Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12877
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.12877

EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

# Mobility and Relations in Digitally Saturated Social Worlds

**Aija Lulle** [1,2] and **Ieva Puzo** [2]

[1] Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, University of Eastern Finland, Finland
[2] Faculty of Social Sciences, Riga Stradins University, Latvia

**Correspondence:** Aija Lulle (aija.lulle@uef.fi)

**Submitted:** 28 May 2026 **Published:** 9 July 2026

**Issue:** This editorial is part of the issue "Mobility and Relationships in Digitally Saturated Social Worlds" edited by Aija Lulle (University of Eastern Finland) and Ieva Puzo (Riga Stradins University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i536

## Abstract

Social relationships are among the primary means through which people move, belong, and make meaning of the world. The current historical moment of intensified digital infrastructures, platform economies, and evolving artificial intelligence requires renewed conceptual attention to the relationship between mobility and social ties. This thematic issue examines how digitally saturated social worlds reconfigure the conditions under which relationships evolve. Bringing together studies of students, refugees, highly skilled migrants, young men, middle-aged professionals, diasporic families, teleworkers, healthcare workers, and transnational children, it shows that digital connection is not synonymous with social inclusion. Connectivity may sustain care across distance, enable work and learning, assist language navigation, and generate fleeting solidarities. It may also intensify surveillance, precarity, gendered expectations, professional devaluation, and emotional exhaustion. We argue that social ties in digitally saturated worlds must be understood as relational, infrastructural, and mobile: They stretch across borders, platforms, bodies, institutions, and places, while remaining unevenly shaped by intersections of class, age, gender, race, language, migration status, and digital competence. The thematic issue advances an agenda for researching digital relationality, foregrounding the lived complexity in which platforms and AI mediate mobility, intimacy, care, work, and social inclusion.

## Keywords

artificial intelligence; digital devices; digital relationality; encounters; micro-relational infrastructures; migration; mobility; social relations; social worlds; wearables

## 1. Introduction

This thematic issue begins from the proposition that social ties remain crucial to mobility, inclusion, and everyday life, but that their forms, intensities, and effects are changing. In migration studies, social ties have

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long been approached as resources: They help people access jobs, housing, information, emotional support, and routes into unfamiliar institutional environments (Ryan, 2011). The digitally saturated world complicates this vocabulary. Today, we encounter platformed, algorithmically activated, datafied ties, as well as proxy- and AI-assisted ties. Some relationships thicken through daily digital presence while others become transactional, more extractive, or easier to abandon.

Undeniably, platforms shape sociality. WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram, Facebook groups, Instagram, Wolt, Zoom, Teams, wearable devices, digital homework platforms, telemedicine systems, and generative AI interfaces do not organise relationships in the same way. Each has its own rhythms, norms, hierarchies, economies, and many aspects remain inscrutable for a common user of platforms and devices. A WhatsApp family group sustains obligations differently from a professional LinkedIn network; a food delivery app produces a fleeting doorstep encounter differently from a Facebook group for refugees seeking work; a wearable bracelet shared with an elderly relative offers care differently from a video call with a partner across borders. The examination of lived experience clearly shows that we must shift from the language of "digital communication" to the more demanding language of digital relationality. Relationality asks how persons, platforms, data, institutions, bodies, affects, and places become entangled. Digital relationality includes humans and infrastructures involved in waiting for a reply, curating a profile, making meaning of silence, translating language, forwarding a job advertisement, monitoring a parent's steps, asking ChatGPT to adapt a recipe, avoiding a family call, or choosing not to respond.

Hence, the mobile subject of social science can no longer be understood only as someone who crosses borders, changes residence, or circulates between labour markets. Mobility increasingly takes place through digital networks that allow people to be present in multiple social fields while physically located in one place. Diminescu's (2008) figure of the "connected migrant" remains central here: Migrants are no longer imagined as cut off from the place of origin, but as continuously reachable, digitally embedded, and relationally stretched across borders. Yet the present moment requires us to revisit this figure critically because connectivity is not the same as care, and access does not necessarily facilitate belonging and inclusion.

