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Digital Tactics of Refugee Women: Towards an Inclusive Framework for Digital Literacies

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Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship between online and offline inequalities for shaping refugee women's experiences during resettlement. Refugee women have unique challenges during resettlement, yet the role of gender in shaping refugees' experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and associated risks is often overlooked. Research into the role of digital technologies in refugees' resettlement is fragmented, spread across disciplines, and therefore lacks analytical focus. Motivated by a research field that is fragmented and lacks a gender analysis, we conducted a scoping review to (a) consolidate studies across disciplines on refugee women's digital practices during resettlement and (b) propose tactics as an analytical approach to the study of the relationship between online and offline inequalities. Through the analytical framework of tactics, we review three thematic areas of the outcomes of digital technology use for refugees: social connectedness, access to information, and self-presentation. We find that outcomes of refugee women's ICT use are heavily shaped by gendered norms, expectations, and structural exclusion, and there is a strong need for a better understanding of the role of digital technologies in the lives of refugee women. This study has also demonstrated the use of tactics as an important analytical tool in pluralising understandings of digital literacies as a practice, and that tactics have a strong gendered component. Using tactics as an analytic tool illuminated that, while offline inequalities can inform outcomes of digital technology use, the same inequalities can shape the reappropriation of digital platforms to mitigate the risk of the practices, while gaining access to the outcomes. This study demonstrates that tactics offer a valuable conceptual framework to foreground refugee women's situated agency in digitally mediated contexts.

Keywords

diaspora; digital inclusion; digital literacy; digital migration; ICT; refugee women; resettlement; tactics

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1. Introduction

1.1. Reconsidering a Gendered Research Approach

Women make up an increasingly large proportion of those seeking asylum in the EU (Teodorescu, 2024). Notably, they are undertaking migration independently of male partners and children, driven by their own motivations (Teodorescu, 2024). Positioned at the intersection of gender-based marginalisation and precarious legal status, they frequently experience compounding inequalities in their country of origin, during transit, and in their arrival destinations. Upon arrival, women refugees may encounter structural disadvantages, including lower levels of education, limited language proficiency, family obligations, childbearing responsibilities, restricted social networks, health challenges, and reduced access to integration support (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). These factors significantly shape their experiences of resettlement (Teodorescu, 2024). Consequently, refugee women have unique experiences and specific challenges in accessing essential resources, education, protection, social support, language acquisition, labour market opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes (Albrecht et al., 2020; Deacon & Sullivan, 2009; Teodorescu, 2024).

Nevertheless, research on refugee resettlement processes often adopts a gender-neutral approach, overlooking the role of gender in shaping resettlement experiences and associated risks (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019). Research tends to present refugees as a homogeneous, non-gendered group, or when gender is present—typically within humanitarian discourse—refugee women are depicted as passive victims devoid of agency (Berg, 2022; Smith, 2025). Consequently, such research has failed to describe the nuanced ways in which refugee women actively engage with their own resettlement. In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized the urgency of incorporating gender as a critical analytical lens in this context (Ponzanesi, 2021; Saïd, 2021).

The widespread use of digital technologies has had a profound impact on the experiences of refugees. Research has emphasised the important role of ICTs for refugees at all stages of the migration process. Scholars point to the importance of the smartphone pre-migration, during flight, and upon arrival (Alencar, 2020). During resettlement, refugees' use of digital technologies has been found to be hugely salient in their daily lives. Refugees use communication technologies for maintaining and creating transnational and local ties (Veronis et al., 2018), accessing vital information to help with decision-making and integration procedures (Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker et al., 2018), learning and educational content (Anderson & Daniel, 2020), as well as leisure and entertainment (Anderson & Daniel, 2020; Awad & Tossell, 2021).

While these findings suggest the important role of digital technologies in the lives of refugees, literature calls for further research on the specific experiences of more marginalised refugee subgroups (Anderson & Daniel, 2020; Potocky, 2022). Moreover, literature on the relationship between offline inequalities and digital exclusion is seemingly paradoxical. Critical scholars have argued that digital technologies offer limited benefits at best, have the potential to reinforce existing inequalities, and in some cases create new forms of stratification (Saïd, 2021). Fung et al. (2025) emphasise the paradox of ICTs to offer potentially equal opportunities, while at the same time enlarging inequality. Baum et al. (2014) refer to the "digital vicious cycle": As offline inequalities lead to digital exclusion, digital exclusion can simultaneously increase offline inequalities. Bastick and Mallet-Garcia (2022) outline that while digital technologies can be a means for

marginalized groups to get access to social networks, resources, and information and services, such communities often have unique needs and vulnerabilities, thus experiencing the risks of such tools in unique ways. Nedelcu and Soysüren (2022) describe the "empowerment-control nexus," outlining the complex entanglement between migrants' emancipatory practices enabled by ICTs and the constraints created by the use of technologies on their mobility, such as heightened surveillance and the digitalisation of border regimes. Thus, refugees, increasingly living a digitally mediated life, experience a complex negotiation between risks and opportunities when engaging with digital technologies (Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, 2022). However, there is little research on how specific refugee subgroups, such as refugee women, who have unique experiences and specific needs from their use of ICTs, may negotiate these risks and opportunities or the entanglement of empowerment and control differently. A gendered lens is essential for expanding and deepening a plural understanding of refugees' digital practices and literacies.

