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Digital lifelines: The use of social media networks among Venezuelan refugees and migrants heading north

4Mi data analysis

About this paper

This paper explores the use of social media by Venezuelan refugees and migrants as they head north through the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region. It is based on an analysis of 4Mi surveys¹ conducted in Honduras, qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted in Colombia and Costa Rica, and focus groups held in Colombia and Peru.

This paper details survey respondents' profiles, their preferred social media and messaging platforms, the reasons they communicate through these networks, and the connectivity challenges they face in accessing them. It also explores respondents' most trusted sources of information, the persistence of information gaps and the risks associated with the presence of smugglers in digital spaces.

This paper's findings aim to build a solid evidence base that will strengthen knowledge about Venezuelan refugees' and migrants' social media habits and guide humanitarian actors' engagement with digital platforms.

- 68% of respondents identified family members, friends, and acquaintances in countries of origin and destination as their most reliable sources of information, while 11% put online communities in that category.
- No respondents mentioned state authorities as being among their most trusted sources of information. Only 7% expressed confidence about the information that NGOs and United Nations agencies shared.
- Despite having obtained information from social media, more than half of respondents said they were not well informed to prepare their migration journey.

Introduction

Social media play a crucial communication role for Venezuelan refugees and migrants heading north through the LAC region. Findings from an MMC/4Mi study on access to information by Venezuelan refugees and migrants interviewed in Costa Rica in 2022 indicate that 50% of them relied on social media to gather information and make decisions during their journey to North America.²

According to the 2023 Digital Global Overview Report, a similar share of the Venezuelan population—about half (some 14.6 million people)—regularly use social media in Venezuela.³ In the country, as in the wider region, a growing distrust of institutions and mainstream media has led to the increased use of social media as alternative sources of information.⁴ Social media enables people to express their opinions freely and access information from anywhere in the world. For people who decide to migrate, social media are an accessible tool for obtaining real-time information that helps them make decisions about their journeys. All they need is a smartphone—or at least an internet connection.⁵

However, the use of social media carries disinformation risks: incorrect or deceptive information is widely shared⁶ to migrants on social media. Lack of digital literacy or deliberate misinformation⁷ can make it hard for people on the move to identify fake news and determine the truthfulness of information shared by other users about

Key findings

- Almost all respondents said they used messaging or social media platforms to stay connected with their families and friends, while half of them said they did so to find information about the route they were travelling, and a third mentioned seeking out news about migration issues in transit and destination countries.
- More than nine in ten respondents primarily used WhatsApp. Fewer (29%) used Facebook or TikTok (3%). Other platforms barely featured in survey responses (such as Instagram and YouTube) or did not feature at all (such as Twitter and Telegram).
- Just over half the respondents said they used a messaging or social networking platform every two or three days, and 39% did so daily.

1 [The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative \(4Mi\)](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. It is a regular, standardized, quantitative and globalized system, with a network of more than 120 field enumerators who are conducting survey interviews with refugees and migrants on the move in around 15 countries at any one point in time. More on how 4Mi works, our methodology and how we collect our data can be found here in our [FAQs](#)

2 Mixed Migration Centre (2021) [Access to information for Venezuelan refugees and migrants before and during the journey](#).

3 Digital Global Overview Report (2023) [Digital 2023: Venezuela](#).

4 For more on this topic, see: Mont'Alverne, C. et al. (2021) [Trust in the media in Latin America: the same old story?](#) LSE Latin America and Caribbean. | Equilibrium CenDE (2023) [En busca de noticias confiables: ¿Cómo la población venezolana determina la veracidad de la información que consume?](#)

5 Ramírez, M. & Ricard, J. (2023) [How content creators on social media spread misinformation about immigration policies](#). The Poynter Institute.

6 Tech transparency Project (2022): [Inside the World of Misinformation Targeting Migrants on Social Media](#).

7 Ibid.

crucial aspects of migration, such as current entry policies, smugglers' services, recommendations for routes, etc.⁸ An increasing number of posts published on social media promote irregular and dangerous migration routes,⁹ such as the Darien Gap to Central and North America, or through mountainous and desert regions between Peru and Bolivia to reach Chile.¹⁰

Smugglers post a lot of the information shared on social media that tries to influence people on the move, while national governments and NGOs are often effectively absent.¹¹ The prevalence online of "smuggler lies" that encourage irregular migration has prompted the US Department of Homeland Security to launch a digital ad campaign on Central and South American social media.¹²

It is hoped that this study's empirical data about Venezuelan refugees' and migrants' use of social media will help government officials and aid workers to respond more effectively to information needs and help mitigate the risks to which refugees and migrants are exposed while travelling in the LAC region.

Methodology

This paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered by MMC. The quantitative data derives from 4Mi surveys conducted by MMC and the Centro de Desarrollo Humano¹³ (with support from UNICEF), between 15 May and 18 August 2023 in Honduras among 938 Venezuelan refugees and migrants heading north. The paper will focus on the 48% of respondents (n=451/938) who reported using social media to gather information and make decisions during their journey.¹⁴ This result on the proportion of Venezuelans using social networks to prepare for their migration is similar to the outcome of a different study conducted in Costa Rica in 2022.¹⁵

The qualitative data was collected (with the support of European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations) through 11 semi-structured in-person interviews conducted in Costa Rica and Colombia with Venezuelan refugees and migrants whose destination was the United States; four focus groups comprising Venezuelan citizens conducted in Peru and Colombia (with the support of the Danish Refugee Council and Encuentros SJM);¹⁶ and two semi-structured interviews conducted virtually with key informants, humanitarian workers involved in migration and communications projects in Colombia and Chile.¹⁷

An extensive desk review of relevant published research and news articles complemented the primary research.

