



# Dispositions of dis/trust: Fourth-wave mobile communication for a world in flux

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## Abstract

Mobile scholarship has highlighted the embeddedness of mobile media practices within power hierarchies and sociostructural conditions. We enrich the critical approach by examining how trust, as a future-oriented disposition that deals with uncertainty and social vulnerability, conditions mobile practices and vice versa. We interviewed 29 Syrian refugees residing in the Netherlands, examining how different levels of vulnerability and uncertainty in refugees' experiences shape mobile use and non-use. We found that low vulnerability–low uncertainty situations were associated with habitual, everyday use; low vulnerability–high uncertainty corresponded to anxiety-expunging non-use; high vulnerability–low uncertainty influenced harm-mitigating mobile practices that sometimes acquiesced to hierarchies; and high vulnerability–high uncertainty circumstances incited radical forms of dependence and collaboration between mobile users. We posit that this framework is not limited to refugee contexts, but mobile-mediated relationships in general. We underscore the importance of mobile scholarship in understanding and offering solutions to contemporary global crises of distrust.

## Keywords

Crisis, migration, mobile communication, mobilities, refugee, trust, uncertainty, vulnerability

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How should mobile communication scholarship adapt to a world that is increasingly uncertain? We propose a direction using Syrian refugees' mobile practices in the Netherlands to examine interrelations between trust, mobile practices, and social cohesion within situations of varying uncertainty and vulnerability. Existing scholarship emphasizes the role of mobile communications in engendering social cohesion, specifically how mundane (everyday) mobile phone use has fostered interpersonal and communal bonds. Pioneering scholar Rich Ling (2014), drawing on Ferdinand Tönnies, termed this phenomenon the "digital *Gemeinschaft*"—social solidarity characterized by friendship, intimacy, emotions, and tradition—a mode of social organization viewed as an ideal of modern society, as opposed to transactional and bureaucratized relationships driven solely by rational self-interest (*Gesellschaft*). This idealized narrative of social inclusion has been extended to suggest the importance of mobile practices for marginalized populations (Chib et al., 2021), such as refugees.

"*Gemeinschaft*" paints a broad and fuzzy image of social cohesion, traditionally characterized by communal attributes such as common beliefs, strong emotional bonds, frequent reciprocal interactions, familiarity, and trust (Brint, 2001). This conceptualization is both romantic—harkening to an elusive past before the dominance of modern rationalization—and easily romanticized, with *Gemeinschaft*-like social inclusion implicitly presented as a panacea to marginality in modern society. Digital *Gemeinschaft* inherits these connotations, with initial research techno-optimistic about the novel ways mobile communication enhances interpersonal bonds and acts as a collective resource (Campbell and Russo, 2003).

However, contemporary research notes digital *Gemeinschaft* as not truly a space for mutual participation and collective action but as stratified along extant sociostructural hierarchies, such as class, race, and gender. Scholars have foregrounded how social positions and circumstances can affect what mobile strategies users feasibly choose to negotiate their (power-laden) relationships (Chib et al., 2021; Pei and Chib, 2020). Indeed, the very mechanisms of mobile-facilitated digital *Gemeinschaft* that maintain social cohesion (e.g. expectations of telephonic availability) can reinforce power disparities and enforce social control (Ling, 2004). Ling (2012) describes being "taken for granted," suggesting that mobile use is so commonplace that one is socially and perhaps even materially penalized for not being sufficiently and appropriately integrated into the digital *Gemeinschaft*.

There seems to be a performative contradiction here. If the *Gemeinschaft*, as an ideal, offers the promise of organic communities self-governed through reciprocity, collaboration, and trust—then perhaps the solidification of social norms governing the digital *Gemeinschaft* is increasingly renegeing on that promise. As Ling (2012) writes, "we become a problem for our friends when we are not able to . . . be available on our mobile phone." Mobile relationships are now grounded less upon mutual and iterative interpersonal negotiations (Licoppe and Heurtin, 2001) than upon social demands with a predictable and pseudo-rational character.

Individuals, especially those in marginalized social positions, use innovative mobile strategies to navigate these socially determined circumstances, sometimes assenting to mobile-facilitated control and surveillance to maintain their immediate well-being (Chib et al., 2021). In previous work, we have described such digital strategies as manifestations

of what we termed “subverted agency,” allowing a certain degree of personal empowerment without leading to sociostructural change, sometimes even being counterproductive to such change (Chib et al., 2022). Therefore, mobile-facilitated collective action—people purposefully acting together to dismantle hierarchies or empower the community (Cardoso et al., 2019)—leading to substantive social transformation is likely to be rare. Being able to trust others to work together for the common good amid uncertainty is integral to collective action; instead, mobile interactions are increasingly structured to prioritize self-interest and competition over collective action. The bleak state of mobile-facilitated social cohesion amid a world beset by recurrent crises of distrust reflects the demise of the initial promise of the digital *Gemeinschaft* to foster trust between individuals in ways that cannot be reduced to rational calculation or taken-for-granted norms.

