The Role and Influence of Social Media in Shaping Afghan Refugees' Repatriation Decisions

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ABSTRACT

For over 40 years, the repatriation of Afghan refugees has been a major topic in discussions about humanitarian issues and policies in South Asia. While decisions about returning to Afghanistan have often been shaped by political uncertainty, insecurity, and unstable economic situations, the rapid rise of social media has introduced a new factor into this process. This article explores how Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran use digital platforms, specifically Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and TikTok, to obtain information about repatriation and how this interaction affects their decision-making. The study employs descriptive statistical analysis to evaluate perceptions of social media's role in refugee returns, based on a purposive survey of 50 postgraduate students from Quaid-i-Azam University and the National Defence University who have studied Afghan refugees academically. According to research, social media is a crucial information source as well as a contested area where misinformation, diaspora advocacy, and trust-building all influence refugee decisions at the same time. The paper makes the case that understanding the informational ecosystems in which refugees function is crucial to creating more successful repatriation plans, guaranteeing safety, and reducing the dangers of false information.

Introduction

Repatriating Afghan refugees continues to be one of the most difficult and drawn-out displacement issues of the contemporary era. It is the largest and longest-running refugee population under UNHCR's mandate, with millions of Afghans seeking safety in neighboring Pakistan and Iran since the late 1970s as a result of waves of conflict, political unrest, and economic collapse. (UNHCR, 2025). About 2.6 million Afghans were officially registered as refugees worldwide by early 2025, with about 2.2 million of them living in Iran and Pakistan alone, making Afghanistan one of the countries with the largest refugee populations in the world, according to UNHCR. (UNHCR, 2025). Millions of Afghans have been hosted by neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan, due to decades of conflict, but recent policies have resulted in massive returns. More than 2.1 million Afghans, including about 352,000 from Pakistan, had returned to Afghanistan or were compelled to do so by the middle of 2025. (UN Geneva, 2025). About 1.3 million long-term Afghan residents were the target of Pakistan's "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan," which was introduced this year (AP News, 2025). Afghan refugees rely on information networks more and more in this volatile environment, with social media and smartphones becoming essential resources. (UNHCR, 2025).

To get information about return conditions, reintegration assistance, border procedures, and security updates in Afghanistan, platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter are essential. Social media, unlike traditional communication channels, enables direct interactions that can expose refugees to biased stories, rumors, and false information. At the same time, it can also provide them with valuable insights. Social media greatly influences how refugees think about returning home because it serves two purposes. It can build trust through community networks and diaspora advocacy. However, when misleading content is more common, it can increase uncertainty. To understand how Afghan refugees, decide about their return, we need to assess how humanitarian and policy actors can better use digital platforms to support safer and well-informed choices. (Khonsari, 2024; UNHCR, 2021).

Literature Review

More and more, access to information in displacement contexts is acknowledged in analysis of how refugees make decisions. According to Harrell-Bond and Voutira (2007), refugees do not just rely on structural push and pull factors but also the information they have access to while making the decision to move. Recent research indicates that digital communication and timely access to knowledge frequently mediate mobility decisions (Wall et al., 2017). Lack of information and uncertainty have, historically, led to over-reliance on informal networks. These have now moved into the digital world, especially due to Afghan refugees.

To better understand how the refugees faced this crisis, we can look at other refugee crises and make comparisons. Digital platforms function as navigational tools in transit. Displaced people rely on them for maps, legal advice, and unofficial tips. The case of Syrian refugees in Europe shows this (Dekker et al., 2018). In a similar vein, research on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh shows that portable phones and messaging apps are essential for humanitarian accountability as well as for family contact, with refugees using social media to report abuses and amplify complaints (Akhter & Kusakabe, 2014). According to comparisons, the Afghan situation is similar on a larger scale, as displaced people are using digital practices to develop their identity, move around and survive (Ahmed et al., 2021).

The literature provides a further important dimension on disinformation in humanitarian contexts. Based on studies examining displacement in Africa, refugees' evaluations of security and social support are largely influenced by online rumors. Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2019), for example,

found that East African Congolese refugees are spreading misinformation that affects their relocation choices and faith in aid agencies. Research shows Afghan refugee communities have used incorrect narratives about border control or reintegration assistance to convince people to return before their time is right. These studies show just how urgently humanitarian organizations need to monitor and counter digital disinformation as part of their protection strategies.

