

# Mapping Digital Citizenship Among Resettled Refugees’ Social Media Use in New Zealand

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## Abstract

In an increasingly digital world, refugees heavily rely on modern communication technologies to navigate many aspects of their lives. In this article, we specifically explore how resettled refugees in New Zealand use social media in their everyday lives. We present the findings drawn from a national survey ( $n = 592$ ) in six languages, exposing the benefits and limits of social media use among this cohort of people. Using a multivariate model, we show how refugees’ social and political activities enable civic participation and a sense of belonging. Our study also charts the barriers constraining their everyday social media use, including financial cost, security concerns, and low technical and digital literacy levels. By centring the impacts of sociodemographics and sociotechnological factors, we interrogate the meanings and outcomes of digital exclusion, which is crucial for informing digital citizenship and settlement policy among resettled refugees.

**Keywords:** refugee; resettlement; social media; participation; information communication technologies

## Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2023) acknowledged that over 108 million people are currently forcibly displaced worldwide, while less than 1% of the total number of refugees having opportunities to resettle in places like Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand and across Europe. In an increasingly digital era, refugees heavily rely on modern communication technologies to navigate many aspects of their lives. Their everyday digital practices highlight how communication technologies are becoming more available, affordable and usable for refugees—in resettlement contexts and across their transnational networks (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016). These communication tools and social media platforms are now used to forge and establish personal, familial and social connections that deeply shape the lives of refugees from local to transnational domains (Aléncar, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018; Leurs, 2019; Marlowe & Bruns, 2020).

This article specifically explores how resettled refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter, New Zealand) use social media in their everyday lives.<sup>1</sup> We foreground this focus through a digital citizenship

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lens to outline the opportunity and ability of individuals to participate in society online and benefit from it by exploring the associated barriers and enablers. Many studies have shown the implications of social media use among refugees across the world. On the one hand, social media use allows refugees to forge and maintain connections among their local and transnational networks while navigating their everyday lives in sites of displacement and resettlement (Aléncar, 2017; Hill, 2023; Leurs, 2019), but on the other, refugees also experience communicative challenges as shaped by access, competencies and broader concerns on surveillance and control (Dekker et al., 2018; Glasius, 2018).

Our work focuses on refugees who have settled in New Zealand, particularly underlining the factors shaping their positive and negative experiences in using social media. Since 1989, New Zealand had committed to resettle up to 750 refugees annually, and the government increased this quota to 1500 people in 2020. Alongside this formal commitment, over the last decade the country has accepted an annual average of 178 asylum seekers as refugees (Ferns et al., 2022). When conducting this study, there were eight settlement sites across New Zealand where refugees initially settled: in the Auckland region, Christchurch, Dunedin, Manawatu region, Waikato (Hamilton), Invercargill and Wellington region. These settlement sites are generally characterised by digital ubiquity, where opportunities to connect are publicly available (schools, libraries, council sites) and privately, if people can afford it. Despite this digital availability, several New Zealand studies have highlighted how refugees experience barriers to access, particularly those who have non-English speaking backgrounds (Hua, 2021), and how digital inequality is exacerbated by financial burdens of being able to connect online (Leurs, 2014; Marlowe & Chubb, 2021).

Our work deploys a digital citizenship lens (Millard et al., 2018) in the context of refugees' embodied, lived and negotiated experiences. For these scholars, *digital citizenship* refers to the ability of individuals to participate in society online. Digital access, competencies and support networks have all been noted as key to enabling online participation. In the case of refugees in immigration detention, Leung (2018), utilising the lens of cultural citizenship, highlights how digital access, competencies and environments can both enable and impede refugees to access and engage in a range of social and cultural activities in mediated spaces. By applying a digital citizenship perspective and focusing specifically on refugees' social media usage, we focused on three aspects: (1) communicative patterns, (2) demographic characteristics, and (3) the determinants shaping social media use. The findings are based on an online and paper-based national survey ( $n = 592$ ) in six languages, the first-ever social media survey conducted in New Zealand with resettled refugees. Using a multivariate model, we describe the main social media platforms resettled refugees in New Zealand use, with the refugees' associated demographic characteristics, to address two research questions:

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'refugee' in this article to acknowledge people who have a refugee background in New Zealand. This includes quota and convention refugees and asylum seekers who are still awaiting a determination on their claim.

- (1) What are potential barriers for accessing social media, and what contributes to these barriers?
- (2) Do refugees use social media to communicate their social or political viewpoints, and what factors are associated with being socially or politically active?

Social and political activities were established by asking the participants if they had participated in an associated group, posted content, looked for information about rallies/protests, or encouraged others to take action. By illuminating the positive and negative experiences of social media use among refugees and unravelling the differing factors that shape them, the study contributes to advancing a deeper understanding of digital inclusion and its associated policy implications in New Zealand.

The following sections present the scholarly terrain on digital inclusion and refugee studies to unpack the possibilities and limits of social media use in resettled refugees' personal and civic lives. We conclude by summarising the study's key insights and offer reflections and recommendations for digital inclusion in New Zealand.

## Social media and refugee settlement

The rapid uptake of social media has had profound implications for the daily lives of resettled refugees through its multifaceted potential to meet a range of needs, including accessing essential information for personal and social purposes (Aléncar & Tsagkroni, 2019; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Gillespie et al., 2018; Wilding et al., 2020). For refugees, connecting with local and transnational networks reflects the “compulsion for proximity” (Diminescuc, 2008, p. 572). In this case, these digital connections negotiate proximity across distance through sustaining political affiliation within the host country's homelands (Glasius, 2018; Marlowe, 2019), supporting a sense of emotional belonging (Kneer et al., 2019), developing confidence and self-esteem (van Eldik et al., 2019), and maintaining cultural ties and identity (Neag, 2019). Pottie et al.'s (2020) scoping review supports this literature in illustrating how young people from refugee backgrounds use social media in resettlement contexts to improve their self-esteem through self-presentation, accessing health information, and building supportive social networks. Similarly, Dekker et al. (2018) reported that resettled Syrian refugees predominantly used smartphones to access the internet—especially during migration. In particular, their use of social media platforms depended upon the type of information they sought and their familiarity with that platform, highlighting these digital tools' contextual, technological and relational elements.