Scholars have analyzed power dynamics in mobile relationships by examining interactions between personal agency and social structures (Chib et al., 2022) and overlapping mechanisms of oppression (Alencar, 2020). We propose a conceptual lens of trust that arguably enriches these existing approaches. Since relationships depend on trust (Rousseau et al., 1998), examining mobile-facilitated conditions for the fostering of trust and/or distrust may allow us to understand why users choose self-prioritizing mobile strategies over collaborative ones—leading to subverted agency (Chib et al., 2022). We consider trust’s interrelations not just with interpersonal relationships but also relationships between individuals and enforcers of sociostructural constraints, such as authorities and institutions (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Trust is dependent on the expectations of behavior of another (Rousseau et al., 1998). Trust and distrust, affected by contextual conditions constituting varying degrees of uncertainty and vulnerability, are dispositions that motivate choices in mobile communication strategies, delimiting possibilities and constraints for mobile practices and corresponding social outcomes. We interviewed Syrian refugees in the Netherlands to illustrate the complex interplay of trust dispositions, choices of mobile strategies, and corresponding impacts on social cohesion. We argue that a possible “fourth wave” of mobile communications research may recenter trust in a critical analysis of mobile practices to elucidate agentic possibilities amid circumstantial and sociostructural constraints.

## **Trust and mobile use in refugee context**

Mobile practices improve the physical and emotional well-being of refugees and asylum seekers across various stages of their migration journey (such as departure from their home country, up until life within their host country). Studies have demonstrated the mobile phone’s role in allowing refugees to maintain contact and emotional bonds with families and friends in their host country, while forging new social networks and promoting acculturation within their host country (Mancini et al., 2019; Pottie et al., 2020). However, refugees constitute a social group exposed to some of the highest levels of uncertainty and vulnerability vis-à-vis other social actors. Gough and Gough (2019) characterize refugee lives as facing “chronic disruption,” such that successive hurdles and ever-changing circumstances continually disrupt stable futures that refugees imagine for themselves. Although Alencar’s (2020) review study notes that mobile phones remain important lifelines amid such crises, mobile phone affordances produce opposing

possibilities for both benefit and harm toward refugees (Gillespie et al., 2018). This means that mobile use is not a straightforward panacea; rather, every decision to enact a mobile practice (or conversely, to abstain from mobile use) carries non-negligible risk for refugees, and often involves adaptive communicative strategies (Maitland and Xu, 2015). These risks are exacerbated by significant amounts of misinformation and information overload that pose potential threats to refugees' well-being (Borkert et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2017), potentially causing distrust. Mobile media use also introduces complications during the asylum-seeking process (Byrne, 2015), increasing uncertainty when dealing with immigration authorities. These elevated levels of vulnerability and uncertainty makes refugee experiences a useful starting point for exploring complexities of mobile-facilitated trust, especially in creating conditions akin to the theorized digital *Gemeinschaft*.

Following the diverse forms of mobile use detailed in existing refugee literature, we define mobile practices inclusively, including both instrumental and expressive purposes of use, and various mobile features (e.g. voice call, social media, and Internet access). Importantly, mobile practices engender communicative mobilities, meaning that staying connected *while on the move* empowers individuals to counteract restrictions in free movements across social and geographic boundaries (Chib and Nguyen, 2018)—as seen in the forced migration of refugees.

## Literature review

We classify the research trajectory of mobile communication viewed from the perspective of social im/mobilities into three waves, focused respectively on: (1) social connection, (2) social exclusion, and (3) power disparities.

### *First wave: connection*

The first wave of mobile scholarship argued for the importance of mobile communication in fostering social cohesion through connectedness (Goggin, 2006). On an instrumental level, mobile telephony affords microcoordination, allowing greater flexibility in our scheduling of social activities, since we can adjust plans on the fly (Ling, 2004). Yet, the mobile phone was revolutionary in its ability to facilitate phatic (Licoppe, 2004)—not just instrumental (Fortunati, 2002)—communication. Since mobile telephony strengthens ties with one's closest social circles (Ito and Okabe, 2005), people communicate most often with their friends and family, their "most intimate sphere" (Ling, 2012: 137).

Ling (2004) highlighted texting as an important way to maintain social groups, such as for youth to bond with peers while remaining tethered to their parents, who provide a sense of familial security through the telephonic link (Ling, 2007). By allowing ourselves thus to be almost always available for connection, the mobile phone sustains our mutual belonging to a social world with shared meanings and experiences. This is partly an outcome of "connected presence"—maintenance of social bonds by the mutual expectations that friends and family are just a call or text away, in turn repeatedly affirmed by periodic reciprocal, telephonic interactions (Licoppe, 2004).

Despite rapidly evolving technological affordances, recent studies reinforce the importance of mobile communication for social cohesion, extending the same themes into contemporary contexts. Scholars accounted for affordances in Internet-enabled mobile devices by conceptualizing hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006) and ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016), which account for the interplay of multiple media affordances in maintaining strong emotional bonds remotely. Yet, some first-wave studies—such as Ling and Yttri’s (2002) discussion of teens’ mobile-facilitated peer group boundaries—foreshadowed issues of exclusion and control.

