, costs, transportation, and contacts—constitutes a primary concern for individuals crossing the Darién Gap (Table 1). This category also recorded a high average number of comments per post (74.2), reinforcing the importance migrants place on practical and up-to-date information as a means of reducing uncertainty during the journey.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of Posts, Interactions, and Levels of Participation in the Migración Emprendedora Group, by Thematic Axis of Analysis*

| Thematic Axis                          | No. of Posts | Total Likes | Average Likes | Total Comments | Average Comments |
|----------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|
| Informed Decision-Making for Migration | 32           | 862         | 26.9          | 2,373          | 74.2             |
| Resistance to Restrictive Structures   | 28           | 1,253       | 44.8          | 1,870          | 66.8             |
| Emotional Management of the Journey    | 20           | 595         | 29.8          | 1,231          | 61.6             |

*Note.* Calculation details include:

- Axis 1: Route, Price, Travel Companion.
- Axis 2: Community Building, Associated Risks.
- Axis 3: Search for Family Members, Traveling with Minors, Requests for Group Support.

The thematic axis Resistance to Restrictive Structures, composed primarily of posts promoting collective organization and warnings about potential dangers, ranked second in volume of posts ( $n = 28$ ) and recorded the highest total number of likes (1,253), reflecting high levels of approval and symbolic validation from users. This suggests that practices of resistance and solidarity—such as reporting abuses, organizing travel groups, or disseminating tactics for circumventing controls—constitute key expressions of migrant agency in hostile environments.

For its part, the thematic axis Emotional Management of the Journey, although it contained the fewest posts ( $n = 20$ ), generated a substantial volume of interactions (1,231 comments), particularly in posts initiated by women, single mothers, or individuals facing situations of heightened vulnerability. This finding confirms that digital social networks also fulfill an affective and collective caregiving function, serving as spaces where fears, anxieties, and strategies for sustaining the journey in emotional and communal terms are openly expressed.

Gender-based analysis reveals a significant disparity in participation. While men quantitatively dominated posting activity (45 posts), women exhibited greater qualitative impact, receiving a higher average number of comments per post than men (79.7 vs. 67.1) (Table 2 and Figure 1). The Mann–Whitney U test confirms that this difference is statistically significant ( $U = 284$ ,  $p = .021$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $r = .34$ ).

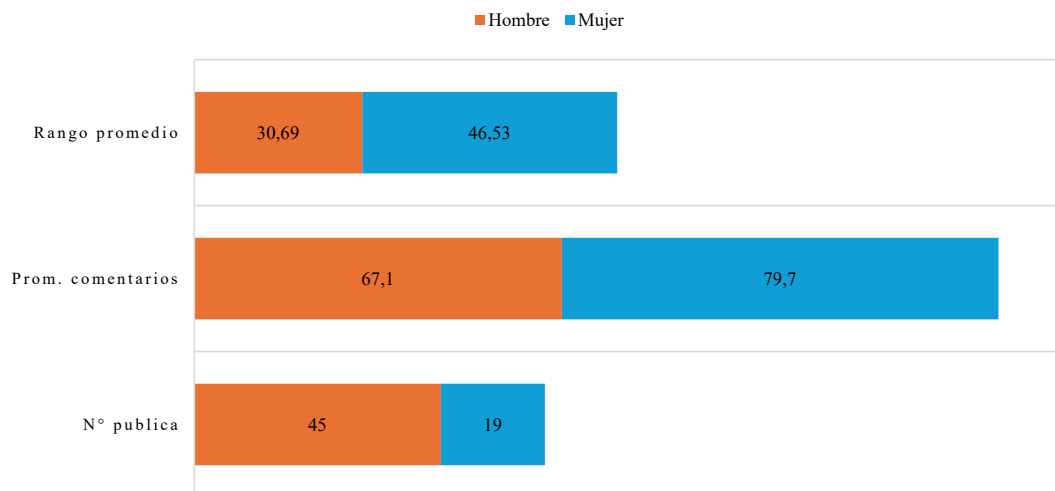
**Table 2.** *Interaction Levels and Statistical Inference by User Gender*

| User Gender | No. of Posts | Total Comments | Average Comments | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks (R) | U Statistic | p-value |
|-------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|------------------|-------------|---------|
| Male        | 45           | 3,019          | 67.1             | 30.69     | 1,381.0          | 284         | .021    |
| Female      | 19           | 1,514          | 79.7             | 46.53     | 884.0            |             |         |
| Unknown     | 6            | 113            | 18.8             | —         | —                | —           | —       |

*Note.* The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare the number of comments per post between male and female users, excluding anonymous posts ( $n = 64$ ). A statistically significant difference was found in favor of women ( $p < .05$ ), with a moderate effect size ( $r = .34$ ), suggesting greater qualitative engagement in posts initiated by women.

