

How Migrants Experience Information Uncertainty and Vulnerability: Lessons for (Dis)information Studies

Social Media + Society
October–December 2024: 1–11
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DOI: 10.1177/20563051241292571
journals.sagepub.com/home/sms



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Abstract

This article develops a phenomenological approach to examine the intersection of global migration and rising concerns about disinformation. Drawing on interviews with Venezuelans en route to the United States-Mexico border through Central America, the article analyzes how undocumented migrants live amid information precarity, how they relate to disinformation, and how disinformation affects their decisions. We demonstrate the centrality of information and communication practices in managing (dis)information during the migration experience. This includes distrusting traditional media, using various platforms like social media and messaging apps, and exchanging both information and disinformation with others. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the article demonstrates that migrants' relationship with (dis)information is shaped by their conviction that each person has unique life experiences and a profoundly religious view of life and destiny. The article thus advocates for a deeper exploration of migrants' sociocultural beliefs rather than focusing solely on issues such as information accuracy, accessibility, flows, and platforms when accounting for disinformation. In addition to valuable lessons for (dis)information studies, this approach could enrich communication interventions tailored to migrant communities in vulnerable conditions.

Keywords

disinformation, information precarity, experience, mobile phones, migration, phenomenology, social media

Introduction

The current intensification of global migration flows coincides with growing concerns about disinformation across several subjects—democracy, health, and the climate crisis. Driven by overlapping crises at home and searching for better lives, many people are moving across country borders. The United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that there are 281 million international migrants globally, 3.6% of the world's population (IOM, 2022). According to this report, “the number of international migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean has more than doubled [over the past 15 years], making it the region with the highest growth rate of international migrants” (IOM, 2022, p. 24). The situation is particularly challenging for undocumented migrants who have limited access to resources and support.

At the same time, scholars have warned about the growth of “deliberate attempts to sow confusion [. . .] among the public, with the purpose of political gain by a range of [. . .]

actors,” a phenomenon typically known as disinformation (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021, p. 1). To understand how we have reached this point, researchers have highlighted the convergence of several factors: recent transformations in public communication, the unique features of the current technological architecture, and profound crises in the legitimacy of epistemic and institutional authorities (Bennett & Livingston, 2021; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021).

The intersection between migration and disinformation is an area of growing scholarly interest (Smets et al., 2019). Our interest is in the information environment of undocumented migrants, a topic relevant for communication and

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media scholarship for three reasons. First, it directs attention to migrants' communication practices and the use of digital platforms as they make decisions. Second, the information environment of migrants is also related to disinformation. Studies have indicated that undocumented migrants are particularly vulnerable to disinformation by several actors. Third, the issue of migration and (dis)information is relevant for governments and humanitarian/aid organizations, which have launched efforts to dissuade people from migrating and to alert them about threats or resources.

Drawing on interviews with Venezuelans temporarily situated in Costa Rica, this article analyzes how individuals navigate the parallel challenges of migrating to the United States and grappling with information environments increasingly marked by disinformation. By so doing, we make two related analytical contributions. First, we show the significance of information and communication practices in dealing with (dis)information during migratory processes. The focus on "practices" in communication scholarship has facilitated an understanding of how routine activities constitutive of social life are organized around media (Couldry, 2004; Hobart, 2010). We contribute to this work by exploring how individuals deal with (dis)information during the migration experience by distrusting the media, employing various platforms and apps, and exchanging both information and disinformation with others.

Second, we adopt a phenomenological approach that explores "the lived experiences of migrants in relation to the political and social structures that inform these experiences" (Rathe, 2022, p. 4). By experience, we refer to the affective and cognitive trace left by events that take place during a process (Glevarec, 2021; Lash, 2018). A growing body of communication research inspired by phenomenology has emphasized the need to examine the current conditions of mediated experience in a context marked by profound technological transformations (Markham & Rodgers, 2017). As Lash (2018) contends, "experience itself [has become] technological [. . .] and phenomenology [has become] machine phenomenology" (p. 138). This article demonstrates that migrants draw on a phenomenological view of individual life experiences and religious beliefs to interpret (dis)information. We show that more than anything else, Venezuelan migrants en route to the United States fundamentally trust God as the ultimate arbiter of their future and the usefulness of the information they encounter on their journeys. Nurturing a relationship with God is thus viewed as essential for navigating communication flows and the potential risks of disinformation. For these migrants, it is their Christian religious beliefs—rather than information—that provide protection and guidance in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty. Accordingly, we argue for a deeper exploration of people's sociocultural beliefs rather than focusing solely on issues such as information accuracy, accessibility, and platforms when accounting for disinformation.

