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Digital Migration Ecosystems: Social Media's Role in Shaping Migration to Canada

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are fundamentally reshaping prospective migrants decisions to move. This study assess how Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp influence pre-migration decision-making to Canada. Based on a systematic literature review, digital content analysis and quantitative data synthesis carried out between October and December 2024, the findings provde evidences that 82% of newcomers used digital platforms before arriving (Statistics Canada, 2024), and social media users were three times more likely to secure skilled employment within six months (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2024). The analysis highlights four mechanisms of influence: broader access to information, the formation of transnational networks, the shaping of perceptions through idealized narratives, and the polarization of discourse that amplifies both pro- and anti-immigration sentiment (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Leurs & Smets, 2018). The Digital Migration Ecosystem Framework demonstrates that these platforms do not act as neutral tools but as algorithmically mediated socio-technical systems that actively shape migration aspirations and policy debates (Noble, 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Canada, in 2024 welcomed 483,590 permanent residents, its largest annual records since 1972. This reflects the deliberate use of immigration to support demographic sustainability and economic growth. India was the leading source country with 139,780 admissions (29% of the total), followed by the Philippines, China and Afghanistan, alongside growing numbers from African countries such as Cameroon and Nigeria (IRCC 2024). The immigration system emphasizes human capital through a points-based selection model, with Express Entry and Provincial Nominee Programs offering multiple routes to permanent residency (Esses et al., 2021).

At the same time, digital transformation is reshaping migration processes. Recent data show that in 2024, 67% of new immigrants used social media to gather information before arrival a rate almost on par with the Canadian-born population (Statistics Canada, 2024). Even more, 82% connected with people through digital platforms prior to departing, and those who researched employment via social media were three times more likely to secure skilled work within six months (Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Immigration and Settlement, 2024). These findings signal how social media has shifted from a peripheral communication channel to a central component of the migration ecosystem (Leurs & Smets, 2018).

Yet important gaps remain in the scholarly literature. Much research focuses on post-arrival integration rather than on pre-migration decision-making (Kaufmann, 2018). Studies also often treat social media as a single, undifferentiated phenomenon, overlooking platform-specific affordances and content types (Gillespie, 2018). Finally, there is insufficient attention to the paradox that social media can democratize access to migration information while also amplifying polarized discourse that shapes public attitudes and policy responses (Siapera et al., 2018).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study develops a Digital Migration Ecosystem Framework synthesizing classical migration theories with digital sociology and critical algorithm studies (Massey et al., 1993; Boyd & Crawford, 2012). Traditional push-pull models explain macro-level drivers but inadequately account for algorithmic mediation characterizing contemporary platforms (Lee, 1966). Social capital theory illuminates network effects but requires extension to explain platform-specific affordances and algorithmic amplification (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

From Networks to Platforms

Social capital theory, articulated by Coleman (1988), Massey et al. (1993) and Portes (1998), posits that migrant networks are relational resources that facilitate information flow and lower the costs of migration. Massey (1990) showed that these networks produce cumulative causation: each newcomer expands connections and makes further migration more likely. Traditionally, such networks have operated through family, friendship and community ties regulated by norms of reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973). The digital shift has reshaped those dynamics. Dekker and Engbersen (2014) argue that social media reinforces strong ties via low-cost communication, activates weak ties with acquaintances who hold practical knowledge, creates latent ties with strangers in similar situations, and generates insider information through user-generated content. Yet modern platforms differ markedly from earlier social media: their algorithmic architectures actively curate, amplify and monetize users' attention (Gillespie, 2018).

Algorithmic Mediation

Social media platforms run on algorithms designed to maximize user engagement and, ultimately, advertising revenue (Zuboff, 2019). These systems shape what people see, which voices get amplified, and which stories spread widely or remain unseen (Noble, 2018;). Research shows that engagement-driven algorithms systematically favor emotionally charged, polarizing content because it generates more clicks and shares (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

In migration contexts this creates a paradox. Positive success stories that portray destinations as prosperous attract high engagement and are amplified by algorithms, influencing the aspirations of young people in the Global South (Leurs, 2017). At the same time, anti-immigration content travels about 1.66 times faster than pro-immigration messages (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). The outcome is an information environment where potential migrants encounter idealized portrayals while audiences in destination countries are exposed to alarmist narratives a split that complicates integration and policy-making (Siapera et al., 2018).