Finally, a growing body of studies has looked at the intersection of technology, morality, and humanitarianism. Sandvik, Jacobsen, and McDonald (2017) assert that while digital tools improve humanitarian organizations' capacity to reach displaced people, they also raise the possibility of digital exclusion, privacy violations, and monitoring. These findings especially apply to the Afghan crisis, where refugees could have limited connection, linguistic difficulties, or worry about government observation. These systemic problems must be fixed so that social media is a tool of empowerment instead of exposure.

All things considered, the research shows how Afghan refugees use social media by means of conversations on digital migration, disinformation, and humanitarian responsibility. By comparing the Afghan refugee case to other displaced groups and including results from studies on rumors, risk, and digital ethics, this article sets it inside a more general comparative and theoretical framework that pushes the debate beyond national or regional borders.

Statement of the Problem

Still among the most pressing political and humanitarian problems in South Asia is the repatriation of Afghan immigrants. Though international organizations like the UNHCR have long advocated voluntary repatriation, a range of complex political, social, and financial factors shape the process. Recent years have seen social media develop into a powerful tool that shapes how refugees view the world, acquire information, and make decisions. Little investigation has been conducted on how Afghan refugees use social media to stay abreast of integration initiatives, employment opportunities, and security circumstances in Afghanistan notwithstanding its growing relevance. Social media can either encourage return by highlighting good events or discourage it by emphasizing instability and uncertainty. This dual role underscores a lack of understanding of the actual impact social media has on refugee choices. Politicers and humanitarian organizations cannot develop policies that effectively meet refugee needs or use social media to further safe, voluntary repatriation without these insights.

Research Questions

1. How frequently Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran use social media sites (WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter/X) to get information on repatriation?
2. How much does social media impact Afghan refugees' decisions to return to Afghanistan?
3. How do social media influence refugees' decisions to repatriate—through advocacy, misinformation, trust-building, or other mechanisms?
4. How do scholars and students who have studied Afghan repatriation perceive social media's influence differently?

Research Objectives

1. To determine how much social media is used by Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran to obtain information about repatriation.
2. To investigate how social media affects refugees' choices about going back to Afghanistan.

3. To determine the main ways that social media influences repatriation procedures, including advocacy, disinformation, and trust-building.
4. To examine the viewpoints of graduate students who have produced theses on the repatriation of Afghans.

Theoretical Framework

The basis of this study is several theoretical viewpoints clarifying how refugee decision-making and social media interact. As Castells' network society theory (2009) emphasized, refugees' reliance on digital peer networks rather than official channels reflects a shift from top-down to horizontal trust. Afghan refugees satisfy particular needs by means of different platforms: Facebook for news and advocacy, WhatsApp for family communication, and YouTube for learning (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Further explanation of this comes from the Uses and Gratifcations Theory (Katz et al., 1974). Using information-seeking and misinformation models, which show how digital platforms expose refugees to injurious rumors while also providing them with up-to-date information, the research, which builds on Gillespie et al. (2018).

Additionally, studies on diasporas and transnationalism show how Afghan diaspora members use social media to influence repatriation narratives, therefore politicizing return decisions (Leurs, 2020). Finally, research on digital migration paints refugees as involved, participants in a greater migration ecology wherein phones and platforms function as survival tools (Leurs, 2020). Taken together, these structures give a thorough perspective by which to analyze how social media affects the repatriation choices of Afghan refugees by acting as an intermediary for trust, knowledge, and advocacy (Ashraf, 2021).

Research Methodology

Using a mixed-methods design, this study assessed how Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran use social media to find information regarding repatriation and how that information influences their decisions to return. Fifty postgraduate students particularly picked from two departments—Quaid-i-Azam University's Department of International Relations and the Department of International Relations at the National Defense University—who had finished theses or dissertations on Afghan refugees or repatriation comprised the sample. Their prior studies provided informed perspectives on networks for refugee information and media influence.

Data were obtained using an online structured survey that included short open-ended questions together with categorical and Likert-scale items. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were used to examine quantitative data; qualitative data were thematically coded to find mechanisms including advocacy, fake news, trust-building, and social pressure. Ethical permission was secured, and all participants provided their informed consent. Acknowledged restrictions exist, including the limited purposeful sample and possible academic bias.