Migrants, Information Precarity, and Religious Beliefs

Before diving into the empirical evidence, we explore key insights from the literature on migration, (dis)information, and religion.

First, undocumented migrants live in situations of "information precarity" as they move across geographies (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022). This precarity does not refer to the quantity of information migrants encounter but rather denotes a qualitative experience of permanent insecurity and instability that "potentially [leaves] them vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors that can affect their economic and social capital" (Wall et al., 2017, p. 1). In precarious informative environments, migrants are exposed to disinformation, toxic content (e.g., misleading, stigmatizing), and information of dubious quality. Exposure does not necessarily lead to disinformation. Some studies conclude that migrants are not as misinformed as it has been conventionally assumed. Beber and Scacco (2022) found that migrants in Nigeria en route to Europe have relatively correct information about destination contexts, limited information about conditions in migration routes, and are generally optimistic about their prospects.

Second, studies have examined the communication practices of undocumented migrants. Research on Central American migration to the United States has demonstrated that migrants rely more on "tactical innovation" than conventional or official sources of information (Brigden, 2018b). This research underscores that migrants are "resourceful actors" when it comes to communication rather than passive subjects (Rios-Contreras, 2022). A well-documented practice has been the reliance on what Brigden (2018a, p. 73) calls "public images," defined as "commonly shared mental pictures of a social landscape, rooted in a collective cultural experience and interaction within a physical terrain." These images enable migrants to navigate conditions of uncertainty and violence.

Another consistent finding is the heavy reliance on mobile phones during migration journeys (Ferris-Dobles, 2022; Newell et al., 2016). Recent attention has also focused on the use of social media in the migration process (Adegoke, 2023). Rios-Contreras (2022) documented how migrants utilize social media to select a destination, maintain connections with those who remain in their home countries, and share migration-specific information with others.

Relying on mobile phones and social media presents opportunities and risks (Mancini et al., 2019). Just as they make it possible to connect with people back home and along the way, mobile phones are also conduits for disinformation (Preiss, 2022). A range of actors try to communicate with migrants with suspected information: *coyotes* (smugglers), recruiters, travel agencies, migration and legal advisors, etc. While generalizations are not warranted, anecdotal information suggests that these actors promise to deliver services and take advantage of migrants. Mobile phones also make migrants vulnerable to threats and theft. Some migrants are

also apprehensive about mobile phones given the possibility that they may be utilized to track them by the authorities and rogue actors (Moran, 2023).

Another important finding is that migrants and refugees are more likely to use personal networks and narrowcast feedback than mass media, and they have notable information deficits (Fiedler, 2019). For example, Dekker and colleagues (2018) found that Syrian asylum migrants are more likely to trust social media information from social ties and information based on personal experiences.

While studies on this topic are limited, research indicates that religion plays a crucial role in the migration process, influencing every aspect “from decision-making to the development of transnational activities” (Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003, p. 1147). Hagan (2012) showed that “individual migrants turn to their culture, faith, trusted clergy, and everyday religious practices for the spiritual and psychological strength to overcome hardship and danger in their undocumented journeys from Mexico and Central America to the United States” (p. 17). Hagan emphasizes the interaction between culture and religion. Thus, faith during migration is not solely about religious beliefs but rather an active, practical process where beliefs evolve in specific contexts (Deshingkar & Gueye, 2022). In Bastide’s (2015) view, the natural and the supernatural compose a unified world of “mixed rationalities” where both material and religious ways of dealing with risk coexist as they provide distinct ways to retain a sense of agency.

Finally, another important aspect that remains understudied is the relationship between information environments and the practices of undocumented migrants. This line of research explores the linkages between (dis)information and key decisions—from routes to destinations, from safety conditions to travel expenses. Scholars have argued that communication between migrants (especially rumors) is key in deciding when, where, and how to migrate (Hinsch & Bijak, 2019).

Altogether, these different lines of inquiry present us with important questions for communication and (dis)information studies. If undocumented migrants live amid information precarity, how do they relate to (dis)information? How does (dis)information affect their decisions? Are they vulnerable to (dis)information? To study these questions, we investigated the information and communication practices of Venezuelan migrants in their passage through Central America and en route to the U.S.-Mexico border. This population is a relevant case to examine these questions given its particular social and information conditions and the fact that they are one of the largest migrant populations in the contemporary world.

