Mixed Migration Centre

PAPER

JUNE 2024

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SUGGESTED CITATION:
Mixed Migration Centre (2024) *Online communities: How do people on the move to North America use social media?* Available at: https://mixedmigration.org/resource/people-on-the-move-north-america-social-media/

LAYOUT AND DESIGN:
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Online communities: How do people on the move to North America use social media?

Overview of the information shared by migrant populations in public Facebook groups

About this paper

This is the second publication in a research series exploring how people on the move through Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) use social media.

The research team collected and analyzed posts published on public Facebook groups by the migrant population in the region. The aim was to study the most mentioned topics, named locations, and specific issues related to each country, as well as the participating accounts' level of interaction with the identified topics.

This research phase was conducted mainly through a social-media listening exercise in collaboration with DiSoRLab, a research laboratory from the Universidad del Rosario in Colombia.

Introduction

Social media platforms are increasingly seen as valuable tools for studying the dynamic phenomenon of migration because they offer access to large amounts of real-time data.[1] In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), social media plays a crucial role in facilitating communication and providing access to information for migrants heading northward. For example, in 2023, almost half of the migrants surveyed by MMC in Honduras (48%) indicated that they had used social media platforms to gather information and make decisions during their journey toward North America.[2]

While there is a diversity of social media platforms that migrants use, surveys conducted by MMC with migrants from Venezuela indicate that WhatsApp (93%) and Facebook (29%) are the most used platforms. This is due to the fact that migrants' contacts (family or friends) are already users, the platforms are considered easy to use, cost-effective regarding internet consumption, and facilitate connection with people in other countries.[3]

This research paper investigates how the Spanish-speaking Latin American and Caribbean population on the move northward use Facebook regarding their migration. It examines posts from 2022 and 2023 from eight public Facebook groups created to exchange information on northward migration in LAC.[4] It analyzes the most mentioned topics, the information shared about countries of transit and destination, and the issues with which migrants interacted the most.

This report is the second in a research series on social media networks use by the migrant population, developed by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) in Latin America and the Caribbean.[5] It aims to support governmental institutions and humanitarian organizations in addressing the information needs of people on the move in the region, preventing and mitigating protection risks to migrants in digital environments, combating misinformation, and developing effective communication strategies for migrant populations.

1 Mahoney, J., et. al. (2022). Ethical considerations in social media analytics in the context of migration: lessons learned from a Horizon 2020 project. Research Ethics Vol. 18(3), pp. 226-240 (p. 228).

2 4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system. It is a regular, standardized, quantitative, and globalized system, with a network of enumerators conducting survey interviews with migrants on the move in around 15 countries around the world at any one point in time. See: Mixed Migration Centre (n.d.) 4Mi: in-depth insights on mixed migration dynamics. | For 4Mi data about social media uses, see: Tomasi, S. and Vicari, D. (2023) Digital lifelines: The use of social media networks among Venezuelan refugees and migrants heading north. Mixed Migration Centre. (p.3).

3 Tomasi, S. and Vicari, D. (2023). Op. Cit. (pp. 6).

4 The information for this report comes from Facebook public information sources that were accessed under ethical and regulatory guidelines that prioritize the protection of the population of interest and shared data. MMC and DISORLAB collected and analyzed the data following ethical and legal guidelines set out in an internal protocol drawn up for the research (see more information in the Methodology section).

5 The first research paper explores the use of social media by Venezuelan refugees and migrants as they head to North America. It details migrants' preferred social media and messaging platforms, the reasons they communicate through these networks, and their connectivity challenges in accessing them. It also explores migrants' most trusted sources of information, the persistence of information gaps, and the risks associated with the presence of smugglers in digital spaces. Access the complete document at: Tomasi, S. and Vicari, D. (2023) Op. Cit. Mixed Migration Centre.

Key findings

- Almost a quarter of the posts collected for this study (21.5%) were entries from migrant smugglers and other actors offering services in countries within the region or to reach the United States. Other topics with a significant presence in the analyzed sample were questions from people on the move regarding migratory regularization and transit processes (18%) and questions concerning routes, costs, and locations along the route (17%).

- Most of the analyzed posts showed that migrant populations face a widespread lack of information about regularization processes, migratory transit, routes, costs, access to services, and the updating of migratory policies, among other topics.

- In the studied Facebook groups, there was an absence of posts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national and local authorities regarding migratory regularization processes, policy updates, risks and protection mechanisms along the route, and other information needed and sought by people on the move.

- The most mentioned topics in the posts were not necessarily those that received the most attention from migrants participating in the Facebook groups. Although most of the posts contained offers from migrant smugglers and other actors, these had the least interaction compared to other topics. On the other hand, although fewer posts from migrants containing accounts of experiences and messages of encouragement were found, these had a higher interaction among the participating accounts.

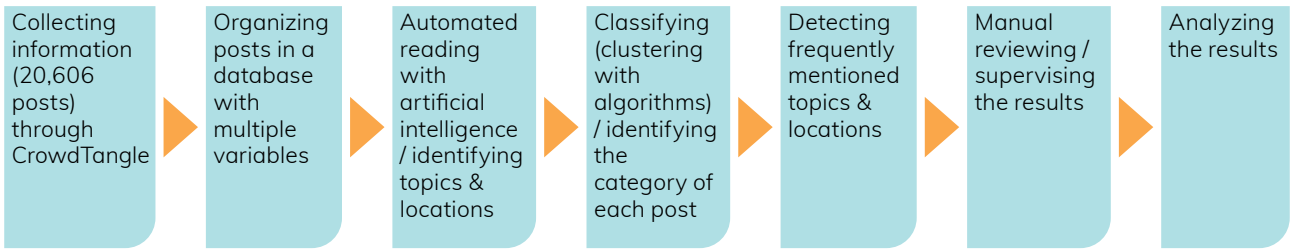
Methodology

MMC conducted this research in collaboration with the DiSoRLab laboratory from the Universidad del Rosario in Colombia. This study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data from posts and interactions in eight public Facebook groups of Latin American and Caribbean people on the move toward North America between 2022 and 2023. The methodological steps are outlined below in Figure 1. For further details on the methodology, please refer to Appendix 1.

Figure 1. Methodological steps

a) Design and planning

b) Data collection and information analysis



Design and planning

MMC selected eight public Facebook groups (see Table 1) with active participation of Spanish-speaking Latin American and Caribbean migrants based on a scoping exercise conducted in 2023 involving observing and monitoring online Facebook conversations. The eight groups selected were identified by tracking keywords related to the locations of northbound migration[6] within the Facebook's internal search engine.[7] Selection criteria included the group's activity level, measured by the frequency of daily posts (as indicated by the search engine), and the presence of messages containing information about migrant transit through the region.