Results and Data Analysis

Respondent Profile

Table 1: *Respondent Demographic Profile*

Variable	Type count	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
University	QAU	25	50.0
	NDU	25	50.0
Gender	Male	32	64.0
	Female	18	36.0
Degree Level	MPhil	30	60.0
	PhD	20	40.0
Thesis Country Focus	Pakistan	28	56.0
	Iran	12	24.0
	Both	10	20.0

Discussion: The sample was divided evenly between QAU and NDU and showed a little male predominance. The majority of respondents being MPhil students suggests great postgraduate interest in Afghan refugee issues. The majority focused on Pakistan, which reflected its role as a host nation, even though Iran and comparative studies were also added. This equilibrium improves the validity of the views gathered.

Use of Social Media Platform

Table 2: *Frequency of Social Media uses for Repatriation-related Information*

Platform	Never (%)	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Often (%)	Very Often (%)	Mean (1–5)
WhatsApp	0.0	6.0	20.0	40.0	34.0	4.02
Facebook	4.0	10.0	28.0	38.0	20.0	3.60
TikTok	30.0	20.0	24.0	16.0	10.0	2.56
YouTube	8.0	18.0	30.0	28.0	16.0	3.26
Twitter/X	14.0	22.0	28.0	24.0	12.0	2.98

Discussion: The most used channels were Facebook and WhatsApp, which shows how accessible and reliable they are inside refugee communities. While Twitter/X and TikTok had a less influence, YouTube had a modest impact. These results highlight the need of community-driven platforms in distributing current border, aid, and advocacy information.

Perceived Impact of Social Media

Table 3: *Perceived Effect of Social Media on Afghan Refugee Repatriation Verdict*

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
Social media is a primary source of information for Afghan refugees.	4.0%	8.0%	14.0%	46.0%	28.0%	3.86
Information on WhatsApp/Facebook encourages refugees to return.	6.0%	12.0%	22.0%	40.0%	20.0%	3.56
Misinformation on social media increases unsafe returns.	2.0%	6.0%	10.0%	44.0%	38.0%	4.10
Diaspora advocacy influences return choices.	4.0%	12.0%	20.0%	40.0%	24.0%	3.68
Refugees trust peer-shared info more than UNHCR posts.	8.0%	10.0%	26.0%	34.0%	22.0%	3.52

Discussion: According to those surveyed, social media had a major influence. Most agreed that false information creates the chance of risky returns, which is a major policy issue. The frequency of refugee-to-refugee communication is reflected in the preference for peer-shared information above official UNHCR sources. Important as well was diaspora advocacy, which showed the interdependence of local and global networks (Farid & Ashraf, 2025).

Analytical Comparison

Table 4: *Comparison of average influence ratings by the University*

University	N	Average Impact Rating	Standard Deviation
QAU	25	3.78	0.62
NDU	25	3.55	0.59

The views of QAU and NDU students were not notably different. Irrespective of institutional context, this convergence reflects a broad academic acknowledgment of social media's impact on repatriation choices.

Discussion

The findings of this research show that social media significantly impacts the narratives related to the repatriation of Afghan refugees. The survey's results indicated that Facebook and WhatsApp were seen as the primary sources for repatriation information, while TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter/X served in supplementary roles. In situations of displacement, where refugees often depend on peer-to-peer communication rather than official channels, this aligns with earlier studies that emphasize the importance of readily available, community-oriented platforms (Majidi & Hennion, 2019). Participants often mentioned that Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan utilize these platforms for practical guidance on border processes, UNHCR aid packages, and return logistics, as well as for news.
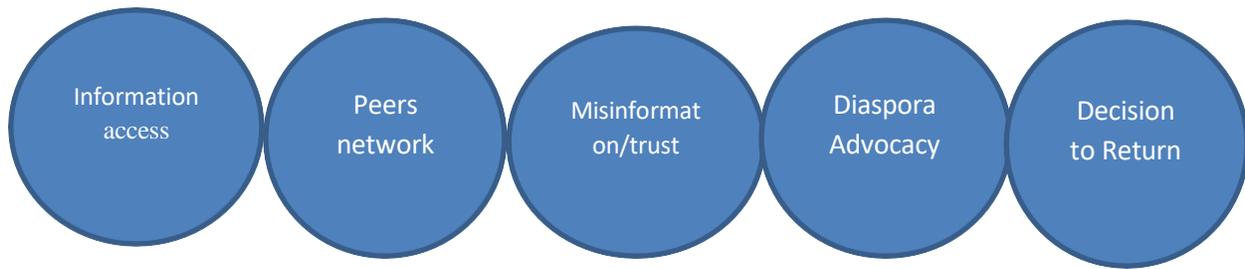
Fig: *Mechanism of Social Media influence on Repatriation*

The data reveals a significant theme regarding the dual nature of social media. It provides reliable, cost-effective, and instant information-sharing platforms, enhancing community connections and increasing confidence among refugees contemplating repatriation. Nonetheless, it also serves as a hub for gossip and misleading information, which may encourage hasty or dangerous returns. This division aligns with findings by Gillespie et al. (2018), who noted that refugees often face a struggle between encountering unreliable information and gaining agency in online environments. Misinformation, including deceptive assurances of reintegration packages and exaggerated security guarantees, was viewed as particularly harmful in the Afghan situation.

