

# "The Illusion of Being a Free Spirit" - Mobile Phones and Social Media in Transit Places of Migration with the Example of the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya

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## **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

The global distribution of new technologies like the internet, mobile- and smartphones, and social media has had a significant impact on refugees' lifeworlds. Mobile phones and the internet are not only auxiliary tools during transnational migration, but through the viral dissemination of information and images, they function as omnipresent companions and bridge the distances for people on the move, acting as migrant essentials. These "connected migrants" are characterised by the fact that they carry their transnational social networks with them and through the virtual bonds create a social space of connected presence (Diminescu 2008). This holds especially true for people living at the margins in liminal or in-between spaces like refugee camps. Social media does offer new spaces through which refugees can act out an identity beyond the refugee label, and imagine and create their own future. Using the example of two women living in the Kakuma refugee camp in North-Western Kenya, I want to show how they use these technologies to engage in transnational networking and communication. In doing so, I will take into account the role of mobile phones and social media for identity construction, future making and the creation of alternative futures in the virtual space.

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## Introduction

The number of people fleeing from war, hunger, insecurity, poverty and missing perspectives has never been as high as it is today, at nearly 70 million (UNHCR 2019). However, contrary to the ongoing public discourse on refugees in Europe, the majority of them are not coming to Europe but take shelter in the global south neighbouring countries in individual rural or urban settlements or refugee camps (UNHCR 2017).

The refugee camp is a shelter marked by its liminal and ambiguous character (Andersson 2013). Although constructed as temporal shelter, many of the camps have existed for centuries and have become what can be called “accidental cities” (Jansen 2009, 2015: 2). People taking shelter in a refugee camp have a position in between: they have left their home countries and sometimes lost their citizenship and are denied entry to the host country. However national and/or ethnic identity still play an important role in limbo, and communities in refugee camps are often organised and structured on the basis of peoples descent. Moreover, the location of refugee camps as opposed to the so-called city camps is mostly at the margins either in the countryside, at the outskirts of cities or at the far periphery of a country near to the border. This adds to the refugees (self-)perception as caught in a non-lieu, out of the world and unconnected from ordinary life. Due to this, refugees in camps seem to be out of sight and invisible to the public eye. Contrary to the view that refugees are faceless victims caught in prison without agency, several studies have shown how inhabitants of refugee camps do very actively take part in the social, political and economic organisation of the camps with linkages and spill-overs to the surrounding communities, cities, countries and even abroad (Jansen 2013).

The agency of refugees has reached another dimension through their access to mobile phones and the internet. Through the internet, access to information and knowledge and the construction and broadening of social networks around the world have become quicker and easier. Seen in this light, the restricted space of the refugee camp becomes widened and borders become permeable through the related virtual spaces used by the refugees. On the other hand, ICT has also become an essential tool to control, govern and survey refugees by those in power. Digital technology is used for surveillance by border control systems, for registration in asylum reception centres and in the asylum procedure by governmental

institutions. Mobile phones are also used by smugglers for communication with clients and their families and as a means of blackmailing. With the problem of the lack of transparency of data, fake news as well as online scamming and betrayal have become common practices. Trust and mistrust are serious issues in the usage of social media, especially for people seeking aid who have to rely on strangers or unevaluated information.

Considering these in this paper, I want to present some theoretical ideas and questions as well as conceptual and methodical considerations on the uses and meanings of social media for refugees. I want to examine how one can theorise the existing relationship between mobility and immobility, marginalised and central, being connected and disconnected in the framework of the offline and online worlds of refugees. The paper is based on the work that has been carried out by the interdisciplinary research group "Trust and Future Imaginations" at the University of Trier since 2015 and a planned research project on the role of smartphones and social media at transit places of migration. I have conducted fieldwork in two asylum homes in Rhineland Palatinate since March 2018. I have undertaken a pilot research in Kenya and Tanzania in March/ April 2017, which included a visit to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and urban refugees in Kenya and Tanzania. In Kakuma I was able to meet two women who were willing to discuss the use of smartphones and social media with me. I have since then stayed in contact with them through smartphones and social media, and was able to follow their virtual activities. Although the main research has not been carried out yet, I want to present some preliminary questions and insights to the field.<sup>2</sup>