### *Second wave: exclusion*

Subsequent studies wrestled with the social consequences of mobile connection: what happens to people who are excluded from mobile use? Research in this wave examined groups that had access issues or were less interested in using mobile technology, such as people with disabilities (Goggin et al., 2003) or in developing countries (Castells et al., 2007). In some cases, exclusion from mobile use occurred as an outcome of sociostructural conditions preventing access (Morris et al., 2007). Yet, in other cases, marginalized individuals willfully exclude themselves from mobile networks to negotiate the oppression and control they were exposed to (Chib et al., 2021). For example, some women in patriarchal societies relinquished or restricted their mobile use to avoid scrutiny and backlash (Malhotra and Ling, 2020). In facilitating new connections, mobile practices can also create “cocooning” effects (Chib and Aricat, 2017: 8), for example strengthening bonds between co-located migrants while separating them from locals.

This conceptual focus arguably culminates in *Taken For Grantedness*, in which Ling (2012) argues for the social facticity of the mobile phone integrated in mundane life. He describes it as a technology of social mediation, arguing that mobile use has become so ubiquitous and firmly integrated into everyday social reality that it imposes sociostructural demands on us. We may defy social norms surrounding mobile communication at the risk of social sanctions. For example, we are often expected to be consistently available through our mobile phones; if we do not have a phone or make ourselves contactable, we pose a problem to others and incentivize them to exclude us socially (Ling, 2012). Therefore, while the digital *Gemeinschaft* intensifies our mobile-facilitated bonds, it also constitutes a mechanism of social control. However, we note that this second wave is still premised on the idea that social exclusion results from an inability to be properly integrated into mobile networks both technologically and socially (i.e. conforming to its norms). Therefore, social inclusion within mobile networks is implicitly valorized. Research has foregrounded how decisions to abstain from mobile use in various ways and to varying degrees constitute agentic strategies to manage sociostructural demands of mobile communication (Chib et al., 2021; Chan, 2018).

### *Third wave: power disparities*

Comprising a critical turn, contemporary work acknowledges that mobile use practices are highly embedded in social relationships and their existing power disparities. The third wave posits that specific circumstances and sociostructural conditions do not just

*include* or *exclude* a person from mobile access. Rather, individuals adopt mobile practices actively and strategically to manage their circumstances. These choices are influenced by contextual factors like power disparities, which can delimit what strategies are feasible or not. In this vein, researchers have examined the complexities of a wide range of mobile strategies motivated by various social positions, including marginalized women (Pei and Chib, 2020), queer and gender-diverse people (Ang et al., 2021), ethnic minorities (Ang et al., 2021), transnational families of migrants (Horst, 2006), refugees (Alencar, 2020), and sex workers (Chib et al., 2022). While social demands of mobile-facilitated relationships are experienced by everyone, a sociostructural perspective suggests that not all individuals are exposed to these pressures to the same extent.

Consequently, strategies of marginalized people to improve their immediate and individual circumstances are often undertaken at the expense of reinforcing broader social hierarchies; a phenomenon termed as subverted agency (Chib et al., 2022). This is opposed to the collaborative collective action that is required to destabilize hierarchies (Connell, 2009). This raises the question: In what circumstances might mobile communication foster or inhibit conditions of *Gemeinschaft*-like collaboration? We argue that the critical approach to mobile communication may be greatly enriched by considering the situatedness of mobile practices within relationships of trust and distrust. This allows us to examine possibilities for mobile-facilitated collaboration without returning to an idealistic conception of a hierarchy-free digital *Gemeinschaft*.

### *Critical perspectives on trust as a fourth wave*

Trust is defined as the “willingness of an individual to rely on the actions and attitudes of others with regard to future actions” (Rao et al., 2021: 53). We view the central role of trust as reducing uncertainty and social complexity to provide a basis for social action amid risk (Luhmann, 2000). Similarly, distrust need not paralyze action, but provides a basis for action “based on suspicion, monitoring, and activation of institutional safeguards” (Lewis and Weigert, 1985: 969). Although individuals must have some expectations and familiarity for trust to be possible, trust cannot be reduced to complete rational certainty (Kuriyan et al., 2010; Luhmann, 2000). As Lewis and Weigert (1985) write, “trust begins where prediction ends” (p. 976). Therefore, trust requires a willingness of social actors to expose themselves to some form of risk and vulnerability, because there is never complete certainty regarding outcomes of social interaction.

This future-directedness of trust—always being conditioned but underdetermined by the past—is what makes trust a potential force for the emergence of radically new social possibilities. Mobile scholars Julsrud and Bakke (2008) emphasize that trust relationships cannot be understood simply as *existing* patterns of mobile interactions. Rather, trust relationships may influence dynamism in mobile interactions and vice versa. To capture these integral dimensions—trust as situational, future-directed, and open to vulnerability—we operationalize trust as the “intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al., 1998: 395).