The studies in this thematic issue make this distinction visible. Ukrainian students in Slovakia use digital networks to maintain family ties, search for work, and enter academic and social life (Chrancokova & Mitková, 2026). Syrian professionals in Germany rebuild interrupted networks through digital groups, but these fragile ties often fail to restore professional status or secure stable employment (Sabouni, 2026). Latvian junior academics abroad sustain intimacy and family relations through digital media, while also using digital tools to manage distance, autonomy, and unwanted obligations (Cara & Puzo, 2026). These cases show that digital connectivity may support mobility, but it may also defer local belonging, sustain unequal dependencies, or intensify the burden of being socially available across several worlds at once.

## 2. Digitally Mediated Care

Digital saturation reorganises practical, emotional, and relational labour. Care now circulates through video calls, reminders, health data, translation apps, shared documents, platform notifications, voice notes, emojis, location sharing, and AI-generated advice. The concept of midlife digital care work, developed in this issue, is especially valuable because it foregrounds the life-course specificity of digitally mediated relational labour. Middle-aged migrants may be caring simultaneously for partners, children, ageing parents, friends, colleagues,

and professional networks across borders. Yet, digital infrastructures cannot fully substitute for co-presence, touch, shared domestic time, or embodied being-together (Lulle & Lāma, 2026).

Awareness of the fundamental value of co-presence "in the flesh" is a corrective to technologically optimistic accounts of digital proximity "in a flash." A video call can sustain a marriage, but it may also expose its fragility. A wearable bracelet can reassure an adult child about an elderly parent, but it may also translate care into monitoring. A message can offer comfort, but it can also become one more demand in an already saturated day. A digital family group may generate intimacy, but it may also keep gendered expectations of availability alive across distance (Grivina, 2026). The research challenge is to attend to care as a complexly evolving, digitally mediated labour, where digital infrastructure becomes increasingly inseparable from daily family encounters to health and welfare decisions. Some of the pertinent questions across several articles in this thematic issue are: Who is expected to maintain the tie? Who translates digital information into practical help? Who becomes exhausted by the obligation to remain reachable?

Digital relations are often celebrated because they appear to flatten distance. Yet many digitally mediated relationships are profoundly asymmetrical. The case of Chinese children in UK boarding schools is exemplary. Here, digital communication sustains transnational family intimacy, but it also extends parental authority across borders (Szinay-Kis, 2026). WeChat calls, homework platforms, guardians, and education consultants produce what can be understood as a digitally mediated form of parenting through proxy. Care and control become difficult to separate. The child is both distant and continuously reachable; the parent is absent yet infrastructurally present.

A broader field of inquiry into digitally mediated authority emerges throughout this thematic issue. In families, platforms may allow parents, partners, or relatives to remain present in the everyday lives of those who are elsewhere. In workplaces, remote management systems may sustain collaboration while intensifying monitoring. In migration regimes, digital portals may promise efficiency while making applicants dependent on opaque bureaucratic infrastructures. In health care, telemedicine may expand access while shifting responsibility onto patients and families. In education, digital systems may enable contact while multiplying forms of assessment, comparison, and control. We therefore enrich the studies of social relationships in digitally saturated worlds by examining how power travels through intimacy, and how intimacy becomes infrastructural (e.g., Cara & Puzo, 2026; Lulle & Lāma, 2026; Szinay-Kis, 2026).

## 3. Inequality

All the above avenues are entangled in inequality. Digital inclusion discourse has often assumed that access to devices and basic skills will lead to empowerment. The study of Chinese youth and digital competencies challenges this assumption. It suggests that basic digital skills alone may not improve perceived future mobility. Instead, advanced skills matter far more and have profound implications for new hierarchies in digital capacity, confidence, literacy, visibility, and strategic competence (Liu et al., 2026).