\*\*\*Anonymous posts were excluded from the inferential statistical analysis.

**Figure 1.** Comparison of Posting Activity, Comments, and Mean Rank Between Men and Women



With respect to female agency, it manifests itself through the creation of microstructures of solidarity, where interaction extends beyond instrumental concerns to address emotional support needs. For example, 68% of posts initiated by women ( $n = 13/19$ ) contain personal narratives or requests for collective support, compared to 22% among men ( $n = 10/45$ ). This finding not only challenges the traditional invisibilization of women's roles in high-risk migration processes but also demonstrates how digital platforms reconfigure patriarchal power dynamics, enabling women to exercise community leadership in hostile environments.

Anonymous posts generated 35% fewer interactions than posts associated with identifiable profiles ( $n = 6$ ; 18.8 comments per post) (Table 2). This disparity is consistent with studies on social capital in migration contexts (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), in which verifiable identity functions as a mechanism of validation under conditions of high uncertainty. This suggests that migrants prioritize sources with visible histories of interaction, perceiving them as more trustworthy for the exchange of critical information such as safe routes and costs. Consequently, anonymity not only limits the ability to generate institutional trust (Putnam, 2000) but also hinders the formation of transnational social capital, which is essential for survival along unregulated migration routes.

Regarding the posts that generated the highest number of comments, these reinforce the notion that migrants are not only seeking practical information about routes or costs but also place considerable value on the sharing of lived experiences. In this case, User066, a woman, writes: "Can someone tell me whether my husband, my daughter, and I can get through the jungle with \$400.00?" This post received the highest number of comments.

Posts that invite members of the virtual community to share personal stories—particularly accounts of crossing the Darién Gap under extreme conditions and with limited financial resources—also generate substantial engagement. Such is the case of User031, who asks:

“For those who have already crossed the jungle, which route is better, Acandí or Capurganá? Which one is flatter?” This type of content allows group members to learn from the successes and mistakes of other migrants, often resulting in valuable advice on how to cope with the challenges of the journey. The comments on these posts are notable not only for their quantity but also for their substance, including opinions, warnings, and practical recommendations. Such information is essential for individuals facing the uncertainty of a journey as dangerous as this one and seeking to be better prepared.

More broadly, participation in the group appears to be motivated by the search for safety and support, both of which are fundamental factors when undertaking such a high-risk journey. The group functions as a space where migrants can find answers to their most immediate concerns while simultaneously receiving solidarity from others who understand the hardships of the route. Equally important is the sharing of information not only about how to reach a destination but also about how to survive the journey itself, manage risks, and make practical decisions.

Migrants within the study group use this platform not only to exchange useful information but also to build relationships, obtain emotional support, and foster a sense of community. This is particularly relevant in a context where formal institutions often fail to provide migrants with the support they need—or become structures that obstruct and restrict mobility—leaving digital social networks as one of the few available tools for filling that gap.

## Discussion

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The findings from the Migración Emprendedora group demonstrate that digital platforms function as structuring spaces in which migrants negotiate the conditions of their transit in real time. Consistent with Giddens’s (1995) theory of structuration, these practices reveal the dual nature of social structures: while they condition mobility, they are simultaneously reproduced and transformed through the actions of social actors. The constant circulation of advice, warnings, and personal accounts illustrates that migrant agency is not merely a matter of individual decision-making but rather a collective process of reorganization in response to external constraints.

These results are consistent with previous research highlighting the role of digital technologies in human mobility. Dekker and Engbersen (2014) have shown that social networks transform migration dynamics by facilitating access to logistical information, while Forero Medina and Trompetero Vicent (2022) argue that narratives shared within WhatsApp groups directly influence

decision-making processes. The present analysis confirms and extends these observations by demonstrating that digital interactions not only guide route selection but also consolidate practices of care, trust, and solidarity.