Given the prominence and widespread uptake of ubiquitous modern communication technologies, the 2016 UNHCR report *Connecting Refugees* clearly illustrates a trend showing how numerous displacement sites now offer new forms (though not necessarily stable) of mobile connectivity that have fundamentally shifted how people can bridge distance and sustain social interaction. Such shifts have thus been labelled (and critiqued) as “digital lifelines” (Aléncar et al., 2019; Maitland, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2016), underlining how social media can facilitate ongoing connection and potentially ensure safety by informing of safe asylum pathways, notifying people of disaster events through transnational networks, and supporting settlement in local places (Aléncar, 2017; Marlowe, 2018). As digital technologies and, specifically, social media platforms become deeply embedded into the lives of the refugees, it is worth noting that digital media access and use represent basic human rights in a digital world (Leurs, 2017).

We approach the benefits of social media use among refugees as crucial for digital citizenship. According to Millard et al. (2018), digital citizenship is influenced by key factors such as digital access, competencies and networks, which enable individual users to communicate, connect and engage in a range of social, cultural, economic and political activities. Complementing Millard et al.'s work is Leung's (2018) study that extends and examines refugees' citizenship in a mediated and cultural context. For Leung,

participation in a mediated society necessitates access, competencies, finances and a safe environment. Examining the case of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, she highlights the crucial role of mobile phones in enabling these individuals to connect to their family members and peers locally and transnationally, particularly via various social media platforms. Through mediated practices, refugees living away from their family members and networks achieve what Diminescu (2008) referred to as establishing a sense of “co-presence” when physical proximity is not possible. Through ‘telecooing’, people can maintain intimate ties and various activities through these technologies to transcend traditional geographical and time-based barriers (Cabalquinto, 2021; Habuchi, 2005). As a result, connecting at a distance through social media platforms supports a transnational habitus (Nedelcu, 2012) and affective capital (Leurs, 2019), paving the way for a sense of belonging. Thus, everyday mediated practices are integral for digital citizenship, redefining and reshaping the distances between ‘here’ and ‘there’ and enabling new forms of social, political and cultural interaction in the “age of the connected migrant” (Diminescu, 2008).

However, the use of these tools is not just one of ICT-enabled optimism. Studies show that refugees experience digital exclusion where inequalities are reflected in people’s lack of access, competencies and social inequalities (Hargittai, 2022; Helsper, 2021; van Dijck, 2020). Digital exclusion among refugees often results in constrained availability, access and usability, frequently hindering their ability to engage in everyday life (Leung, 2018). In some cases, the feeling of being tracked and controlled through surveillance systems curtails social media use among refugees (Aziz, 2022; Dekker et al., 2018; Glasius, 2018; Leung, 2018). Furthermore, refugees have been found to disconnect from using social media because of surveillance fears deployed by their host and home countries (Witteborn, 2014), highlighting how refugees can be tracked and controlled (Ajana, 2019). For instance, the study by Leurs (2019) productively captures how refugees’ desire for proximity with transnational networks has created an “affective paradox”, showing social media use in enabling both connection and new forms of surveillance. On a transnational scale, Glasius (2018) cautions how a state can use social media as tools for “extraterritorial authoritarian aggressions” to surveil and control people beyond its borders.

In response, refugees may disconnect from or modify social media use (Aziz, 2022; Leung, 2018; Leurs, 2019; Marlowe, 2019). Thus, alongside the promise of these communication technologies and various social media platforms for connection, we support caution against a techno-deterministic and utilitarian focus that renders power, structural oppression and asymmetrical forces less visible (Awad & Tossell, 2019). Gillespie et al. (2018, p. 6) referred to this digital environment as “unstable assemblages that regimes of control and care can simultaneously occupy”. This conception complements Witteborn’s (2014) contention that the digital practices of refugees should be situated within a larger sociopolitical context.

Despite this growing literature that illustrates the various and textured ways refugees use social media, some studies have also located and recognised the agency of refugees in using mobile devices and social media. For example, scholars have critiqued how dominant discourses portray refugees as unprepared and incompetent users of digital technologies (Gifford & Wilding, 2013). McCaffrey and Taha (2019) challenged this assumption in their study of migrants and refugees in New Jersey to highlight their deft use of smartphone technology. In some cases, refugees select information to share on social media and choose a secure channel such as an email to sustain connections among family members overseas (Witteborn, 2014). These studies highlight the nuanced ways that refugees use these tools and associated social media platforms to illustrate how they are digitally discerning. Consequently, researchers increasingly acknowledge the sophisticated strategies that refugees employ to navigate these mobile, communicative networks (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Gifford & Wilding, 2013).

In response to these rapidly evolving technological, social and political environments, this article showcases how resettled refugees in New Zealand use social media in social and political domains and the factors that enable—and constrain—their use of these platforms. In doing so, we contribute to unpacking the meanings and practices of digital citizenship in a forced migration context.

## Study design

To examine how refugees across New Zealand use social media, we designed a survey in English and piloted it with more than 30 individuals with refugee backgrounds and with people who work in the resettlement sector. Once the survey was finalised, we translated it into five additional languages: Arabic, Spanish, Dari, Nepali and Burmese. These languages were chosen as representing some of the largest country of origin numbers of resettled refugees—Arabic being common in numerous countries in the Middle East and Africa, Spanish for Colombians, Dari for Afghans, Nepali for Bhutanese, and Burmese for Myanmarese (see Immigration New Zealand, 2024). To ensure consistency across these language groups, we instigated a process of establishing functional equivalence to ensure that the meanings were compatible (Jin & Nida, 2006). We used protocols established by Gable and Wolf (1993) for judgement valuation to compare each target language with the English version by first having the survey translated and checked by bilingual translators in each target language. Bilingual facilitators guided this process by placing each of the 29 questions and associated responses in the English and target languages next to each other. We developed a scoring sheet to ascertain the confidence that each target language was functionally equivalent to the English version with at least four bilingual community members (two males and two females). These community members scored each item from 1 (low agreement) to 4 (high agreement) to achieve a score usually of 4 and sometimes of 3. Every item in the survey across the five target languages achieved a score of either 3 or 4. The study received university ethics approval from the authors' associated institution.

Recruitment was done through third parties, social media channels and announcements at community events. Participants could elect to enter a prize draw (by providing an email address) to win one of ten \$100 grocery vouchers drawn at the end of the survey. Over four months starting in September 2019, 702 participants who identified as refugees responded to a self-paced survey about their social media usage. Fifteen research assistants who have strong links to communities from refugee backgrounds facilitated these activities and delivered the survey in both paper-based ( $n = 184$ ) and online ( $n = 518$ ) forms. Nearly all the research assistants were from refugee backgrounds, and one or more of these colleagues covered all the six languages in which the survey was developed. The research assistants played a central role in implementing the surveys by presenting the study at various community events and on social media channels.