With this case study of two women living in the Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya, I want to exemplify theoretical thoughts and look at how they specifically use these new technologies and how smartphones and social media are changing their daily lives. I want to shed light on what the use and the establishment of virtual networks means for them, also with respect to trust and mistrust. Another aspect will look at how refugees use

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<sup>2</sup> I want to thank the residents of Kakuma Refugee Camp I have talked to, especially Jamilah and Fazilah for their kind cooperation in sharing with me their experiences and allowing me to use extracts from their FB posts in this paper. Further thanks go to my research assistant Timothy Ochieng for his company and support and Maurice Otieno Odero for his assistance in Lodwar as well as driving us to Kakuma; the UNHCR Headquarters and Samuel Otieno for their assistance in the camp.

social media for what Arjun Appadurai (2004, 2013) has called “future making”, namely those practices that connect the present with the future and thus describe a relation and reflection between ideas of desirable futures and actions, measures, policies that are aimed at reaching them (Pink/ Salazar 2017).

Firstly, I want to discuss the relation between migration, immobility and social media and look at how the notion of the “connected” or “virtual” migrant is gaining traction in migration and refugee studies also by humanitarian projects and organisations. Secondly, I will introduce Kakuma Refugee Camp as an example of a transit place of migration but also a city and place to be or call home, where ICT and social media have become an essential part of daily life, social and political activities and the economy of the camp. With the reflections of two women living in the camp and examples of some of their Facebook posts<sup>3</sup>, I want to sketch out how they use smartphones and social media and what it means to them.

The paper hopes to contribute to the question of the role of new media in contemporary African migration practices as new “media cultures of migration”<sup>4</sup> as well as the role of media in restricted places.

### **Note on difficult concepts**

Talking about people on the move or in transit leads one to be confronted with a number of difficult concepts with a vast semantic field and varying definitions and meanings: international, transnational and transit migration, migrant and refugee. A migrant is defined as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.” (IOM 2019). This definition encompasses intra- and interregional border crossing and intercontinental as well as international migration. Transnational migration takes into account the process, through which migrants, through their social, economic and political relationships, construct social fields that transcend the borders of nation-states and as such takes their agency

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<sup>3</sup> In the transcription of the posts, the original script with spelling “mistakes”, abbreviations and symbols has been maintained.

<sup>4</sup> An extension of the concept of “Cultures of Migration” Hahn/ Klute 2007; Cohen/Sirkeci 2011.

seriously (Glick-Schiller et. al. 1992, Köngeter/ Smith 2015). While migration seems to relate more to mobility, movement and transformation, the term refugee refers to a seemingly static political and social status with clearly defined rules and regulations, rights and entitlement to access to food and shelter and restrictions and limitations of status and movement (Inhetween 2006, Scherschel 2011). Moreover while transit migration and flight are often discussed as a linear and direct movement from country A to country B, many studies have shown, that the process of movement is much more non-linear, time consuming and constantly changing, due to the possibilities and restrictions a migrant faces on the move and the subsequent decisions someone is making. The same is true for the social networks of migrants, which are highly dynamic and flexible due to the continuously changing journey (Schapendonk 2014). As Joris Schapendonk argues, migration seen in this light is a process of temporal or semi-temporal settlements, as migrants get stuck on the way and end up in transit areas or leave desired destinations for other places. Immobility, much more than constant mobility, marks the lives of those people fleeing (Schapendonk 2008: 131). In this paper I will use the term (transnational) migration/migrant as a cover term when I talk generally about people on the move. I will use the term refugee when talking either about the discourse on "refugees", or when talking about people who are defined or define themselves as refugees.

### **Transnational migration, refugees, immobility and social media**

The idea of, and the hope for, a better future elsewhere, as well as the trust in persons, institutions and information have always been essential prerequisites for migration. Transnational migrants up to the penultimate century could only rely on information from trustworthy or untrustworthy middlemen and oral and written reports of returnees like emigrant letters, literature and advertisements (Borges/ Cancian 2016, Lehmkuhl 2014). Audiovisual media (radio, cinema, television) radically changed this situation in the 20th century and - to a much greater extent - through the digitalisation and global distribution of mobile phones, access to the internet and social media since the early 2000s.