In this vein, we propose examining the engendering of trust and distrust as a consequence of—and conversely as a condition that influences—mobile communication and

media use practices. Based on the operational definition of trust, two dimensions may further contextualize analyses of mobile practices. First, actors assume different levels of *vulnerability* within their social relationships with other social actors (who can be friends, family, the authorities, the media, etc.). That mobile practices are embedded within these power-laden relationships is not a new idea; it forms the basis of critical mobile scholarship. Trust and distrust are always affected by power imbalances, insofar an ideal situation of trust assumes an equal relationship in which all parties assume similar levels of vulnerability amid a risky or uncertain situation. Since relationships are almost always characterized by some degree of power disparity, some social actors tend to assume more vulnerability than others. These disparities may thus impede trust and foster distrust. Second, circumstances in which mobile practices are motivated (or sometimes, necessitated) are characterized by varying levels of situational *uncertainty*. Trust is fostered amid some degree of stable expectation of future behaviors by other actors. However, certain situations are characterized by high degrees of uncertainty. In such situations, one cannot be sure if other social actors will reciprocate and collaborate, especially if they are in comparatively vulnerable positions. Conceptually, trust goes beyond a mere attention to social positions as it examines varying conditions of uncertainty that influence action.

We use the refugee context as a vehicle to understand how varying levels of vulnerability and uncertainty influence dis/trust dispositions and motivate specific mobile media practices. Refugees engage in various mobile practices across various stages of the migration journey (Diminescu, 2008) from their departure in the home to arrival at the host country. These experiences are generally characterized by relatively higher levels of uncertainty and vulnerability, although both still vary across migration stages and refugees' interactions with different social actors (e.g. families versus authorities).

## Method

In 2016, 29 semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugees were conducted in the Netherlands, mostly in Arabic with the help of a translator. Interviews were carried out in refugee centers, cafés, and participants' homes. Interviewees were recruited onsite at refugee centers, or through snowball sampling—participants recommended others whom they knew through refugee centers, welfare organizations, and language classes. The interview sought to uncover details as to how interviewees used their (sometimes Internet-enabled) mobile phones at different stages of their journey from Syria to the Netherlands. Participation was voluntary and not based on compensation. All interviewees provided informed consent. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, except for three, in which cases comprehensive notes were taken.

Fifteen interviewees were women while 14 were men. Their ages ranged between 17 and 73 years; 16 interviewees were aged below 35 years (eight women and eight men), and 13 were aged above 35 (seven women and six men). The sample represented diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds (Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Kurds). Twenty-six interviewees owned a smartphone before arriving in the Netherlands; two acquired their smartphones after arrival; and only one had no smartphone at the time of the interview. All interviewees used messaging apps; 25 used such apps before arrival, and four started



**Table 1.** Permutations of vulnerability and uncertainty.

| Situation <sup>a</sup> | Disposition                 | Mobile practice                                       | Example                                   |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Low V, Low U           | Habitual trust              | Mundane use   | Mobile use for study and work             |
| Low V, High U          | Disunifying distrust        | Avoidant non-use, rebuilding trust through mobile use | Distrust of information from mobile media |
|                        | Inhibited trust development | Indifferent non-use                                   | Refugees do not keep in mobile contact    |
| High V, Low U          | Acquiescent trust           | Conforming use and non-use                            | Patriarchal dependency                    |
|                        | Informed distrust           | Pre-emptive use and non-use                           | Management of digital traces              |
| High V, High U         | Circumstantial trust        | Radical dependent use                                 | Reliance on online anecdotes              |
|                        |                             | Radical collaborative use                             | Pooling of mobile resources in boat       |

<sup>a</sup>V denotes “vulnerability” while U denotes “uncertainty.”

after arrival. Facebook was a popular social media platform among the interviewees; 23 had accounts before arrival, three created accounts after arrival, while one interviewee owned more than 10 accounts.

Transcripts were analyzed using the constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), wherein we iteratively developed and refined conceptual categories. We undertook two levels of manual coding. First, we inductively identified recurrent themes that emerged in the data. These broad themes were further analyzed and clarified. One example: We identified many instances of “negative emotions” that refugees associated with mobile use. These were then classified into subthemes based on associated conditions—“anxiety when communicating with home country,” “anxiety over delayed communication,” “mobile reliance and overuse,” “distrust and disaffiliation surrounding mobile media,” and “undesired mobile connections.” In the second stage, identified themes were categorized along the matrix of vulnerability and uncertainty developed as our theoretical framework. We then examined how dis/trust manifested within the respective combinations. We determined situational uncertainty by finding evidence of unpredictability and associated anxiety and confusion. We determined vulnerability by examining refugees’ relationships for power disparities (such as patriarchal control). Interviewees’ identities are anonymized; quotes are reported with interviewee’s gender and age (e.g. [M25] means Male, 25 years old).

## Findings and discussion

Interview data reveals that different permutations of vulnerability and uncertainty correspond to different trust dispositions, which in turn motivate different types of mobile practices. We develop a provisional typology of trust and distrust dispositions that motivate complex forms of mobile use and non-use practices (summarized in Table 1).