1.2. The Context of a Fragmented Research Field

The emerging interdisciplinary field of digital migration focuses on the relational interaction between migration and digital technologies. It thus investigates how ICTs shape migration and how migration is shaped by ICTs. Although the topic as a thematic area has been prevalent across a range of different disciplines, the need to clarify and establish a common field comes from the challenges of a lack of dialogue between disciplines (Leurs, 2023). Mancini et al. (2019, p. 2) argue that digital migration studies remain "fragmented, unsystematic, and lacking an analytical focus, especially for what concerns migrants based in Europe." Scholars have identified several factors that hinder the development of the field (Leurs, 2023; Mancini et al., 2019). These authors, along with others (Lythreatis et al., 2022; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Potocky, 2022; Vuningoma et al., 2020), have made forward steps in addressing the fragmented field by conducting important literature reviews, carving out and clarifying a shared research agenda for digital migration studies. However, what remains lacking is gender as a key point of analysis, with notable exceptions of several small-scale and exploratory studies (Berg, 2022; Witteborn, 2018).

2. The Present Study

2.1. Research Approach

Motivated by the gender-neutral and fragmented nature of the research field, a literature review has been conducted with the key aim of (a) consolidating studies across disciplines on refugee women's digital practices during resettlement and (b) proposing an analytical approach to the study of the relationship between offline and online inequalities for marginalised groups. To achieve this, we pull feminist migration scholarship into conversation with media, communication, and forced migration literature. We argue for a gender analysis of existing literature on refugees' use of digital technologies, to explore and illuminate the unique digital practices of refugee women and how they interact with their experiences of marginalisation. In this way, gender provides a useful analytical tool to weave together the fragmented research landscape. This review, therefore, responds directly to calls for the inclusion of marginalisation studies in communication science research (Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, 2022) and nods to the shortcomings of the literature in using a critical and in-depth comprehension of gender as a social relation in its approach (Saïd, 2021).

We have employed a scoping review methodology, which allows us to address exploratory research questions, while highlighting key themes, concepts, and gaps in the field (Logan et al., 2024) and is particularly useful to map literature on emerging topics (see also Mak & Thomas, 2022). Following Mak and Thomas (2022), the composition of the research team was developed to ensure diverse expertise. Then, the specific scope was selected, with a preliminary search of the literature to determine the breadth of the topic and what reviews have been conducted. It was found that gender was absent in all existing reviews of the field. This gap further justified our approach, as a gendered perspective remains largely absent from reviews on refugees' digital practices during resettlement. Next, search strategies were employed, such as including varied terminology to target different disciplines and keeping in line with the aims of the research. Keyword combinations ("refugee" OR "migrant") AND ("ICT" OR "digital" OR "digital technology" OR "social media") AND ("gender" OR "women" OR "female") were used to search across several scholarly databases. Results were then sorted upon consultation with the team according to the inclusion criteria. These criteria included: being relevant to the research question; being published in English; being peer-reviewed; and being in the field of media, communication, migration, or gender studies. Due to the scattered debates across fields, it was decided that no rigid time frame for inclusion or exclusion criteria was established, as this would ultimately undermine the goal of uniting fragmented research lines. To avoid the "categorical fetishism" of refugees (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018), some literature focusing on other migrant groups was included upon consultation and shared agreement among the team as to its relevance. The resulting articles were then collated, summarised, and synthesised for common themes, trends, and gaps.

This article draws on existing literature across fields that contribute to the topic. Our discussion is structured around three key themes that emerge from the broader literature on refugees' use of social media and ICTs: social connectedness, access to information, and self-presentation. Within each theme, we provide an outline of the key research and debates, although we acknowledge that the themes are not mutually exclusive, and some literature may overlap and spread across categories. Where empirical research on refugee women is lacking, we refer to other migrant groups to explore potentially relevant themes. Rather than providing a complete overview of all literature on these themes, we aim to assess the effectiveness of our analytical lens and highlight key gaps in the literature and potential avenues for further research.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Digital Literacies and Tactics

2.2.1. Conceptualising Digital Literacy

Due to the fragmented research field (see Section 1.2), literature on marginalised communities' use of digital technologies takes a broad range of different approaches and frameworks. In the following section, we outline key approaches in the existing literature and advocate for a more holistic and context-based understanding of the approach of research on refugee women's experiences of ICTs and digital exclusion. This article does not argue for a move beyond digital literacy, but rather a pluralising of digital literacies to incorporate a contextualised understanding of the broad multiplicity of both offline and online practices that contribute to a relationship between use and outcomes of digital technologies, in relation to an individual's structural position.

Initial scholarly discussion on digital exclusion developed around the term "digital divide" (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014; Lythreatis et al., 2022; Scheerder et al., 2017; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). The term originally

referred simply to the uneven distribution of *access* to the internet and was based on the dichotomous distinction of being "connected," i.e., on the right side of the digital divide, or being unconnected, on the wrong side of the divide (Scheerder et al., 2017). This is now commonly referred to as "the first level digital divide." As internet use and access to devices became more prevalent, the focus of the digital divide discourses shifted to digital skills, which became part of the "second level" of the digital divide (Scheerder et al., 2017). This level focuses on the *use* of digital technologies. With regard to specific subpopulations of excluded groups, the focus on use, often framed as "digital skills," is prominent in humanitarian and supra-governmental organisations (Antonio & Tuffley, 2014). Initiatives such as the UNHCR Innovation Service and the UN Agency for Digital Technology demonstrate a strong policy focus on the development of digital skills to increase the social inclusion of excluded groups. The development to consider not just access to but also use of digital technologies has added nuance to the binary distinction, but still garners criticism, for wrongly framing specific groups as digitally excluded, or being on the wrong side of the digital divide (Leung, 2020). This can result in the framing of particular groups as "digitally low literate groups" and often overlooks a person's ability to manage literacy tasks in their everyday lives (Smit et al., 2024). More recently, scholars have termed a "third level" digital divide, which focuses on the *outcomes* of digital skills and internet use (Scheerder et al., 2017). Digital exclusion, therefore, refers to situations when the possession of digital skills and internet use do not lead to beneficial outcomes (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019) While this provides a useful development for the study of refugee women's experiences with digital technology, this framework can fall into the trap of assuming the needs of a specific population and assessing their use of digital technologies against those assumed needs (Anderson & Daniel, 2020). Due to a lack of empirical research on refugee women, this is a particular vulnerability of this approach.