Table 1. Selected Facebook groups

Name and link to the group	Number of members at the time of data collection	Total number of collected posts
VENEZOLANOS EN MEXICO	39,103	1,177
CBP One OFICIAL	191,034	3,532
CBP One Ayuda Información Latinos	274,167	7,429
El Darién 2023	174,007	47
Darien Panama USA 2023	n.d.	4,136
SELVA DARIEN MIGRANTES SOBREVIVIENTES	435,281	1,018
Venezolanos en Guatemala	3,625	1,889
Frases	353,223	1,378

Data collection and information analysis

Based on the initial scoping exercise, MMC established nine categories to classify the topics most mentioned in the selected groups, in order to conduct further analysis. 20,606 posts published between January 1, 2022, and November 10, 2023, were extracted via CrowdTangle, a tool developed by Meta to collect information on its social media.[8]

For the data analysis and classification, DiSoRLab implemented automated reading using artificial-intelligence (AI) tools, specifically natural-language models, to identify the issues (topics) and locations (entities) mentioned in the selected groups. After identifying these elements, DiSoRLab classified the posts according to topics into the nine predefined categories established by MMC (see Table 2), using the clustering method to mathematically verify each post's category.[9]

6 Key words included official names of countries, cities, towns, and transit locations along the migratory route in the Americas as well as some variations with typing or spelling errors found in manual monitoring. For instance, "Tapón del Darién" (Darien Gap) and derivations such as Darien, Dairén, Dairen, Diaren, Barién, among others were included.
7 See: Facebook (n.d.). Groups.
8 Meta (n.d.). CrowdTangle – About us.
9 Saxena, A., et. al. (2017). A review of clustering techniques and developments. Neurocomputing Magazine.

Table 2. Categories of the topics most frequently mentioned in the selected groups (in alphabetic order)

#	Category name
1	Migrants requesting services along the route
2	Migrants seeking companionship or forming groups for their migratory journeys
3	Migrants seeking employment, help or assistance
4	Migrants sharing their experiences on the route
5	News and information regarding the migration journey
6	Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors
7	Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes
8	Questions regarding routes, costs and locations
9	Words of encouragement and socialization

After identifying the categories and classifying the posts, the outcomes underwent a manual review to ensure optimal results.

Finally, MMC and DiSoRLab teams interpreted the categorized data. The description and analysis that shape this document are based on that interpretation.[10]

Ethical considerations

Information was collected following strict ethical standards that prioritized the privacy, anonymity, safety, and protection of the personal data of the migrant population involved,[11] as well as international data-protection regulations and Facebook's terms of use.[12] Personal information, such as names, profile URLs, or locations, was not collected and this report does not disclose any identifiable information, including direct quotes from the analyzed posts. Posts were extracted exclusively from public groups where the information is public[13] and easily accessible even without a registered Facebook account.[14]

The information used for this report was collected with a registered account through CrowdTangle, a tool designed and authorized by Meta for social research purposes. Thus, it complies with Facebook's terms of use.

Limitations

The methodological development of this research entails the following limitations:

- Using CrowdTangle as a tool for extracting Facebook posts only provides access to information granted by Meta and does not allow comments from posts to be downloaded. This restriction eliminated the possibility of studying interactions between migrants as relevant information for a deeper analysis of the dynamics of Facebook usage by the population of interest was inaccessible.

10 To review the technical step-by-step of the methodology, please refer to the annex 1.

11 MMC developed a protocol based on these ethical and legal standards for research after conducting a risk analysis and developing a plan for prevention and mitigation measures. An ethical advisory committee with members from MMC and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) supported the process.

12 To access information related to the ethical and regulatory considerations for research on social media considered in this study, please refer to: Association of Internet Researchers (2019). Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0. | Dedecek Gertz, H. (2023). Accounting for ethical measures in a text-as-data approach. Frontiers in Sociology. | Mahoney, J., et. al. (2022). Op. Cit. pp. 226-240. | United Nations Global Pulse (2016). Data Privacy, Ethics and Protection Principles. | United Nations Global Pulse (2019). Risk, Harms and Benefits Assessment Tool. | United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF (2018). Ethical Considerations When Using Social Media for Evidence Generation.

13 For this research, MMC considers "public information" information that meets the danah boyd's "public network sphere" criteria, as well as the factors determining the non-obligation of consent for the general use of information from McKee and Porter (2009), as stated by Elgesem, D. (2015) Consent and information – ethical considerations when conducting research on social media. Fossheim and Ingierd (pp. 16-17).

14 A British Psychological Society recommendation for research on social media. Given by Mahoney, J. et. al. (2022) Op. Cit. (p. 233).

- Although the analyzed Facebook groups were created to share information about migratory experiences and processes in the Americas, anyone with an account can join them, whether they are located in LAC and a migrant or not.

- The ethical decision to not access personal data and non-public information from the involved accounts eliminated the possibility of analyzing the dynamics of the migrant population's Facebook usage according to nationality. Nonetheless, the analysis considered posts written in Spanish in groups related to migration experiences and processes in the Americas, and according to the qualitative and manual analysis of these posts, most were made by Spanish-speaking Latin American and Caribbean migrants.

- The focus on posts written in Spanish eliminated the possibility of analyzing the dynamics of Facebook usage by the non-Spanish-speaking migrant population moving northward through the region.

