



Studying Migration through Visibility? Method, Invisibility, and the Politics of Digital Migration Research A Review of Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday

Xing Zeng^{a,*}

^aZhaoqing University, Zhaoqing 526061, Guangdong, China

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Digital Migration
Visibility and Invisibility
Methodological Reflexivity
Migration Governance
Digital Inequality

ABSTRACT

This critical book review examines Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday (Leurs & Ponzanesi, eds., 2024), a landmark edited volume that explores how migration is increasingly mediated, studied, and governed through digital technologies. The review contends that the book makes a significant contribution by reframing digital media not as neutral research tools but as ontological conditions that shape migrant experiences, while simultaneously emphasizing everyday practices and methodological reflexivity. Drawing on a diverse range of empirical cases—from digital kinning among migrant families to platform-based negotiations of identity—this volume presents migrants as active agents within digitally mediated social worlds. Simultaneously, the review advances three critical interventions. First, it questions the methodological accessibility of digital migration research, highlighting how undocumented migrants and digitally disconnected individuals risk being rendered invisible due to survival-driven practices of digital silence. Second, it interrogates whether reflexivity alone can dismantle entrenched power asymmetries between researchers and subjects, particularly within Global North–Global South knowledge hierarchies, where empathy risks becoming a paternalistic mode of knowledge production. Third, it raises concerns about the blurred boundary between academic research and migration governance, warning that scholarly analyses of migrants’ digital practices may be appropriated for surveillance, securitization, and biopolitical control. Despite these unresolved tensions, the review concludes that Doing Digital Migration Studies represents the most comprehensive methodological contribution to the field to date. Its enduring value lies not in offering prescriptive solutions but in cultivating a critical “toolbox of self-doubt” that compels researchers to recognize methodology itself as a political practice with material consequences for migrants’ lives.

1. Introduction: The Paradox of Visibility and Invisibility

In contemporary societies, migrant experiences are increasingly datafied and made visible through smartphones, biometric technologies, and social media platforms. Migration today is tracked, mapped, quantified, and visualized to an unprecedented extent. Yet this expanding regime of “digital visibility” raises a

paradoxical question: does enhanced visibility necessarily lead to greater recognition, protection, or agency for migrants, or does it instead create new forms of invisibility?

Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday directly addresses this question by rejecting technologically deterministic narratives and emphasizing migrants’ everyday practices alongside methodological reflexivity. Rather

* Corresponding author. e-mail: 18475827791@163.com

than treating digital technologies as neutral tools for observing migration, the volume explores how digital media actively mediate migrant lives, while migration itself reshapes technological infrastructures and practices. Throughout its chapters, the book confronts ethical and methodological dilemmas that digital migration research too often leaves unexamined.

This review contends that, although the volume makes a compelling intervention by politicizing digital migration methods and centering everyday experiences, it simultaneously exposes the persistent limitations of reflexivity in addressing exclusion, power asymmetries, and the entanglement of research with migration governance.

2. Core Contributions: Experience, Everyday Life, and Methodological Awareness

The volume makes three major contributions to the rapidly expanding field of digital migration studies. First, it elevates digital media from being merely ancillary research tools to fundamental ontological conditions of migration itself. The editors conceptualize migration and technology as mutually constitutive rather than analytically separable, arguing that contemporary migration cannot be meaningfully understood without considering its digital mediation.

Second, the book refocuses analytical attention on everyday, micro-level practices, moving beyond the predominance of macro-level data analytics. The empirical chapters highlight migrants' ordinary digital activities—such as maintaining kinship ties, negotiating identity, and navigating bureaucratic systems—as sites where migration is actively produced and experienced. Case studies, including Chinese migrant grandparents in Australia engaging in digital kinning through WeChat and Latinx migrants negotiating belonging and visibility on TikTok, portray migrants as active agents rather than passive data subjects.

Third, and most importantly, the volume demands sustained methodological reflexivity. Contributors repeatedly emphasize that research methods are not neutral techniques but ethical practices embedded within power relations. The acts of data collection, interpretation, and representation are framed as forms of knowledge production that carry moral and political consequences. In this sense, the book positions itself not merely as a collection of case studies but as an epistemological intervention aimed at reshaping how digital migration research is conducted.

3. Critical Intervention I: Methodological Accessibility and Excluded Experiences

Despite its strengths, the volume leaves a fundamental question unresolved: who can actually be captured by digital migration research? While digital connectivity is often portrayed as empowering, individuals who lack access to digital platforms—or who deliberately avoid them—risk exclusion from both social participation and scholarly inquiry.