Scholars working with migrant populations criticise digital divide approaches and argue that refugees develop skills in a specific context, shaped by vulnerability (Georgiou et al., 2024), and therefore their skills cannot be understood outside of this context. To acknowledge their situated contexts, some scholars have relied on frameworks developed specifically for refugee integration (Ager & Strang, 2008) and adapted them to explore the role digital technologies have held in this process (Alencar, 2018; Anderson & Daniel, 2020; Potocky, 2022). These approaches—focusing on refugees' use of technologies to meet specific needs—have been criticised for reinforcing a utilitarian approach of digital technology use, which ignores or makes invisible the contradictions in their use, in particular, the cultural and gendered context (Awad & Tossell, 2021). In response, Awad and Tossell (2021, p. 12) argue: "[We] tried to avoid simplifying refugees' experiences and to situate technology, gender, and forced migration…in their sociopolitical, legal, and historical contexts." Thus, the importance of understanding refugees' use of ICTs in their context is particularly important for looking at subgroups such as refugee women, to pay attention to their specific and nuanced structural positionalities.

In accordance with understanding the situated context of digital literacy, some digital media scholars advocate for understanding digital skills and practices as not separate and distinct from the material world, but seeing the interweaving of digital lives with everyday lives, in what has been termed the "everyday digitally mediated migrant life" (Candidatu & Ponzenasi, 2021, p. 4). Candidatu (2021) argues for the benefits of this focus specifically for intersectional research, as the focus on "everydayness" can be used to circumnavigate some of the intersecting gendered, classed, and generational relations often overlooked in digital studies. Borkert et al. (2018, p. 4) critique digital literacy as theorised as "a 'thing' or competence to 'possess, lack, need and acquire,'" with digitally illiterate people being perceived as vulnerable and passive. In addressing this critique, they expand Street's definition of literacy to the digital, by understanding "literacy

as social practices and conceptions of reading and writing" (Street, 1984, as cited in Borkert et al., 2018, p. 4). Their broadening scope acknowledges the many different ways that people engage with technologies, in different contexts, and how refugees in their study become both consumers and producers of content, and active agents in their digital practices. This framework is thus particularly useful in counteracting the passive framing of refugees' use of digital technologies, in which gender plays an important role (Awad & Tossell, 2021). Similarly, Tour et al. (2023) draw on the theorizing of traditional literacy to emphasise the importance of understanding literacy as having pluralities, rather than being singular and universal. Building on Snyder (2009, as cited in Tour et al., 2023), they approach the study of digital literacy practices as culturally and socially shaped ways of using, producing, and understanding information found using digital technologies. They therefore understand digital literacy as a process and focus on what enables and constrains digital literacy practices. Likewise, Smets et al. (2021, p. 5) argue digital literacies should be understood as "relational conditions, situated in socio-cultural practices, instead of purely neutral and/or technical tools to navigate the digital." Georgiou et al. (2024) extend this argument to argue that recognising vulnerability as a productive force, beyond simply context, is essential for understanding the "emergence, limits and lack of skills among vulnerable young people facing risks online and offline" (p. 2). These approaches demonstrate a move away from supposedly objective measures of digital exclusion to a more holistic approach, which calls for a framing of "differentiated uses" (Leung, 2020), most adequate for capturing specific marginalised groups' experiences of digital practices and the impact on their lived experiences.

2.2.2. Tactics

We propose that the concept of "tactics" can provide the basis for a framework for understanding the digital technology use of refugee women. Our framework of tactics builds on theoretical foundations laid by de Certeau and Rendall (1984), who introduced the conceptual distinction between "strategies" and "tactics." De Certeau suggested analysing everyday urban life through the interplay between top-down "strategies" employed by urban planners to organise the city and the bottom-up "tactics" used by city dwellers as they carve out a living, thereby adapting their own routines and navigating the urban environment in their own ways. We argue that a focus on tactics has the potential to situate forms of agency demonstrated by refugees in their digital literacies in the context of structural constraints and has a strong gendered component, which complexifies the discussion in the case of refugee women. Schelenz (2023) explores the appropriation of technology by marginalised groups through the lens of a dialectic of oppression and resistance. Invoking this, she argues, allows space for counteracting victimhood narratives by emphasising users' expressions of agency through ICT use, whilst recognising structural disadvantages. Tactics can acknowledge that the way that individuals reappropriate digital technologies to meet their specific needs is rooted in their own experiences of marginalisation and digital exclusion, as argued by Bastick and Mallet-Garcia (2022). Smit et al. (2024) opt for the use of the term tactics rather than strategies as the latter, in their study, is used to draw out the mechanisms through which power manifests itself, through institutional and technological structures that exert power over subjects, and the former are ways in which individuals appropriate the affordances of ICTs to express agency. Likewise, Udwan et al. (2020) argue that, in the context of refugees, strategies can be considered operating within the top-down integration apparatus and tactics are tools of "making do" in a structurally disadvantaged position. Miellet (2022) emphasises that digital tactics can serve as a "coping mechanism" for refugees, in a vulnerable and constrained situation of uncertainty, to regain control and exercise agency, although often "conditionally" and "minimally." Tour et al. (2023) use assemblage theory to describe the way refugee and migrant