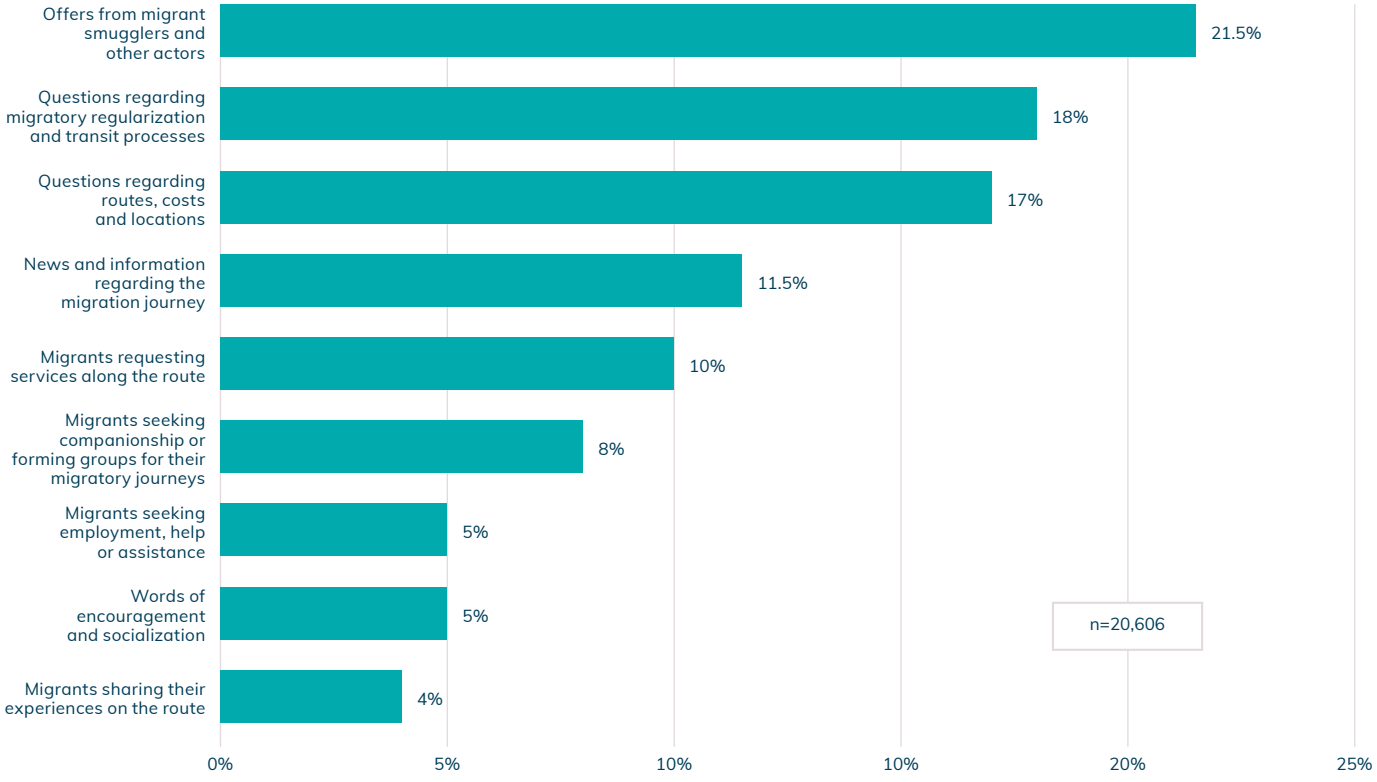
- As in other studies,[15] the capabilities of AI to identify and analyze may be limited regarding posts written using informal language. Similarly, post formats other than text (i.e., images and videos) may be excluded from data collection and analysis. During the manual monitoring of the groups, MMC identified that these formats, other than text, are one type of advertising used by migrant smugglers, so the smugglers' entries could be more frequent.

Findings

The most prevalent topics discussed in the Facebook groups

A total of nine categories were derived from the extracted posts and were analyzed in terms of their presence.[16] The most common category discussed on the selected Facebook groups was "Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors", representing the 21.5% of the analyzed sample. This was followed by "Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes" (18%) and "Questions regarding routes, costs, and locations" (17%). Less common posts were related to the categories and "Requests for work, help or assistance" (5%), "Words of encouragement and socialization" (5%), and "Migrants sharing their experiences on the route" (4%, see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Presence percentage of the analyzed posts by category



15 Search for Common Ground & BuildUp (2022). Social media listening analysis in Kenia - Uchaguzi Bila Balaa.

16 Presence pertains to the number of posts classified in each category within the analyzed sample. Thus, the presence of each category increases the likelihood that a person will encounter a post related to the topic when browsing the selected groups.

Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors are the most frequent posts

More than one-fifth of the posts found in the analyzed sample contained offers from migrant smugglers and other actors.[17] Two or more services were often offered in the same post, so it was not possible to separate the offers of smugglers (related to facilitating irregular entry into a country of the region) from those of other actors, offering, for example, money transfers or accommodation in countries of transit. Smugglers' posts regularly consist of publicity endeavors and advertisements, and many such accounts constantly repost messages within these groups.

Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors encompass a wide range of services presented by both individuals and "agencies", including intermediation for monetary procedures (banking, currency exchange, sending or receiving money for people without the necessary documents), accommodation, local transportation, border crossings, entertainment, gambling, and "legal" advice. These posts are largely context-specific and linked to location – for example, they center on key transit and border locations, and the specific services offered vary according to those places.

Recent journalistic and NGO investigations highlight that social media platforms have become a strategic and powerful tool for smuggling networks.[18] Smugglers are increasingly using platforms like Facebook and TikTok to promote their services and offer "all-inclusive packages" for irregular migration to the United States from various countries in the region, including Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador.[19]

In the analyzed sample, the most frequently mentioned locations in these posts were Venezuela and Colombia (more than 800 posts each), Guatemala and Chile (more than 400 each), and Mexico and Ecuador (more than 300 each). Posts mentioning Venezuela and Colombia were mostly related to money-transfer and remittance services, given that the Venezuelan population with expired documents cannot transfer money directly in financial services corporations and because the exchange of money between the two countries is usually intermediated by individuals with international platform accounts or cash liquidity in Venezuela.[20] Posts related to Colombia also included many offers for irregular transit to the United States or Mexico from that country, as Colombia has consolidated its position as a strategic transit country of the land route to North America.[21]

Similarly, posts mentioning Chile focused on money transfers and transportation to begin the route northward, particularly to Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia, since recent changes in migration policies and the overall social climate in Chile have pushed an increasing number of Venezuelans and other immigrants populations to begin a secondary migration.[22]

Posts on Guatemala focused on offers for transportation and other services, as this country serves as the southern gateway to Mexico, where crossing the border often requires river transport. Finally, posts mentioning Mexico primarily offered transportation services within the country and "legal advice" and information regarding the migration route, showing the high demand for unregulated transportation to the north of that country and the constant need for migrants to receive legal information and counselling for transit and border crossing to the US.

Access to information is a constant need among migrants heading northward

Information requests by migrants represented almost half of the posts (46.5% by adding the three categories on questions and information search from migrants; see Figure 2). Almost 35% of posts relating to information demand (7,000) included requests for information from migrants regarding regularization processes or information related to their transit, such as temporary stay permits, transit permits or fees, laissez-passers, etc. Furthermore, 11.5% of the posts included migrants providing information to other people on the move, including information about missing migrants on the route.

The high presence of these information requests and exchanges in the analyzed Facebook groups illustrates the widespread lack of updated and verified information for people on the move and their pressing need to access

17 MMC defines migrant smuggling as any of a wide range of activities—including facilitating irregular border crossings, supplying travel documents, and providing transportation, food, and accommodation during a migration journey—carried out in return for payment or other forms of compensation MMC does not necessarily consider all activities included in this definition as criminal actions. For more information on this topic, see: Canal Laiton, X. (2023) Secondary actors: the role of migrant smugglers in mixed migration through the Americas. Mixed Migration Centre.

