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EDITORIAL

Digitalization and Migration: Rethinking Socio-Economic Inclusions and Exclusions

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Abstract

This thematic issue interrogates the relationship between digitalization and the social inclusion or exclusion of migrants in destination countries. Drawing on thirteen articles employing a breadth of methodological approaches across eight national contexts around the globe, it investigates whether digitalization phenomena simply reconfigure pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities or demonstrate unprecedented, emergent dynamics. Three cross-cutting themes structure the issue. First, authors provide timely evidence on migrant agency and digital practices, demonstrating how migrants navigate and reappropriate digital technologies. In doing so, they challenge exclusionary infrastructures and offline inequalities. Second, articles analyze the role of intermediary organizations, highlighting contrasting dynamics: On the one hand, state digitalization initiatives produce intentional or unintended exclusionary consequences; on the other, NGOs can leverage these technologies to support migrants in the face of old or technologically intertwined challenges. Finally, the issue zooms into a digital intermediary—the platform economy. Platformization creates new layers of precarity for migrant workers in food delivery and care sectors, and can be prevailed upon in migrant strategies to overcome exclusion. Ultimately, the query as to whether technologies and spaces of digitalization reinforce pre-existing inclusion or exclusion or create new ones is answered in a nuanced, context-specific manner that demands even further research: to some extent the embedded power relations in digitalization processes and practices do entail reproduction of the same, but new facets also emerge, and technologies can also be leveraged to challenge inequalities via migrant agency.

Keywords

digitalization; digital technologies; migrants; migration; social exclusion; social inclusion

1. Introduction

Evidence increasingly suggests that digital technologies have direct consequences for migrants, in affecting their decision to migrate, their migration trajectories, their life in the country of destination, as well as continued relationships beyond this new physical residence (Dekker et al., 2016). In addressing digitalization and migration, this thematic issue explores how digital technologies influence the social inclusion or exclusion of migrants in the country of destination. In particular, it explores the inclusions and exclusions of evolving digitalized phenomena or processes in both digital (or digitally adjacent) practices, implementation of policy schemes at an intersection with digitalization, and digital technologies in the everyday experience of migrants. Here, we define digitalization as the "complex and heterogenous process leading to increased relevance of digital technology and digital data in contemporary society" (Büchner et al., 2022, p. 11).

The issue's thirteen articles canvass digital inclusion and exclusion of migrants and beneficiaries via diverse methodological approaches—including qualitative interviews, ethnographic research, literature reviews, and critical document analysis—across eight national contexts (the Netherlands, Turkey, Italy, Poland, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, and Tanzania). Three cross-cutting themes emerge, illustrating the multifaceted and dynamic relationship between digitalization, mobile subjects, and forms of inclusion or exclusion. We proceed from examining migrant agency to analyzing the role of institutional systems and other intermediaries, to zooming in on the unique case of the platform intermediary. Taken together, they wholistically examine and question the following: to what extent do digitalization phenomena simply manifest as reconfiguration of pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities, versus evidence of newly created dynamics, including empowerment?

2. Context and Framework: Digitalization and the Migrant as a Subject of In- and Exclusion

Digital technologies have been emphasized across interdisciplinary migration studies and even further afield as crucial for migrants' social inclusion in new contexts (Alencar, 2020; Brown et al., 2019; Masiero & von Deden, 2022). For one, it emphasizes how technologies, including social media, smartphones, and a range of digital platforms, facilitate migrants and refugees maintaining connectedness with families and communities at the point of origin or in their destination as they link to local residents, other migrants, and support networks (Gillespie et al., 2018; Kutscher & Kreß, 2018).

In this sense, they can facilitate navigation of new cultural and societal landscapes, both in terms of connectedness and in a mutually constitutive, practical way. Digital structures and networks offer access to information and essential services, such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities (Brown et al., 2019). Moreover, those working with a remit to support migrants, like governments, national and sub-national bodies, and NGOs, can utilize these technologies in their work (Diaz Andrade & Doolin, 2019; Modesti et al., 2020; Schreieck et al., 2017). For example, e-government services have been proven to streamline processes, including visa applications, work permits, and social services registration, making it easier for migrants to access these resources (Borkert et al., 2009; Diaz Andrade & Doolin, 2019). Moreover, NGOs have been documented as often developing apps and online portals to provide information on asylum procedures, employment rights, and language courses (Schreieck et al., 2017).