### *Low vulnerability, low uncertainty*

*Habitual trust.* Situations characterized by lower vulnerability and lower uncertainty appear to correspond to the disposition of *habitual trust*. In such situations, our interviewees tended toward *routine, everyday forms of mobile use*. This applies predominantly to day-to-day experiences of refugees settled in the host society (low uncertainty) who were not immediately fearful about threats to their physical or emotional well-being (low vulnerability). Thus, there was significantly less risk at stake when negotiating mobile use choices. This does not mean that mobile use was no longer salient; rather, it means that existing mobile-facilitated social networks and technological features could predictably manage any uncertainty that arises. Therefore, habitual trust implies a form of reliance on the mobile phone, making it a “taken-for-granted” (Ling, 2012) part of everyday life.

As interviewees stabilized into routines, so too did their mobile practices. “It became the norm that the phone is always next to you, like it is now. And when you wake up or go to bed, you check it” [M38]. These stable mobile practices correspond to their everyday needs: “My phone is always with me . . . the contacts on my phone are important. Also, I need 9292 app and Google maps. . . they help me to get around” [F33]. Similarly, another [F23] said, “I used my phone for taxes office and municipality . . . And I use email to follow up with the tax office.” Yet, the stability of habitual trust also meant that interviewees greatly feared losing access to their mobile phone—its centrality within their lives meant that losing it upset existing mechanisms of managing uncertainty. “I will go crazy. When I forget my phone, I feel lost” [F33]; “If I am outside of home, my phone is always with me” [M29].

Low vulnerability–low uncertainty situations provided a stable ground for refugees to begin moving on with their lives. While mundane mobile use may be insignificant to most people, it is highly significant in refugees’ lives, because they can embark on forward-looking life projects instead of having their life trajectories impeded by chronic disruption (Gough and Gough, 2019). “I am thinking about continuing my studies here, so I use Internet for that. I also checked online with URF, an organization helping refugees with higher education” [M29]. Plausibly, mundane mobile use also allowed refugees to maintain continuity in their lives:

Having a mobile phone helped a lot, because I used team viewer to control my old laptop in Syria and do some work . . . [Before leaving Syria, I] informed the company that I worked for that I am leaving . . . They didn’t [find] a replacement, but I still had to leave. [M29]

While the need to use the mobile phone for remote working exemplifies the social demands of mobile communication (Ling, 2012), it also signals a degree of empowerment. While occupied with mundane anxieties about education and work, it is likely that life-and-death worries are less immediately salient. These examples demonstrate that habitual trust is associated with regaining a sense of normalcy within refugees’ personal lives.

### *Low vulnerability, high uncertainty*

Low vulnerability–high uncertainty situations involve ongoing or potential mobile interactions within unpredictable situations without significant power disparities. Yet, unlike

low vulnerability-low uncertainty situations, mobile use does not seem to alleviate the uncertainty, and may even exacerbate it. Therefore, low vulnerability-high uncertainty situations appear to incite *indifferent* and *avoidant* non-use of mobile media, associated with an *absence of trust* or *disunifying distrust*, respectively.

*Inhibited development of trust.* When mobile use fails to alleviate immediate uncertainty, the development of trust relationships is inhibited, leading to *indifferent non-use*. Existing research expects refugees to be taking every opportunity to form and maintain trust relationships, such as employing mobile communication to build social networks for mutual assistance (Walker et al., 2015). However, many interviewees reported failing to maintain mobile contact with other refugees that traveled alongside during their often-perilous migration journeys. “I met this group in Turkey and we exchanged information about Holland and then we met again in Ter Apel (Netherlands), but now we are not in touch anymore” [F46]. Other interviewees’ experiences corroborate this. “Everyone went in different directions and we forgot to take each other’s number. Most people in our group went to the Netherlands” [M33].

Although communicative mobilities afforded by the phone can bridge distances and create empowering social networks (Chib and Nguyen, 2018), refugees did not see any salient reason at that time to engage in mutual trust—suggesting an unrealized potential for collaboration. We argue that it may be the elevated levels of circumstantial uncertainty that prevented the fostering of trust and enduring connections. “We didn’t really interact with others, because we were too busy making sure our family was safe” [F33]. This suggests that uncertainty during refugee journeys relegates mobile networking to low priority. Being preoccupied with the situational uncertainty, they did not have a salient reason to form trust relationships.

*Disunifying distrust.* Interviewees relied on mobile-facilitated information sources, such as news media, to keep in touch with their home society. However, the elevated, perhaps even extreme, levels of uncertainty led them to develop distrust toward information sources. They often received conflicting information, exacerbating anxiety and distress; as refugees, they were geographically separated from their home country and thus could not personally verify the information. Such distrust appears to elicit *avoidant non-use*, especially of mobile media sources beyond immediate friends or family. “Before I used to read things on the Internet and then run to talk to my family to discover that nothing [reported] . . . actually happened. So, I am no longer interested in whatever news is on the Internet.” [F43]

Respondents reported high levels of uncertainty induced by mobile-facilitated information. “There are old neighbors sending us messages . . . all the news about people being killed or not. We hear someone could have been killed, but they are not sure” [M58]; “Sometimes I contact my family to check on them, because I have already information about bombing and insecurities, which they don’t know yet . . . When I call . . . I am the one informing them” [M29]. Mobile use exacerbates feelings of uncertainty, inciting refugees to distance themselves from their home society, particularly when they have no more personal or familial ties within the home country:

When my wife was in Syria, I was obsessed with following the news, but since she is here it is the opposite, I am obsessed with not following the news . . . I have distrust in the people making the news and the information and that's why I decided to stop following it. [M38]

Several interviewees saw mobile media as a key source of disunity, rather than community. "Because of the conflicting opinions and honestly I don't trust any source of information on these social media anymore" [F33]; "The use of Internet and this [mobile] technology, it didn't only start the conflict, but also feeds into it" [M58]. Both quotes powerfully emphasize how mobile media not only reflects but *reinforces* existing distrust within Syrian society, causing a vicious cycle that deteriorates social cohesion.

Where mobile use is not demanded by power structures, individuals have more autonomy to decide whether to maintain or cut off mobile connection. For example, refugees can stop following the news without immediate consequences. As such, the easiest way to manage uncertainty in low vulnerability-high uncertainty situations seems to be engaging in mobile non-use. Yet, we crucially observe that uncertainty and associated distrust was not totalizing. As Lewis and Weigert (1985) observe, living life in complete distrust is untenable—distrust often leads social actors to fall back on some basis of trust. Therefore, some interviewees attempted to mitigate distrust, such as by carefully navigating information landscapes (Borkert et al., 2018). "I can't trust anyone at the moment. So, I check different sources, to see the story from different sides" [F35].

### *High vulnerability, low uncertainty*

A characteristic feature of high vulnerability–low uncertainty situations is high power imbalance within mobile-facilitated relationships. Yet, these relationships have stabilized to provide some level of predictability. Thus, individuals can negotiate and respond to power-laden demands with less uncertainty. We observe that this can be expressed in either an *acquiescent trust* or *informed distrust* disposition. These two dispositions are not mutually exclusive, as both are driven by the need to avoid or mitigate personal exposure to harm by responding to potential harm based on existing expectations.

*Acquiescent trust.* Acquiescent trust is a disposition that incites vulnerable individuals to enact mobile use and non-use patterns that *conform* to power-laden social demands. This has been observed in gendered relationships of patriarchal control and dependency for refugee women (Witteborn, 2018). Women in more conservative families seemed to restrict their mobile contact to family members: "Today [I spoke with]: daughter-in-law, grandsons, daughters. I don't speak with anyone outside of my family" [F73]; "Only my husband calls me on my mobile. On my husband's phone I have most recently contacted family and friends" [F33]. Mobiles facilitated acquiescence to patriarchal norms, wherein men had the prerogative of decision-making and interacting with outsiders:

I came with my brother-in-law; he was our guardian. He did most of the interaction with the authorities on our behalf . . . he would ask the people around us [for information] and we [the women] did not interfere in this process . . . I left my phone in Syria . . . my brother-in-law was with me, so I didn't need a phone. [F22]

This results in a dependence on patriarchal authority, where women trust men in the family to make decisions for them. Thus, women gain assurance of their well-being during the migration journey, while simultaneously giving up autonomy and submitting to patriarchal control by relinquishing mobile access: “I don’t have a Facebook account, but my husband does . . . We didn’t buy any SIMS for my phone, but for my husband’s phone we did in Turkey, Austria, Germany” [F33].

The upside to acquiescent trust is that women who submit to patriarchal dependence are less exposed to the high levels of uncertainty during the migration process. This plausibly alleviated worry and distress to some extent as they did not have to contend with difficult decisions amid uncertainty. “Because my brother-in-law was with me, I don’t know which countries I was in, but I know I was coming to the Netherlands” [F22]. In this vein, Clark and Sywyj (2012) describe how children in refugee families often willingly have their mobile usage heavily controlled and surveilled by their parents. This demonstrates how mobile use or non-use practices are embedded within existing trust relationships, such as intrafamilial love and concern. The women and children do not see themselves as having less autonomy; instead, their trust toward their family members causes them to perceive the restrictions as acts of reciprocity that protect their well-being, rather than increase their vulnerability.

*Informed distrust.* Informed distrust is a disposition that often leads to *pre-emptive patterns* of mobile use and non-use, in the sense that refugees expect and respond to potential harm and control, without necessarily conforming to demands in a reliant way. We observe informed distrust in the way some interviewees anticipated and responded to surveillance by the Syrian government, by deliberate mobile media non-use. “In Syria I used [Facebook] Messenger only limited, because social media was monitored. We had surveillance over social media in Syria, so you couldn’t interact with someone comfortably” [M29]. Alternatively, anticipation of surveillance influenced mobile use practices that attempted to circumnavigate the surveillance. “The government cannot have access to conversations through applications [i.e. WhatsApp, Viber, Skype], unlike normal calls, so it is more secure” [M49].