18 CNN (2021). Report: Human smugglers increasingly use Facebook to advertise services on the US-Mexico border

19 See: Canal Laiton, X. (2023) Op. Cit. | Tomasi, S. & Vicari, D. (2023) Op. Cit. | Medina, P. & Gonzales, C. (2024). Dolor, anuncios y videos en la dimensión digital del tráfico de migrantes. CLIP, Bellingcat, et. al. | IOM (2023). Information and communication technologies and migrant smuggling in Central America, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

20 International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2022). Transferencias monetarias en el contexto migratorio: Voces de Migrantes en Colombia.

21 Crisis Group (2023). Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap

22 Paúl, F. (2021). ¿El fin del "sueño chileno"?: los migrantes que luchan por permanecer en un país que les cierra las puertas. BBC.

it for safe and successful migratory processes. Social media, in this instance, facilitates the rapid creation of online communities and circulation of information, with the additional benefit that migrants can access information about the journey and the destination in real-time. According to MMC data collected in Honduras by MMC previously, 50% of people on the move interviewed who used social media during their migratory journey did so to access information, and 33% to check news.[23]

However, social media does not guarantee access to accurate and up-to-date information despite its ease of access. Outdated, incorrect, or false information is often shared on digital platforms thus exposing migrants to potential misinformation and manipulation campaigns, deception, and misleading offers online that may lead to risks of theft, labor exploitation, human smuggling, and other forms of abuse.[24]

Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes: people on the move seeking to migrate and transit regularly

Questions about migratory regularization and transit processes represented 18% of the total analyzed posts. This most frequently included posts related to the possibilities of regularizing migratory status and how to access regular migration transit in different locations along the route northward. These questions differed depending on the context, and included information about how to register to obtain entry appointments at the border between Mexico and the United States, visas, voluntary deportation processes, or residency permits in other countries in the region.

Mexico (with more than 600 posts) was the most mentioned country in these posts, particularly the cities of Tapachula, Monterrey, Tijuana, and Mexico City. Entries mentioning Mexico included specific questions about crossing into the United States: general use of the CBP One application and the assignment of appointments,[25] humanitarian parole processes, work permits, asylum applications, and other regular migration processes. In this category of posts, individuals consistently sought legal advice and assistance to apply for these migratory processes and commented on the complexity of the procedure and the need for specific information for highly particular cases.

The second most mentioned country in this topic was Colombia (±450 posts), including many questions from Venezuelan migrants about the regularization processes in Colombia or posts about the logistical difficulties they faced obtaining documents in their country of origin.[26]

These posts also consistently mentioned locations in Central America, particularly in Guatemala and Honduras. User accounts of the migrant population raised general questions about how to legalize their status and secure jobs in this area of the continent. There was a lower level of understanding regarding migratory processes in these Central American countries compared to other locations. This may be explained by the fact that much of the information disseminated on social media, about mechanisms for regular stay and transit, tends to focus on destination countries or countries with longer stays, such as Colombia, Mexico or the United States. This can create information gaps on regular migration mechanisms for countries of rapid transit, such as those in Central Americans on the route to North America.

Overall, many concerns regarding migratory regularization raised in these Facebook groups were very specific, with differential criteria depending on nationality, family situation, or other characteristics. Understanding these complexities and specificities can provide tools for orientation programs and legal aid to address the needs of people on the move, which cannot be sufficiently and correctly covered in general information campaigns. The aforementioned differential criteria often require an in-depth comprehension of the cases, a review of legal details, and personalized assistance for individuals or families in their specific situations.

Questions regarding the migration route: concrete information on the journey continues to be lacking

Questions regarding migration routes, costs and where to stop were also common in the studied Facebook groups (17% of the total posts). During the analyzed period (2022–2023), over 3,000 questions seeking information to plan their route and prepare for travel expenses were shared by migrants. These posts were often linked to comments about extended routes, costs, and imminent dangers along the journey.

The most mentioned places in these types of posts were in Mexico (over 300 entries), particularly Monterrey and its region—where the population often expressed fear for their safety, Tapachula, Tijuana, and Mexico City. Other countries consistently mentioned in this topic were Guatemala, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Some questions also related to seeking logistical information on how to cross the subregion, expressing the difficulty of finding information about transit areas and available means of transportation.

23 These were the most mentioned reasons for usage, after "staying in touch with family and friends," mentioned by 96% of the surveyed individuals. This study analyzed 938 surveys conducted in Honduras between May and August 2023. See: Tomasi, S. and Vicari, D. Ibid. (p. 7).
24 Tomasi, S. and Vicari, D. Op. Cit. (p. 8).
25 See: Mixed Migration Centre (2023). Quarterly Mixed Migration Update, Latin America and the Caribbean. Quarter 2 - 2023. (p. 12).
26 See: Danish Refugee Council (2024). Análisis regional de ayuda legal: Colombia, México, Perú, Venezuela, Guatemala y Honduras. (pp. 50-51).

News and information regarding the migration journey: need for updated information in a changing context

In the selected groups, more than 2,000 posts (11.5% of the total) contained news and reports regarding the status of other migrants on the move. The shared news included updated information regarding the status of transit routes and changes in regularization processes. To a lesser extent, posts containing reports and notices about migrants who were lost or went missing along their migratory route were identified. These posts both requested and provided information about such migrants, including messages from people on the move sharing data or photos when they found a lost or deceased person during their journey.

The most mentioned countries in these posts were Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, and the United States. Primarily, there was a high demand for updated information specific to changing migratory contexts, the impacts of political decisions, and transit conditions in border areas. These include, for example, changes in road conditions, the presence of immigration agents, new requirements for regular transit, new regularization programs, changes in legislation due to electoral environments, etc. Posts in this category highlighted the importance of mutual collaboration among migrant populations in sharing official information as well as support to relatives to help obtain information about loved ones on the route.

Facebook as a space to search for services and protection along the route

Posts in the Facebook groups revealed a pressing need for access to services and protection along the northward migration route. The need for access to services along the route and the expansion of regular migration routes was evident in the posts that sought information on how to access services (10% of the total). These posts included searches for hotels or other accommodation offers and people seeking transportation and guidance to continue their journey northward.

The need for protection against the risks and dangers of migration was reflected in posts where migrants were seeking companionship and to form groups to undertake or continue their journey along the route (8% of the analyzed posts). Finally, the need for general assistance and access to economic resources was evident in migrants' posts requesting work and assistance (5%). In 2023, 81% of the migrant population surveyed by MMC in LAC expressed having assistance needs at the time of the survey, with food (51%), money (44%), and shelter (42%) being the most frequently mentioned need.[27]

Migrants requesting services along the route

Requests for services from smugglers and local businesses, mainly regarding accommodation services, were most prevalent in the category "Migrants requesting services along the route". Due to the lack of formal services available for migrants in irregular situations, requests for smugglers' services were mainly for low-cost transportation between key points of the migration route and in border areas.