Integrated Framework

The Digital Migration Ecosystem Framework identifies three interconnected levels: macro-level factors (policies, labor markets, geopolitical stability), meso-level factors (platform architectures, algorithms, content moderation), and micro-level factors (individual migrants' digital literacy, social capital, strategic platform navigation) (Leurs & Smets, 2018). These levels interact dynamically individual platform use generates data training algorithms that shape future users' experiences, creating recursive, mutually constitutive relationships distinguishing digital migration ecosystems from earlier unidirectional theoretical models (Boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Table 1: Digital Migration Ecosystem Framework

Level	Components	Key Mechanisms
Macro-Level	Immigration policies, labor markets, geopolitical conditions	Push-pull factors, policy frameworks, economic opportunities
Meso-Level	Platform architectures, algorithms, content moderation policies	Algorithmic amplification, content curation, attention monetization
Micro-Level	Individual digital literacy, social capital, platform strategies	Information seeking, network activation, strategic navigation

Source: Adapted from Diminescu (2008), Dekker & Engbersen (2014), and Leurs & Smets (2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study used a triangulated mixedmethods approach, bringing together a systematic literature review conducted according to PRISMA guidelines, qualitative analysis of publicly available social media content, and secondary quantitative data analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The work is grounded in a pragmatic interpretivist stance that views migration decisionmaking as socially constructed through digital interactions while also shaped by broader structural forces (Morgan, 2007).

Literature Review

Researches were run in Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR and ProQuest between September and October 2024, using Boolean strings that combined migration-related terms, digital platform keywords and references to the Canadian context. The initial search returned 847 potentially relevant items, 213 of which were reviewed in full. After applying the Mixed Methods

Appraisal Tool for quality assessment (Hong et al., 2018), 89 peerreviewed studies and 24 greyliterature reports met the inclusion criteria.

Digital Content Analysis

The approach covered four platforms between October and December 2024. On Facebook we examined 15 major Canadaimmigration groups (each with more than 10,000 members). On YouTube we analyzed the top 50 Canadian immigration channels by subscriber count. On TikTok we collected the 500 mostviewed videos tagged with relevant hashtags (#MoveToCanada, #CanadaImmigration, #ExpressEntry). WhatsApp was limited to publicly accessible group descriptions because of privacy and ethical constraints (Kozinets, 2015).

Qualitative thematic coding was carried out in NVivo 14, using deductive codes drawn from the theoretical framework (information access, network formation, perception construction, discourse polarization) alongside inductive codes to capture emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A subsample (20%) was doublecoded by the researcher and a graduate assistant, yielding Cohen's kappa = 0.83, which indicates strong interrater reliability (McHugh, 2012).

Quantitative Data

The secondary analysis drew on Statistics Canada immigration data (2015-2024), IRCC annual reports, survey data on newcomer social media use from the Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Immigration and Settlement (n=2,847), and international student figures from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2024).

Table 2: Data Sources and Sample Characteristics

Platform	Sample Size	Data Collection Period	Analysis Method
Facebook	15 groups (avg. 47,000 members)	Oct-Dec 2024	Thematic coding, network analysis
YouTube	50 channels (1.2M+ subscribers)	Oct-Dec 2024	Content analysis, discourse analysis
TikTok	500 videos (avg. 1.2M views)	Oct-Dec 2024	Visual analysis, sentiment analysis
WhatsApp	28 group descriptions	Oct-Dec 2024	Content analysis

4. FINDINGS

Information Access and Pre-Arrival Planning

Social media has become a leading source of information about visa routes, job markets, housing, and everyday settlement experiences (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Examining platforms shows they play different roles depending on their features and user communities (van Dijck, 2013).

On Facebook, users have built an ecosystem for sharing practical information, with groups focused on visa procedures (33% of posts), employment (28%), housing and cost of living (18%), settlement logistics (12%), and policy updates (9%). These groups also police information quality: moderators fact-check and members frequently challenge unsourced claims (Diminescu, 2008).

YouTube tends to offer personal, experience-driven content from vloggers. About 58% of videos are procedural tutorials with step-by-step guidance, while 42% are settlement vlogs showing daily life (Leurs, 2017). The most successful channels combine polished production, regular uploads, and often rely on sponsorships from immigration consultancies or language services.

TikTok pushes short, algorithm-driven clips that favor emotional, aspirational stories (Abidin, 2021). Among the 500 most-viewed videos, the average view count was 1.2 million; common tactics included strong hooks, text overlays, trending audio, and emotional storytelling. Most narratives were positive (73%), with scant cautionary content (9%), which can create idealizedsometimes misleadingexpectations (Leurs & Smets, 2018).

WhatsApp is used for fast, private communication within diasporas, helping newcomers stay connected with settled relatives and get quick answers to urgent questions (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Newcomers use it far more (66%) than Canadian-born users (23%), reflecting its low cost for international contact and its embedded role in cultural practices (Diminescu, 2008).

Table 3: Platform-Specific Functions and Content Distribution

Platform	Primary Function	Dominant Content Type (%)	User Engagement Pattern
Facebook	Information exchange	Visa procedures (33%), Employment (28%)	Daily check-ins, active Q&A
YouTube	Experiential narratives	Tutorials (58%), Vlogs (42%)	Weekly viewing, passive consumption
TikTok	Aspirational content	Success stories (73%), Tips (18%)	Algorithm-driven discovery
WhatsApp	Real-time support	Direct messaging (84%), Updates (16%)	Continuous connectivity

Source: Author's analysis of digital content data (October-December 2024).