Another example of informed distrust is in the way the fear of having their digital traces scrutinized by Dutch immigration authorities might have conditioned the way some interviewees used their mobile phones during the journey:

When they took my phones in Ter Apel, I heard there could be two reasons, either to know the route we took or otherwise to get information about our identity, to know if we are really Syrian or not, because there are people coming there claiming to be Syrian when they are not. [M45]

Several interviewees noted that Dutch authorities confiscated their phones when evaluating their eligibility for asylum. Certain idiosyncratic mobile practices might be explained by interviewees being aware of this possibility before arrival in the Netherlands. The choice to digitally document the refugee experience might have been influenced by the perceived need to provide evidence of authenticity of their claims to Dutch authorities:

I documented everything. I documented how refugees were sleeping, eating and moving from one place to another. I documented our journey of each of the places we passed, either of the family or the places . . . the pictures I took of the suffering of the people and the pictures of my family. [M27]

Conversely, another interviewee kept picturesque photos taken during the journey strictly private. “Natural sceneries I take with my family and there is no way I would share it with anyone” [M33]. Such innocuous photos are generally not what people feel the need to hide. We reason that the need for privacy arose because the aesthetic portrayal of the family vacation undermines status claims associated with the stereotypical refugee experience. These examples show how informed distrust conditions mobile use and non-use practices, which in turn allows individuals to manage and reduce uncertainty.

### *High vulnerability, high uncertainty*

*Circumstantial trust.* High vulnerability–high uncertainty situations involve exceptional conditions where individuals are exposed to threats of imminent harm (such as life-and-death situations) without the means to predictably manage the related risks, being embedded in relationships with high power differentials. Refugees’ journeys contain many such high-stakes situations: “we heard about a few boats that sank . . . there were rumors about when the boats might arrive or not on the Facebook group” [F25]. Individuals making such journeys are incited to take a leap-of-faith, which can manifest as two interdependent forms of mobile-facilitated collective action: *radical dependent use* and *radical collaborative use*. Refugees could not rely on authorities to protect them, as their journeys often involved potentially illegal passage through various countries, sometimes involving human smugglers. Given the immense information precarity faced by refugees, including the threat of misinformation (Borkert et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2017), interviewees commonly had to self-navigate, placing their trust in external information and assistance with little certainty of favorable outcomes:

There are internet pages where people share about their journeys. What I read on the net, it was anonymous people sharing, it was difficult and uncertain. And when we made the journey, I found out what was shared on the net was indeed true . . . Most of these [Facebook] groups are for Syrians, written in Arabic, but who writes it I don’t know. [M43]

Interviewees found themselves having to trust strangers, such as street vendors encountered along their journey. “We bought SIM cards, but they were not working, so we faced trouble . . . Sometimes people would give SIM cards for free, but sometimes they didn’t work” [F33]. Such circumstantial leaps-of-faith surrounding mobile practices also manifests in other contexts with high vulnerability and uncertainty. Kang et al. (2018) observe that North Korean women escaping to the South willfully trusted human smugglers communicating through mobile, despite the great risk of being surveilled or entrapped.

Such radical dependence finds its necessary counterpart in radical collaboration. For example, a respondent described his own experiences on Facebook to help others, inspired by how the experiences shared by his predecessors had aided him previously:

There are so many Facebook pages that are specialized on the trip and they will also tell you about the tide and they will explain you the roads from Greece to Europe. And it is all based on personal information and experiences . . . I explained a lot about the road after I experienced it in the trip and shared that information. I shared it on Facebook pages that I used to obtain information from. [M30]

This cyclical interdependence of radical dependence and collaboration allows for collective and altruistic action that allows refugees to help each other, beyond the immediate well-being of their families. Having experienced the condition of radical dependence inspires refugees to engage in radical collaboration. Sometimes, trust may be strengthened by parties they encounter demonstrating a reciprocal willingness to be exposed to vulnerability. For example, Yüksel (2022) notes how Afghan refugees extend their trust toward volunteers, despite not having any prior relationship with them.

Collective action manifested during or following dire situations of extreme vulnerability and uncertainty, such as when dealing with the human traffickers who sought to monopolize information to keep the refugees vulnerable and compliant. One respondent [M29] recalled, “You can’t ask the smugglers where you are going. There was a group of Syrians with me, we used GPS together, on different phones.” Another interviewee noted a similar experience:

The smugglers left us in the sea, but we managed to keep one of the smugglers with us. In these days we could have gotten lost or died in the sea . . . We all used internet or our phones to navigate our way and to know where we are, but we would all take turns so the batteries wouldn’t run out. Because we all wanted to know where he [the smuggler] is taking us. [M58]

Such radical collaboration means that new trust networks are formed with strangers—at least temporarily. This required a mutual willingness to be potentially vulnerable to each other, as there was no guarantee that the other party would not act in threatening or anti-social ways. Yet, such collaborations were often most altruistic and socially consequential:

Once in Libya, I had an application on my old phone that could break into secured Wi-Fi connections, so I managed to break into a network and also give connection to 30 others, it was like a celebration . . . [another time,] some Libyan fighters took us from the smugglers and put us in student housing where this secured wireless was available. [M29]

Such radical collaboration arguably exemplifies the idealized digital *Gemeinschaft*. However, since circumstantial trust involves extremely high-stakes circumstances, it is often a transient disposition. High vulnerability–high uncertainty situations usually stabilize into one of the other three permutations of vulnerability and uncertainty. Transposed onto a typical Syrian refugee’s migration, different permutations arise at different stages. The physical migration journey is characterized by high vulnerability–high uncertainty situations at various points, while low vulnerability–low uncertainty situations typically arise only when refugees have secured asylum and are more integrated into Dutch society. This recalls what Kang et al. (2018) call the “Katzian flip”—constrained mobile use becomes constrained mobile *non-use*, where use has become taken-for-granted and socially demanded.