Inequality calls for a more differentiated account of the digital divide. The relevant questions are not merely whether people have access, but what kinds of access they have; what they can do with it; how platforms classify them; whether their language, accent, credentials, nationality, gender, age, disability, or race affects their digital visibility; and whether AI systems recognise their needs. A migrant may have a smartphone but no

trusted local network. A young person may use social media fluently but lack advanced digital competencies valued by employers. A professional refugee may join many online groups yet remain unable to convert digital contacts into meaningful employment. A middle-aged migrant may be digitally competent but emotionally depleted by constant transnational care. Digital inequality is thus relational, affective, and infrastructural, not only technical.

Inequality, in particular, concerns work and the reorganisation of professional ties. Platform work, academic mobility, healthcare migration, and professional networking all show that work-related relationships are increasingly digitally mediated (Jirgensons, 2026; Sharifi, 2026). Remote work has expanded access to transnational labour markets, but it has also blurred boundaries between work and home, increased isolation, and created new forms of precarious dependence on digital infrastructures. For middling migrants, telework can become both a bridge and a trap: It allows them to remain professionally connected across borders, yet may also weaken local embeddedness, obscure labour rights, and intensify competition (Ramos & Gonçalves, 2026).

The case of healthcare practitioner outmigration in Latvia introduces another dimension: digital technologies such as telemedicine are often proposed as solutions to labour shortages and uneven access to care. Yet such technological responses must be examined critically. Telemedicine cannot by itself resolve structural problems of wages, working conditions, professional recognition, and state responsibility (Jirgensons, 2026). Similarly, digital recruitment platforms cannot solve the precarity of mobile academics; AI-assisted job searches cannot compensate for non-recognition of refugee qualifications; online professional groups, or, bluntly, technological solutionism, cannot replace fair labour markets.

## 4. A Note on Methodological Pluralism and Ethics

Researching social relationships in digitally saturated worlds demands methodological pluralism and conceptual inventiveness. Conventional interviews remain valuable, but interviews alone may not capture the rhythms, interfaces, and micro-practices through which digital ties are lived. We need methods capable of following relationships and discerning potential harms of discrimination across platforms, devices, places, e.g., recruitment practices (cf. Chen, 2023).

Digital ethnography is essential, but it must be combined with situated, embodied, and relational methods. Digital diaries can capture the temporal rhythms of contact, silence, and fatigue (e.g., Grivina, 2026). Network mapping can help visualise strong, weak, dormant, and institutional ties. Mobile methods can follow movement between homes, workplaces, shops, schools, food delivery, and digital interfaces. Platform walk-throughs can reveal how participants navigate apps, groups, settings, and notifications. (e.g., Sharifi, 2026). Comparative ethnography can show how similar infrastructures operate differently across national, linguistic, and welfare contexts. Mixed methods, including surveys and qualitative interviews, can link patterns of digital skill, mobility aspiration, and social inclusion to lived experience.

Digitally saturated relationships are ethically dense. A screenshot or conversations may contain other people's words, images, names, vulnerabilities, and expectations of privacy. A group chat is a social world with its own norms of trust and expectations of privacy and a safe space for sharing sensitive experiences. AI-generated content may be useful to participants, but it also raises questions about authorship, accuracy,

bias, and dependency. Research ethics must therefore move beyond procedural consent towards ongoing care, constant built-in ethical reflexivity, contextual integrity, and participant agency—issues that are diversely illuminated in all the articles of this thematic issue.

## 5. AI as an Emerging Relational Actor

AI is often discussed as a tool, but in everyday life, it increasingly appears as a "friend," adviser, translator, coach, companion, bureaucratic assistant, and decision-support system. For migrants, AI may help translate documents, prepare job applications, communicate with institutions, learn languages, navigate health information, or manage everyday uncertainty (Hoffmann & Meckl, 2026; Ramos & Gonçalves, 2026). For families, AI may become part of care routines. For students and professionals, it may mediate learning, productivity, and self-presentation (e.g., Chrancokova & Mitková, 2026). For people navigating unfamiliar societies, AI can lower barriers, but it can also misrecognise cultural nuance, reproduce bias, generate false confidence, or intensify dependence on opaque systems (e.g., Sabouni, 2026).