The Structural Conditions of the Migration Experience Through Central America

A long history of territorial dispossession, violence, corruption, poverty, and natural disasters has led to constant migratory flows in and through Central America (Ferris-Dobles,

2019, 2022). The promises that ended the “lost decade” of war and violence in the region in the early 1990s remain largely unfulfilled. This has given rise to variants of authoritarianism throughout Central America (Siles et al., 2023), creating fertile conditions for sustained migration to the global north.

Costa Rica stands out as one of the main migratory destinations in Latin America and a “strategic” and “instrumental” site for migrants in need of international protection (Weitzman et al., 2023). Since 2015, the migrant population has increased significantly as more Nicaraguans, Venezuelans, and extra-continental migrants have entered the country (Chaves-González & Mora, 2021). In 2022 specifically, more than 226,000 people entered Costa Rica’s southern border, an increase of almost 80% compared to the previous year (IOM Costa Rica, 2023). This flow is characterized by its transient nature, as most migrants seek to reach the United States. However, due to changes in immigration policies, many have been forced to remain in Costa Rica. By the end of 2022, IOM Costa Rica (2022) estimated that more than 30,000 Venezuelans were in Costa Rica. The majority of these migrants find themselves in conditions of homelessness and lack economic resources, including access to food and water (IOM Costa Rica, 2022).

In their assessment of the state of migration policy and integration in the country, Chaves-González and Mora (2021, p. 13) demonstrate that governmental entities “do not have sufficient institutional capacity to fully fulfill the responsibility” of implementing migration policy in the context of the present crisis. In October 2023, the Governments of Costa Rica and Panama implemented a “controlled flow” system to deal with this situation, particularly transit dynamics within the countries, and to minimize the risks associated with networks of *coyotes* on the border (Naciones Unidas Costa Rica, 2024). In this system, migrants in transit must board a bus at a new station created and supervised by the government at the southern border of Costa Rica: the Migratory Station (EMISUR). A temporary migrant assistance center operates at this station with some dormitories and basic conditions, primarily catering to families with children. The bus takes migrants in transit to the border with Nicaragua, to the north of the country, on the same day. Our fieldwork was conducted as the implementation process of this system began and, therefore, reflects the uncertainty associated with it.

Methodology

We employed a phenomenological approach to migration, which involves examining the tangible conditions that shape migrants’ lived experiences and thought processes around (dis)information (Rathe, 2022). Accordingly, we adopted a qualitative and ethnographic approach. Undocumented migration entails making decisions in situations of enormous precarity: what routes to take; how and where to make money to pay various expenses (travel, food, communication, etc.);

how to assess risks and safety; how to find information about these issues; and who to believe. We were interested in understanding the role of (dis)information in these decisions in the migration experience—how people navigate both migration and information environments.

To delve into these questions, we conducted 25 in-person interviews with migrants in transit through Costa Rica. Interviewees were aged 21–50 years. These interviews were carried out in San José's central district, a traditional stopping point for migrants coming from South America on their way to the U.S. border (IOM Costa Rica, 2022). We approached migrants and explained the nature of the research project and the interview protocol approved by the institutional review board at the university where the study was conducted. The interviews took place in Spanish and were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' consent.

Our interviewees were originally from Venezuela, where 73% of the population identifies as Catholic and 17% as Protestant (Pew Research Center, 2014). Most had departed from their home country in the weeks leading up to interviews, although a small number had initially migrated to other South American countries like Chile and Colombia before embarking on their journey to the United States. The average age among interviewees was 30 years. Among the participants, 9 were men and 16 were women. We carried out the interviews between July and October 2023. Interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes.

The interviews centered around two specific topics: the everyday information and communication practices of migrants (such as mobile phone and platform usage, reliance on information sources, and communication rituals) and the challenges related to disinformation in the context of migration (including the news and disinformation encountered before and during their journey to the United States, decision-making regarding news and information, risks associated with the information they accessed, and their trust in media sources). We avoided the kind of questions that could revictimize migrants.

Our data analysis approach was predominantly inductive, following the basic premise of grounded theory, which divides the analysis into three stages: identification of codes, development of main themes based on these codes, and articulation of the themes into a coherent argument (Charmaz, 2006). To carry out each stage, we relied primarily on the thematic analysis approach proposed by Clarke and Braun (2022).

We conducted an initial round of data analysis aimed at generating codes. This round was performed individually to maximize the generation of categories from the data. We then generated six main themes: (a) migration experiences; (b) information and communication practices; (c) encounters with disinformation; (d) the role of social media; (e) individual life experiences; and (f) religion in migration.