Before accessing the survey, participants had to confirm they were from a refugee background, lived in New Zealand, and were at least 18 years of age. We did not ask the participants if they were citizens, permanent residents, residents or on a visa to remain in New Zealand. This decision arose from advice given during the pilot phase, which suggested that such a question would likely cause participant reluctance to engage. We checked IP addresses for duplicates to help ensure that there was no doubling-up of responses, and this was further supported by checking we received unique email addresses for the prize draw. It is necessary to acknowledge that only those active on social media and proficient in one of the six main languages could participate. Thus, this study does not represent people from refugee backgrounds who have highly constrained access to, or do not use, social media or those who might be using social media but are not proficient in one of the six languages of the survey.

The number of surveys completed in each of the six languages were:

- English ( $n = 383$ )
- Arabic ( $n = 231$ )
- Spanish ( $n = 33$ )
- Dari ( $n = 19$ )
- Burmese ( $n = 19$ )
- Nepali ( $n = 17$ ).

Two research assistants manually inputted the paper-based responses into SPSS and then randomly checked 20% for accuracy; no errors were found.

### *Social and political activities*

To unpack digital citizenship among the participants, we chart the prevalence of social or political activities on social media by creating a binary variable with people saying ‘Yes’ to any of the following four questions asking whether they had engaged on social media in any of the following activities:

- participated in a group that shares an interest in a political or social issue
- posted content on a social media site related to a political or social issue
- looked for information about rallies or protests, and/or
- encouraged others to take action.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to acknowledge the limitations related to the question related to ‘political or social activity’ within the survey as individual perceptions of what politically and socially active means or what constitutes an ‘issue’ can have significantly different interpretations. For some, following the news in their home countries, engaging in political discussions with family and friends, or voting constitutes these activities. For others, political activity could mean engaging in transformational activism and a high engagement with the political situation in their country of origin or elsewhere. Finally, it is worth noting that the survey does not ask participants to nominate where these activities were focused; that is, whether in New Zealand or outside it. This is because other literature has shown how people participate in a range of political activities in various countries (see Marlowe, 2019), making this difficult to isolate for the study. Despite the anonymous survey, the decision to keep the ‘political’ and ‘social’ terms together was made following consultation with individuals and groups from refugee backgrounds during the pilot phase. This group strongly advised that separating the political and social questions would make participants too nervous about participating because of previous experiences of political persecution, echoing studies that surveillance compels refugees to use digital devices and online channels in a range of political and social activities related to their home countries (Wall et al., 2019). In the following discussion, we provide suggestions that respond to this limitation alongside the possible policy implications arising from this study.

### *Barriers*

In unpacking digital citizenship as undermined by both social and technical barriers (Leung, 2018; Millard et al, 2018; Ritchie, 2022), we created binary variables related to three barriers to accessing social media: 1) financial barriers, 2) concerns about privacy and confidentiality online, and 3) technical barriers.<sup>3</sup>

For financial barriers, we considered that respondents had this concern if they responded ‘Always’ or ‘Frequently’ to one or both of the following questions:

- Does paying for this internet access place you under financial stress? and/or
- Do the ‘financial costs of using social media’ create access barriers?

For security concerns, if a participant identified with any of the following three concerns, they were considered as experiencing security/confidentiality barriers: ‘Concerns about privacy and confidentiality

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<sup>2</sup> See “Appendix S3: Social and political activity” in the Supplementary Notes for the survey questions in the six languages. Available at [https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al.\\_Mapping-Digital-Citizenship\\_NZS-Vol.39-No.2\\_Supplementary-Notes.pdf](https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al._Mapping-Digital-Citizenship_NZS-Vol.39-No.2_Supplementary-Notes.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See “Appendix S4: Barriers to accessing social media” in the Supplementary Notes for the survey questions in the six languages. Available at [https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al.\\_Mapping-Digital-Citizenship\\_NZS-Vol.39-No.2\\_Supplementary-Notes.pdf](https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al._Mapping-Digital-Citizenship_NZS-Vol.39-No.2_Supplementary-Notes.pdf)

online’, ‘Safety and security concerns for you’, or ‘Safety and security concerns for your friends or family’. If a participant identified with either ‘Difficulty in understanding how to use social media’ or ‘Unreliable internet connection in overseas countries’, they were considered as having technical barriers.

## Findings

To respond to the potential problems caused by missing data, we removed respondents whose key demographic information was missing from the data set. This step left a final sample of 592 participants. The statistically non-significant results of Little’s MCAR test ( $p = 0.317$ ) suggest that the remaining missing data were completely at random. It is also necessary to acknowledge that this survey is not representative of all refugees in New Zealand—it only targeted those who used social media, and it was predominantly completed by those who could respond in English and Arabic. This means that certain groups are far more likely to have participated in the survey, limiting our ability to extrapolate to other groups.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participants’ demographics. As is shown, slightly more than half of the participants (55.5%) were female, a majority (76.2%) were below 45 years of age, and most (73.5%) had been residents in New Zealand for more than three years. Geographically, the participants were mainly from Asian countries and were distributed across the eight major resettlement sites in New Zealand.

To better understand the participants’ social media usage, we kept the top two platforms with a large-enough sample of people who used them frequently—Facebook (66.6%) and YouTube (61.3%)—as separate platforms. We then grouped other social media platforms with similar features to make binary variables based on the frequency of use: frequently (always or almost always), infrequently (sometimes, not very often) or none (none-almost none). From this, we developed three groupings:

- WhatsApp, Viber and SnapChat—texting, photo sharing and video sharing and interactive options in more private groups
- LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter—enabling a stronger public profile, and
- Skype, Imo and Facetime—real-time, video and audio interaction

We used chi-square tests of association to evaluate the potential associations between these platform groupings and key demographic variables (age, gender, length of stay in New Zealand, country of origin, and/or settlement regions). For countries, the preference was to keep any single country with a large-enough sample separate and then group other countries with smaller samples in the same region. The sample of participants was large enough for Bhutan, Afghanistan and Syria. We placed the only two South American countries (Colombia and Chile) into one category and all African countries into another category. We then divided the rest of the Asian countries with smaller samples into three categories: (1) East/Southeast, (2) Middle East, and (3) South Asia and Other Asian countries.

For both political or social activities online and each barrier variable, we first used chi-square association tests to evaluate their potential associations with key demographic variables. Next, we employed logistic multivariate regression models to identify factors associated with any of these outcomes. Age and gender were adjusted for in all models. All statistical analyses were conducted with SAS version 9.4.

More than 86% of the participants used four or more social media platforms. Still, the frequency of use varied from one platform to another,<sup>4</sup> with some platforms (such as Skype) predominately used infrequently (24.8% infrequent versus 5.1% frequent users). In contrast, YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp were used more frequently.