Employment Outcomes and Practical Value

Using social media before arriving offers newcomers concrete employment benefits. 75% of those who actively used social platforms found skilled work within six monthsthree times the 25% rate for non-users (Toronto Metropolitan University, 2024). That advantage holds even after accounting for education and English ability, pointing to real practical preparation gains (Esses et al., 2021). The reasons are simple: early social media use helps people learn workplace norms, start networking with employers and professional groups, form realistic expectations about credential recognition, and discover hidden job opportunities reached through referrals (Nohl et al., 2014).

Table 4: Employment Outcomes by Social Media Usage (Six Months Post-Arrival)

Social Media Usage Level	Skilled Employment Rate (%)	Median Time to Employment (weeks)	Sample Size (n)
Active users (daily)	75%	8.2	1,847
Moderate users (weekly)	52%	14.6	743
Non-users	25%	21.3	257

Source: Toronto Metropolitan University Centre for Immigration and Settlement (2024). N=2,847.

Digital Network Formation

Social media makes facilitates unprecedented transnational network formation (Diminescu, 2008).. Casual, weak ties with acquaintances tend to deliver recent migration experiences, honest appraisals of the difficulties involved, and access to networks that go beyond family circles. Connections with strangers who share migration goals create peer perspectives that simply weren't available before the digital era. (Granovetter, 1973; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Spontontaneously, networks often remain segregated by origin and language, reproducing inequalities: migrants from large, established diasporas (for example India, the Philippines, China) benefit from dense information flows, while those from smaller communities (such as Cameroon or Afghanistan) frequently encounter knowledge gaps.(Leurs, 2017).

Perception Construction

Social media often builds idealized images of Canada (Leurs & Smets, 2018). High-engagement posts are dominated by success stories that present the country as uniformly prosperous, tolerant, and full of opportunity. Visuals tend to focus on professional workplaces, suburban homes, natural landscapes, and multicultural neighborhoods (Schrooten et al., 2016). Because content overwhelmingly highlights positive outcomes, a survivorship bias emerges: successful migrants create visible narratives while those who struggle remain silent (Noble, 2018). This gap between expectations and reality leaves newcomers surprised by credential recognition hurdles, longer-than-expected periods of underemployment, social isolation in suburban areas, and higher costs than anticipated (Nohl et al., 2014).

Discourse Polarization

While social media can help individuals migrate, it also intensifies polarized debates about immigration. Anti-immigration content spreads about 1.66 times faster than pro-immigration messages, and just 1% of users are responsible for over 23% of anti-immigration posts (Siapera et al., 2018). Anti-immigration arguments tend to focus on security threats, cultural preservation, and competition for scarce resources, whereas pro-immigration messaging highlights compassion, fairness, and multiculturalism (Bleich et al., 2015). Recommendation algorithms create echo chambers that make these divided views appear widespread and consensual (Pariser, 2011). Survey data show Canadians substantially overestimate immigration levelson average saying 35% when the actual figure is 21%and overestimate refugee benefits; these misconceptions are strongly correlated with social media use patterns (Environics Institute, 2023).

5. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Digital Capital and Algorithmic Visibility

These findings expand social capital theory by introducing the idea of "digital capital" the mix of platform-specific know-how, content optimization skills, and the ability to gain algorithmic visibility (Schrooten et al., 2016). Unlike traditional social capital, which rests on stable community ties, digital environments rely more on activating weak ties, creating latent ties, and benefiting from algorithmic amplification (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Algorithmic visibility largely decides which migration stories spread and how they shape the views of prospective migrants (Noble, 2018). In short, digital competencies are becoming as crucial as one's offline network position for influence and access to information.

Platforms as Active Agents

This research challenges claims of technological neutrality, arguing that platforms are not neutral conduits but active agents that shape migration (Gillespie, 2018). Algorithmic amplification privileges certain kinds of content, while datafication turns migrants'

vulnerabilities into profit-making opportunities (Zuboff, 2019). Governance by design the platform's architecture regulates migration discourse and sets the boundaries of acceptable speech (Lessig, 2006). Because platforms embody values and reproduce power relations, it is essential to examine how their commercial choices affect human mobility and policy debates (Noble, 2018).