One example of this transformation are the so called "Merkel-selfies" made with Syrian refugees in a refugee camp in Berlin. Through their dissemination in the internet, their makers gained positive and negative stardom and Angela Merkel was the glorified and iconized as the refugee

saviour "Mama Merkel" in Germany in 2015 (Hagen 2015). In the following years, other politicians and some parts of the German public accused her of having brought too many refugees into the country. But what the example of the refugee selfies also makes clear, is how important mobile phones have become for refugees to report on the experience of their journeys. On several social media platforms, like Facebook groups or YouTube channels, refugees present pictures and movies of their escapes. In the documentary "My escape from Syria - Europe or Die" (Al-Jezairy 2015) published on VICE NEWS, Syrian refugees report in detail on their migratory journey. The documentary "My Escape" by the German television station WDR (2016), is a montage of mobile phone videos by several refugees. The videos show the track through the desert where the refugees were attacked by bandits and got robbed of their personal belongings. Via mobile phones, the bandits negotiated with smugglers to get money from the refugees' relatives.

These published videos testify and make visible to us what great risks refugees take and the horrors of their journeys to reach Europe as well as the power of access to the mobile phone.

The images of refugees with mobile phones does alter our vision of them as poor and faceless victims of global development and circumstances but also makes them subjects of mistrust and suspicion when smartphones are discussed as luxury tools not appropriate for people seeking asylum.

Transnational migrants and refugees today use mobile phones and social media before, during and after migration to inform and connect themselves and also report on their journeys (Byrne/ Solomon 2015, Gillespie et al. 2016, Hendawi 2015, McLaughlin 2015).

Social media and its content can accordingly be labelled as the so-called migration pull factors (Everett 1966; Schönhuth 2008) and are used for resource mobilisation and social capital (Bourdieu 1991). Through the easier generation and use of weak ties (Haythornthwaite 2002, Wells 2011), social media changes the availability as well as trust in information, imaginations of the future as well as social networks (Dekker/ Engbersen 2012; Schönhuth 2010). Social media in this way is part of an active future-making (Appadurai 2004, 2013), practices through which the present and future are connected and which focus on the relation between imaginations of hopeful futures and deeds which aim to realise these (Pink/ Salazar 2017).

Media in general play an important role for diaspora communities or transnational families as they become media migrants (Hepp et al. 2011). In a study of Philippine foster mothers in the UK, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller illustrate how transnational families keep up their family lives through the use of "polymedia"<sup>5</sup>. Facebook, the most used social media platform around the world, is essential for producing and maintaining social networks as well as for identity construction. In his book "Tales on Facebook" Daniel Miller has found out, that Facebook in Trinidad is essential for Trini-ness and is sometimes itself perceived as an actor in its own right which changes people's lives. It can help find and keep up relationships but can also break up a marriage, and the public and private spaces are intermingled such that it can act as an annoying intruder as well as scandal creator (Miller 2011).

The topic of the role of ICT and social media during migration, was only recently taken up by refugee studies.<sup>6</sup> The studies have proven that migrants do use social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, mobile applications such as Google Maps, GPS and WhatsApp for the following:

1. in the selection and generation of information and knowledge about the target country before taking the concrete migration decision.
2. networking with other migrants and assistants, communicating with families and friends, planning, organisation and orientation during the journey.
3. documenting, memorising and processing the experience, as well as accessing contact details and the latest information from the region and place, family members and friends after their arrival.

Migrants in this way have become "connected migrants" (Diminescu 2008) or "virtual migrants" (Komito 2011:27-29), who with the help of the virtual connections made possible by the internet, create a social space of "presences", a "connected presence" (Licoppe 2004), and are therefore here and there at the same time. Through their "multi-belonging", they are able to continuously renew their ties with their homeland while making contact

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<sup>5</sup> The term polymedia not only describes the availability and choice of many different media but the way this transforms the relationship between people and the media and how media are socialised (Madianou/ Miller 2012:8).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Hiller/ Franz 2004; Gillespie et al. 2016; Adams Parham 2004; van den Bos/ Nell 2006; Diminescu 2008; Ros 2010; Komito 2011; Borkert et al. 2009; Ros et al. 2007; Dekker/ Engbersen 2012; van Meeteren/ Pereira 2013, Emmer et al. 2016, UNHCR 2016, Kutscher/ Krefß 2015, Charmarkeh 2013, Hannides et al. 2016.

with the societies in the destination country (Diminescu 2008: 569, 572). This space of presences makes possible an interconnection, overlapping and merging of past, present and future, as in a present situation of the migration process future action enabled by the activation of past experiences and contacts.