Limitations

4Mi employs a non-probability, purposive sampling. MMC selected the survey respondents at strategic locations along the migration route in Honduras.¹⁸ Their responses are, therefore, not necessarily representative of all Venezuelans engaged in mixed migration across the region.

Respondents' profiles

This paper analyses 4Mi survey responses from 451 Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Honduras who had used social media before or during their migration to prepare for their journey. In this group, 271 (60%) were women and 180 (40%) were men. 83% of respondents were between 18 and 35 years old (see Figure 1), and the average age of the total sample was 29 years.

8 For more on this topic, see: Mendoza, D., Mercado, P. & Ricard, J. (2023) [La trampa de la desinformación: el negocio de engañar a personas migrantes](#). Conexión Migrante. | Borkert, M., Fisher, K. E. & Yafi, E. (2018) [The Best, the Worst, and the Hardest to Find: How People, Mobiles, and Social Media Connect Migrants In\(to\) Europe](#). Social Media + Society.

9 Human rights watch (2023): [Este infierno era mi única opción](#).

10 For more on this topic, see: Saavedra, A. (2023) [Creadores de contenido en redes sociales fomentan la desinformación entre migrantes](#). Voz de América. | Mixed Migration Centre (2022) [Safety risks in the Darien Gap and assistance needed among refugees and migrants](#). | Carvajal, J. & Batarce, C. (2023) [Niños en riesgo y 32 personas fallecidas en Colchane en los últimos tres años: el complejo escenario de la crisis migratoria en el norte](#). La Tercera.

11 BBC News Mundo (2023) [Los engañosos videos de traficantes de personas que se promocionan en redes sociales como si fueran agencias de viajes para cruzar hacia EE.UU.](#)

12 US Department of Homeland Security (2023) [DHS Launches Digital Ad Campaign to Counter Smuggler Lies: U.S. Immigration Laws are Tougher, Impose Consequences for Illegal Entry](#).

13 CDH is a private development organisation dedicated to promoting human rights and advancing alternative human development.

14 The surveys were conducted in the following municipalities: El Paraíso (253 respondents), Trojes (71), Aguas Calientes (56), Ocotepeque (36), Tatumbla (24) and Choluteca (11).

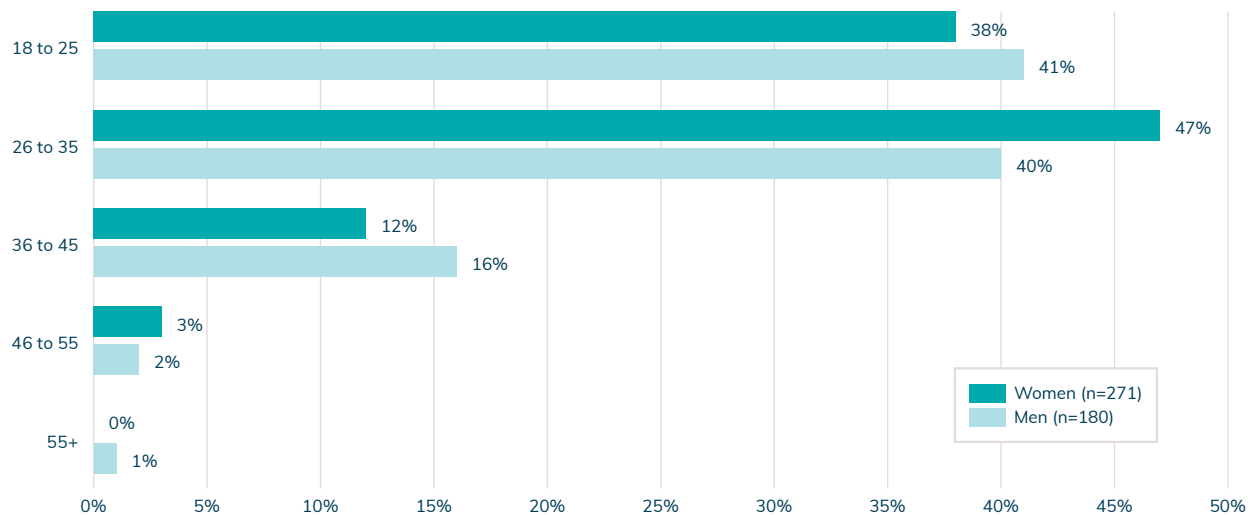
15 50% of the Venezuelan surveyed in Costa Rica used social media during the journey. For more, see: MMC LAC (2022) [Access to information before and during the journey among refugees and migrants in Costa Rica](#).

16 Encuentros SJM is an organization associated with the Servicio Jesuita de la Solidaridad (Jesuit Service of Solidarity) that assists and protects refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations.

17 The interviews with Venezuelan refugees and migrants and with key informants were conducted between 10 and 30 January 2023; the focus groups took place between 28 October and 4 November 2022.

18 Because this study's respondents also took part in parallel MMC research about child migrants and refugees, MMC targeted people travelling with children. Therefore, the sample's ratio of women to men is likely to be greater than that of all Venezuelan refugees and migrants travelling through Honduras, and there may be other specificities about this group of the migrant population.