A significant discovery relates to trust and authority. The survey found that refugees tended to trust information shared by friends and family on Facebook or WhatsApp groups more than that from the UNHCR or host governments. This suggests that humanitarian organizations need to better embed themselves within the social media environments where refugees participate, as conventional top-down communication methods may be insufficient. Castells' (2009) network society theory posits that narratives shared among peers are more convincing than those from institutions since trust in digital interactions is rooted in social relationships and reasoned understanding.

Moreover, the influence of diaspora advocacy was emphasized. Participants highlighted that, influenced by their political views, Afghan diaspora groups utilized Twitter activism, YouTube accounts, and Facebook initiatives to either advocate for or dissuade return. This kind of advocacy may raise protection issues and enhance awareness of refugees' rights, but it can also politicize repatriation discussions, complicating decision-making for vulnerable populations. This discovery aligns with studies on the diasporas of Rohingyas and Syrians, which indicated that online advocacy similarly affected refugee feelings of safety and belonging (Leurs, 2020). Consequently, social media advocacy should be considered a facet of repatriation dynamics that can serve to empower as well as to divide.

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating digital strategies into repatriation planning from a policy perspective. Alongside funding digital literacy programs to address misinformation, UNHCR and host countries ought to utilize Facebook and WhatsApp for sharing verified, multilingual details about return processes (UNHCR, 2021). Moreover, monitoring and engaging in digital advocacy led by the diaspora could provide valuable insights into refugee feelings, helping policymakers develop more flexible interventions (Leurs, 2020). Stakeholders can help Afghan refugees make safer, more informed choices by recognizing social media as a key factor in repatriation decisions instead of a secondary one (Gillespie et al., 2018).

This research does acknowledge important constraints. Instead of being refugees, the survey participants were intentionally chosen from postgraduate students who had researched Afghan refugees. While their insights are valuable as expert opinions, they cannot fully substitute for the firsthand experiences of refugees (Majidi & Hennion, 2019). Consequently, to capture the actual experiences of how social media affects their choices, upcoming research should carry out direct

surveys of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran employing a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Gaining insight into whether the Afghan situation is unique or part of a broader global trend would also benefit from comparative studies involving other displaced groups.

Conclusion

This research highlights the significance of social media in influencing the decision-making process regarding the repatriation of Afghan refugees. Facebook and WhatsApp are the leading sources of information because of their community-oriented nature, accessibility, and dependability. Social media increases dangers by disseminating misinformation that can lead to harmful or premature outcomes, yet it also aids individuals in making informed choices through timely updates and support. The need for humanitarian organizations to engage directly with refugee networks on their existing platforms was emphasized by the view that information shared among peers was more influential than official communications from UNHCR. Thematic insights emphasized trust, misinformation, advocacy, and emotional narratives as key mechanisms, while correlation analysis confirmed the significant link between the usage of WhatsApp/Facebook and perceived influence.

The findings highlight the significance of these dynamics for learning and policy by demonstrating extensive academic consensus on them. Consequently, policymakers and humanitarian groups need to integrate digital literacy initiatives, enhance official information efforts on popular platforms, and monitor misinformation trends. To ensure safe, voluntary, and sustainable repatriation of Afghan refugees, this is essential (Farid, 2023).

Recommendation

The research indicates that to enhance their digital communication approaches, policymakers and humanitarian groups should proactively involve refugees on widely used and reliable platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. To reduce vulnerability to misinformation, funding for digital literacy programs should be provided alongside up-to-date, multilingual, and validated information. Given that their online advocacy significantly shapes views on return and integration, enhanced collaboration with Afghan diaspora networks is essential. Finally, to create more refugee-focused policy solutions and gain insight into how digital settings influence repatriation choices, upcoming studies should include the perspectives of refugees.

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