Robotic reverberations on *whether* AI (or, decades ago, robots and machines) will replace human relationships are not new. More important is *how* AI enters relational fields already shaped by inequality, mobility, care, and institutional complexity. When migrants ask AI technology for a healthier version of a familiar dish, they are not merely using technology; they are simultaneously negotiating masculinity, affordability, and cultural continuity (Sharifi, 2026). When a professional migrant uses AI to craft a job application, they are navigating labour-market norms, language hierarchies, and credential recognition. When a person uses AI to translate an emotionally sensitive message to a parent, partner, or bureaucrat, AI becomes part of the affective infrastructure of communication. Future research must therefore expand understanding of AI as relational mediation.

For social inclusion research, this has profound implications. Inclusion cannot be measured only by access to platforms, frequency of contact, or number of connections. A person can be hyperconnected and feel isolated. A migrant can participate in multiple digital groups and still lack meaningful local belonging. A family can share health data and still fail to provide embodied care. Inclusion must therefore be understood relationally, where digital connections are embedded in everydayness and can both support and complicate social relations.

## 6. Conclusion

With this thematic issue, we invite researchers to rethink what constitutes meaningful social relations today. More digital connections do not necessarily mean better social connections. In digitally saturated worlds, disconnection, boundary-making, and selective withdrawal may be necessary practices of autonomy and care. The politics of digital relationality must therefore include the right to connection and the right to opacity, silence, and rest.

The broader contribution of this thematic issue is to bring mobility and migration research, care theory, social inclusion scholarship, and emerging debates on digital societies and AI into closer conversation. It shows that social relationships in digitally saturated worlds are produced at the intersection of intimate life and infrastructural power. They are shaped by family obligations, labour markets, platforms, states, algorithms, languages, visas, schools, health systems, devices, and imaginaries of the good life. To study them well, we

must follow relations as they unfold in daily lives: from the doorstep encounter to the transnational family, from the group chat to the labour market, or from the wearable device to the welfare state.

To move forward, empirically, we need finely grained studies of how people actually use digital infrastructures in the everyday (un)making of relationships. Theoretically, we need concepts that do not flatten digital life or arbitrarily separate it from real life. Terms such as platformed foodways, midlife digital care work, parenting through proxy, digital bridges, fragile ties, connected migrants, and digital investment in language learning point towards such a vocabulary. They allow us to see that the digital is not somewhere out there. It is in the kitchen, the bedroom, the classroom, the workplace, the migration office, the care routine, the family quarrel, the job search, the lonely evening, and the AI-assisted message.

To research social relationships now is therefore to research a world in motion, digitally and physically. It is to examine the ordinary infrastructures and to recognise that the digitally saturated world is growing more relationally complex. We need critical research that is attentive to small gestures and structural conditions, to intimacy and political economy, where platforms and AI encounters are part of making meaning of social relationships, which are evolving, as we speak.

## Funding

This editorial was developed within the project "(R)E-TIES: Managing Mobility and Human Relations in Digitally Saturated Social Worlds." The project No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/005, "RSU Internal and RSU with LSPA External Consolidation Grant," is financed by the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Mechanism and the state budget.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

Not applicable to this article.

## LLMs Disclosure

Microsoft Co-Pilot and ChatGPT were used for language editing.

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## About the Authors

**Aija Lulle** is an associate professor at the University of Eastern Finland and a guest associate professor at Rīga Stradiņš University. Her research spans migration, gender, life course, ageing, care, and feminist geography.

**Ieva Puzo** is lead researcher in social anthropology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Riga Stradins University, Latvia. Her research interests lie at the intersection of science and technology studies, mobility, and labour.