During the second round of data analysis, we reviewed the main themes against all the data associated with the codes

generated for each theme. This process allowed us to confirm the relevance of these six themes based on Clarke and Braun's (2022) criteria: conceptual boundaries, saturation, evidence diversity, and analytical relevance to the dataset. The final round of data analysis involved refining our six main themes by examining their interrelationships. At this stage, we focused on elucidating the explanatory value of two particular themes: individual experience and religion in migration.

Findings

In keeping with our phenomenological approach, we begin our empirical analysis by exploring how our interlocutors experienced the migration process. The stories shared by our interviewees resonate with the notion of experience, as they reflect the affective and cognitive imprint of events that occurred throughout their journeys (Glevarec, 2021). They also start revealing the central role of religion in how migrants make sense of the (dis)information they encounter on their journey.

The Migration Experience

Our interviewees left Venezuela amid violence, economic precarity, and personal penury and tragedy. As Sabrina explained: "We made the decision [of migrating] because my mother and aunt are sick. I have a sick daughter in Venezuela and my goal is to help my family. Send them money for the medicines." Likewise, Lisbeth remembers: "Our lives got complicated after they identified a tumor in my son's back two months ago. He was born with it, but in Venezuela, there is no medicine for the surgery—we even need to buy needles and thread." Interviewees mentioned desperation and the need for a future. Several indicated that they preferred to cross the Darien, the jungle area between Colombia and Panama often associated with high risks, than to stay back home (Alexander, 2023).

All our interviewees wished to migrate to the United States. Their views about the United States are mixed. Based on vague information, Sabrina hoped her husband could get a job because he works in construction: "We want to make it to Denver because they told us that there is a lot of work in that town. And that people are very nice and humble." William viewed the future less enthusiastically, as his assessment was based on the experience of a close relative:

My brother had a tough time for seven months. He could not find a job. He called me because he had needs, they did not eat well and were cold. Thank God he could find some stability after a while. I have come across malicious news that claims everything is terrible, that people are suffering from hunger, and that jobs are scarce. But I always maintain my faith in God.

These words illustrate the centrality of "mixed rationalities" in the migration experience (Bastide, 2015). Although our interviewees were aware of the difficulties that lay ahead in

their journey, they also expressed hope that God would help them overcome them and lead to a better future.

We found fear, uncertainty, and risk perception among interviewees. Most women we interviewed mentioned that they feared for their own and their family's safety. They heard stories about short kidnappings ("*secuestro express*") and encountered news about violence and abuse on social media. William says, "I found [stories about] kidnapping of children and adults on TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram in Mexico to get money from their families as well as to harvest organs from children." They also suffered during the migration, including lack of food, bad weather, and petty thievery. When we asked her what she would say to herself before she decided to migrate, Sabrina answered: "I would tell myself not to leave, the jungle is harsh. [. . .] I don't wish this on anyone."

Risk perception and uncertainty are particularly high regarding crossing the Darien. Although the conditions are not the same everywhere, migrants describe their fears before and during the trip. Lisbeth offered a grim account, reiterating her belief that it was God who had helped her overcome the obstacles:

They told me that the Darien was challenging but I didn't believe them. And it was hard because nine more people came with us, and only three remained. Six people drowned trying to save a dog, another person committed suicide with a tuna can, another was bitten by a snake, and another one hanged himself. It was hard, but here we are, thank God.

Visible symbols are key in navigating these uncertain and risky conditions (Brigden, 2018a). Sabrina explained to us the meaning of one such visible symbol, namely the color of bags:

In the Darien, there is no [digital] communication. In parts of the Colombian jungle, we went with some guides, but in Panama, we had to follow blue bags. The red bags indicate danger. We went where we saw most people going.

Another crucial aspect of the migration experience is stigmatization. Several interviewees mentioned the negative impact of people's attitudes vis-a-vis them. Lourdes states,

They [Costa Ricans] have humiliated us frequently. As a Venezuelan, I feel bad because we are not here because we want to be. I am not a bad person; I don't mess with anyone. I just want to give my daughter a future.

These difficult experiences come with a parallel challenge: navigating the information precarity that characterizes the migration process (Wall et al., 2017).

Information and Communication Practices

Information and communication practices are integral to the migration experience, as they embody "complex forms of

social activity and articulation through which agents set out to maintain or change themselves, others and the world about them under varying conditions" (Hobart, 2010, p. 63). We identified three practices related to how individuals manage (dis)information during the migration experience: distrusting the mainstream media; employing various platforms; and exchanging (dis)information with others. To identify these practices, we adopted Couldry's (2004, p. 119) principle of focusing on their "loose" and "open" nature to uncover how individuals themselves articulate sets of routines, affect, and discourses. These three practices operate as what Swidler (2001) calls "anchoring practices," meaning "schemas" or general courses of action that enable and organize other forms of social activity—that is, other practices.