A recent UNHCR report from 2016 with the title "Connecting Refugees" exemplifies the growing interest in mobile phones and social media, not only by the media but also from humanitarian organisations. UNHCR, with the support of Accenture Development Partnerships (ADP), carried out a global assessment of refugees' access to, and use of, the internet and mobile phones, with the aim of the development of a new UNHCR Global Strategy for Connectivity for Refugees. The research made several key findings, which indicate that refugees' connectivity is still restricted due to their place of location (urban or rural), affordability, literacy and language knowledge, societal and cultural challenges as well as gender and technical gaps in coverage. Despite affordability constraints, refugees place significant value on being connected. Access to the internet is crucial for refugees in communicating with friends and family, in both their home and host country, as well as for providing help and assistance. In this way, as the UNHCR states, mobile phones and internet connectivity have become part of the overall aim of increasing refugee well-being and self-reliance in refugee camps (UNHCR 2016: 22).

The refugee camp has been theorised since the 1990s with reference to Goffman's "Total Institution" (1961) Foucault's "Heterotopias" (1977, 1984) in the context of social processes of power, control and security (Pieper 2008). According to Marc Augé they have been regarded as "non-places" (2008) with a supposed absence of history, relation and identity. But, as many studies have shown, with the long existence of many refugee camps and people who live there over several generations, they do indeed have a history, relation and identity. They have been analysed with Bourdieu's "field of forces" (1991) a social space of governance and control and resistance against this power and as part of urbanisation processes, as an urban ethnographic phenomenon ("City-Camp", Agier 2002). Kreichauf recently described them as the result of recent social developments that "make the camp's ideology the rule of law" (Kreichauf 2016: 209).<sup>7</sup> In the

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<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic field research has been undertaken in refugee camps in Europe, USA Offshore, Asia (Thailand, Pakistan, Cambodia), Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan



vicinities of the restricted and limited spaces of refugee camps where the desire and longing for a life elsewhere are all encompassing, the use of mobile phones and social media become especially crucial.

### **The lifeworld of Kakuma refugee camp**

Kakuma was founded in 1992 following the arrival of the "Lost boys of Sudan", young Nuer and Dinka who were orphaned and displaced during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005). Other refugees followed from Ethiopia and Somalia later on. At the end of 2016, the camp had a population of about 155,000 people from Southern Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, DRC Congo, Congo Brazzaville, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania. The camp consists of four parts Kakuma 1 to 3 and 4 which entails the Kalobeyei settlement consisting of three villages (UNHCR Kenya 2019).

Like other refugee camps, Kakuma is the result of, and structured by, the humanitarian aid industry. The camp is administered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Besides the UNHCR a wide range of organisations are active in the camp.<sup>8</sup> The camp is under the jurisdiction of the Kenyan government and the Department of Refugee Affairs. Since the implementation of the Kenya Refugee Act in 2007, there is an appointed Camp Manager who oversees the camp affairs as well as the affairs of the humanitarian agencies. As it is written in the Act, in an eventual case, the Kenyan Government can assume full management of Kakuma refugee camp (KANERE 2019).

Kakuma refugee camp is situated in northwestern Kenya at the outskirts of Kakuma town in the Turkana West District of Turkana County, about 120 km from Lodwar and 130 km from the border of South Sudan. Kakuma lies

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and Western Sahara on topics like crises, physical and psychological violence, humanitarian aid, political mobilization, terrorism, education, refugee identity and vulnerability vs. agency. In Africa several studies have been carried out on the largest camps in Daadab, Kakuma in Kenya (Agier 2002, Horst 2006, Hilhorst et al. 2010, 2012, Jansen 2008, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016, Crisp 2000, de Montclos/ Kagwanja 2000, etc.), Uganda (Paardekooper et al. 1999), Zambia (Inhetveen 2010) and Tanzania (Agier 2002, Malkki 1995) and the anonymous settlements of urban refugees from Burundi in Tanzanian cities (Malkki 1995; Sommers 1993, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> World Food Program (WFP), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), Windle Trust Kenya (WTK), Film Aid International, and Salesians of Don Bosco in Kenya.

in a semi-arid desert environment with regularly occurring dust storms, high daily temperatures of 35 to 38 degrees Celsius and regular outbreaks of malaria and cholera during the flood in the rainy season (UNHCR Kenya 2019).