Figure 1. Age and sex distribution of survey respondents



Most (73%) respondents had completed secondary school, while 9% had earned university degrees. 72% had lived in urban areas before migrating. A large majority (73%) started their migration journey in Venezuela, 20% in Colombia or Peru and 7% in Brazil or Chile. Almost all (97%) were aiming to reach the United States.

Core observations

While (as noted above) this study's survey respondents and other interlocutors are not necessarily representative of all Venezuelans on the move in the LAC region, the

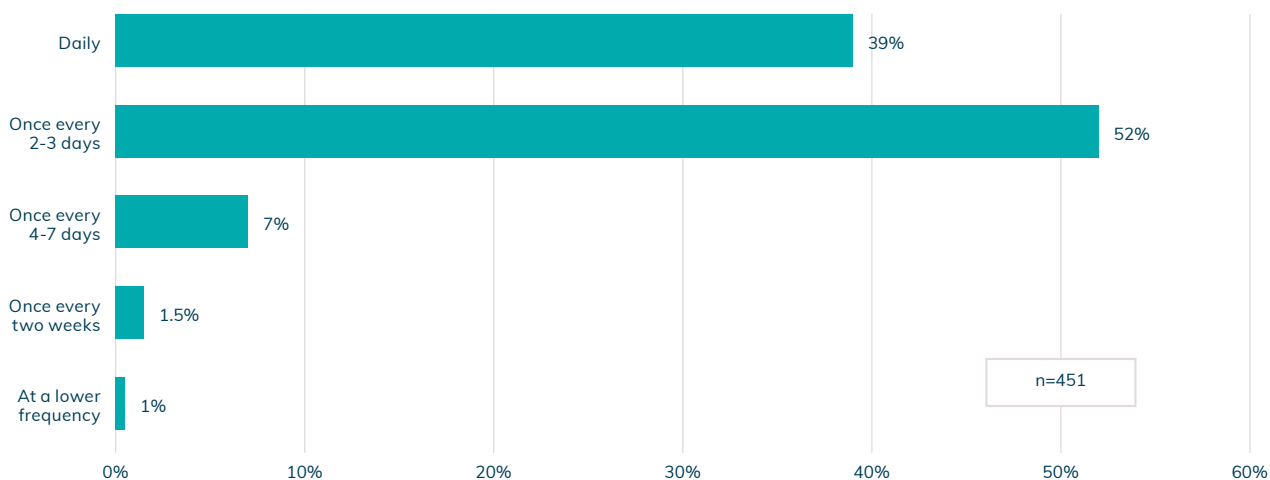
following general observations can be tentatively drawn from the quantitative and qualitative data.

Social media access is challenged by limited connectivity and financial constraints while travelling

For Venezuelans relying on social networks to prepare for migration, prioritizing smartphone ownership and ensuring internet connectivity was essential. 97% of respondents had a smartphone during their journey. Half the respondents said they used a messaging or social networking platform every two or three days, and 39% did so daily (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Frequency of access to social media

Responses to 4Mi survey



However, well over half (61%) of those surveyed said they faced obstacles accessing social networking platforms during their journey. In almost all of these cases (267/274 respondents), this was due to a lack of internet connection, while 83 respondents (30% of those facing obstacles) said they could not afford a new SIM card in the countries they travelled through, and 42 (15%) mentioned the cost of mobile data as a hurdle.¹⁹

Respondents said accessing social media and messaging platforms while travelling was a priority for them. Thus, some of those interviewed in Costa Rica said they had sold belongings to pay for internet services and other basic needs.

“They [people in a transit country] sold us a SIM card that lasted about seven days. In each country, we had to change the SIM; it cost us \$5 or \$10. The two children’s phones were sold to be able to continue paying because we had no more resources.”

Venezuelan man (age unknown) interviewed in San José, Costa Rica

Wi-fi networks in squares, parks and other public spaces enabled those who owned smartphones but could not afford new SIM cards or data bundles to connect to the internet. For those who lost or had their phones stolen (23%), borrowing phones from travelling companions was a common way of accessing social media networks.

“Sometimes I’m embarrassed to do it, but I ask them to lend me the phone to tell my relatives where I am.”

35-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Cúcuta, Colombia

During their migration, some people bought smartphones or internet access from other migrants, smugglers, or people in host communities.²⁰

“Entering the [Darién Gap] jungle in the camps before arriving [in Panama], they share wi-fi with you, but they charge you \$5 just to connect and send a message.”

30-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Heredia, Costa Rica

WhatsApp and Facebook are the favourite platforms for obtaining information

Used by 93% of respondents, WhatsApp was by far the most popular platform for obtaining information and preparing for migration, followed by Facebook (29%). Only 3% of respondents said they used TikTok. According to those interviewed, TikTok videos delving into migration themes attract a substantial audience among Venezuelan migrants. However, migrants do not perceive this platform as a reliable source of information for preparing their journeys, mainly because much of TikTok’s content is focused on entertainment. Figure 2 breaks down the various attractions of the two predominantly used platforms.

“Let’s say TikTok is for distraction, watching funny videos, etc. Facebook is for communicating with friends and family. WhatsApp is the current means of communicating with messages. The standard mobile phone message [SMS] is already obsolete.”