communities make use of a combination of specific personal, material, social, and spatial resources to overcome barriers in their daily digital practices. Wood and Eagly (2015) describe "gendered tactics" as the communication strategies and behaviours individuals use that are shaped by the cultural expectations of gender. Witteborn (2018) shows how women negotiate creative tactics to navigate ICT use, while invoking gendered logics. These findings echo Collins' (2000) understanding of the dialectic of oppression and resistance. Despite the lack of research focusing on refugee women's use of tactics to overcome digital exclusion, due to refugee women's unique and specific challenges during resettlement and therefore the gendered nature of negotiating the affordances and risks in their digital practices, there is strong support for a gendered approach to engaging with tactics to manage this negotiation. Thus, in this article, we understand certain practices, both online and offline, as a form of tactics employed by individuals in their use of digital technologies to manage the risks and affordances of ICTs to access outcomes. Through this, we argue that gender shapes the tactics employed in digital literacy, and, therefore, the outcomes of digital literacy practices are heavily influenced by gender. This perspective deepens the call to understand refugee women's digital practices through the lens of situated agency and structural positioning, rather than against a normative model of successful digital use.

Understanding refugee women's digital practices through the lens of tactics helps us interpret their everyday engagement with ICTs, a perspective that shapes the empirical findings below. In the next section, we explore existing literature using tactics as an analytical framework.

3. Findings

3.1. Social Connectedness

Refugees may experience disconnection during their resettlement and rely on ICTs to create and maintain social ties. Refugees are geographically disconnected from social networks from their home country, and from local communities through housing (Pozzo & Nerghes, 2020) and the workplace (Alencar, 2018). Research shows that even the street can be a space of reproducing separation (Huizinga & van Liempt, 2024). Thus, migrants and refugees make extensive use of ICTs to establish and maintain social ties, with vast transnational networks, and are often at the forefront of innovative use of ICTs due to their dependency on such for connection (Madianou, 2016; Madziva, 2016). Social connectedness is reported as a key motivation for refugees' use of digital technologies (Anderson & Daniel, 2020) and is well documented as one of the most important outcomes of use (Mancini et al., 2019; Vuningoma et al., 2020), with clear benefits during resettlement (Alencar, 2018; Udwan et al., 2020). While gender has been found to significantly impact resettlement experiences, research on the gendered differences of refugees' use of ICTs for social connectedness remains sparse (Anderson & Daniel, 2020). Literature on the use of digital technologies for social connectedness during resettlement tends to distinguish between the maintenance of social ties in the country of origin and migrants' use of ICTs to create new social ties with communities in their host country, with some frameworks suggesting that such uses are in opposition or tension with each other (Leurs, 2023). Contrary to this, and in line with the work of Diminescu (2008), who argues for a move beyond binaries and to acknowledge the complexities of simultaneous belonging to multiple territories and networks, this article takes the approach that migrants use ICTs for investing in different forms of social connectedness, and that all are part of the same process of identity formation (Candidatu, 2021).

Udwan et al. (2020) use the framework of digital resilience tactics to understand how social networks maintained over distance using digital technologies allow refugees in the Netherlands to become resilient—providing the ability to create networks of shared support and providing stability through constant, routine communication. However, Udwan et al. (2020) found this came with limitations, as their participants described limiting their sharing of emotions to mostly positive emotions, through fear of worrying or hurting those left at home facing other challenges. Participants described the conscious emotional management that takes place in these interactions, expressing guilt or shame when sharing negative emotions with those remaining at home and intentionally suppressing them in their online communication. These feelings may be intensified by gendered expectations of family. Transnational studies suggest there is a heavy burden on women associated with staying constantly connected to family members via digital technologies, rooted in ideas of gendered roles of motherhood (Veazey, 2021). Madianou (2016) describes the uniqueness of migrant transnational families, arguing that the convergence of transnationalism and communication technologies enables and transforms the role of the family. However, Witteborn (2015, p. 351) argues that "mediated sociality became an opportunity for transnational family intimacy but also a challenge, as people were held accountable for meeting family expectations in virtual interactions." Zontini (2004) makes use of the concept of "kin work" to describe labour that migrant women do to contribute to the development and maintenance of transnational family and communities. She describes the gendered expectation that migrant mothers maintain feelings of family "togetherness" despite distance, through financial remittances, sending of parcels, and constant communication. Candidatu (2021) draws on the work of Geldalof (2009, cited in Candidatu, 2021) to argue that the maintenance of migrant and family communities in the digital diaspora is a form of cultural reproduction. Parreñas (2014, p. 425) explored the way ICTs have created expectations of transnational mothers to be "here and there," "absent and present," and "always available," thus reproducing rather than deconstructing gender ideologies around female domesticity. She also notes a lack of literature on transnational fathering, despite the focus on men's migration in existing literature—a finding supported by this review—arguing this is because fathering from a distance does not interrupt normative gender behaviour, but rather abides by gender norms of male breadwinners (Parreñas, 2008). While transnational family studies literature focuses on labour migration, the findings remain salient to refugee women, despite their structural exclusion from the formal labour market. Madziva (2016), in her study of Zimbabwe asylum-seeking women in London, discusses "mothering through remittances," a common practice for transnational parents, which was almost impossible for asylum-seeking mothers due to integration regimes' restrictions on work and led to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. In line with Parreñas (2008, p. 8), Madziva highlights the gendered expectation of remaining in close contact with family members, emphasising that the ability to nurture and maintain close ties with their own children under any circumstances was the "proper identity of the African mother." In contrast to the burden of this kind of labour, Greene (2020) describes that her participants mediated family practices as a "tactic of hope" during the period of waiting they experienced in a refugee camp in Greece. She observed how her participants used ICTs to, together with their loved ones, fantasize about family life to remain hopeful for the future, during periods of separation.