Of course, there are the inequalities inherent to societal systems and power structures, and in this case, the digital divide and risk of surveillance and breach of rights come to the fore. Firstly, disparities in access to digital technologies and the internet, due to resources, digital literacy skill levels, socio-economic status, or language barriers, can put migrants at a disadvantage, especially in highly digitalized societies, where many governmental services are offered mainly online (Alam & Imran, 2015; Martin-Shields et al., 2022). Then, state surveillance and algorithmic governance can both limit or breach migrant and refugee rights, or intentionally discriminate and deepen inequalities (Dijstelbloem & Broeders, 2015; Yang et al., 2024).

Before proceeding further, we acknowledge that the issue moves between and examines different categories of migrants (i.e., a person residing in a country other than their country of birth), including refugee (a recognized beneficiary of international protection) and asylum seeker (a subject seeking international protection). We use these labels to communicate or research while understanding that these are bounded categories and forms of legal status remain fluid, and indeed that voluntary and involuntary movement can also be defined and redefined along political, social, and cultural lines over a life trajectory (Robertson, 2018). We also note that while the issue tends to lean towards migrant experiences once arrived to the Global North, we share the criticism and critique of this dominant tendency in the migration literature (Levitt, 2023) and attempt to work towards decentralizing and decolonializing via contributions regarding contexts in South Africa and Tanzania.

With these clarifications noted, a series of three cross-patterns emerge when the issue is taken as a whole, related to migrant agency, the impacts of digital technologies for those intermediaries working with migrants (including power dynamics with the state), and finally, the proliferating platform economy's impact on migrants.

3. Migrant Agency, Digital Practices, and Confronting Exclusive Infrastructures

To begin, several articles find a common thread in noting the agency of migrants despite infrastructural inclusion, both in digital practices and with regard to digital infrastructures. Firstly, Bartlett et al. (2026) offer a scoping review that consolidates research on refugee women's digital practices during resettlement. Through the analytical framework of "tactics," they demonstrate how refugee women reappropriate digital platforms to mitigate risks while pursuing social connectedness, information access, and self-presentation. At the same time, offline inequalities shape practices through which refugee women navigate these technologies, foregrounding the gendered dimensions of digital literacies. Similarly, and with empirical evidence, Hamarat Yalçın and Akar (2026) identify how emotional, linguistic, and structural factors—frequently exacerbated by gender and legal status—create barriers to digital inclusion, in their examination of migrant groups in Turkey. In particular, they point to how monolingual e-government platforms, low digital trust, and reliance on family members for online access emerge as primary obstacles.

The issue also asks as to migrant agency via an ethnographic lens: Wilson and Demirdirek (2026) explore how Congolese refugee women in Dar-es-Salaam leveraged social media engagements for entrepreneurship, to counterbalance the immobilization they experience as part of the Tanzanian asylum regime. The piece presents how virtual mobility and connectivity can provide essential workarounds for an already marginalized group, although it cautions that such encounters do not substitute for offline connections. Their contribution also outlines how technology can reinforce intersectional discrimination based on gender and precarious legal status. Turning to Europe, Gebru and Vrăbiescu (2026) also provide an ethnographic account via digital participant observation with Eritrean refugees. They reveal how differences in digital

knowledge and unequal digital infrastructures between asylum seekers and other Dutch residents create challenges for both refugees and street-level bureaucrats, proposing ethical digital training pathways for both bureaucrats and refugees. In the same vein, Mena Montes et al. (2026) explore how digital communication technologies and informal actors facilitate and shape communication and network development that support Syrian refugees in navigating integration in the Netherlands. The article shows how digitalization introduces both opportunities and challenges in addressing language barriers, cultural differences, and bureaucratic procedures.

Finally, in relation to the category of student migrants, Łukaszewska-Bezulska (2026) presents a case study of internal and international student migrants in Poland, comparing how they form and maintain different types of social capital through social media. Based on in-depth interviews, they demonstrate how online social networks created by student migrants often defy clear-cut distinctions between local and international networks. Instead, contextual factors (i.e., the nature of the diaspora, frequency and type of social media activity, and proficiency in the host-country language) influence the impact of social media as a tool for social capital.

4. Intermediaries: The State and Algorithmic Governance versus NGO Strategies

Another group of articles addresses the role of intermediates when considering deliberate or unintended consequences for migrant exclusion and inclusion. The state first comes to the fore in several articles. Greyling and Johnson (2026) trace the effects of South Africa's online asylum seeker and refugee permit extension system, explaining how digitalization has fundamentally refigured borderscapes navigated by asylum seekers and refugees. While a policy aim may have been to streamline efficiently, in practice, the online system is demonstrated to shift bureaucratic responsibility to asylum seekers themselves, distancing them from the state to affect social, legal, and economic inclusion. Then, Cascone (2026) looks at Swedish detention centers via ethnographic vignettes based on interviews with detained and formerly detained migrants. Cascone explores what happens when everyday digital media practices are no longer possible, marking the return of "old" media forms like basic phones and paper letters. She argues for a double exclusion, via both the initial detention and this "counter-digitalization."