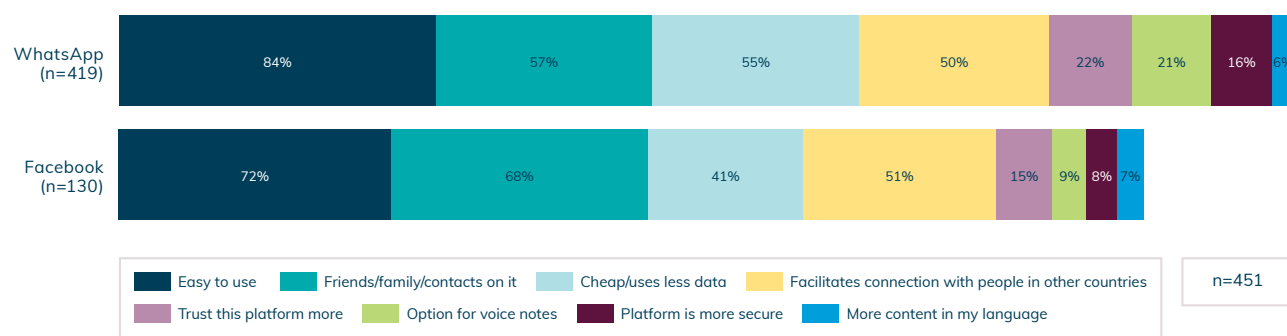
30-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Heredia, Costa Rica

19 For more on this topic, see: El Heraldo (2023) [“Me quedé sin dinero en el camino”: el desgarrador testimonio de migrante venezolana varada en Honduras.](#)

20 Turkewitz, J. (2023) [“A Ticket to Disney”? Politicians Charge Millions to Send Migrants to U.S.](#) The New York Times.

Figure 3. Reasons for using particular social media platforms

Responses to 4Mi survey



*Respondents could select more than one response for each platform: each graph represents the proportion of respondents who chose a particular response for a platform.

WhatsApp is the predominant messaging application in Latin America and the most widely used among refugees and migrants interviewed. For those who did not own a phone or found themselves without a SIM card, Facebook was the most used option to access social networks.

Facebook has advantages over WhatsApp in that it can be accessed without a functioning/connected SIM card (as long as a Wi-Fi internet connection is available). Network contacts are not lost as they are not stored on the sim card or the phone, and the phone numbers of interlocutors are not required. In addition, unlike WhatsApp, Facebook offers online community spaces, such as public groups devoted to topics such as regional migration. According to those interviewed, Facebook has thus become the leading platform for migrants without mobile phones or connected SIM cards to stay in touch with relatives and friends, and to visit digital spaces where migration information is disseminated.

“When I was in Venezuela and on my way, I communicated by WhatsApp and Facebook. I was able to come up with that communication. Facebook chat [Messenger] was how I could communicate with my cousin, who is helping me. He helped me until I got here.”

22-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica

In some instances, respondents’ choice of social media platform was influenced by the theft of their mobile phone during their journey, a fate reported by 13% of respondents.

“On the road, there are people with phones, so you ask them to communicate via Facebook. It is the only way because we do not have a phone, and some of my relatives do not have smartphones, so we must keep going and communicate via Facebook.”

33-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica

Through observing social media pages and the qualitative information collected, MMC LAC noted a strong interconnection between the usage of Facebook and WhatsApp among Venezuelan migrants. Through Facebook, people on the move initiate initial contacts on various migration-related topics with a multitude of stakeholders, including migrants, smugglers, and “touristic agencies”, among others, as detailed in the following paragraphs. Subsequently, the ongoing interaction typically transitions towards private conversations on Facebook or directly onto WhatsApp within private groups or through direct communication with the involved users.