At the same time, this study differs from research on migration externalization (De Novión, 2007; Varela, 2015; Castillo, 2022), which has primarily emphasized the coercive effects of state policies. By focusing on migrants' digital practices, this study highlights how migrants themselves reconfigure such structures through everyday strategies of resistance. In this regard, it responds to the arguments advanced by Leurs and Ponzanesi (2024), who contend that digital environments should be understood not merely as tools but as constitutive spaces for new forms of mobile citizenship.

The incorporation of a Foucauldian perspective further deepens this interpretation. As Foucault (1977) argues, power circulates through microphysics that operate within everyday interactions. The group examined here provides a clear example of how collective micropowers emerge in response to the vertical structures of state and criminal control. These include regulating the reliability of information, establishing norms of interaction, and legitimizing migrant knowledge that is often devalued in other contexts. In this way, digital platforms become arenas of contestation in which coercion and resistance, surveillance and solidarity, coexist simultaneously.

Within this framework, it is particularly important to revisit Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice. While migrant voices are often rendered invisible or regarded with suspicion in institutional discourses, they acquire legitimacy within digital spaces through processes of community validation. This revaluation of migrant knowledge constitutes a critical resource for managing risks and organizing mobility.

This study also engages critically with research that highlights the limitations of social media use in migration contexts. Sheller (2018) argues that digital infrastructures, while enabling solidarity, can also reinforce practices of surveillance and exclusion. Similarly, Frank and Núñez Chaim (2021) document how information circulating through social networks may be manipulated by migrant smugglers or criminal actors, introducing new forms of vulnerability. The findings presented here do not deny these tensions. Rather, they demonstrate that despite the inherent ambivalence of digital environments, migrant communities are capable of generating internal counterbalances through collective regulation and active skepticism toward questionable sources of information.

In summary, the discussion demonstrates that migrant agency is neither a marginal nor a secondary phenomenon; rather, it is a structuring element of the digital experience of mobility. While virtual spaces may reproduce certain logics of control, they also enable forms of resistance, solidarity, and collective knowledge that allow migrants to reconfigure, from the ground up, the very structures that seek to restrict their right to mobility.

## Conclusions

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The analysis of digital communities demonstrates that migrants are not passive subjects in the face of migration restrictions but rather active agents who reconfigure the structures that seek to control them. Shared information functions as a strategic resource for reducing uncertainty, digital solidarity compensates for the absence of state support, and gender roles are negotiated in real time, revealing that digital practices serve both as mechanisms of survival and as spaces of emerging power.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings extend Giddens's theory of structuration and Foucault's concept of micropower by demonstrating that human agency can redefine rules and hierarchies even in contexts of extreme marginalization. Digital interaction does not merely reflect offline reality; it transforms it, generating microstructures of trust, community norms, and forms of female leadership that challenge patriarchal stereotypes and institutional structures.

From a policy perspective, the findings call for a rethinking of migration policies. The externalization of risks and the proliferation of bureaucratic restrictions do not eliminate mobility; rather, they displace resistance into digital platforms where migrants create autonomous alternatives for information sharing, safety, and mutual support. Recognizing these self-organized dynamics requires valuing collective agency as a strategic resource and a source of resilience in the face of coercive structures.

From a social perspective, the study demonstrates that contemporary migration cannot be understood without considering its digital dimension. Online interactions consolidate networks of cooperation, build reputation and community leadership, and generate temporary spaces of inclusion and protection, challenging narratives that reduce migration to victimhood or illegality. Women, through their leadership in caregiving and risk management roles, demonstrate how technology enables reconfigurations of power that transcend the boundaries of gender and marginality.

Ultimately, digital communities illustrate how collective agency and digital practices constitute a pillar of resistance, transformation, and resilience. Every post, comment, and interaction represents an act of social creation that challenges traditional hierarchies, reconfigures the relationship between structure and agency, and opens new avenues for understanding, designing, and intervening in contemporary migration flows through an approach that integrates security, autonomy, and social justice.

## Author contributions

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Paul Antonio Córdoba Mendoza: Principal Investigator; conceptualization, study design, supervision, and writing.

Samuel Alberto Pinto: Co-Investigator; data analysis and interpretation.

Jorge Roquebert: Co-Investigator; manuscript writing and critical review.

Guillermo Mendoza: Research Assistant; data collection and analysis, technical support in digital environments.

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## Conflict of interest

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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to the conduct and publication of this study.

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