On the other hand, requests for services from local businesses were mainly for low-cost accommodation near the border entry points between Mexico and the United States. These posts highlight a lack of awareness of the free services available in some areas and the urgency of the migrant population to find safe and affordable accommodation options as they wait for the appointments to cross the U.S. border in increasingly prolonged periods.[28] This may be associated with the lack of presence of public institutions and non-governmental organizations on social media platforms. Most posts in this category mentioned Mexico, specifically Monterrey, Mexico City, Tijuana, Matamoros, Ciudad Juárez, Tapachula, Reynosa, and Mexicali.

Migrants seeking companionship or forming groups for their migratory journeys

There were more than 1,500 posts by the migrant population seeking companionship for their migratory journey. This highlights the interdependence of migrant communities in various locations and the mechanisms to mitigate the risks present along routes in LAC. Specifically, these posts frequently were characteristic of solidarity and fear regarding the dangers of the route. Between May 2022 and November 2023, 65% of the respondents migrating northward surveyed by MMC in Honduras, Costa Rica and Mexico expressed that traveling in groups was one of their protection mechanisms along the route.[29]

The most mentioned places in this category were Mexico (particularly Monterrey, Tijuana, Matamoros, Mexico City, Tapachula, and Ciudad Juárez). These posts primarily came from people seeking companionship to continue a journey they had already started. Colombia, Guatemala, and Venezuela were also often mentioned by people seeking companionship to begin their migration journey from those locations.

27 Mixed Migration Centre (n.d.). Interactive Dashboard 4Mi.
28 Gottesdienes, L., Hesson, T., Rosenberg, M., Cooke, K., and Solomon, D (2023). Biden's new asylum policy strands some migrants at Mexico border as conditions worsen. Reuters.
29 It was the mechanism mentioned by the largest amount of surveyed individuals. See: Canal Laiton, X. (2023). Op. Cit. (p. 11)

Migrants seeking employment, help, or assistance

Migrant populations also actively used the analyzed Facebook groups to search for employment in certain countries or to request assistance or support along their migration route. In this category, posts by migrants with the intention of staying in a host country were also identified. In the collected data, nearly 1,000 entries for this purpose were found.

The most mentioned locations in the posts from this category were Guatemala (almost 250), Venezuela (100), and Colombia (90). The interactions in this space reflected an active community dedicated to seeking assistance and providing useful information for the migrant population's acute needs. As such, this category involved high community support and reciprocity. This type of social media usage can positively impact the integration of the migrant population into host countries of the region, which has already occurred in other south–south migration contexts.[30]

Building communities on social media: words of encouragement, socialization, and exchange of experiences

According to previous studies by MMC, social media serves as a space for sharing words of encouragement and finding information that confirms the ideas, desires, and migratory objectives[31] of the migrant population. This current study found approximately 1,700 posts related to this purpose, comprising 9% of the total posts.

Messages analyzed from the "Words of encouragement and socialization" category revealed the need for connection and emotional support among people on the move and their intention to uplift the spirits of others on the route during difficult moments. Most of these posts included messages related to religion, faith, and spirituality, which is linked to the prevalence of Catholicism in the region. The most mentioned countries in this category were Venezuela, Guatemala, and, to a lesser extent, Colombia, Mexico, and Honduras.

On the other hand, approximately 780 posts were found regarding "Migrants sharing their experiences on the route." In these posts, the migrant population described experiences from their migration process in general, often without focusing on specific locations. Those who mentioned locations along the migration route recounted stories of resistance in Mexico, perseverance in Colombia and Venezuela, dangers and traumatic experiences in the Darien Gap and other parts of Panama, and obstacles to the migratory journey in Central America. According to interactions in these posts, it was evident that they also served as learning tools for other migrants.

The most present topics did not receive the most attention

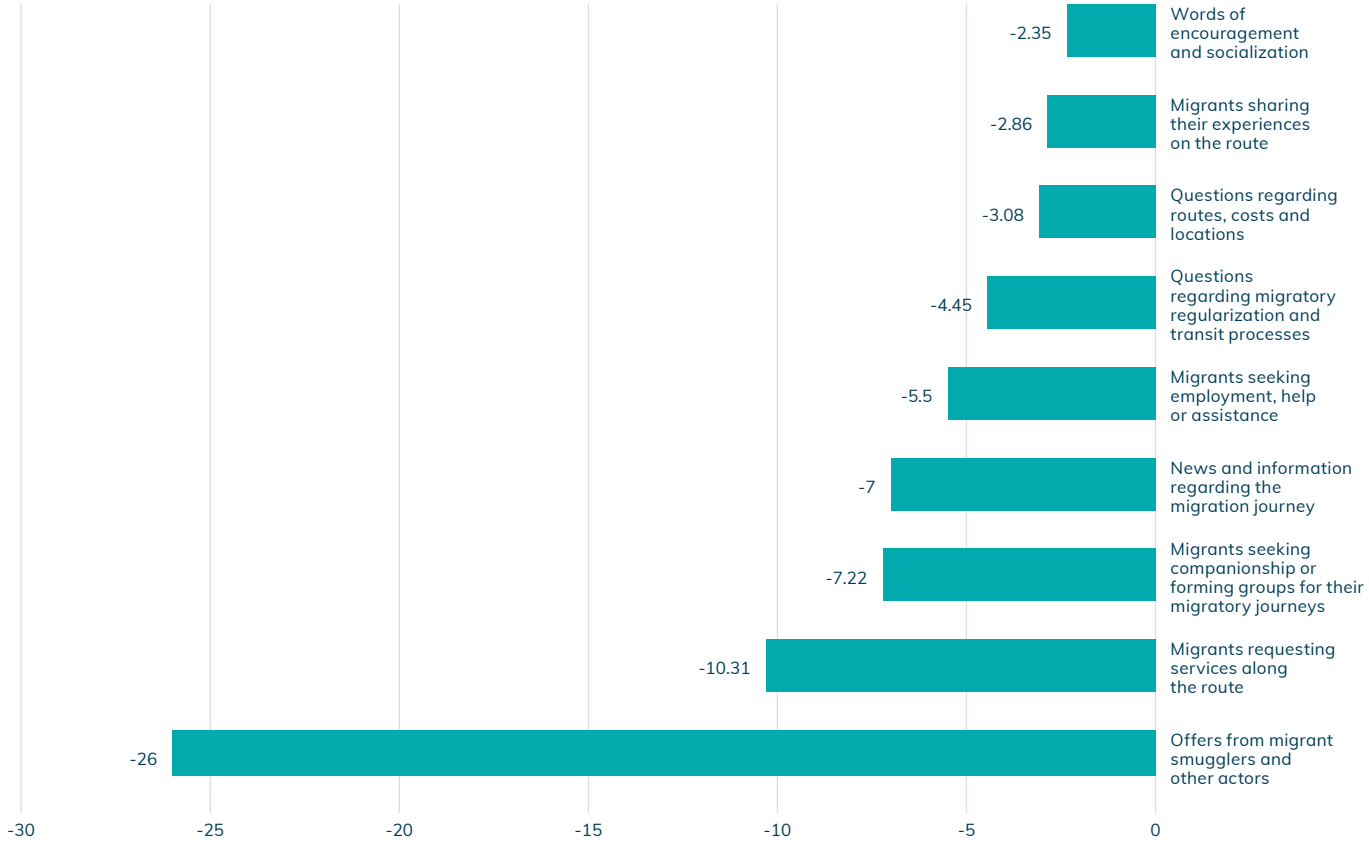
The presence of a category in the Facebook groups only corresponds to the number of posts on each topic. As such, the frequency with which a category appears in a group is not related to the interest it generates in the participating accounts nor the level of interaction it may have (views, comments, reactions, shares).