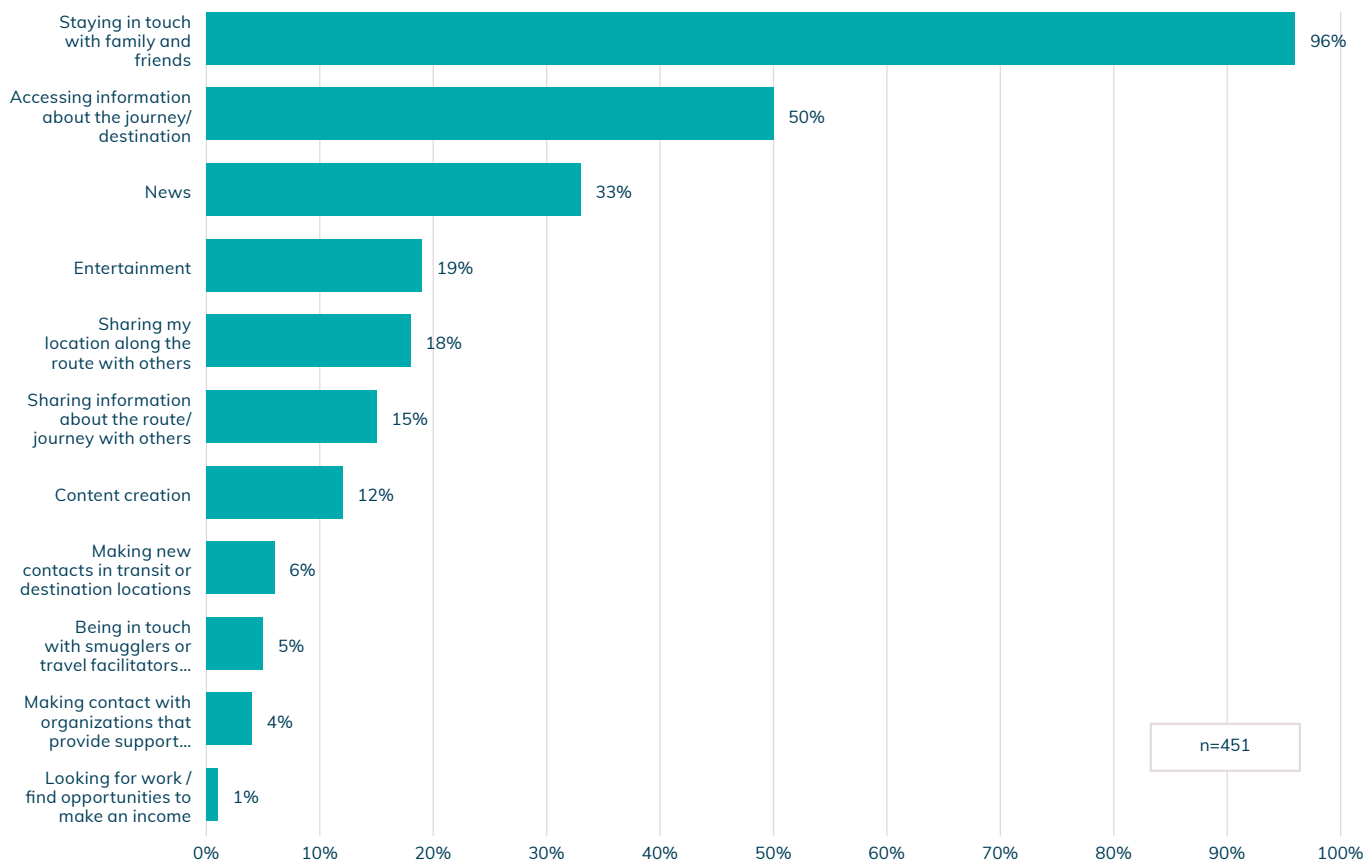
Access to social media makes it easier to stay connected with loved ones and to find helpful travel information

As detailed in Figure 4, virtually all respondents said they used social media to communicate with relatives

and friends, while half of them said they did so to search for information about their journeys or destinations. Much less frequently cited reasons included contacting organisations that could help them and finding job opportunities.

Figure 4. Main reasons for using social media networks

Responses to 4Mi survey



*Respondents could select more than one response.

The Venezuelan refugees and migrants interviewed in Honduras said the information they obtained on social media about travel routes, potential dangers, access to assistance and entry requirements to their transit and destination countries helped them formulate their travel plans.

“In [social] networks, we start looking for information on how to cross the border, how to eat, how to solve problems. We look for ways to cross the border, that is, the easiest ways, where they cannot take money from us.”

22-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica

Of the 434 survey respondents who said they used social media to maintain contact with relatives and friends, 361 (83%) said they did so to share their locations for safety reasons, 285 (66%) mentioned exchanging news, 240 (55%) cited obtaining information about their trips, and 219 (50%) said they talked to their family members to get moral support, which is an indication that ongoing communication with loved ones is a vital resilience mechanism during migration.

“I think that social media are essential. Through them, we can communicate with our loved ones who are far away. To have news about the road, where we are going, the location, it is critical to be communicated with because that

way you can contact your relatives and so they are not so worried about not knowing where you are.”

33-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Cucuta, Colombia

Relatives and other migrants are far more trusted as information sources than official channels

Half the respondents said friends and relatives who had already migrated to other countries were their most reliable sources of information. Most focus group participants said information from family members, friends and acquaintances who had previously travelled to other countries was credible because those people had first-hand experience of the migration process. Such sources were seen as trustworthy also because they were “like them” and “expressed themselves in the same way as them”. The interviewees said knowing that information came from reliable sources strengthened their confidence in their migration decisions. For their part, one-fifth of respondents considered their most reliable source of information to be their friends and relatives in the country of departure.

Interviewees and survey respondents preferred information they obtained from people they knew or who had similar experiences because they felt this was “concretely geared to help them move towards their intended destination”.²¹ This finding is not specific to migrants in the Americas: global migration studies reveal that people on the move tend to prefer sources of information that can confirm their ideas, desires, and migration objectives.²²

“People are stubborn; they do not change their mind because they know about the risks of migrating to North America.”

Venezuelan woman, focus group participant in Soacha, Colombia

“Mainly, you have to have excellent information from people you trust because we all have different experiences. Knowing that a

person you trust knows what they are going to tell you step by step, how you can move from one place to another, where there are better opportunities both for work and better shelter... Because on the road you don't get everything, but if it is a person you trust who is giving you information, your migration will be much more successful.”

26-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Trojes, Honduras

Yet, eleven percent of the respondents said they thought online communities were the most reliable source of information. This study's qualitative research found that refugees and migrants, as well as other actors (“travel agencies”, smugglers, etc.), form groups and online communities on WhatsApp and Facebook to exchange information and trouble-shooting tips about travel routes and destinations. According to previously published research, migrants using those online communities are exposed to campaigns of disinformation, scams,²³ occasionally orchestrated by individuals claiming to be fellow migrants, or promotion by “travel agencies” of so-called “tourist packages” that purport to get refugees and migrants quickly and safely to the United States and which contain fraudulent promises about access to documentation, “immigration amnesties”, and “employment”.²⁴

“Yes, I trust the networks because I know there are good people who will not publish bad or wrong things because they know we are struggling. So, they know this is not just a suck-up (‘we're not playing games’), this is reality.”