State surveillance becomes a consideration as Alajak et al. (2026) go on to critically investigate the GeoMatch algorithm, a recommender system implemented by the Dutch government to automate employment search and matching for refugees across 35 labour market regions. They reveal that, contrary to official claims or purported policy aims of effectiveness and objectivity, GeoMatch prioritizes aggregate optimization over individual opportunities, creating disproportionate risks of discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, or marital status. Also in the Netherlands, Poelen and van Oers (2026) examine the digitalization of civic integration in the Netherlands under the Integration Act 2021. This act establishes a partially digitalized programme including digital monitoring, digital language classes and exams, and online communication between integrators and case managers. They conduct desk research and in-depth interviews with municipal officers and language teachers to reveal dual impact: On the one hand, for individuals with sufficient digital literacy, technologies offer enhanced language learning and greater self-reliance; on the other, digital technologies exacerbate existing inequalities and create new forms of digital exclusion for those lacking digital skills, stymieing their civic integration trajectory. Moreover, they argue that digitalization transforms street-level bureaucratic discretion into "web-level bureaucracy,"

where technologies may streamline workflows but also impose administrative burdens, introduce bias, and limit discretion.

Turning from the state perspective, the issue presents the case of intermediaries like NGOs tasked with supporting migrations. Solano et al. (2026) examine how NGOs in Turkey and the Netherlands use information and communication technologies to support refugees. In interviews with representatives of 23 NGOs, they find that organizations in both countries use digital technologies extensively for communication, advocacy, and service provision. While such digital technologies enhance visibility and reach, support multilingual and remote service delivery, and assist the organizations in raising funds and building institutional identity, challenges remain. These include, inter alia, unequal access to digital tools, insufficient digital literacy among both staff and clients, lower engagement in online formats, and risks of losing personal connection through standardized digital processes.

5. The Platform Economy and Navigating New Layers of Exclusion

Finally, we zoom into the case of the ever more prevalent platform economy, another so-called intermediary, and highlight the tension generated from a real sense of precarity experienced by migrant workers and the opportunities migrant platform users seem to have. Pasetti et al. (2026) examine platform-mediated food delivery work across Italy, Poland, and Spain through 60 in-depth interviews with migrant riders. Despite distinct regulatory models in the three countries, Italy's "dual-track," Poland's "contractual bricolage," and Spain's "regulated exclusion," the study illustrates that each country context is rampant with legal ambiguity, economic insecurity, and algorithmic control, furthering migrant worker marginalization and platform logics co-producing new forms of labor exploitation.

On the other hand, Boland (2026) examines how migrant mothers in the Netherlands navigate digital childcare platforms heavily reliant on migrant care labor. Findings indicate little or unclear knowledge of domestic work regulation among migrant mothers, further obfuscated by platforms as intermediaries. As the migrant mothers navigate belonging in fluctuating contexts, they can perceive exclusion due to child care costs and factors, causing them to engage with platforms, which, in turn, have been proven to be precarious for migrant workers. It reveals migrants' aspirations for ethical engagement with care workers, versus the structural constraints they face, and how the digital layer creates an added dimension in this contestation.

6. Concluding Remarks: New Dynamics Building Off and in Conjunction With Pre-Existing Societal Inequalities

Taken as a whole, this thematic issue ultimately illustrates how processes and practices of digitalization neither inherently include nor solely exclude migrants. Rather, these new technologies and their utilization function as contested sites where pre-existing inequalities can be simultaneously reproduced, reconfigured, or new ones produced—with all of these systems potentially challenged through migrant agency in limited yet significant ways.

In terms of what remains of the pre-existing inequalities, they remain shaping migrants' offline lives—via, inter alia, legal precarity, gender discrimination, and linguistic exclusion. However, they can also be actively transformed in digital spaces through the specific affordances and constraints of digital technologies. While

it may be an obvious observation, this volume confirms that online and offline reality continues remain deeply intertwined.

Moving forward, as our authors highlight in some concrete, context-specific policy recommendations, ensuring more equitable digital futures for migrants entails multi-level interventions that address both technological access and the power relations embedded in digital systems themselves. These can include, among others, culturally responsive digital literacy programs, critical redesign of algorithmic decision-making systems, further support for intermediary organizations navigating tensions between efficiency and human-centered care, or informed platform labor regulation to support. In this sense, we call for further, comprehensive, and evidence-based accounts of how layers of digitalization mutually reproduce old power dynamics and introduce new, context-specific developments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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