Leurs (2019) finds the paradox of "asymmetrical emotional intimacy" in transnational migrant networks. He uses the term "digital care labour" to describe the tactic of impression management work that young migrants do online, similar to the practices found in Udwan et al. (2020). Leurs (2019) finds examples of digital care labour, such as having multiple social media accounts for kin networks in their homeland and friends locally, or withholding negative feelings online, demonstrating how young migrants tactically make

use of platform affordances to practice care in the context of vastly divergent material conditions. Likewise, Madianou and Miller (2013) introduce the concept of "polymedia" to explore how, as different forms of communication technologies become accessible to broader segments of the population, choices about which medium to use become ingrained in social, emotional, and moral dimensions. They argue that individuals navigate an environment of polymedia, making tactical decisions in their choice to manage the potential risks of the communication.

In line with other scholarship, this article encourages a move away from a utilitarian understanding of migrants' use of digital technologies (Awad & Tossell, 2021) and binary distinctions of connectivity (Diminescu, 2008) to understand the entanglement of transnational and local social connectedness. This is supported by Georgiou (2013), who argues that transnational social connectedness provides migrants with the "ontological security" needed to flourish and grow in a local context, as supported by Alencar (2018). These scholars, and others, emphasize the two-way exchange of connectedness. Smets et al. (2021), in their study of one temporary refugee shelter in the Netherlands, found that asylum seekers used social media to develop social relations with local communities in receiving countries. The study focused on two Facebook groups set up by local residents, which created a space of communication and exchange of goods and resources between local residents and newly arrived asylum seekers in the area. Likewise, Veronis et al. (2018) found that social media serve as a contact zone between communities, with the potential to facilitate transcultural communication. They suggest that social media become a borderland to bridge cultural differences and aid in the negotiation of a sense of belonging between virtual and physical spaces. Although in their initial study, gender did not appear to have noticeable effects on refugees' use and experience of social media as a mechanism of transculturalisation, a more in-depth study of gendered practices is needed to explore this further. Both Minchilli (2021) and Candidatu (2021) explore the gendered nature of the relationship between refugees' engagement with transnational communities online and the impact it has on local engagement. Candidatu (2021) explored the "multi-sited embeddedness" of the Somali diaspora community between local, national, and transnational spaces and found the central role of motherhood practices in bringing together Somali migrant women. She found that, along with the strong embeddedness of her participants in transnational family networks using ICTs, the same technological affordances allowed them to create and maintain ties between Somali women in their local communities in Amsterdam (Candidatu, 2021). These connections were facilitated by their childcare responsibilities, such as maintaining connections with mothers from school. Thus, it is seen here that gendered expectations of migrant motherhood not only emphasise social connection with children and other family members left behind, but also encourage new connections between mothers in the diaspora living abroad. Minchilli (2021), in her comparative study of different generations of Somali refugee women living in Rome, also explored the tension between refugees using ICTs to build local weak new ties and maintain their strong existing ties through transnational communication. She found that the younger generation of Somali women, more recently arrived refugees, with generally lower literacy levels and a lack of cultural, social, and economic resources, focused their attention on maintaining stronger transnational relationships. She argued that their vulnerability pushed them to prioritise relationships with family and friends at home, or with people they had met on their journey to Europe, rather than those living locally (Minchilli, 2021). This means their online interactions were not coupled with offline encounters, and they highlighted a common experience of social isolation on a local level (Minchilli, 2021). This suggests that layers of vulnerability play a vital role in the extent to which refugee women can engage with the use of digital technologies for local and transnational social connectedness.

Some research describes marginalised groups evoking tactics to the burden of being constantly connected through disconnection, and this too may have a strong gendered component. Chib et al. (2021) found four tactics invoked by marginalised communities through their digital media use: discretion, disguise, disengagement, and disconnection. Discretion involves selective sharing and careful management of information, disguise entails altering one's digital identity to conform to societal expectations, disengagement involves withdrawing from certain digital platforms or interactions to avoid harassment, and disconnection refers to completely withdrawing from online tools or platforms. Chib et al. (2021, p. 823) argue that digital (non)use should not be understood as externally imposed and, therefore, devoid of agency, but as an expression of situated agency, which "on the surface may suggest compliance," but in reality "hides subtle strategies of resistance." However, Cascone and Bonini (2024), when researching the differing disconnection practices of refugees and other migrants, argue that this practice is structured by layers of privilege and cannot be employed by all migrants equally. They demonstrate how asylum seekers in Athens, due to the familiar expectation of being constantly connected, are unable to engage in absolute non-use, and are more likely to engage in contextual non-use (Chib et al., 2021).

There are a few studies that use the framework of tactics to study the digital literacy of so-called digitally excluded groups. These studies find that the relationship can indeed be reversed: Social tactics are used by individuals to overcome challenges in digital spaces. This points to the entanglement of offline and online practices, as discussed above. Worrell (2021) finds that "digital brokering" is a common form of intergenerational support for migrant families in Australia; that is, young people helping their parents use smartphones, social media, and video-calling apps to maintain relationships during resettlement. Likewise, Marler and Hargittai (2024) found that older adults often rely on social digital support from partners and are motivated by, among other things, a desire to avoid burdening other network members. Smit et al. (2024) find that low-literate Dutch adults make use of informal and formal offline support structures, as well as digital affordances like non-written communication, translation software, and optical character recognition to overcome digital barriers. These show a strong role of the use of social connections to tactically overcome digital challenges. The extent to which these are used by refugee women, who are more likely than male refugees to arrive through family reunification, remains unstudied, but raises interesting debates on whether this tactic supports or discourages dependency.

The research discussed above shows that refugees may experience disconnection, relying on their use of ICTs to increase social connectedness, both within transnational diaspora communities and among local communities, with well-documented benefits to resettlement. However, these uses come with risks, like asymmetrical emotional intimacy and being overburdened with being constantly connected, which likely are felt more by women due to gendered roles and kin labour expectations. Refugees employ tactics to manage these burdens, including digital care labour and contextual non-use as a disconnection strategy, although this is informed by different privileges. Offline social connection can be a tactic for overcoming online challenges, like digital brokering, but the gendered effects of this remain understudied.