The majority of the local population are the nomadic pastoralists of Turkana, who mostly still live and exhibit a very “traditional” lifestyle. They are themselves a marginalised and poor group of people and depend on missionary aid to get education and health services. As the access to water and pasture land under the extreme climatic conditions is restricted, the area has become a place of regular intergroup and cross-border violence with the neighbouring Pokot, Karamojong and others. This leads to rejection and envy by the host population resulting in articulations like “It is better to be a refugee than a Turkana in Kakuma” as well as violent conflicts between the two groups (Aukot 2003: 74).

Unless one takes a UNCHR chartered flight from Nairobi, which takes one hour and 40 minutes, the travel to Kakuma is a long journey to the northern end of Kenya. My assistant Timothy and I took the bus from Nairobi to Eldoret, which takes about 3 to 4 hours and took a flight to Lodwar, as the route between Eldoret and Lodwar by bus is troublesome and dangerous. In Lodwar Timothy’s cousin, who works in Lodwar as an engineer, picked us up and gave us a ride to the UNHCR headquarters. The trip to Kakuma was a two and a half hour rough road ride as the street to Kakuma is in bad condition so one has to drive both on and off the road. The landscape is an apocalyptic dusty semi desert surrounded by bizarre rock formations. Once a while you see Turkana walking barefoot beside the road. A small boy was selling bags of incense at the side of the street, his face whitened by dust, staring at us frightened and slowly went backwards after he had sold us a plastic bag of incense.

Finally, we saw the white iron reflections of tents at the horizons when the mass area of the tented camps became visible. We passed the lively small town of Kakuma, which is stretched out beside the main road to the camp. When we reached the UNHCR headquarters, we registered, asking for a permit of entry before we could drive to the actual camp.

“When entering Kakuma refugee camp [in Kenya],” states Bram Jansen who has done research in the camp, “notions of time and space become obsolete, not only because of the many years of existence of the camp, but especially as a result of the social and material processes that occur in it” (2009:11).

Like Dadaab, Kakuma is a "city of thorns" (Rawlence 2016) with segregated living areas marked by fences built of the thorn bushes from the area. In the frame of a process of what Michel Agier has labelled "ethnic chessboard" (Agier 2002: 332-336), the camp is divided into different zones, not only due to the arrival of refugees, but into districts within the zones, which bear names referring to national descent like Ethiopia, Eritrea or Somalia etc.

We went to visit the section of Kakuma called Hong Kong, the very lively business quarter of the camp, which has the impression of an ordinary quarter of a city. In a small photo art studio I was able to talk to Jamilah from Somalia and Fazilah from Southern Sudan who were willing to talk to me about their experiences.

Both have spent most of their lives within the borders of the camp and as registered refugees. Jamilah came to the camp in 1995 when she fled from the war in Somalia with her husband and their two daughters. Since she separated from her husband she has to raise the children alone. Jamilah was hoping for resettlement to the USA, but the Trump government stopped the processing of their application. Now all her hopes are for a resettlement to Canada. She is working for an NGO and an international organisation in the camp.

Fazilah is 22 years old and was born in Kakuma, following her parent's flight from Southern Sudan. She completed her secondary education in the camp and her biggest dream was to get a scholarship to study abroad. She is working for a camp related project and won an award for her activities (Fazilah 2017).

As both said, life in the refugee camp is marked by restrictions and limitations, lack of security and regularly occurring violence, a lack of access to resources and chances and most importantly a lack of identity, as the refugee label is stamped upon them, hiding their personal identity. In this negative in-between present-ness, dreams and hopes for change and a better future are all encompassing. As Jamilah stated: "You don't want to lead a refugee life for the rest of your life you feel wasted you feel you lack that sense of identity. [...] So you wish that one day not at least (your) kids will not have an identity like you. But someday they will have an identity, they will have a good education, you don't have to be restricted of some things, you don't (have to) receive negative moments about being a refugee. So yes I have like a whole lot of dreams like once to get out of this place" (Jamilah 2017).