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<sup>4</sup> See “Table S1: Frequency of use for different social media platforms” in the Supplementary Notes. Available at <https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al.-Mapping-Digital-Citizenship-NZS-Vol.39-No.2-Supplementary-Notes.pdf>

Table 1: Participant demographics ( $N = 592$ )

	Count	Percentage
<b>Gender (<math>n = 533</math>)</b>		
Male	236	44.3 %
Female	296	55.5 %
Gender diverse	1	0.2 %
<b>Age (<math>n = 587</math>)</b>		
16–25	154	26.2 %
26–35	147	25.0 %
36–45	147	25.0 %
46–55	89	15.2 %
> 55	50	8.6%
<b>Length of stay in New Zealand (<math>n = 567</math>)</b>		
Less than 1 year	44	7.8 %
1–2 years	106	18.7 %
3–5 years	184	32.5 %
6–8 years	59	10.4 %
More than 8 years	174	30.7 %
<b>Countries/regions of origin (<math>n = 590</math>)</b>		
Syria	133	22.5 %
Afghanistan	122	20.6 %
Bhutan	49	8.3 %
East/South East Asia	32	5.4 %
Other Middle East	90	15.2 %
All Africa	72	12.2 %
South America	34	5.7 %
South Asia/Other Asian	59	10.0%
<b>Religious belief (<math>n = 588</math>)</b>		
Yes	545	92.7%
No	43	7.3%
<b>Religion (<math>n = 544</math>)</b>		
Islam	346	63.6 %
Christianity	144	26.5 %
Hinduism	30	5.5 %
Buddhism	18	3.3 %
Other	6	1.1 %
<b>Location in New Zealand (<math>n = 586</math>)</b>		
Wellington region	169	28.8 %
Auckland region	129	22.0 %
Dunedin	76	13.0 %
Christchurch	69	11.8 %
Nelson	68	11.6 %
Waikato	57	9.7 %
Invercargill	10	1.7 %
Manawatu	8	1.4 %

- Notes.* 1. The discrepancies between full sample ( $N$ ) and subsample ( $n$ ) are due to participants' missing responses.  
2. South East Asia comprises Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Indonesia; Other Middle East comprises Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and Jordan; All Africa comprises Cameroon, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Burundi, Eritrea, Egypt, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Congo, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tunisia and Liberia; South Asia and Other Asian countries comprises Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia;



### *Social media access and use*

In this section, we present the descriptive statistics pertaining to overall social media usage and report the chi-square test results of the association between key demographic variables and refugees' social media usage.

First, as for *social media time usage in the past week*, 159 participants (27.0%) indicated using social media less than two hours per day, with 207 (35.0%) spending two to four hours daily, 135 (23.0%) reporting four to seven hours, and 87 (15.0%) eight or more hours.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the majority ( $n = 432$ ; 73.0%) indicated that they spend more than two hours per day on social media platforms.

YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp were the most popular platforms with frequent usage by the participants of this study. As shown in Table 2, female gender, settled region and country of origin were associated with usage of WhatsApp-Viber-Snapchat and LinkedIn-Instagram-Twitter groups ( $p < 0.05$  for both groups). Younger age was significantly associated with a higher prevalence of LinkedIn-Instagram-Twitter and YouTube usage ( $p < 0.001$  for both). There were also significant differences between people's choice of platforms to connect by the country/region of origin ( $p < 0.01$ ). The prevalence of YouTube usage was higher among those with a shorter length of stay in New Zealand ( $< 2$  years;  $p = 0.001$ ).

The most common device respondents use to connect to their family/friends on social media daily is the smartphone ( $n = 542$ ; 91.6%), with only a handful ( $n = 8$ ) using other devices daily, and not smartphones.<sup>6</sup>

### *Barriers to access to social media*

Participants also reported frequent barriers to accessing social media (Table 3). Concerns about privacy and confidentiality ( $n = 353$ ; 59.6%) was a leading barrier to social media use. This finding complements a range of studies that have highlighted how resettled refugees feel unsettled in environments of mediated control (Aziz, 2022; Dekker et al., 2018; Leung, 2018). The second leading barrier for our participants was difficulties understanding how to use social media and/or the reliability of connection with overseas countries ( $n = 230$ ; 39.0%). Lastly, the participants identified financial burdens ( $n = 259$ ; 43.7%) as a hindrance to social media use, complementing studies that expose financial capital as a constraint in everyday digital media use (Hill, 2023; Leung, 2018; Leurs, 2014). Age, country of origin, and length of stay in New Zealand contributed to these barriers (see Table 3).

As shown in Table 4, in multivariate models, older age ( $> 46$  years old compared with 18–35 years old) was associated with higher odds of technical barriers. Also, those from Afghanistan and Bhutan were more likely to report technical barriers than Syrians. Those who had stayed in New Zealand for 3–5 years or less were more likely to report financial barriers than those with 6+-years' stays. The odds of reporting financial barriers by respondents from Afghanistan were four times those of respondents from Syria (OR = 4.05; 95% CI = 2.15, 7.62). Country or region of origin was the only contributing factor for stating concerns over security or confidentiality with access to social media, with higher odds of this barrier reported by Afghan, African, South American and Middle Eastern refugees than Syrians.

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<sup>5</sup> See "Appendix S2: Social media use patterns" in the Supplementary Notes for the survey questions in the six languages. Available at <https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al.-Mapping-Digital-Citizenship-NZS-Vol.39-No.2-Supplementary-Notes.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See "Appendix S1: Device use patterns" for the survey questions in the six languages and "Figure S1: Device use pattern to connect with family/friends among New Zealand refugees" for the results. Both are in the Supplementary Notes, available at <https://www.saanz.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Marlowe-et-al.-Mapping-Digital-Citizenship-NZS-Vol.39-No.2-Supplementary-Notes.pdf>

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 Table 2: Characteristics of refugees who frequently used social media platform groups versus infrequent users