This limitation becomes especially pronounced for undocumented migrants. For individuals facing deportation, surveillance, or legal precarity, digital disconnection often serves as a survival strategy. Many employ what are known as anticipatory tactics, minimizing their digital footprints to avoid detection. However, digital migration research tends to focus on platform-visible subjects—such as content creators, influencers, or highly networked users—whose activities generate abundant data traces.

As a result, digital silence risks being misinterpreted as absence, deficiency, or a lack of digital literacy, rather than as a deliberate and politically meaningful form of non-connection. This methodological bias raises a critical concern: research practices based on digital data may systematically overlook the most vulnerable migrants precisely because their invisibility is a condition of survival. The volume acknowledges this tension but does not fully resolve how digital research can ethically account for experiences that are structurally inaccessible through digital methods.

4. Critical Intervention II: Does Reflexivity Undo Power Asymmetries?

A central strength of the volume lies in its emphasis on reflexivity. However, reflexive awareness alone does not dismantle entrenched power asymmetries between researchers and the researched. Several chapters implicitly demonstrate that methodological self-critique, while necessary, is insufficient to address structural inequalities in knowledge production.

One particularly insightful contribution critically examines the concept of virtual reality as an “empathy machine.” Through an analysis of refugee-focused VR documentaries, the author recounts experiencing physical nausea while viewing immersive simulations of displacement. This embodied reaction reveals the ethical tension inherent in immersive media: instead of promoting political solidarity, virtual empathy may depoliticize suffering by reducing it to a consumable sensory experience.

Even when researchers adopt critical and reflexive stances, the epistemic distance between scholars—often based in the Global North—and migrant subjects in the Global South persists. In such contexts, empathy risks becoming a paternalistic gesture that reinforces, rather than challenges, colonial knowledge hierarchies. Interpreting migrants' digital traces without fully engaging with the historical and material conditions shaping those traces may constitute a form of epistemic violence. This limitation suggests that reflexivity, while indispensable, cannot replace structural interventions aimed at addressing global inequalities in knowledge production.

5. Critical Intervention III: The Blurred Boundary between Research and Governance

Perhaps the most troubling issue raised by this volume concerns the close relationship between academic research and migration governance. Detailed analyses of migrants' digital practices, mobility patterns, and social networks can be appropriated by states and corporations to enhance surveillance, risk profiling, and border control.

The book critically examines cases in which biometric voice recognition systems are used to determine asylum seekers' countries of origin, as well as instances where consulting firms such as McKinsey have promoted efficiency-driven management of refugee camps. These examples reveal how datafication and securitization are increasingly converging within migration regimes.

However, while the volume clearly acknowledges these dangers, it remains cautious in articulating concrete strategies for disentangling scholarly research from biopolitical governance. The ethical critique is compelling, yet the structural conditions that enable the translation of academic knowledge into tools of control remain largely intact. This unresolved tension underscores the difficulty of maintaining critical distance when research itself

operates within infrastructures of surveillance capitalism and state security.

6. Theoretical and Methodological Value: A Toolbox of Self-Doubt

Despite these critiques, *Doing Digital Migration Studies* stands as the most systematic and comprehensive methodological intervention in the field to date. Its greatest contribution lies not in offering definitive solutions but in fostering methodological self-reflection. By integrating media studies, sociology, geography, and artistic research, the volume offers a multifaceted perspective on digital migration.

The book emphasizes combining quantitative data with qualitative ethnography and integrating creative and artistic practices into research design, significantly expanding the boundaries of knowledge production. Rather than presenting a prescriptive model, the volume offers a toolbox that encourages researchers to continuously question their assumptions, methods, and positionalities. In an academic landscape increasingly driven by efficiency, scalability, and data extraction, this insistence on embracing uncertainty constitutes a meaningful intervention.

7. Conclusion: Methodology as Politics

Doing Digital Migration Studies compellingly demonstrates that research methods are never neutral. The processes of collecting, interpreting, and visualizing data are inherently political acts that determine whose lives become visible and whose remain invisible. Although this volume does not resolve the ethical tensions surrounding digital inequality, exclusion, and governance, it succeeds in making these issues impossible to ignore.

Compared to more techno-optimistic accounts of digital migration, this volume stands out for its ethical rigor and methodological self-awareness, even as it leaves unresolved the structural entanglement between academic research and migration management. Ultimately, the book compels scholars to confront an uncomfortable truth: the methodologies we choose do not merely describe migrant lives—they actively shape the conditions under which those lives are governed.

Author Contribution

The author was solely responsible for the conceptual framing, critical interpretation of the literature, and the writing of the manuscript.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Not Required

Funding

None

Competing Interest declaration

The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

None

References

1. ponzanesi, sandra. (2024). *Doing Digital Migration Studies. Theories and Practices of the Everyday*. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463725774>