To evaluate the attention received by a post, Facebook calculates the "performance score," an indicator based on the comments and reactions it receives (like, care, love, haha, wow, sad, and angry). CrowdTangle then provides the calculated figure for each post in the data download. The performance score assesses the relevance of a post with a weighted value, meaning that its values always depend on other posts within the group.[32] A higher value, in this case closer to 0, implies a higher interaction.

In addition to considering a category's presence, measuring its relevance offers the opportunity to understand which topics are the most significant to the participating accounts in the analyzed Facebook groups. The performance score of each category was thus obtained by calculating its posts' average score compared to those in the other analyzed groups (see Figure 3).

30 Harindranath, G., Unwin, T. and Lorini, M. (2023) The Design and Use of Digital Technologies in the Context of South-South Migration. (pp. 504-505)
31 Tomasi, S. and Vicary, D. (2023). Op. Cit. (p. 8)
32 For more information, see: CrowdTangle (n.d.). How do you calculate overperforming scores? | DiSoRLab (n.d.) Guía - Performance Score (only available in Spanish).

Figure 3. Overall performance score of analyzed categories



The numerous offers from smugglers and other actors received little attention and the lowest performance score

In the analyzed Facebook groups, the topic with the highest number of posts, "Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors," had the lowest performance score out of the nine analyzed categories (see Figure 3). This score indicates that the member accounts of these groups interacted less with the posts in this category than the entries of the other eight. Therefore, it was the category with the least relevance.

While migrant populations are exposed to numerous posts about migrant smuggling and other informal services (more than 4,000 posts were found), their interaction with these is minimal. The discrepancy between presence and interaction could be caused by two situations. On the one hand, the migrants often "choose" the smugglers they hire through previous referrals from other migrants or *in situ* in locations along the migration route where they can access in-person offers, rather than through social media. Only 5% of those surveyed by MMC in LAC in the preliminary stage of the research on social media usage indicated they used online platforms to contact smugglers or *travel facilitators*.[33] On the other hand, when the migrant population accepts the online offers made by smugglers, contact is usually made through direct messages, whether via private messages on Facebook or instant-messaging applications, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, so it is not visible in the public groups.

33 Tomasi, S. and Vicary, D. (2023). Op. Cit. (p. 7)

Attention and interaction with words of encouragement and life experiences: the highest performance score

Although "Migrants sharing their experiences on the route" and "Words of encouragement and socialization" categories were the least prevalent in the analyzed Facebook groups, the participating accounts interacted most with these posts (see Figure 3). This outcome is related to the previous statement, that, on social media, the migrant populations seek ways to reinforce their migration goals and to give and receive words of encouragement to boost their spirits and continue their journeys through the region, which present many challenges.[34]

Posts about "Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes" and "Questions regarding routes, costs, and locations" had both a significant presence (35% in the analyzed groups) and a high level of interaction (see Figures 2 and 3). In this context, these categories that combine high levels of presence and attention reveal the importance of seeking information about their migration processes and trajectories on social media for the migrant population. This topic has been previously addressed in the "Access to information is a constant need among migrants heading northward" section.

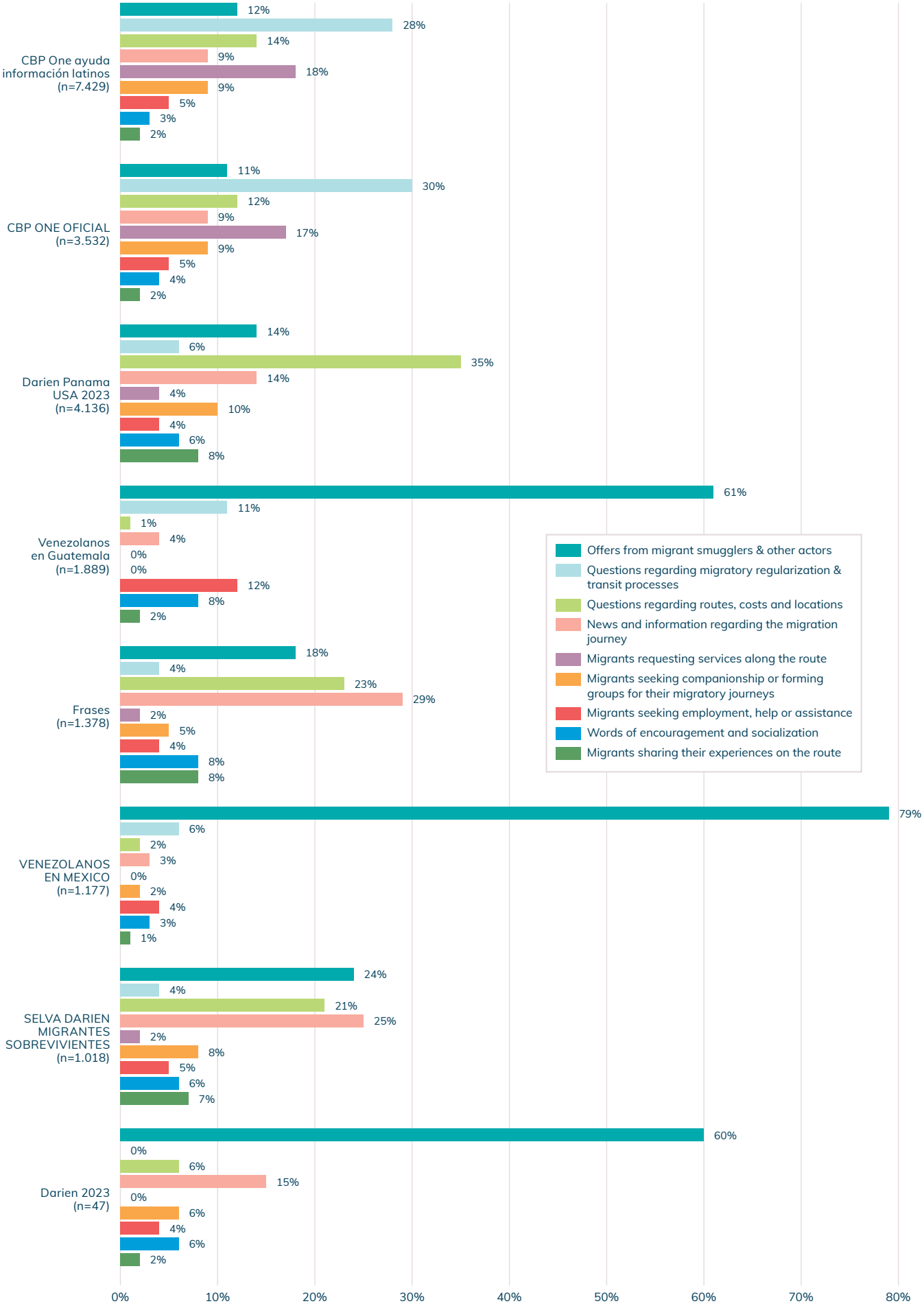
Specialized groups: each conversation occurs within its own space