		Viber-WhatsApp-Snapchat ( <i>n</i> = 426)		$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	LinkedIn-Instagram-Twitter ( <i>n</i> = 192)		$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	Skype-Imo-FaceTime ( <i>n</i> = 111)		$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	YouTube ( <i>n</i> = 394)		$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	Facebook ( <i>n</i> = 363)		$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)
		<i>n</i>	Row%		<i>n</i>	Row%		<i>n</i>	Row%		<i>n</i>	Row%		<i>n</i>	Row%	
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	156	66.1	5.1 (0.02)	58	24.6	11.6 (0.006)	37	15.7	3.01 (0.08)	157	66.5	0.57 (0.45)	155	65.7	2.39 (0.12)
	<b>Female</b>	222	75.0		114	38.5		64	21.6		206	69.6		175	59.1	
<b>Age groups</b>	<b>16–25</b>	111	72.1	6.4 (0.09)	102	66.2	126.6 (< 0.001)	27	17.5	0.41 (0.93)	131	85.1	36.7 (< 0.001)	89	57.8	4.4 (0.21)
	<b>26–35</b>	116	78.9		50	34.0		30	20.4		100	68.0		98	66.7	
	<b>36–45</b>	106	72.1		22	15.0		28	19.1		82	55.8		95	64.6	
	<b>46+</b>	91	65.5		17	12.2		26	18.7		80	57.6		79	56.8	
<b>Settled regions</b>	<b>Auckland</b>	97	75.2	64.8 (< 0.001)	50	38.8	13.8 (0.03)	26	20.2	10.6 (0.10) <sup>1</sup>	81	62.8	4.5 (0.60)	66	51.2	37.7 (< 0.001)
	<b>Christchurch</b>	58	84.1		27	39.1		14	20.3		46	66.7		59	85.5	
	<b>Dunedin</b>	63	82.9		18	23.7		14	18.4		47	61.8		48	63.2	
	<b>Manawatu region<sup>2</sup></b>	14	77.8		6	33.3		2	11.1		11	61.1		8	44.4	
	<b>Nelson</b>	22	32.4		13	19.1		7	10.3		48	70.6		47	69.1	
	<b>Waikato region (Hamilton)</b>	45	79.0		23	40.4		18	31.6		43	75.4		23	40.4	
	<b>Wellington region</b>	123	72.8		52	30.8		29	17.2		115	68.1		108	63.9	
<b>Country/regions of origin</b>	<b>Afghanistan</b>	98	80.3	92.6 (< 0.001) <sup>1</sup>	46	37.7	19.6 (0.006)	31	25.4	19.2 (0.008) <sup>1</sup>	84	68.9	2.4 (0.93)	77	63.1	29.9 (< 0.001)
	<b>Bhutan</b>	12	24.5		8	16.3		3	6.1		34	69.4		39	79.6	
	<b>All Africa</b>	57	79.2		31	43.1		21	29.2		44	61.1		35	48.6	
	<b>Colombia/Chile</b>	28	82.4		9	26.5		4	11.8		21	61.8		19	55.9	
	<b>East/South East Asia</b>	17	53.1		11	34.4		13	24.1		21	65.6		20	62.5	
	<b>Other Middle East</b>	65	73.0		32	36.0		15	16.7		59	66.3		49	55.1	
	<b>Syria</b>	115	86.5		30	22.5		17	12.8		91	68.4		96	72.2	
	<b>South Asia/Other Asian</b>	32	54.2		24	40.7		7	19.4		38	64.4		27	45.8	
<b>Length of stay in New Zealand</b>	<b>less than 2 years</b>	116	77.3	5.4 (0.06)	54	36.0	1.3 (0.51)	27	18.0	0.79 (0.67)	107	71.3	13.0 (0.001)	92	61.3	0.09 (0.95)
	<b>3–5 years</b>	136	73.9		58	31.5		32	17.4		137	74.5		114	62.0	
	<b>6+ years</b>	156	67.0		71	30.5		48	20.6		137	58.8		141	60.5	

Notes: 1. Fisher exact *p*-value is reported.  
 2. Due to the small counts in both Invercargill and Palmerston North, the data have been merged and results shown only as the Manawatu region.  
 3. Discrepancies between full sample (*N*) for each platform and subsample (*n*) are due to participants' missing responses.  
 4. See Note 2 under Table 1 for a full list of the countries within each region of origin.

Table 3: Prevalence of having any barrier/financial barriers to accessing social media

		Financial barriers ( <i>n</i> = 259)	$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	Security/ confidentiality concerns ( <i>n</i> = 353)	$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)	Technical barriers ( <i>n</i> = 292)	$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	104 (44.1%)	0.04	142 (60.2%)	0.16	115 (48.7%)	0.77
	<b>Female</b>	128 (43.2%)	(0.85)	173 (58.5%)	(0.68)	148 (50.0%)	(0.79)
<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>16–25</b>	57 (37.0%)	8.49	91 (59.1%)	0.23	62 (40.3%)	27.5
	<b>26–35</b>	58 (39.5%)	(0.04)	86 (58.5%)	(0.97)	59 (40.4%)	(< 0.001)
	<b>36–45</b>	70 (47.6%)		88 (59.9%)		76 (51.7%)	
	<b>46+</b>	72 (51.8%)		85 (61.2%)		93 (66.9%)	
<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Afghanistan</b>	80 (65.6%)	42.3	94 (77.1%)	62.4	86 (70.5%)	47.8
	<b>Bhutan</b>	21 (42.9%)	(< 0.001)	18 (36.7%)	(< 0.001)	33 (67.4%)	(< 0.001)
	<b>All Africa</b>	22 (30.5%)		56 (77.8%)		34 (47.2%)	
	<b>Colombia/Chile</b>	10 (29.4%)		26 (76.5%)		20 (58.8%)	
	<b>East/South East Asia</b>	8 (25.0%)		24 (75.0%)		9 (28.1%)	
	<b>Other Middle East</b>	46 (48.3%)		37 (41.6%)		38 (42.2%)	
	<b>Syria</b>	57 (42.9%)		62 (46.6%)		47 (35.3%)	
	<b>South Asia/Other Asian<sup>1</sup></b>	17 (28.8%)		36 (61.0%)		24 (40.7%)	
<b>Length of stay in New Zealand</b>	<b>≤2 years versus 6+ years</b>	76 (50.7%)	6.6	87 (58.0%)	15.3	78 (52.0%)	0.26
	<b>3-5 years</b>	84 (45.6%)	(0.037)	90 (48.9%)	(0.0005)	82 (44.6%)	(0.25)
	<b>6+ years</b>	88 (37.8%)		158 (67.8%)		121 (51.935)	
<b>Hours of social media activity</b>	<b>&lt; 2 hours/day</b>	64 (40.2%)	7.1	100 (62.9%)	1.1	86 (54.1%)	0.38
	<b>2–4 hours/day</b>	82 (39.6%)	(0.07)	119 (57.5%)	(0.77)	99 (47.8%)	(0.39)
	<b>4–7 hours/day</b>	71 (42.6%)		80 (59.3%)		68 (50.4%)	
	<b>≥ 8 hours/day</b>	42 (47.7%)		52 (59.1%)		38 (43.2%)	

Note: See Note 2 under Table 1 for a full list of the countries within each region of origin.