3.2. Access to Information

Refugees have unique and specific information needs during resettlement, operating in a challenging and precarious information landscape "where receiving poor or false information can most severely cause death, loss of family, or financial ruin" (Borkert et al., 2018, p. 2). Information seeking is cited in research on

refugees' use of digital technologies as an important motivation, including accessing information on the asylum process, the current situation in their home countries, important local information for new refugees, information to help find jobs and establish a network in a new city, and national and international news (Anderson & Daniel, 2020). Wall et al. (2015, p. 1), in their study of Syrian refugees in Jordan, use "information precarity" to describe "the condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information, potentially leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumours that can affect their economic and social capital." They identify five areas of information precarity, namely: access to information; the prevalence of irrelevant, dangerous information; refugees' lack of control over their image in the media; surveillance and phone monitoring; and refugees' disrupted social support. Women refugees may be more vulnerable concerning information precarity, having more specific information needs and an increased lack of access to relevant information due to exclusion from formal information streams (Berg, 2022; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). Likewise, Berg (2025a) argues that women refugees experience "relational information precarity": They experience disconnection from local knowledge systems due to emotional and cultural detachment in their host country, for example, a distrust of local mainstream news outlets. Due to their differing experiences of information needs and precarity, women refugees may therefore rely more heavily on informal information-seeking tactics (Mena Montes & Boland, 2025).

To address the challenges of information precarity in resettlement, refugees make use of informal information-sharing tactics. Critical migration scholars have proposed the term "mobile commons" to refer to "the invisible knowledge of mobility that circulates between the people on the move…but also between transmigrants attempting to settle in a place" (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 191). While knowledge-sharing through the mobile commons emerged through word-of-mouth, Dekker and Engbersen (2014) demonstrate how social media have transformed this practice through cementing and expanding social networks. For example, Udwan et al. (2020) described "digital health tactics," that is, community members setting up Facebook groups to share experiences and feedback on navigating health infrastructure, particularly noting the affordance of geolocating services to find tailored, local support. Dekker and Engbersen (2014) and Miellet (2022) argue that these tactics are a form of resistance against restrictive immigration regimes. However, informal information-sharing tactics are not neutral. Angulo-Pasel (2018) demonstrates how the mobile commons are based on gender-neutral assumptions about migration and information needs, and knowledge found there can reproduce gendered power imbalance. Likewise, the labour that is required to produce the mobile commons is often not a site of examination and may well reflect gendered differences. For example, Veazey (2021) terms "gendered digital labour" as the often overlooked emotional and relational labour that migrant mothers invest in maintaining online communities, engaging in what she describes as meta-maternal practices of creating online groups that provide emotional support during migrant resettlement. This demonstrates that informal information-sharing tactics are intertwined with the politics of care.

There are risks associated with relying on information sharing as a digital tactic, which may impact women more due to a higher reliance on informal information. Reliance on information found online presents the risk of dis- or misinformation, and refugees employ knowledge validation tactics to assess the reliability of information found via the commons. Dekker et al. (2018) and Borkert et al. (2018) reported participants' lack of trust in the information they found online. Borkert et al. (2018) found that people employ "information mediaries" to help search and evaluate information found online. Generally, friends (49%) and other refugees (23%) were reportedly the most frequently used, and it was the social ties to persons who

successfully migrated that respondents considered most trustworthy. Berg (2022) found that women prefer to receive information from information mediaries, despite expressing an awareness that some of this information is not accurate. Dekker et al. (2018) highlight four knowledge validation strategies used by refugees to verify the trustworthiness of online information. Strategies included checking the source of information and characteristics of the specific platform or group; validating or cross-checking information with trusted social ties; triangulation of online sources with other online or offline sources; and comparing information with their own experiences. In general, they found that existing offline ties were very important in the access to and trust in information found online. This is supported by the findings of Borkert et al. (2018).

Both Berg (2022, 2025a, 2025b) and Witteborn (2014) explore gendered barriers to information seeking using digital technologies, and explore the tactics women refugees employ to overcome such barriers. Berg (2022) found that for young refugee women living in Germany, precarity was shaped by access to internet connection. She reports that while her participants had access to a mobile phone and the sufficient digital literacy required, differing living conditions meant participants had differing access to unlimited and stable internet connections. Likewise, Witteborn (2014) found the affective barrier of shame to limit women's access to internet rooms in shared temporary accommodation for refugees. She found that shame, brought about by gendered norms around promiscuity and upheld by a culture of community surveillance in the shared accommodation, prevented women from producing, sharing, and circulating information on topics such as health, law, and migration and asylum policy (Witteborn, 2014). In this sense, the gendered experience of shame transformed such rooms into spaces of disconnection, therefore "mirroring, reduplicating and amplifying the isolation of the institutional setting" (p. 79). Berg (2025b) refers to this as "digital othering": the exclusionary practices, not just physical but also social and cultural, within digital spaces that limit access. Both authors found participants' use of gendered tactics to manage limited internet access; Berg (2022) described how her participants chose to forgo their entertainment needs—for example, watching shows from their home country—in order to save their limited internet data for information needs. Participants reported that access to this information made them feel more in control. Witteborn (2018) described the "gendered persuasion tactic" of participants using "charm" to access a phone contract with unlimited internet, despite not having the documentation necessary. Wall et al. (2015) also noted that older women refugees often rely on their sons and grandsons for access to the internet, which raises questions about dependency. Recently, Berg (2025a, p. 2454) introduced the concept of "digital sacrifice" to describe how gendered household expectations shape use of technology, describing "a form of negotiation in which women deprioritize their own digital needs to support others." Here, Berg (2025a) demonstrates how shared technology within households is shaped by caregiving responsibilities and family dynamics.