22-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica

21 Carlson, M., Jakli, L., & Linos, K. (2018): [Refugees Misdirected: How Information, Misinformation, and Rumors Shape Refugees' Access to Fundamental Rights](#). Virginia Journal of International Law, Vol. 57, No. 3, 2018.

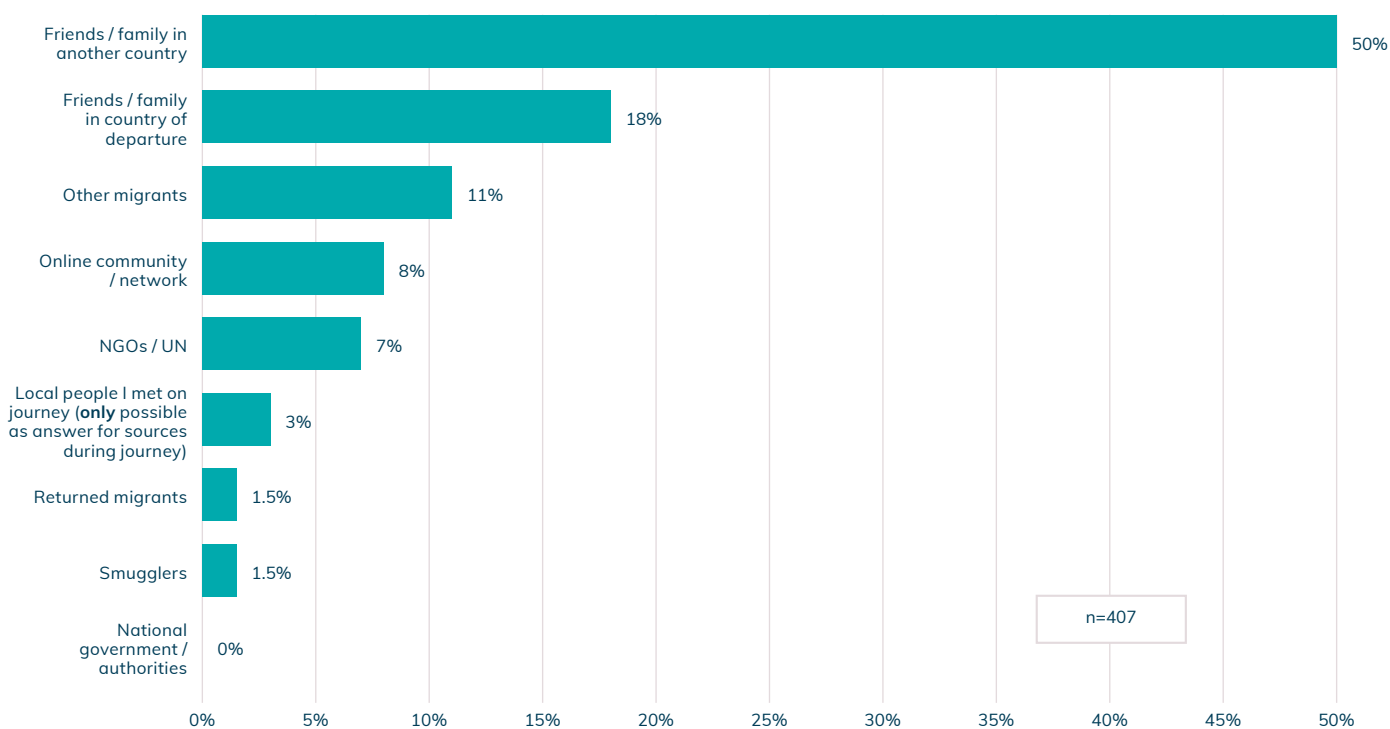
22 See: Carlson, M., Jakli, L. & Linos, K. (2018) [Ibid.](#)

23 The Guardian (2022): [Migrants targeted in Canadian immigration scam on Facebook](#).

24 For more on this topic, see : Mendoza, D., Mercado, P. & Ricard, J. (2023) [La trampa de la desinformación: el negocio de engañar a personas migrantes](#). Conexión Migrante. | Ricard, J., Ramírez Uribe, M., Spinardi, A. & Fernández, B. (2023) [El “negocio” de los influencers](#), Conexión Migrante.

Figure 5. Most trusted sources of information

Responses to 4Mi survey²⁵



Government authorities in transit or destination countries, as well as NGOs and UN agencies, often publish information about the risks of travelling along dangerous routes such as the Darien Gap or about migration restrictions in LAC countries, with the aim of helping people on the move make informed decisions.²⁶ However, none of the survey's 451 respondents selected "national governments" as one of their most trusted sources of information and just 28 (7%) included NGOs and UN agencies in their selections.²⁷

Interviewees and focus group participants offered several explanations for this lack of confidence. First, they reported that they did not trust the information provided by official authorities because of the media landscape in their country of origin, which is mainly state-controlled.²⁸ Their distrust was also exacerbated by the fear of being identified by authorities, potentially facing sanctions or expulsion from transit countries, leading them to avoid any digital interactions with authorities.

Second, the information shared by governments, NGOs, and the UN did not attract the attention of Venezuelans planning to migrate or already on the move because it did not respond to their needs or online communication habits. Those interviewed said such messaging and its format often contained "too much text", were written in a "complex" way and/or were distributed through online channels that migrants seldom use.