Table 4: Factors influencing barriers to accessing social media

Variables	Level	Financial barriers			Security/confidentiality concerns			Technical barriers					
		Odds Ratio	95%Confidence Intervals (CI)	<i>p</i> -value	*Odds Ratio	95%Confidence Intervals (CI)	<i>p</i> -value	*Odds Ratio	95%Confidence Intervals (CI)	<i>p</i> -value			
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Female vs Male</b>	1.06	0.72	1.55	0.74	0.87	0.59	1.29	0.51	1.13	0.77	1.66	0.51
<b>Age</b>	<b>18–25 vs 46+</b>	0.56	0.33	0.96	0.08	0.93	0.54	1.66	0.99	0.38	0.22	0.66	0.001
	<b>26–35 vs 46+</b>	0.72	0.42	1.23		0.95	0.55	1.66		0.40	0.23	0.68	
	<b>36–45 vs 46+</b>	1.02	0.60	1.75		0.98	0.56	1.70		0.74	0.43	1.27	
<b>Length of stay</b>	<b>less than 2 years vs 6+ years</b>	2.44	1.44	4.14	0.004	1.06	0.63	1.80	0.20	1.50	0.89	2.52	0.15
	<b>3–5 years vs 6+ years</b>	1.70	1.03	2.83		0.71	0.42	1.18		0.95	0.57	1.56	
<b>Country/regions of origin</b>	<b>Afghanistan vs Syria</b>	4.05	2.15	7.62	< 0.001	3.10	1.65	5.85	< 0.001	3.81	2.02	7.18	< 0.001
	<b>All Africa vs Syria</b>	1.16	0.56	2.41		3.43	1.58	7.46		1.57	0.76	3.24	
	<b>Bhutan vs Syria</b>	1.28	0.61	2.69		0.56	0.26	1.20		3.38	1.55	7.40	
	<b>Colombia/Chile vs Syria</b>	0.52	0.19	1.38		2.88	1.08	7.62		1.59	0.65	3.94	
	<b>East/South East Asia vs Syria</b>	1.02	0.38	2.74		3.74	1.31	10.67		0.81	0.30	2.19	
	<b>Middle East vs Syria</b>	1.37	0.73	2.55		0.78	0.42	1.45		0.99	0.53	1.87	
	<b>South Asia/Other Asian vs Syria</b>	0.77	0.37	1.57		1.72	0.87	3.41		1.30	0.65	2.60	

Notes: 1. Adjusted odds ratios are reported.  
2. See Note 2 under Table 1 for a full list of the countries within each region of origin.

### *Social or political activity on social media*

As shown in Table 5, about 37% of respondents indicated some social or political activities on social media. Significantly fewer Syrians (18.8%), Bhutanese (28.6%) and people coming from other Middle East countries (28.1%) reported conducting social and political activities on social media relative to people from other regions such as Africa (61.1%) or Southeast Asia (59.4%) ( $p < 0.001$ ).

According to Table 6, in multivariate models, females had a 0.61 odds ratio of being socially or politically active on social media than males (95% CI = 0.40, 0.91;  $p = 0.02$ ). Being settled less than two years in New Zealand was associated with less social media activity than six years settled and longer (OR = 0.53; 95% CI = 0.31, 0.93). However, there was no statistically significant difference between those who had stayed for between three and five years and those who had stayed for six years or longer. Being from Africa, South America and East/Southeast Asia or other Asian countries (e.g., Nepal, Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan) increased the odds of reporting social or political activities on social media compared with Syrians. There were also direct associations between those who used LinkedIn, Instagram or Twitter and those who had social or political activities (OR = 1.84; 95% CI = 1.11, 3.03). Finally, having security concerns was associated with social or political activities on social media (OR = 2.22; 95% CI = 1.45, 3.39).

## **Discussion: Negotiating social, political, and relational settlement**

The accelerating trend of forced displacement further underscores the potential of social media to connect family, friends and wider communities across distance. Indeed, the uptake and use of digital technologies and social media among mobile subjects such as refugees and their benefits in terms of civic participation demonstrate the formation and embodiment of digital citizenship (Millard et al., 2018). In this article, we present the implications of the survey findings for connecting people, settlement support and enacting social and political lives within countries of resettlement and beyond.

Before outlining these implications, it is necessary to reinforce that the study presents the findings of people from refugee backgrounds who use social media. The respondents predominantly chose to complete English or Arabic versions of the survey, highlighting that the study findings do not reflect all groups. Thus, while our findings suggest commonalities in how refugees use and experience social media, they also highlight important differences related to gender, country of origin and time settled in New Zealand. These determinants are fundamental to articulating digital citizenship's meanings and outcomes for resettled refugees.

### *Facilitating communication and connection*

A clear finding of this study is that the smartphone is by far the most common communication tool. This aligns with the forced migration literature that shows that, while access remains uneven, the increasing accessibility of these devices is making them more interwoven into everyday lives—within New Zealand and beyond (see Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; McCaffrey & Taha, 2019; UNHCR, 2016).

Within this, participants noted using YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp as the three most common social media platforms. Facebook and WhatsApp are already used in a range of contexts to assist with settlement support, access to information and to convey important public health messages from everyday to emergency messaging. An interesting observation from other studies shows that refugees often did not trust or choose to use government and NGO-led websites and platforms designed to assist them (Dekker et al., 2018). These studies, alongside this survey, highlight the importance of ensuring that any communication strategy engages on the platforms where communities are already active. Furthermore, the possibility of fear among refugees when accessing state-run services and channels, which are often understood as spaces for surveillance and control is necessary, needs to be considered (Witteborn, 2014).