This strand of literature shows that women experience heightened information precarity during resettlement, and, consequently, both invest in and heavily rely on informal information sources found through their use of digital technologies. Accordingly, they employ digital tactics to overcome or manage the risks of unreliable information, often relying on information intermediaries, although the gendered differences in the use of these tactics remain understudied. Research also suggests that women refugees experience gendered barriers in accessing information online through digital technologies, including affective barriers of shame, community surveillance rooted in gendered norms, and gendered family dynamics. However, some research shows refugee women make use of gendered tactics to overcome this.

3.3. Self-Presentation

Refugees often face significant challenges in asserting agency over how they are represented in mainstream media spaces. Existing research into refugees' media representation suggests that they are frequently subjected to reductive and often negative narratives (McLoughlin, 2023; Rothenberger & Schmitt, 2024). This struggle for representational agency is especially pronounced for refugee women, who are frequently depicted through a lens of victimhood and passivity, which has concrete adverse effects, as it sets the stage for paternalistic policies (Rothenberger & Schmitt, 2024). Potocky (2022), in their review of research on the role of digital skills in refugee integration, concluded that research highlights digital expression as "a medium for producing and disseminating counter narratives to host societies' negative discourse about refugees" (p. 98) and points to this as an important avenue for further research.

Some literature on refugees' self-presentation emphasizes refugees' choice to tactically politicise their identities online. Cascone and Bonini (2024) compared the digital media use of refugees to other migrants in reception centres in Italy and found that while other migrants post content related to their private lives, asylum seekers always addressed the public sphere—usually the diaspora. They commented and discussed political issues, sharing news articles and following political activists, but rarely shared posts with a self-narrative purpose. Godin and Doná (2016) also found that politicising identity plays an important role in refugees' public self-presentation online. They examined a case study of two artistic projects by young Congolese refugees in London—and described how the projects, using social media, added multiplicity to refugee representation in two ways: (a) through repoliticising refugee experiences and thus making community voices more active, and (b) through heterogenising refugee voices, rather than a singular refugee voice. By contrast, Witteborn (2015) found that participants in her study did not always engage with politicising their identity. She describes incidents of being "imperceptible," that is, purposefully distancing their online presentation from the stigmatised label of asylum seeker in order to emphasise their other qualities and parts of their identity, and, oppositely, of choosing to embrace the label of refugee to aid in political mobilisation. In both cases, refugees use the affordances of digital technologies to allow for self-presentation, some to politicise their experiences and identities *as* refugees, and others to move beyond their refugee identity to emphasise the existence of multiple identities.

The opportunity to tactically engage in self-presentation online is even more complex for refugee women. Mevsimler (2021) found that second-generation Somali women in London, the children of refugees, used social media as a space to construct new forms of being a Somali woman, beyond conflict and fleeing. Witteborn (2018) reported, in her case study of refugee women in Germany, that learning to use digital technologies represented a process of "unbecoming: both unbecoming refugee and a female corseted in norms and rules imposed on her in the name of naturalised gendered ways of acting" (Witteborn, 2018, p. 26). She also describes that the materiality of the digital that gave women the agency to control how they represent themselves online opened up an imagined space to feel "free" and connect with other women who were trying to move beyond disciplining gender roles. These cases highlight how digital technologies are used by refugee women to exert agency over their representation by creating collective identities, renegotiating their identities shaped by gender and diaspora identities.

There are well-documented risks associated with self-presentation online, particularly for marginalised communities, and people employ digital tactics to reduce the impact of such risks. Schelenz (2023) found

that Afghan women in Germany have privacy and safety concerns associated with being visible online, both from a high awareness of state surveillance and also from gendered norms around visibility. Wall et al. (2015) describe tactics that refugees use to manage risks of state surveillance, such as using coded language with relatives at home, but it is unclear how gendered norms around visibility play into this. Another risk experienced by visibility online is context collapse. Borrowed from media studies, Marwick and Boyd (2011, p. 114) identify "context collapse" as "social media technologies that collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences," contrary to the distinctions made in the literature above. For some people, they argue, social media are particularly challenging as there is a need to navigate the expectations of different audiences on one platform. This is particularly felt by refugee women, who are subjected to different gendered expectations from audiences in different contexts and cultures. These risks are heavily informed by the social, cultural, and material contexts (Cassidy, 2018; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Fox & Warber, 2015). Literature suggests that refugees employ digital tactics to manage context collapse, demonstrating ways in which such communities tactically use the polymedia environment to mitigate the heightened risks of platform affordances, while making use of the opportunities. Udwan et al. (2020) describe their participants as engaging in complex and multifaceted digital identity resilience tactics online. Participants used online platforms to claim their right to express themselves, while actively negotiating between sometimes contradictory expectations and obligations. They engaged in "technology-enabled code switching," sometimes even having completely separate social media accounts for different audiences. Almenara-Niebla and Ascanio-Sancez (2020) explore this in the gendered context. They found that the context collapse of digital technologies fuels transnational gossip, which serves as a disciplining gendered control and enforces strong ideas of gender roles. The authors describe two tactics to manage digital gossip and the challenges of context collapse: Participants have different Facebook accounts for different audiences, or they have one Facebook account but make use of privacy settings to manage what content is seen by what audiences. The use of these tactics is found in research on other marginalised migrant groups (Cascone & Bonini, 2024; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Leurs, 2019). Dhoest and Szulc (2016) emphasise that the use of such tactics is related to factors such as digital, physical, and economic proximity to conservative family members and ethno-cultural community; economic self-sufficiency; linguistic proficiency and literacy; psychological and physical safety; and internet access. Therefore, the use of tactics to manage the heightened risks of context collapse faced by precarious groups is not equally used by all community members, thus exposing those more marginalised to even more risk. This has the potential to reproduce existing inequalities, for which further research is needed on refugee women.