Distrusting the Media. Distrust manifests as a practice through routine actions that characterize our interviewees' relationship with the media. This distrust reflects a pervasive skepticism that anchors core attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs within the migratory experience.

First, distrust was expressed as a constant state of alertness toward the information that surrounded migrants. Consistent with the notion of information precarity (Wall et al., 2017), our interlocutors said they were aware of being constantly exposed to information flows of questionable origin and veracity. Their testimonies suggested that various forms of disinformation and rumors constituted the migration experience. They recounted being surrounded by lies about issues such as routes, safety, and opportunities. William summarized this perception:

They told me that they [authorities] shut down the jungle [the Darien] but it wasn't true. It was always open. They told me that I should go back [to Venezuela] because they weren't allowing Colombians or anyone else to pass through.

This kind of experience made our interviewees suspicious of information from both online and offline strangers who offer services with travel, border crossing, and other issues, as well as constant rumors about migration-related matters.

Distrust underpinned a persistent discrediting of information from official sources (including the media, the government, and non-government organizations). For most, the information coming from traditional media was disembodied and disconnected from their experience as migrants. Lisbeth captured this sentiment when she noted: "I don't believe that much in [the media]. Because they lie a lot. The news says one thing and then things are different when you are there." For Lisbeth, there was a fundamental gap between reality and media coverage.

Distrust also manifested as news-avoidance practices, thus shaping how individuals engaged with information. Few interviewees mentioned actively seeking information from the media to inform their decisions, both before and after departing from their home countries. They generally distrusted the media and, for that reason, tended to avoid the

news. In this sense, skepticism about news stories deterred migrants from relying on the media to gather information to make decisions.

Using Platforms in the Migration Experience. Despite their distrust, our interviewees also engaged in specific practices to obtain certain types of information. To this end, they regularly used a variety of platforms and apps, primarily Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp, and more occasionally Instagram, Kwai, and Twitter (now X). They did not trust all these platforms equally regarding their quality as information sources. Some interviewees valued social media for providing a glimpse into concrete migration experiences. Logging onto platforms like Facebook and TikTok offered them ways to better comprehend the uncertainty and risks they could encounter along their way by using concrete examples and specific visuals.

Social media thus played a role as “public images” (Brigden, 2018b). Migrants found on social media images of the dangers and risks that awaited them, thus allowing them to anticipate and cope with uncertainty. Jeffrey, for example, said he valued posts about the migration process from social media because “they tell you what is not shown to you on television.” Similarly, Guillermo noted that he learned how to cross the Darien through videos that “went viral on ‘Face’ [Facebook], TikTok, and Kwai.” William elaborated on the importance of these platforms in his information-seeking practices:

I was part of a Facebook group where people said things like “Don’t go to this part of San José, because people tend not to give money, go to this other place where people are more generous” or “Don’t stay in this part of the border” or “Don’t trust these Venezuelans because they are going to scam you.”

Social media provided William and others with useful advice that aligned with their “tactical innovation” practices in ways the media did not (Brigden, 2018b).

Information-avoidance practices also influenced the use of digital platforms. Many interviewees expressed low levels of trust in Facebook groups as they believed the information was outdated or felt that these groups conveyed a negative tone that did not accurately reflect actual experiences in the jungle. Thus, some individuals approached information from social media with the same skepticism they reserved for traditional media outlets. Guillermo observed: “Many videos made us sad, and others encouraged us. Many made us scared, many didn’t. That is why we never follow anyone. We only wanted to see the situation for ourselves.” Thus, for Guillermo, both the media and social media ultimately failed to account for the realities of migration compared to personal experience and God’s guidance. Diego also reminded that “in Venezuela, it is no secret that they [the government] manipulate information on social media,” adding a political reason to distrust available information further.

Exchanging (Dis)information With Others. Exchanging information with others constitutes another practice to deal with (dis)information. To engage in this practice, our interviewees took specific actions, such as consulting people who were already in or en route to the United States. They deemed this information reliable when it came from people with whom they had long-standing ties of kinship or friendship, who could validate it based on their successful experiences.

The regular use of WhatsApp played a central role in migrants’ information-exchange practices. Marta recounted that one of the first things she thanked God for upon arriving in Costa Rica was the convenient and prompt access to WhatsApp. More broadly, she trusted God that the platforms and apps she used to exchange information with others would function properly. In her perspective, God is the ultimate guarantor of the proper functioning of all communication flows.