Table 5: Prevalence of social or political activities on social media

Variables	Level	Political or social activity				$\chi^2$ ( <i>p</i> -value)
		Yes ( <i>n</i> = 219)		No/Not sure ( <i>n</i> = 373)		
		<i>n</i>	Row%	<i>n</i>	Row%	
Gender	Male	93	39.4	143	60.6	1.2 (0.27)
	Female	103	34.8	193	65.2	
Age group	16–25	63	40.9	91	59.1	2.3 (0.49)
	26–35	56	38.1	91	61.9	
	36–45	55	37.4	92	62.6	
	46+	45	32.4	94	67.6	
Country of origin	Afghanistan	50	41.0	72	59.0	49.5 ( <i>&lt;</i> 0.001)
	Bhutan	14	28.6	35	71.4	
	All Africa	44	61.1	28	38.9	
	Colombia/Chile	13	38.2	21	61.8	
	East/South East Asia	19	59.4	13	40.6	
	Other Middle East	25	28.1	64	71.9	
	Syria	25	18.8	108	81.2	
Resettled region	South Asia/Other Asian	28	47.5	31	52.5	40.6 ( <i>&lt;</i> 0.001)
	Auckland	73	56.6	56	43.4	
	Christchurch	31	44.9	38	55.1	
	Dunedin	17	22.4	59	77.6	
	Manawatu region	4	22.2	14	77.8	
	Nelson	17	25.0	51	75.0	
	Waikato region (Hamilton)	24	42.1	33	57.9	
Length of stay in New Zealand	Wellington region	50	29.6	119	70.4	23.8 ( <i>&lt;</i> 0.001)
	less than 2 years	42	28.0	108	72.0	
	3–5 years	53	28.8	131	71.2	
Hours of social media activity	6+ years	113	48.5	120	51.5	4.2 (0.24)
	2–4 hours/day	80	38.7	127	61.4	
	4–7 hours/day	57	42.2	78	57.8	
	< 2 hours/day	50	31.5	109	68.6	
Security/confidentiality concerns	$\geq$ 8 hours/day	30	34.1	58	65.9	29.7 ( <i>&lt;</i> 0.001)
	Yes	162	45.9	191	54.1	
Facebook user	No	57	23.8	182	76.2	2.3 (0.13)
	Yes	143	39.4	220	60.6	
Viber/WhatsApp/Snapchat user	Yes	170	39.9	256	60.1	5.5 (0.02)
	Yes	92	47.9	100	52.1	
LinkedIn/Insta/Twitter user	Yes	46	41.4	65	58.6	14.5 (0.0002)
	Yes	46	41.4	65	58.6	
Skype/Imo/FaceTime	Yes	46	41.4	65	58.6	1.2 (0.28)
	Yes	46	41.4	65	58.6	
YouTube user	Yes	46	41.4	65	58.6	2.2 (0.14)

Notes: 1. See Note 2 under Table 1 for a full list of the countries within each region of origin.  
2. Due to the small counts in both Invercargill and Palmerston North, the data have been merged and results shown only as the Manawatu region.

Table 6: Determinants of social or political activities among refugees in New Zealand

Variables	Level	Model 1 (without social media platforms and security concerns)			Model 2 (with social media platforms used and security concerns)				
		Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Intervals (CI)		<i>p</i> -value	Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Intervals (CI)		<i>p</i> -value
<b>Gender</b>	Female vs Male	0.66	0.44	0.97	0.04	0.61	0.40	0.91	0.02
<b>Age</b>	16–25 vs 46+	1.66	0.95	2.91	0.32	1.19	0.63	2.25	0.87
	26–35 vs 46+	1.50	0.85	2.66		1.22	0.67	2.23	
	36–45 vs 46+	1.29	0.73	2.29		1.22	0.68	2.20	
<b>Country of origin</b>	Afghanistan vs Syria	2.76	1.41	5.40	0.0003	2.07	1.03	4.18	0.02
	African countries vs Syria	5.20	2.39	11.29		3.87	1.72	8.67	
	Bhutan vs Syria	1.15	0.47	2.77		1.66	0.64	4.31	
	Colombia/Chile vs Syria	2.96	1.13	7.73		2.73	1.02	7.29	
	East/South East Asia vs Syria	3.35	1.28	8.75		3.08	1.12	8.45	
	Other Middle East vs Syria	1.53	0.75	3.14		1.52	0.72	3.21	
	South Asia/Other Asian vs Syria	3.37	1.61	7.06		3/50	1.59	7.70	
<b>Length of stay in New Zealand</b>	less than 2 years vs 6+ years	0.56	0.32	0.95	0.05	0.53	0.31	0.93	0.06
	3–5 years vs 6+ years	0.59	0.35	0.99		0.63	0.37	1.07	
<b>Security concerns</b>	Yes vs No	—	—	—		2.22	1.45	3.39	0.0003
<b>LinkedIn/Instagram/Twitter</b>	Yes vs No	—	—	—		1.84	1.11	3.03	0.02
<b>WhatsApp/Viber/Snapchat</b>	Yes vs No	—	—	—		1.57	0.95	2.61	0.08

Notes: 1. We did not include both regions settled and countries of origin in one model due to the higher conceptual relevance of country of origin.  
2. Adjusted odds ratios are reported.  
3. See Note 2 under Table 1 for a full list of the countries within each region of origin.

This study also found gender differences in using social media platforms, with women using the Viber/WhatsApp/Instagram grouping more than men. This finding complements the study by Ritchie (2022), showing how Somali women refugees in Kenya use WhatsApp to carve spaces for social, cultural and entrepreneurial connections. In contrast, Merisalo and Jauhiainen (2021) conducted a study on asylum seekers' settlement journeys and found men were significantly more likely than women to use YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that discrepancies in digital access can stem from factors such as availability and skill levels (Alam & Imran, 2015), alongside conservatism (Ritchie, 2022) and discrimination (Witteborn, 2014), which can hinder the digital practices of female refugees and other demographic groupings. These differences suggest the importance of locating the sociocultural and relational factors that inform any given study or policy intent.

Since conducting this study, the New Zealand government has identified five additional settlement sites: Levin, Masterton, Blenheim, Ashburton and Timaru. Social media can play a role in connecting communities separated by physical distance and may potentially help people feel 'in place' if they can connect with cultural and language communities based elsewhere in New Zealand. This has already been shown, for instance, for Muslim women from refugee backgrounds who maintain WhatsApp groups across various geographic places within the country (see Marlowe, 2019). This study also demonstrated that women, more than men, prefer WhatsApp/Viber/SnapChat to connect with friends and families. In addition, factors such as accessibility to basic services, which are usually located in urban centres (hospitals, city councils, social welfare support), also play an important role in social media use due to the link between the necessity of connection with certain services and limitations to access these services. This potential has already been demonstrated during New Zealand's COVID-19 lockdowns—as various video-enabled platforms allowed mental health clinicians to work with refugees to provide support when physical proximity and travel were not possible (see Mortensen, 2020).

### *Communications in a crowded environment*

This survey found 86% of respondents used four or more social media platforms. While social media can be used to assist with settlement support, it is also necessary to recognise the unstable media environment through which information flows. The echo chambers resulting from these platforms can become powerful sources of misinformation and disinformation (Marlowe, 2019; Wall et al., 2019). Thus, the use of these tools underscores the need to improve digital information literacies and competencies to ensure cybersecurity. This training would include understanding what might constitute misleading or suspicious content, such as fake news and scams. Furthermore, developing strategies for communicating through social media channels is increasingly important in engaging with refugee groups as an important, though not singular, approach to conveying key messages. This could relate to important policy announcements and responding to extraordinary events such as disasters. The latter was clearly the case during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and various lockdowns, when ensuring timely, accurate and trusted communications was paramount (O'Brien et al., 2018). Thus, understanding what platforms particular communities are using is essential to ensure that communications have reach into targeted groups.