This state of being is called suffering from *buufis*<sup>9</sup> by the Somali refugees, which describes the constant wish to get out of the camp and live abroad. According to Cindy Horst *buufis* is fostered by transnational flows of remittances and information and can have severe psychological effects like mental health issues and even suicide (Horst 2006).

“So it’s everyone’s of us dream. So that you don’t be under some restrictions like you’re not supposed to go outside the camp, you’re not supposed to do this, you don’t have the ability to continue the education you like, there is a lot of limitations you know. There is no way that you can you can get beyond that limits. So, (whatever) there is a limitation, there is a lot of restrictions, life becomes like you’ve been caged somewhere, you are in a cage, you are in prison, there is no difference, ja. So it’s our dreams to break the limits and seek for our identities and that’s, I think, mostly it’s (through) education.” (Fazilah 2017).

But, although the inhabitants can go to school in the camp up to secondary level, the possibility to continue on to third level remain low:

“Sometimes you go to your primary level, your secondary level, you pass well but there is limited chances for you to go (further) studies, because the chances are very limited, the (gap) is very slim, and there are many students who have passed. So whenever you’ve finished your high school you just sit and come back to where you’ve started life, it’s just a circle that continues.” (Fazilah 2017)

Though being restricted, the two women are very active and engaged within the vicinity of the camp as they work with NGOs and as journalists. With the help of a photographer from the US, in February 2017, they were able to open their own photo studio, where they offer photographic services, technical training and photoshoots to Kakuma inhabitants as well

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<sup>9</sup> *Buufi* is a Somali term that means ‘to blow into or to inflate’ (Zorc and Osman 1993 in Horst 2006:143). It refers to air, *hawo*, which also stands for a longing or desire for something specific, an ambition or a daydream. Thus, *buufis* can be understood as a longing or desire blown into someone’s mind (Horst 2006:143).

as document life in the camp. Photographs help to visualise stories, happenings and the people and cultures of Kakuma. Through portrait photography they give the people the chance to present themselves in a respectful and beautiful manner and to actively imagine a better life and self.

### **Refugees' social media use**

When internet and mobile phones became available and widely used in Kenya, the UNHCR reaction to new media usage was firstly disapproving. The authorities prohibited the use of mobile phones and ICT in the camp. When pressure from the inhabitants and public grew, they not only allowed it but today even foster new media usage in the camp.<sup>10</sup> In 2017 the UNHCR initiated an ICT Bootcamp for Kakuma inhabitants to educate refugees on the technical skills of ICT to enhance their abilities to find education or work (Otieno 2017).

Within the vicinity of the camp internet cafés, mobile phone shops and M-Pesa services blossomed and today make up a big part of economic activities as well as the visual landscape in the camp with painted phone shops, creative charging facilities and their advertisement boards all over the place.

However, power cuts and financial resources still restrict media usage. In order to access the internet, consumers have to have well working and charged smartphones and buy data bundles from the respective provider.

Both Jamilah and Fazilah use their mobile phones to access the internet and social media platforms very actively, especially WhatsApp, Facebook, FB Messenger, Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram although they sometimes have difficulties with access or money to buy data bundles. The mobile phone and social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are most important to them, as they can connect with people outside the camp and present themselves with a personal identity beyond the refugee status (Fazilah/ Jamilah 2017).

Through Facebook both of them have built up big networks of contacts in Kakuma, Kenya and abroad.

Jamilah started to use Facebook as early as 2009. Her first post on 9 September 2009 being "Am looking 4 friends" and two weeks later on 21

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Bram Jansen 25.05.2018.

September “Am serchng 4 gret, honest,lovng n caring frnds! To date Jamilah has 1,729 friends from different places like Kenya, the USA, and Europe. On her profile one can see a picture of her sitting cross-legged between her two daughters in front of a black background in the photo studio. The black background and the black dress of Jamilah let her merge with the background. In contrast to the background, the smiling faces of her and her daughters, who are dressed in blue and black and white, seem shining. Jamilah and her elder daughter wear a veil with black and white stripes while the younger daughter is unveiled. In the middle is a smaller round picture of herself sitting at a window front looking at the sea with the subtitle “2019-International Women’s Day”.