Refugee women struggle for agency over their representation in mainstream media. Through their use of ICTs, they are able to engage in tactics to regain agency over their self-representation, some through politicising and others through depoliticising their refugee identities, getting access to new gendered ideals, and using online platforms to carve out new diaspora identities. However, visibility online comes with risks, particularly under the constraints of rigid gender roles, such as privacy and context collapse. Refugees employ tactics in their use of digital technologies for self-representation to manage the associated risks, although their use of these tactics is informed by other vulnerabilities.

4. Conclusion

This article had two key aims: first, to consolidate research on refugee women's digital literacy practices during resettlement, which was thus far fragmented across disciplines, and second, to propose tactics as an

analytical approach to the study of the relationship between offline and online inequalities, in particular of refugee women. With respect to the first aim, this study demonstrates a clear need for a better understanding of the role of digital technologies in the everyday lives of refugee women. While refugee women experience structural inequalities in their resettled societies, digital technologies offer the potential to help meet their specific needs. However, outcomes of such technologies are not evenly distributed, nor are the benefits they promise; heavy reliance on ICTs increases the risks of digital technology use, shaped by conflicted gendered roles and expectations, and the potential to exacerbate the precarity felt by refugee women in their resettlement. With respect to the second aim, this study has demonstrated the use of tactics as an important analytical tool in pluralising understandings of digital literacies. Using tactics as an analytic tool has illuminated that while offline inequalities can inform outcomes of digital technology use, the same inequalities can shape the re-appropriation of digital platforms to mitigate the risk of the practices, while gaining access to the outcomes. Yet these tactics are heavily impacted by gender. For social connectedness, refugees maintain social networks as a form of digital resilience tactics; however, due to gendered expectations around family, women are burdened with the labour of maintaining such networks, and likely do more work to manage their emotions within such networks. Additionally, while refugees may use online spaces to facilitate connection with local residents, for women, this is often limited to being facilitated by gendered roles such as motherhood and childcare. For access to information, migrants and refugees use information commons, but again, the maintenance of such networks often falls on women, and the information found there can be less relevant, and women have a preference for receiving information through information mediaries. Likewise, some research suggests that material and affective barriers to access, rooted in traditional gendered roles, increase information precarity for women. Refugees use tactics to engage with their own self-presentation online, but for women, the identity work involved is more complex and the privacy and safety risks of online visibility and context collapse are starker, under the constraints of rigid gender roles. Thus, this study demonstrates that tactics have a strong gendered component, and exploring gendered tactics offers a valuable conceptual framework to foreground refugee women's situated agency in digitally mediated contexts.

By structuring the review around three core themes, this article has sought to provide conceptual clarity on the outcomes of digital technology use in line with existing understandings of the digital divides, while remaining attentive to the fluidity of digital practices. This approach has elucidated that individual tactics often span multiple thematic categories. For example, practices like disconnection can simultaneously be a tactic to mitigate the risks of the burden of feeling constantly connected, and of the surveillance risks of self-presentation. Thus, tactics do not directly relate to only one outcome of digital technology use.

The review also draws attention to the eurocentrism present in much of the research, reflecting Leurs' (2019) argument that the field's agenda has been shaped by the political framing of the so-called refugee crisis. This results in the contested categorising of refugees often present in research. Although we acknowledge the unique position of refugees in the EU due to their specific legal categorisation and positioning in migration regimes, we also realise that this is less relevant in the case of some research; therefore, in this literature review, we have made use of research on other migrant groups where relevant. Additionally, the review shows that current research focuses on social media use; therefore, social connectedness as a theme is more developed with more empirical support, as reflected in this literature review. Research often neglects other critical digital tools such as translation apps, platforms for digital governance, or technologies that mediate access to public services such as health, schooling, and education. As governments continue to digitalise service delivery, this

oversight is particularly concerning, as the ability to navigate these tools becomes increasingly important for healthcare, social benefits, employment, and housing for refugees. The impact this has on women, who face unique resettlement conditions, has the potential to exacerbate their precarity.

This review is not exhaustive, and several important themes fall outside its immediate scope. One such area requiring urgent attention is refugee women's engagement with the digital economy, particularly through platform-mediated service delivery, such as delivery or domestic work and screen-based remote labour. Emerging literature points to the growing relevance of digital labour platforms in refugees' access to the labour market. Reports from the UNHCR (2024) and the ILO (2021) underscore the potential of online work to circumvent some legal and social barriers that are experienced by refugee women, offering access to income opportunities. However, these benefits also come with significant risks. Digital workers often lack basic protections and reinforce existing gender disparities, as shown in studies like Mansour-Ille and Starks (2023), who document persistent challenges such as limited digital literacy, poor connectivity, and inadequate regulation. The digital economy may appear promising, especially for groups such as refugee women who are excluded from formal labour markets, but gendered dynamics may play an important role in shaping the outcomes of labour platform use, as well as vulnerability to risks. As digital labour becomes an increasingly prominent source of income for refugee communities, future research should engage with its complex implications, particularly how benefits and risks are shaped and distributed by existing inequalities.

We propose that future research would benefit from the interdisciplinary approach taken here, using digital tactics as an analytical tool to examine the relationship between offline and online inequalities. Future research must attend to this tension and explore how refugee women navigate the risks, constraints, and opportunities of digital technologies under existing intersectional inequalities.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability
Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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No AI-based generative technology was used in the preparation of this manuscript, nor in the execution of the research that the manuscript reports upon.

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