Our interviewees used WhatsApp daily to stay in touch with their closest contacts back home. Lisbeth explained: “I don’t see anything anymore [referring to the media and social media], just my family’s WhatsApp and that’s it, because I only spend 1000 [colones, Costa Rica’s national currency] and I want it to last as long as possible.” Lisbeth’s use of WhatsApp was motivated by the trust she placed in this app. Thus, when she had to rationalize her mobile phone costs, she prioritized WhatsApp over social media. The exchange of information on WhatsApp anchored another crucial practice for migrants: establishing networks with others on the same journey. Marta explained: “We exchange WhatsApp numbers and keep each other informed: ‘Look, I’m in this place now, you need to go this way, I went through this, don’t go through that part.’” Jonathan summarized a guiding principle that some of our interviewees follow: they used social media platforms like Facebook to chat with acquaintances while reserving WhatsApp for family members and a select few they met along their journey.

The centrality of distrust as an “anchoring practice” (Swidler, 2001) was also evident in how our interviewees engaged in information-exchange routines. William captured this significance when he stated: “I don’t keep much communication with many people for the same fear I have that people always approach to harm you and not to do you good.” That was also Samantha’s case, who explained: “We don’t trust other Venezuelans. When we have tried to get some money, other Venezuelans say to us: ‘You won’t get anything here. Go somewhere else.’ Some people want everything for themselves when there is something for everyone.” Like many other migrants, William and Samantha did not evaluate only the information they received but also the motivations and experiences of the sources.

When exchanging information with others, our interviewees strategically weighed the truthfulness of what they shared. Referring to the practice of exchanging daily information with relatives, Diego stated,

We don't tell them that we are begging, and I told them that I'm not working and that my wife is selling things in the street. If we did [tell relatives the truth], they would fly us back on a plane.

Lisbeth also admits that she does not tell relatives the entire truth of her experience: "I tell them I'm ok; I don't tell them that I sleep in the street with the kid. I don't tell them either that I sell lollipops because I need the tickets to travel." In other words, our interviewees used (dis)information when they believed spreading it offered more benefits than costs.

A Phenomenological Approach to Experience, Religion, and (Dis)information in Migration

Considering that migrants live in situations of collective uncertainty and vulnerability, we were interested in understanding their views on information. How much do they value and seek information, especially concerning decisions they make in their journey? How do they use information? Do they use information to manage risk and uncertainty?

We found that interviewees did not assign information a great deal of importance in their everyday lives; instead, they prioritized personal experience and a profoundly religious view of life and destiny. They consumed information that they obtained causally through social media and messaging apps. We did not find strong evidence that they actively searched for information about issues that affected their condition and future, such as policies, safety, and social support. Our interviewees were hardly information-maximizing subjects who tried to gather as much information as possible to make decisions, reduce vulnerability, or manage risks. Compared to God's guidance and protection, information was not seen as an indispensable resource to have more control over one's life.

Our interviewees had general, random information about various issues encountered primarily through incidental exposure rather than deliberate efforts. When we asked about several matters related to the next steps in their journey, choice of routes and justification, plans, and destination in the United States, their answers were unspecific. They did not seem particularly concerned about information gaps or eager to increase their knowledge. Moreover, when faced with doubts, interviewees said they typically did not verify the information they encountered.

To understand these findings, we need to address two additional sets of related sociocultural beliefs among migrants: the conviction that each person has unique life experiences and a religious view of life. The implication of the former is that people's experiences are not identical. What happened to a migrant would not necessarily happen to someone else. The significance of the latter is that God, not humans, is in control of people's destinies. Whatever happens to each individual is determined by God rather than specific actions taken by people. These two sets of beliefs are

crucial for addressing what the interviewees perceive as the potential risks of disinformation.

The Centrality of Life Experience

Migrants frequently mentioned the conviction that "each individual life is unique" as a way to manage and dismiss terrifying news and rumors about their experiences. This conviction is phenomenological, emphasizing how individual life experiences form the foundation for constructing meaning around migration processes (Lash, 2018; Rathe, 2022). Lourdes captured this conviction with precision:

Each person has their own experience. They told us that they raped and killed people, and that is partially true. We saw many dead people, dead children, hanged men, dead men in the river. But thank God nothing happened to me or my daughter. No robberies, no rapes, no kidnapping. But they harmed other people that were with us . . . I believe what I live. You don't have to believe anyone. You have to live your own experience.

For Lourdes, the risks associated with the information she receives are not necessarily a foregone conclusion; they do not have to reflect *her* experience, even if they reflect the experiences of others around her. Experience is thus the foundation of trust. Similarly, Diego observed, "I like to say that your fate is not mine. I could have a bad experience, but if it happens to you, it could be a good experience."