While at the beginning Jamilah used Facebook as a simple messenger tool, today she is using it for multiple forms of communication like posting selfies and photos her daughters and close friends in the camp, picture-text messages, greeting, exchanging news, religious greetings and messages, political topics, love issues, raising awareness for refugees or promoting love for popular culture, music and sports. But most of all she is using personally coined or ready-made sayings to communicate her feelings and thoughts on a particular day or moment.

Fazilah has been on Facebook since 2010, using it more actively since 2012. Starting mainly with selfies or pictures of her friends, today she also uses Facebook for various forms of communication. Her profile picture was until recently a picture of herself together with the photographer from the USA. She has 2,098 friends to date.

Besides topics on refugees, women or popular culture her posts reflect her origin as South Sudanese reporting on the situation of the country, the hope for peace as well as her aim to reach higher education and to be a beauty model. As one of her dreams is becoming a beauty model, there are many posts consisting of very professionally staged self- portraits (FB page 2019). The photo studio has its own FB page, which helps them to advertise their project beyond the camp as well as display the photographs and report on photographic projects in the camp.

### **Reflecting the use of social media for imagining and making the future**

In general mobile phone and social media use are valued by the two women as free platforms, “powerful” tools for networking, reporting on the situation in their home countries, to stand in for refugees, to follow dreams

and to get better chances in life. In this way they are a part of an active future making and widening possibilities for (personal) change.

Firstly, social media is used to increase connectivity and communication with friends and relatives:

"Yes, because whenever you want to chat with a friend or call a family member who is far away, it's just a phone call away. You know, sometimes you just give it a chance it becomes much more easier, you can just see the person you are talking to, so it's really easy." (Fazilah 2017)

"It's just a phone call away" refers to the possibility to bridge the geographical distances to people – which refugees usually have to face – with the mobile phone. Fazilah describes it as a chance to ease the difficult situation of being separated from family and friends, enriched also by the visibility of the others through the use of video call technology like Skype.

A second aspect is the difficult or missing access to information and knowledge by people on the move or in transit. Search engines and free online encyclopaedias, as well as social network platforms like Facebook, are a means of quickly receiving information. Refugees rely on information of possible places to stay and resettlement destinations for actively engaging in and planning their future:

"They tell us it's cool to be in Canada, there is not a lot of racism there and there is a lot of foreigners, the people are accepting them and that's what we are looking for, to be accepted. Because most of your life you have spent as a refugee. Then you go to a place like America and then, if the president is talking about it, you still feel like it somehow changes, you somehow you're still in that cage." (Fazilah 2017)

As the statement exemplifies, there is trust in information about abroad presented especially by those who have already gone through resettlement. Canada then appears as an ideal place for migrants compared to the USA, which has lost much of its popularity due to the restricted immigration policies introduced by the Trump government. Although information and contacts might not be very trustworthy and there is always a danger of

being cheated or betrayed, as Fazilah states “most of the time you don’t think about that, you just rely.”

Through the networks on social media, there is a perceived greater chance to change the current life situation and get out of the camp especially through networks and contacts, which can facilitate access to educational programmes:

“You know, I have friends who got a scholarship through advertising. But you know, most of the time people think these things are not true, so they avoid it, but there is no harm in there. So if you try, you might get lucky, and through social media you have friends maybe they can help. So someone might take interest in your case and finally you can get a scholarship.” (Fazilah 2017)

According to Fazilah, the photo studio is the perfect example of how social media is changing the lives of refugees. Through the studio’s FB and Instagram pages, they were able to reach a larger audience and people around the world now know Kakuma and are able to follow the activities of the photo project.<sup>11</sup>

“Ya, there’s a lot of help which comes through social media. Like for instance, this photo studio that we have and the photographer who helped us and she kept on posting our photos. So when she came back this year, she came back with a lot of donations for us from people who donated due to the pictures they saw that we took. So there’s a lot of hope in social media, a lot of things can change.” (Jamilah 2017)

More than this, Facebook is a platform of self-presentation and self-idealisation and is used to reflect the present situation or imaginatively present another future self with pictures and texts. On 17 June 2018, Fazilah posted a photo studio picture of herself in a beautiful dress together with the title “The illusion of being a free spirit!”. Just like a professional model, she is sitting on a chair with a black short dress, an orange-brownish head scarf, which partly covers her open long Afro hair. She is wearing an

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication via WhatsApp 29.10.2018.