Smuggling groups' presence on social media is extensive, but generally mistrusted

The MMC research team directly observed public Facebook groups and TikTok posts containing content, such as videos and photographs with contact numbers, that was designed to attract the attention of (actual and would-be) Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Such highly commented and shared content is produced by networks of smugglers and boosted by "migration influencers" who use social media to promote smugglers' services and attract potential clients by promising to help them safely reach the United States.²⁹

25 The specific survey questions used for this graphic were: "What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your journey?" "What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. during your journey?" and "Of all sources, what has been the most reliable source of information overall?"

26 For example, in 2022, organisations from the Inter-Agency Group on Mixed Migration Flows published an [infographic](#) on various social media networks that highlighted the risks and challenges involved in travelling through the Darien Gap

27 For a detailed analysis of such mistrust and how it informs migration decisions, see: Carlson, M., Jakli, L. & Linos, K. (2018) [Refugees Misdirected: How Information, Misinformation, and Rumors Shape Refugees' Access to Fundamental Rights](#). Virginia Journal of International Law.

28 Espacio Público (2022) [Report 2022: Situation of the right to freedom of expression and information in Venezuela](#).

29 Conexión Migrante TV (2023) [Creadores de contenido en redes sociales fomentan la desinformación entre personas migrantes](#).

This type of content is abundant in social media,³⁰ but it can be challenging to measure its impact: while 53% of survey respondents mentioned using the services of one or more smugglers during their journeys to Central America, only 5% said they had hired a smuggler through a social media network.

Some studies have suggested that people on the move avoid openly discussing smugglers or guides who are hired on social media or recommended to them by their relatives and friends.³¹ Such migrants might be silent because of presumed loyalty to smugglers, because they are trying to protect themselves, their families, and their friends before and during their journey against possible retaliation by smugglers' networks or possible institutional punishment because it is considered an illegal activity.³²

Although key informants said smugglers often posed as "travel agencies" or "guides" to promote their services and gain Venezuelans' trust, only 1.5% of respondents considered smugglers as the most reliable information source.

“In social media, these actors of the dark side operate in diverse ways, first with these life stories that connect, that move, that advocate hope as a human feeling. This is designed to sell the services of their “travel companies”, companies that offer “tours” to travel through the Darien, or the services of people posing as drivers or people who know the territory, who offer you safe routes.”

Humanitarian worker and journalist, interviewed in Colombia

Positive publications about migration are more popular and encouraged on social media networks

This study's qualitative data and direct observations of networks such as Facebook and TikTok indicate that posts with positive content about successful migration experiences and first-hand experiences tend to be

frequently shared because they generate "positive and pleasant feelings".³³ These posts give hope to people on the move about achieving their migration goals and may also impact how they make decisions.

“You go on Facebook and see your friends who are there in the United States. They are doing well and earning well. I had a friend who also went there; he worked for two months and bought his mother's house in one go. That is what you see, and you are encouraged to do the same.”

25-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica

Members of online community groups where practical advice and success stories are shared tend to develop a sense of belonging and trust in the information shared within these forums, because they "share the faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment together".³⁴

The overwhelming prevalence of positive content about migration survival strategies tended to drown out more posts on incidents or abuses faced during the journey. Social media do not widely disseminate information about the dangers of irregular migration or the immigration procedures in destination countries. The MMC team even observed that content associated with the risks and dangers of migration was frequently removed from public Facebook groups focusing on migration to the United States.

Information on social media does not meet all the needs of people on the move

Although many respondents used social media to access information about migration, much of this information turned out to be incomplete or of limited practical value to their journeys. As detailed in Figure 6, such information gaps were common in the areas of safety and conditions while travelling, routes, costs, and rights in destination countries.

30 Ibid.

31 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018) [Mexico Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018](#).

32 Ibid.

33 Kumpel, A., Karnowski, V. & Keyling, T. (2015) [News Sharing in Social Media: A Review of Current Research on News Sharing Users, Content, and Networks](#).

34 See also: Davis W. & Davis M. (1986) Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory, given by: Navarrete, C. & Huerta, E. (2006) [Building Virtual Bridges to Home: The Use of the Internet by Transnational Communities of Immigrants](#), International Journal of Communications Law & Policy.