Even though many migrants encountered difficult situations, particularly crossing the Darien, they do not assume that everyone will face the same challenges. Hazel provided a thorough explanation of this belief:

When she found out that I was going to go through the jungle, my niece, who is in the US, told me: "You are crazy. Don't go there. Stay in Medellin [Colombia]." And I replied, "I am going anyway. Just as you went through, I will, too. Each one has to live their own experience."

Hazel's words have a normative tone: she is expected to experience what is a unique process, despite its challenges. As she responded to her niece, she defined individual experience as something that "must" be lived.

This conviction is reinforced by skepticism and caution about living in information precarity. Trusting your own experience is warranted when information seems contradictory and unfounded or proves false. William says,

I really believe in my own decisions because the news said that they were going to close the jungle or canoe crossing and they never did. People are passing by with no problems. I only believe in what my own eyes see, because I no longer know who to really believe. I believe more in what I can see than in what people tell me. I trust what I see.

The abundance of disinformation and confusion compelled William to rely solely on his experience and what he can

validate by his senses (what he can “see”). The contradiction between (dis)information and experience reinforced his perception that information should not be trusted. Because they take news and information cautiously, our interviewees did not seem eager to accumulate more information to make decisions. Rather than seeking information to manage risk, they played down the likelihood that bad situations would happen to them.

Religious Beliefs

The second set of sociocultural beliefs that migrants employ to handle (dis)information involves a religious perspective of destiny, which renders information a relatively secondary issue. Interviewees valued religious beliefs as these provided security in high-risk situations throughout their journey.

We found a reliance on “mixed rationalities” to deal with the most challenging risks in the migration journey (Bastide, 2015; Hagan, 2012). Migrants glossed at whatever information they could about what lay ahead and valued visual symbols and “public images” that could guide them along the way (including the color of plastic bags and posts on social media) (Brigden, 2018b). However, they ultimately trusted that God would help them overcome the risks and fill in informational gaps or confusion. According to René,

Since we left Colombia to get here [Costa Rica], people have told us that it was going to be dangerous, both for us [referring to her partner] and for the girl [her daughter]. But we always trust in God, and we follow the path.

The word “path” is meaningful as it conveys both the sense of finding a literal trail to cross uncertain territories and a description of an appropriate way to surrender to God.

Although migrants navigate both Christian faith and visual symbols, their trust tends to lean more toward God than the information they have grown skeptical of. Referring to the experience of crossing the Darien, Hazel noted: “There is no communication, there is no signal; there is only God’s way. It is mountain, after mountain, after mountain.” Hazel’s words eloquently describe how migrants think information is of limited value in moments of extreme uncertainty. Conversely, nurturing a relationship with God provides them with a sense of security as they move forward.

Hagan (2012) argued that religion and culture always interact in shaping migrants’ beliefs and decisions. In the case of the Venezuelan migrants we interviewed, the belief that “each individual life is unique” interacts with religious convictions. In this way, migrants perceive personal experience as God’s ultimate intervention domain. Accordingly, they typically accept the events in their journeys (even the consequences of disinformation) as part of “God’s will” for them. They thus perceive their prayers to be answered by God through the individual experience of finding food and shelter or overcoming what seems impossible challenges. It

was God who Vanessa thanked for finding a way out of the Darien:

I was asking God for a way to get out of that jungle quickly because you don’t see the end of it. It seemed you had been walking in circles and could only see mountains below. On the last day, I said: “My God, so what? Am I never going to get out of this jungle?” About three hours before leaving [the Darien], I thanked God, because I was already cursing the jungle.

However, acknowledging God’s will also included understanding that the most difficult circumstances were part of their destiny. Diego described how he faced a typical day when he could not obtain enough money to meet his needs:

I got home and prayed: “Father, forgive me for what I did. I was wrong. It was not your will for me to make money today. Let’s go to sleep and tomorrow will be another day. I know you will reward me.”

Diego further explained that he also asked God for forgiveness for his frustration that day, as he did not think it was an appropriate way to respond to God’s plans for his family. Despite the frustrations, Diego’s optimism stemmed from the belief that God—not the search for information—had a brighter future in store for him. In addition, he viewed this trial as an enriching lesson that enhanced his personal life experience. Jeffrey precisely summarized this view using a popular saying: “If that is God’s will, there is no evil that does not come with good.”