African collar with big stones resembling the colour of the scarf and a silver watch. Her hands hang loosely crossed between the legs. She is looking to the left side upwards so that one can see her face profile. The post received 192 likes and heart symbols as well as 17 short comments, the majority of which praise her beauty and cuteness or tell her that they are missing her. Only one of the commentators wrote "illusion kweli" (really illusion) referring to the posts' title and her being in the camp.

Moreover, FB is used to reflect and discuss the term "refugee" as well as raise awareness for refugee campaigns. Thus on Refugee day 2018, Jamilah wrote the following:

"Today everyone is celebrating the World Refugee Day, right? I just wish people should understand the weight of that word. It's a seven letter word yet it carries pain, trauma, agony, tears, death, smiles you name it! No one chooses to be a refugee but the circumstance forces u to be one. You feel alone, unwanted and unloved but still you have the will to start all over again. All u ever need is a roof over your head and a safe place to call home. They call u names, put a tag on you a reminder that the soil beneath your feets are not yours and will never be. Refugees are real people like anyone, no situation is permanent and one day that status will change. Let not the past define who we are and achieve a better future. Blessed are those who gave Refugees a chance to prove their worth. Happy WRD to all the fighters who are fighting this battle. #withrefugees#refugeesarerealpeople#WRD2018#includeall#empowerall" (FB page 20.06.2018)

In her post, Fazilah presents her reflections on the term refugee, a category used to describe people who are unintentionally in a state of vulnerability and in need. A stereotypic and static label, which leads to dehumanizing people and carries with it negative experiences and emotions but also hope and the will to change the present situation to begin anew.

In 2017, Fazilah was finally able to get a scholarship at the University of Nairobi, started working as a model and finally became the "free spirit" she longed to be. When she came back to visit the camp in 2018, she used Facebook to post a picture of herself together with the kids of Kakuma

while remembering and reflecting her own history in the camp as well as the refugee camp as a place of chances and opportunities:

“What's more amazing than seeing your old self through this kids  
 ♥ not just memories, they are attending the same pre-school I went to many years ago ( but with better facilities now) Apart from enjoying porridge and Bp5<sup>12</sup>, i had no idea that was a step to building the woman I have become.

Kakuma might means "a place of nowhere" but it will forever be Re- define by several refugee generations as a turning point in their history.

Through kakuma, a girl worth a cow realize the importance of her pen and books, she gain momentum like never before to walk through her meandering path in search of her worth, identity and voice.

There is a hidden treasure in each one of these kids, it's a challenge to all of us new generation to give them a better south Sudan.

Your voice count!“ (FB page 2018)

Her reflections show what being a refugee means for the ones who are subsumed under this category. She describes it as a liminal state of being which can be overcome. People living in a refugee camp are a community, which shares a common place to stay, common food and have similar possibilities to get schooling and education. Looking back, Fazilah sees her past self as an important phase of life comparable to a ritual stage in becoming who she is today. She values Kakuma refugee camp as a place of chances and opportunities and its inhabitants as bearers of hope to make a better future also in their home countries.

In this way, social media make visible to us the articulations and reflections of refugees presenting themselves not as faceless and passive victims but as powerful actors of their own lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Abbreviation and name for a biscuit like food supplement (WhatsApp communication with Fazilah 29.06.2018).

## Conclusion

The mobile phone as a mobile communication tool, and the internet and social media platforms as new social spaces have become essential for refugees. The internet does offer spaces where images and imaginations of better places are produced and distributed. Using the mobile phone as a tool, migrants can connect and retrieve information before or during their journeys and reconnect with their homeland and new communities at their destination. On the other hand, as it entails freedom and power for the migrants, it is a means of control, surveillance and suppression for the ones in power.

As the example from Kakuma has shown, for people in the liminal or in-between-state of a refugee camp, mobile phones and social media do offer widened social spaces, a connection to the world and a way to present themselves with identities beyond the refugee label. With the possibility for active networking and raising awareness and funds, it can be a way of active future-making and a tool for fostering social change.

Representing oneself on social media in a positive and different light, which everybody does, does not mean that all they do is merely illusionist. If we accept the assumption on face value that the difference between virtual and real is untenable, networking, communication and visual practices through Facebook can indeed be interpreted as an active future making.

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