Facebook groups are information channels that aim to build a community around a specific interest. In each one, conversations on specific topics occur.[35] In this sense, the information analyzed in this research revealed that each group had a different purpose, which was usually explicit in the group's title or description. Moreover, the user accounts' participation was consistent with these dynamics, as they focused on specific topics related to a group's objective. Thus, the analyzed categories had different presences and interactions in each Facebook group. For example, while some groups had more posts expressing mutual support among migrants and focused on building bonds among their members, others had more posts aimed at raising and solving questions about specific migratory moments.

In Figure 4, the proportional distribution of categories in the selected groups can be observed.

34 InSight Crime (2023). How Risks Facing Migrants in Latin America Have Multiplied.
35 See: Facebook (n.d.). Groups.

Figure 4. Proportion of each category per analyzed Facebook group



The "Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors" category had a higher proportional presence in the groups "*Darien 2023*," "*Venezolanos en Guatemala*," and "*VENEZOLANOS EN MEXICO*." Posts on this topic represented between 60% and 79% of the total in these groups. The "obvious" intention reflected in these titles may attract accounts that make informal offers for irregular migration in those groups. Such a high proportion of presence was not observed in any other category in another group because many of the posts by migrant smugglers were messages reposted many times by the offering accounts.

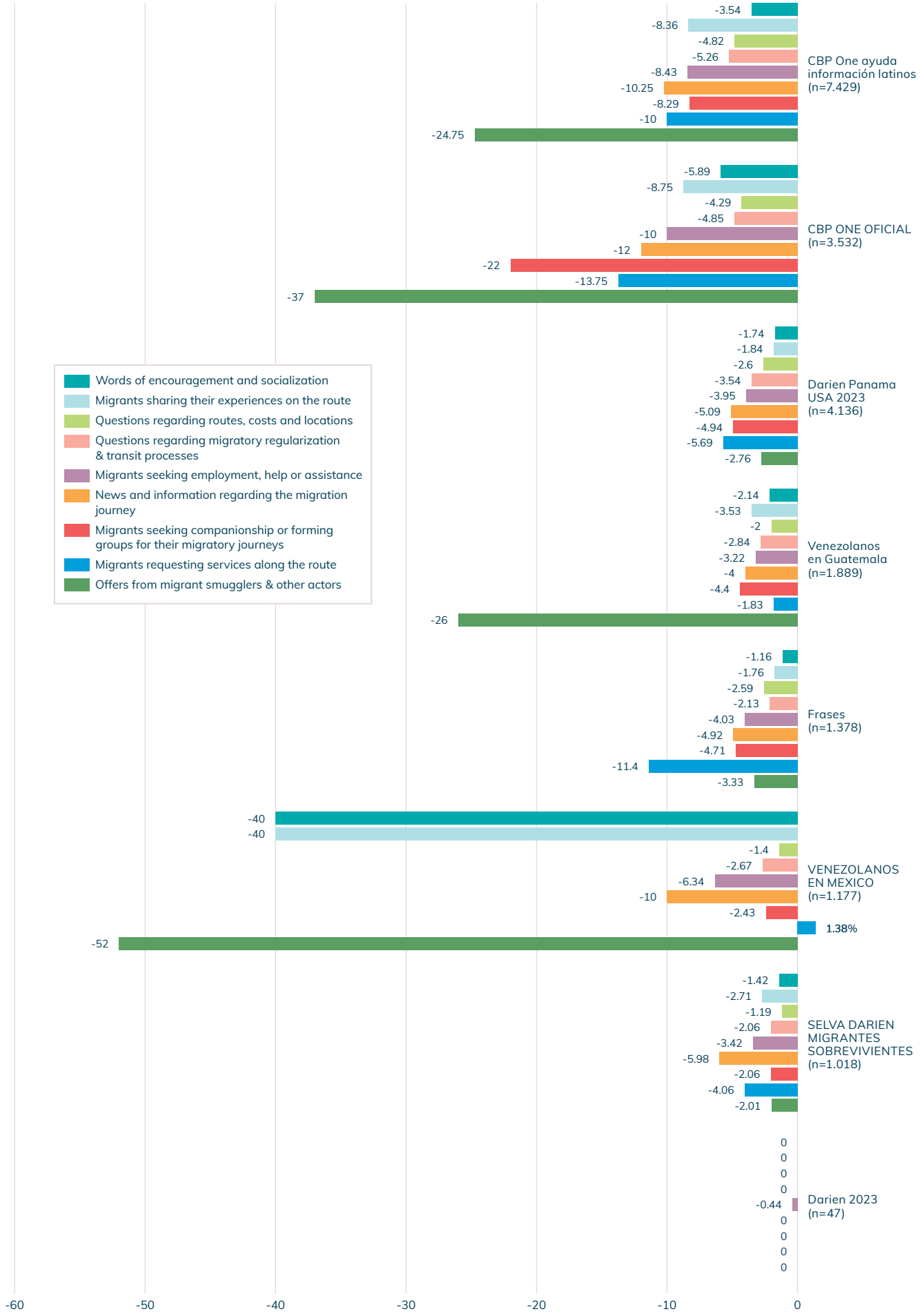
Other categories, such as "Questions regarding routes, costs, and locations," had a significant presence in the "*Darien Panama USA 2023*" (25%), "*Frases*" (20%), and "*SELVA DARIEN MIGRANTES SOBREVIVIENTES*" (18%) groups. Posts related to "Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes" had a greater presence in the "*CBP ONE OFICIAL*" and "*CBP One ayuda información latinos*" groups, which had names related to that topic. Moreover, the migrant population used these groups to raise and resolve concerns about the use of the CBP One application and other available migratory processes at the border between Mexico and the United States.