### *Political and social activity as sites of belonging and meaning*

This study suggests that country of origin approaches to surveillance and transnational authoritarian aggression significantly influence refugees' opportunities and decisions to be socially or politically active, within New Zealand and beyond. Thus, it is possible that people will feel safer becoming politically active after several years. As some states (such as Syria) have higher levels of surveillance, it is perhaps not surprising that participants from these countries are less likely to report political or social activity (possibly due to risks to themselves or their networks back in their country of origin). In some cases, the fear of



being tracked from afar by the home country compels refugees to avoid participating in political discussions or online mobilisations (Witteborn, 2014).

It also suggests that people are more likely to be socially and politically active after a certain time in New Zealand (more than six years). For people resettling in the first few years, such activities may also be affected or minimised due to the combination of elements that recently arrived refugees have to navigate, such as housing, language acquisition, work, education and health. Families with a length of stay of six years or more are more likely to have adjusted to these settlement tasks and may have more time and capacity to participate in conscious political and social spheres.

Finally, it is worth acknowledging that opportunities for social and political action, within and beyond national borders, also create possibilities for a sense of belonging. Social media can foster spaces where people can mobilise various forms of capital that are otherwise difficult to access or utilise. While the survey shows that most of the participants use social media for more than two hours a day, it is also arguable, for some, that these platforms could potentially foster fellowship and social capital that may be limited in settlement contexts (see Alénar, 2017; Dekker et al., 2018). Understanding how refugees negotiate the social, political and relational settlement in these digital spaces has accelerated salience as the distinctions between ‘here’ and ‘there’ become increasingly blurred in this rapidly evolving landscape.

### *Subsidising access and training*

As already presented, numerous studies have demonstrated how social media platforms assist refugee and migrant groups in overcoming isolation and loneliness and can facilitate a sense of well-being (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). However, financial barriers can constrain digital access (Leung, 2018). Considering the high prevalence of economic difficulty in paying for internet access (43.8%) and the popularity of smartphone use among respondents, proximity to libraries, museums and other public spaces with free internet access also plays an important role in the accessibility of refugees to social media. When internet access is considered alongside how important social media is for people’s sense of well-being and connections to family (see Marlowe & Bruns, 2020), it becomes clear that social media represents a critical bridging tool with transnational networks and provides flows of critical resources—something that Wilding et al. (2020) refer to as the “circulation of care”.

Recognising the association found in this study between less than two years of settlement in New Zealand (compared with six years or longer) and financial barriers, it is also arguable that providing subsidised internet access in the first year or two of settlement could help connect people across distances and improve well-being, which in turn could support positive settlement outcomes. In New Zealand, telecommunication companies already offer complimentary basic Wi-Fi access during the first year of settlement for newly arrived refugees. Another notable example includes the Computers in Homes initiative which provides families with access to a computer, internet access and associated training (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016) and how this access and support can enhance well-being and societal participation (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2019).

While subsidising access could reduce the barriers, it is necessary to recognise the limitations of this approach and that our suggestion is not one of complete digital optimism. Here, we follow the contentions of scholars arguing how social inequalities must be identified and considered in examining how people and communities experience and navigate digital exclusion (Helsper, 2021; Warschauer, 2003). One of the notable findings from this study is the high prevalence of security and confidentiality concerns among refugees (nearly 60% of participants) associated with their country of origin. Other studies have highlighted how oppressive regimes can use social media for surveillance and maintain influence beyond geographical borders (Glasius, 2018). In some cases, the fear of surveillance among refugees reproduces disconnection (Witteborn, 2014). Thus, we recommend culturally and contextually sensitive (Warschauer, 2003) digital

literacy programmes to teach people how to access digital resources effectively and mitigate possible risks or safety issues. Such training would also include understanding what digital traces particular social media platforms leave behind and how to keep individuals, families and transnational networks safe.

## Conclusion

Digital communications through social media are reconfiguring how forced migrants experience displacement on social, cultural, economic and political levels. The rapidly evolving landscape presents opportunities and cautions for providing settlement support and the potential to connect people who are separated by distance. We highlight how digital citizenship is engendered and undermined based on demographics, financial resources and literacies. These findings underscore the importance of situating refugees' everyday digital practices within a broader sociopolitical context (Witteborn, 2014).

While this study was conducted just before the COVID-19 pandemic, its findings are arguably more salient than before as societies grapple with the implications of social distancing and remote forms of interaction. The various forms of immobility that arose from the associated lockdowns created new forms of dislocation and separation but also gave rise to new ways that forced migrants could respond to such challenges.

The considerations of time settled, country of origin, age and sociopolitical contexts are necessary to acknowledge alongside a broader recognition of the risks and affordances of engaging online. Thus, studies could explore how the utilisation and availability of these online platforms influence digital citizenship practices as it intersects with various socio-political contexts. The accelerating development of a rapidly evolving technological and communication landscape signals a fundamental shift that will continue to inform refugees' opportunities for integration and a sense of belonging from local to transnational scales.

These conclusions warrant cautious consideration. First, the study findings only represent refugees already using social media (as explained in the Methods section) and not those who did not have any internet access or were not using any social media platforms. Secondly, the predominant respondents completed the survey in English and Arabic, with much smaller numbers for the other language groupings, limiting the ability to make general comments about refugee-background communities. Finally, we were limited in being able to conduct comparative analyses across language groupings because it would have meant smaller power to establish effect sizes with much larger co-variance. Despite these limitations, this study provides an important overview of how social media users from refugee backgrounds use these platforms to communicate, connect and participate in political or social actions. Future surveys could focus on those language groups of lesser diffusion to see if there are differences between these groups' length of time in New Zealand. As already acknowledged, interpreting what constitutes social and political activity can have significant variations. Qualitative studies provide further insights into the specificities of these various activities and interactions where building—or even undermining—trust and safety is possible (Cabalquinto, 2024; Leurs, 2019; Wilding et al., 2020). Future studies could help further address these queries by exploring how those less active or inactive on social media forge and sustain connection and political activities from local to transnational spaces, particularly as digital communication becomes increasingly part of everyday life.

While using information communication technologies and social media opens a range of possibilities for connection and support, it poses questions about the quality of those relationships and presents concerns about safety, security and exclusion. The fact that digitally mediated interactions are becoming increasingly ingrained into daily life shows the importance of digital citizenship and the critical awareness and an appreciation of the various contexts and consequences that include or marginalise people in the digital social nexus.

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