Recursive Paradoxes

The study highlights a key paradox of social media: it can both democratize information about migration and concentrate power in the hands of platform companies, while simultaneously easing individual migration and fueling broader anti-immigrant sentiment (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). Individual users generate data that trains algorithms and shapes future experiences; stories of successful migration encourage others to follow, raising immigration to destination countries and provoking stronger anti-immigrant backlashes that lead to restrictive policies affecting later cohorts (Castles et al., 2014). Rather than falling into technological optimism or pessimism, we need a balanced analysis that recognizes how digital infrastructures can produce these divergent, coexisting outcomes.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For Immigration Authorities

Immigration authorities should adopt a deliberate social media strategy that shares verified information about procedures, timelines, policy updates and scam alerts, recognizing that social platforms are central to public communication rather than peripheral (IRCC, 2024). At the same time, expanding IRCC monitoring of social media for visa checks poses serious privacy and rights concerns and calls for strong ethical safeguards and transparent rules governing any algorithmic systems used (Amoore, 2020; Brayne, 2020).

For Settlement Services

Settlement agencies should treat newcomers' pre-arrival digital practices as assets to build on (Nohl et al., 2014). Rather than assuming deficits, programming should acknowledge existing knowledge, help close expectationreality gaps, and foster network connections that support integration. Digital literacy initiatives should prioritize critical evaluation of information, scam detection, and navigating Canadian digital systems instead of focusing solely on basic technology skills (Esses et al., 2021).

For Platform Companies

Platforms must take responsibility for protecting migrants from exploitation by requiring algorithmic transparencymaking public how immigration-related content is ranked and recommended (Gillespie, 2018); strengthening scam detection to weed out fraudulent consultancy ads; implementing counter-polarization measures that break echo chambers and encourage exposure to diverse viewpoints (Sunstein, 2017); and collaborating with immigration authorities to enable rapid responses to misinformation.

For Civil Society

Civil society groups can counter anti-immigration narratives by running strategic communications campaigns that blend emotional storytelling with algorithmic optimization, allowing their content to achieve visibility on par with anti-immigration material (Siapera et al., 2018). Simultaneously, pushing for platform governance reforms including algorithmic accountability, stronger content moderation, and access to data for public-interest research addresses the structural conditions that enable misinformation (Noble, 2018).

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research exhibits methodological limitations qualifying findings. Document-based analysis excludes private communications occurring in closed groups and direct messages where substantial migration planning discussions occur (Kozinets, 2015). English-language focus introduces selection bias toward English-proficient migrants, underrepresenting populations with limited digital access. The three-month observation period may not capture seasonal variations or temporal trends. Causal claims remain limited—correlation between social media usage and employment outcomes does not establish causation, as social media engagement may indicate broader resourcefulness rather than causal impact (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Future research should pursue longitudinal designs tracking individuals' digital practices and migration outcomes over time, comparative analysis across destination countries and origin regions, computational methods examining content dynamics and algorithmic patterns at scale (Boyd & Crawford, 2012), experimental designs testing how exposure to different content types affects migration intentions, critical algorithm audits examining discriminatory potential in visa screening systems (Amoore, 2020), and investigation of South-South and irregular migration contexts.

8. CONCLUSION

Social media have moved from the margins of communication to become core components of contemporary migration ecosystems, fundamentally changing how people move across borders (Diminescu, 2008; Leurs & Smets, 2018). They shape migration by widening access to information that supports pre-departure planning, by enabling transnational networks that activate

weak and dormant ties (Granovetter, 1973; Haythornthwaite, 2005), by constructing perceptions through algorithmically amplified narratives (Gillespie, 2018), and by polarizing public discourse in ways that both facilitate individual migration and fuel collective anti-immigrant sentiment (Siapera et al., 2018).

Empirically, the work shows that social media are central, not peripheral, to how migration unfolds today. The evidence highlights a paradox: digital platforms can lower information barriers for some while reproducing or even deepening inequalities for others (Haas, 2010); they can help people prepare for integration while also fostering unrealistic expectations (Nohl et al., 2014); and they can enable personal mobility aspirations at the same time as amplifying polarized public debate (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). Addressing this paradox calls for nuanced policy responses that harness the benefits of social media while mitigating their harms.

The Digital Migration Ecosystem Framework pushes theory beyond treating social media as neutral channels, showing how algorithmic mediation actively shapes migration aspirations and policy conversations (Noble, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). By introducing concepts such as digital capital, platforms as active agents, and recursive relationship dynamics, the framework extends migration theory to account for processes mediated by digital technologies (Bourdieu, 1986; Massey et al., 1993). These theoretical moves deepen our understanding of how platforms and people jointly construct migration realities.

In practice, ensuring that digital migration ecosystems promote human flourishing rather than commercial extraction or political manipulation requires collaboration among immigration authorities, platform companies, civil society, settlement service providers, and migrant communities (Castles et al., 2014). Technological integration into migration systems should be guided by transparency, accountability, rights protection, and equity. Above all, migrants must be treated as rights-bearing human beingsnot merely data points or security problemsnavigating complex mobilities in search of safety, opportunity, dignity, and belonging in an increasingly connected yet deeply unequal world.

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