As part of this research, each group was considered part of the general analysis because people on the move who seek these spaces on social media have more than one option. They are not limited to participating in a single group or topic and can, in fact, explore multiple spaces to diversify access to the information they need and fulfill other objectives for which the different groups may be useful.

The performance score varied by group

In the same way that the prevalence of the categories changed, participants' interactions with the topics also altered depending on the interests and objectives of each Facebook group (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Performance score of the topic categories for each analyzed Facebook group



The intentions of each group—which, as previously mentioned, are usually defined in the title or description—affect the dynamics of the topics discussed, even resulting in the avoidance or marginalization of posts that differ from a group's original intention.

For example, in the "*CBP One ayuda información latinos*" group, posts by migrants sharing their experiences had a low performance score. The posts with the highest performance score were related to "Words of encouragement and socialization," "Questions regarding routes, costs, and locations," and "Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes" (related to the group's purpose). Similarly, in "*CBP ONE OFICIAL*," which has a similar purpose, the highest performance scores were also for posts related to "Questions regarding routes, costs, and locations" and "Questions regarding migratory regularization and transit processes."

Additionally, the performance score of "Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors" was not the lowest in some groups ("*Darien Panama USA 2023*" and "*SELVA DARIEN MIGRANTES SOBREVIVIENTES*"), and the participating accounts had a higher interaction with related posts than other categories. Therefore, it can be assumed that geographical location is among the factors affecting the relevance of this type of post, which implies, among other things, the (un)availability of regulated services. It is not possible to compare the availability of transportation or accommodation services in the Darién Gap with that of Mexico, which could be related to a higher need to access informal smuggling services.

Furthermore, it was also established that it is not common to find groups with a "general purpose" or several simultaneous, but dissimilar purposes. Therefore, future studies on the specific dynamics of migrant populations on social media should be conducted, and researchers must consider which groups the data originates from.

Conclusions

Social media is a key space for migrant populations to build online communities, collaborate and support each other, and access information during their transit. More than 60% of the posts on the Facebook groups analyzed in this study shared this purpose. Furthermore, this type of post had the highest levels of interaction across the analyzed categories.

Access to accurate and up-to-date information and specific legal advice and guidance is essential for people on the move. Although migrant populations attempt to close knowledge gaps on social media, the reception of information through this channel is neither sufficient nor optimal. On these platforms, there is no curatorship of the quality, timeliness, and accuracy of information, leading to high exposure to targeted deception, misinformation, and malicious disinformation campaigns.

Each social media platform has specific use dynamics. This research identified some trends in the use of Facebook groups. Considering them can increase the success of communication campaigns in them. On the one hand, the attention that accounts participating in a group give to a certain topic does not depend on the number of posts addressing it. Although "Offers from migrant smugglers and other actors" were the most prevalent topic in the analyzed groups, they generally received the least interaction from the participating population. On the contrary, although fewer posts related to "Words of encouragement and socialization" were posted in these groups, they received more attention. On the other hand, each analyzed Facebook group serves a specific and explicit purpose. Therefore, the migrant population resorts to them according to their interests and objectives regarding the information they want to share or consume. Therefore, the most effective way to study a specific migration topic on social media is by focusing on groups where that topic is actively discussed.

This study can provide key insights for humanitarian actors and regional and national authorities to develop effective communication and legal aid strategies to reach the migrant population in LAC. However, it is important to note that the dynamics of migrants' access to information on social media are constantly evolving, with the emergence of new discussion groups, topics, or social media platforms. Therefore, the assessment of the populations' information access practices should be updated before launching any campaign.

Recommendations

To humanitarian actors

- Create clear, accurate, and simple communication strategies for social media to raise awareness about the following:
    - Migration regularization procedures for transit or residence in countries that are part of the main migratory routes (institutional offices for attention, necessary documents, available procedures, etc.)
    - Services along the migratory routes, including those available (face-to-face on the route or digital) for reliable legal advice and guidance
    - Changes in the migration policies of transit or destination countries
    - Mechanisms to verify social media information and recognize false, inaccurate, or outdated information, as well as possible scams and other risks
    - Identification of dangers on the route and recommendations for prevention and mitigation mechanisms, with disaggregated and detailed information for population groups, emphasizing the possible care of children and adolescents on the move
    - Search and report channels for people missing along migratory routes
- Design communication strategies with programmatic teams to ensure that messages delivered on social media platforms comply with protection standards and basic humanitarian principles.
- Prioritize disseminating this information on social media platforms and channels used by people on the move, WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok; strengthen the presence of messages on social media, including in open community spaces on platforms that allow it, such as public Facebook groups. Dissemination in online groups or communities should consider the thematic focus of each one, reviewing their names, descriptions and topics shared.
- Diversify content formats according to the social media platform, avoiding technical language and long text in images or publications; prioritize audio, visual, and audiovisual formats.
- Work in collaboration with migrants to ensure that information is disseminated in friendly and easily understandable language for all who need it.
- Collaborate with people on the move and regional diasporas, using social media accounts with a high reach among the migrant population to create joint content on the previously recommended topics.
- Use information shared on social media by the migrant population, under ethical and legal standards, to complement situation assessments and needs assessments of the population of interest.

To State actors

Protecting migrant populations from dangers and risks on social media should involve the following:

- Conducting diagnostic exercises on misinformation and abuses that migrants may face on social media and general needs assessments through social media listening exercises.
- Strengthening the presence of governmental institutions on social media platforms most used by migrants, including online community spaces, such as public Facebook groups.
- Disseminating official information on topics previously mentioned in the recommendations to humanitarian organizations through government institutions social media profiles and in the community spaces of the migrant population on social media.
- Establishing dialogues with social media companies to advocate for strengthening protection measures against misinformation and online abuse against migrants.

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).

For more information visit:
www.mixedmigration.org and follow us at **@Mixed_Migration**

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