## Conclusion

This article has proposed a typology that shows likely relationships between various dis/trust dispositions and mobile-facilitated situations and strategies. We caveat that these are not exhaustive categories. Nonetheless, our purpose is to foreground the usefulness of trust as a conceptual lens that deepens our understanding of how individuals engage in various mobile strategies to strategically respond to daily encounters characterized by unequal social power and circumstantial uncertainty. The experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands provided us fertile ground to investigate certain situations (high vulnerability–high uncertainty) rarely encountered in everyday living. Our findings thus enrich existing third-wave critical scholarship that contextualizes mobile practices within power disparities and sociostructural constraints.

The trust and distrust dispositions identified offer cues to understand potential outcomes of mobile practices. Collective and transformative action is most probable in high vulnerability–high uncertainty situations, where individuals feel like they have more to lose in forging new trust networks. While the gambles from collective action might pay off (e.g. navigating the Mediterranean), doing so could also backfire tremendously, further entrenching individuals in structural control (e.g. getting trafficked or imprisoned).

Antithetically, habitual trust in low vulnerability–low uncertainty situations is highly inertial; the lowered stakes mean that individuals may feel personally empowered, but nonetheless lack the motivation to disrupt and reorganize existing trust networks. Finally, low vulnerability–high uncertainty and high vulnerability–low uncertainty permutations correspond to various manifestations of subverted agency (Chib et al., 2022), where individuals' strategies for self-empowerment carry second-order effects that reinforce conditions of vulnerability and uncertainty. This tendency results from the priority to mitigate exposure to harm in these situations, be it threats of physical violence and coercion in power-imbalanced relationships, or emotional distress from uncertainty. However, distrust is never totalizing or paralyzing (Lewis and Weigert, 1985)—even as distrust is engendered, people still figure out ways to negotiate and build mobile-facilitated trust relationships.

We posit that the dispositions identified apply beyond refugee contexts. Just as highly marginalized refugees experience shifting permutations of vulnerability and uncertainty at different points in time, so too do regular mobile users occupying diverse social positions. By exploring two key dimensions of trust (vulnerability and uncertainty), this article illustrates how trust and distrust dispositions are conditioned by power imbalances. This redeems the importance of collaborative facets of trust, without harkening to utopian visions of the digital *Gemeinschaft* that overlook social stratification. Since trust depends on some level of foresight but always wrestles with uncertainty (Luhmann, 2000), trust is a future-directed disposition that takes cues from the past (previous outcomes) but is not determined by it. Similarly, we draw inspiration from first-wave pioneers like Rich Ling—who envisaged the community-building potential of mobile communication—to imagine a “fourth wave” of mobile communications research that, through analyzing dis/trust dispositions, reveals and affirms communicative mobilities (Chib and Nguyen, 2018) as inventive trajectories, pursued by both individual users and social collectives, that overcome social and spatial immobilities.



Indeed, uncertainty seems to characterize both our present and near futures. Globally, societies appear to be facing crises of distrust—crises not limited to mobile communication, but within which mobile communication is deeply embedded. Even as the world is ever-increasingly connected, global information and cultural landscapes are characterized by ever higher degrees of distrust—not just toward traditional institutions like liberal democracy (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2020), but also toward the possibility that people from different social positions can collaborate to create common and equitable futures. Today, exacerbated by the uncertainties of the COVID pandemic and fueled by social media, many societies are witnessing an increase in xenophobia (Ahmed et al., 2021), the spread of misinformation (Su, 2021), and a preference for conspiracy over expert authority (Bessi et al., 2015). These issues underscore the urgent need to rekindle social conditions that foster—rather than extinguish—trust in society, constituting just a few of many relevant contexts for future research that may build on our posited typology of dis/trust.

For example, this typology may offer starting points for research on dis/trust relating to contact tracing applications in the pandemic context. Stevens and Haines (2020) observe that the implementation of the government-mandated tracing app has the potential to erode social trust within the community by substituting it for trust in the government. Future research may explore the extent to which such trust in the government manifests as acquiescent trust, where conformity is undertaken only amid the threat of legal and institutional sanctions. Yet, this also hints at the possibility of its counterpart, informed distrust as a motivator of pre-emptive practices of resistance (e.g. turning off Bluetooth to evade perceived surveillance).


We reemphasize the crucial role mobile communications research has in tackling these existential issues faced by humanity. Given the inextricability of mobile use from human social life (Ling, 2012), mobile scholarship is no longer just trendy research into novel technology, but research that has fundamental implications on the way humans respond to uncertain futures both individual and collective.

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