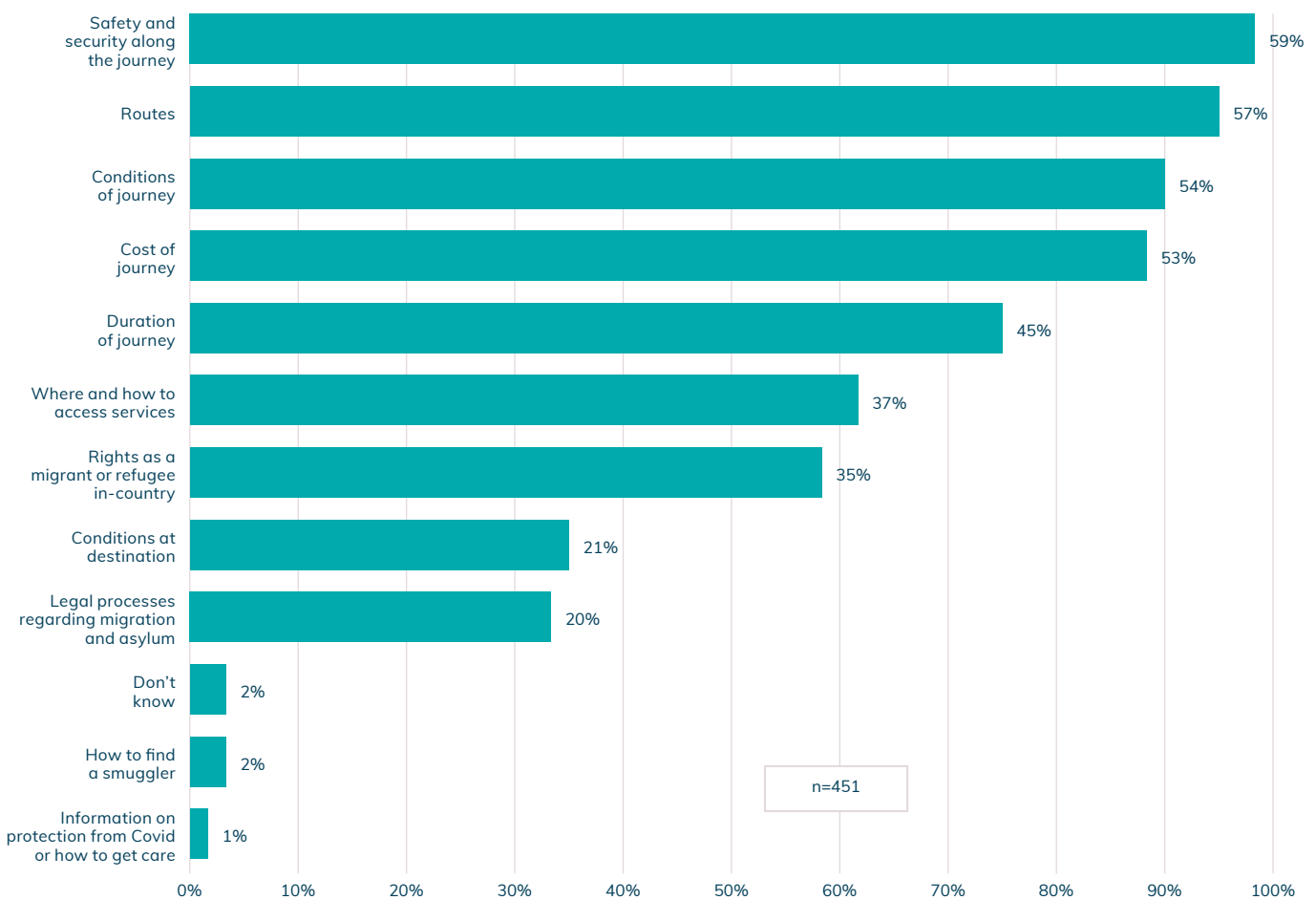
“There are many videos where I saw how many Venezuelans entered the jungle to get to the United States. That is when we gathered the courage and said: ‘Well, if they can do it, why can’t we?’ But we did not know it would be so complicated, and the truth is that it was

hard, but more than anything, we decided because of the videos we saw on TikTok.”

22-year-old Venezuelan man interviewed in Alajuela, Costa Rica

Figure 6. Top information gaps in social media’s content

Responses to 4Mi survey³⁵



*Respondents could select more than one response.

35 The specific survey question used for this graphic was: What information would have been most useful that you did not receive?

Interviewees and focus group participants suggested that the online prevalence of outdated or unverified material containing rumours and misinformation contributed to such information gaps.³⁶

“People see something on the internet and are already sharing it on WhatsApp; they don’t notice if the video is current, sometimes it’s already several months or even years old.”

Venezuelan woman who participated in a focus group in Lima, Peru

Some 59% of respondents reported that they would not have started their journeys if they had known what they had learned by the time they were surveyed. And 72% said it was “unlikely” or “very unlikely” that they would encourage others to travel as they had done. These statistics suggest that many Venezuelans on the move through Central America made ill-informed decisions about the risks and dangers they would face on the route, and that they were poorly prepared to deal with the migration processes in their destination countries.

“I would like to tell them [people contemplating migration] not to take any risks, not risk their children, that nothing is as portrayed on the internet, that going through the jungle is unbelievably bad, that not everyone gets out of there alive, and that whoever is going to do it should ask God to help them get out of there. They should be well informed and bring money, so they do not have to work. I would also like them to have a bit of consciousness and think about things and inform themselves well before leaving the comfort of their own home.”

32-year-old Venezuelan woman interviewed in Trojes, Honduras

36 Obi, C., Bartolini, F. & D’Haese, M. (2020) [Digitalization and migration: The role of social media and migrant networks in migration decisions. An exploratory study in Nigeria](#), Digital Policy, Regulation, and Governance.

Conclusion

Social media plays a significant role in shaping how Venezuelan refugees and migrants access crucial information for planning and decision-making before and during their journeys. However, information obtained from social media is often poorly verified, incomplete, out-of-date, or biased. Consequently, those surveyed said they would not migrate in the same way if they had it to do over again. Nor would they encourage other people to migrate in the same manner they did.

The online communication efforts of governments, NGOs and UN agencies are (unlike those of smuggling networks) failing to reach and influence people contemplating migration or already on the move through the LAC region.

This paper highlights the importance of developing social media strategies that provide timely and adequate responses to the information needs of Venezuelans and other refugees and migrants in LAC. Forthcoming MMC research will focus on how information shared through social media might influence the emergence of new migration routes, practices, and behaviours in the region.



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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