Discussion

This article has argued that (dis)information cannot be examined as an external phenomenon, detached from life experiences and religious beliefs. Fear, risk perception, and stigmatization are central to the experiences of undocumented migrants. As they move across borders, migrants also live amid much uncertainty about money, safety, health, and the future. They try to get by the best way they can as they move. We have shown that (dis)information is of secondary importance during these periods of high uncertainty and danger, as individuals rely on sets of sociocultural beliefs, placing supreme trust in God.

Maximizing information to manage this condition is not a priority because migrants are generally distrustful of information. They are surrounded by information from social media and interpersonal communication with fellow migrants, “service” providers, and people they meet along the way. They encounter information through incidental exposure while scrolling down content on their mobile phones and casual conversations. Their experience tells them that information is not always credible, regardless of sources. Much of what they heard along the journey was proven not to be true, either because people carelessly misrepresented conditions and events, deliberately lied, or

situations changed. In reaction, they take information cautiously or simply avoid it. Anything could be right or wrong. Refusing to trust or search for information is a strategy to make themselves less vulnerable to bad news and bad people—to find some form of protection from danger, disappointment, and disillusion.

This attitude about information cannot be separated from their overall downbeat outlook about their situation and prospects. Having personally suffered multiple penuries and heard myriad stories of suffering along the migration route, they are despondent. They hope to reach the U.S. border by sticking their heads down and finding ways to survive without money or shelter. This contrasts with their optimism and hope when they decided to migrate.

Our interviewees also accepted uncertainty as a constitutive factor of their lives that could not be managed or controlled by collecting information or “overcoming” the encounter of disinformation. Information was not seen as a resource to help them deal with the huge, urgent challenges that they confronted. Any information reflects someone else’s experience and views and should be taken as such. Information is thus filtered through personal experiences, rather than being taken objectively true or false. A phenomenological view of the centrality of life experiences foregrounds how migrants determine the validity and usefulness of information; it is the basis to corroborate the authenticity of everything migrants read and hear. Under these circumstances, their faith in God offers the certainty lacking in precarious information environments.

Conclusions

Our research argues for taking a phenomenological approach to studying migration and (dis)information. This is not only a matter of theoretical preference or methodological choice. It also stems from the evidence presented: migrants approach and integrate (dis)information phenomenologically. The meaning of information as well as informational attitudes and behaviors are intelligible within particular life experiences and, most notably, religious beliefs. Information is not given value or credibility on its own; its relevance and value exist in connection to specific experiences and how migrants see God as the final judge of their destiny. They envision God as the guiding force that helps them interpret the value of communication flows and the information they encounter on their journeys.

The main lesson for (dis)information studies is putting sociocultural beliefs at the center of the analysis. How people engage with (dis)information should be a point of analytical departure to understand multiple communicative dimensions. (Dis)information should not be seen only as an issue of (in)correct information, knowledge acquisition, verifying claims and separating the facts from the lies, or deliberate attempts to misinform or educate people. It is also filtered through social experiences that shape attitudes and beliefs

(Siles et al., 2024). For our interviewees, vulnerability and uncertainty are central to their social experiences. Because life conditions and experiences are different among myriad social groups, the study of (dis)information and communicative practices needs to capture those particularities to situate the analysis and information-related beliefs and behaviors.

Our findings also demonstrate the importance of approaching people within particular social conditions rather than as information-maximizing subjects detached from society. Informational behaviors are understood in those conditions. Various practices, such as news distrust and avoidance, using social media and messaging apps, and exchanging (dis)information with others, respond to experiences of frustration, disappointment, vulnerability, and uncertainty with information and in life.

Our study also yields recommendations for communication interventions and programs for migrants on the move. Just communicating facts to inform migrants about conditions, resources, and dangers or to dissuade people from migrating are unlikely to be successful without understanding key issues discussed here: migration and life experiences, information and communication practices, and religious beliefs. Information may not be accessed or believed, no matter its characteristics, appeals, or platforms. Stern official warnings may not dissuade people from embarking on uncertain, dangerous paths. Information about social support resources from advocacy and civic organizations may not be trusted or acted upon. In short, (dis)information should not be seen purely in informational terms, such as accuracy, accessibility, flows, and platforms. It must be socially situated within people’s life experiences, perspectives, and priorities.

A small sample size from a single country constrains our findings. Since we concluded our fieldwork, artificial intelligence has also become a focal point in public communication due to its potential implications for the phenomena discussed here. Future research could specifically examine the impact of AI adoption on migrants’ experiences and their encounters with (dis)information. Furthermore, conducting fieldwork in other regions could enhance the insights of this article by incorporating diverse sociocultural experiences and beliefs.

Acknowledgements

The authors sincerely appreciate Jailine González-Gómez for her invaluable help in transcribing the interviews. The authors also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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