TRACING GENDERED PRACTICES IN SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEE YOUTH IN OTTAWA, CANADA

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The role of social media in the everyday life of Syrian refugee youth is understudied. Based on the findings of focus group interviews with 29 Syrian refugee youth, both female and male between ages 16-25, in Ottawa, Canada, this article investigates the everyday use of social media for resettlement and integration. Thematic analysis reveals distinct gendered practices in social media in three main areas: (1) social media for settlement, (2) social media as sites of connection, and (3) social media as learning platforms. Gendered implications of social media use for well-being, inclusion, and integration of refugees at the initial stages of relocation and resettlement are discussed.

Le rôle des médias sociaux dans la vie quotidienne des jeunes réfugiés syriens est peu étudié. Basé sur des entretiens de groupes de discussion avec 29 jeunes réfugiés syriens, hommes et femmes âgés de 16 à 25 ans, à Ottawa au Canada, cet article examine l'utilisation quotidienne des médias sociaux dans un contexte de réétablissement et d'intégration. L'analyse thématique révèle des pratiques sexospécifiques distinctes dans les médias sociaux dans trois domaines principaux : (1) les médias sociaux pour l'établissement, (2) les médias sociaux en tant que sites de connexion, et (3) les médias sociaux en tant que plateformes d'apprentissage. Les implications sexospécifiques de l'utilisation des médias sociaux pour le bien-être, l'inclusion et l'intégration des réfugiés aux stades initiaux de relocalisation et de réétablissement sont discutées.

By January 2017, over 40,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Canada (IRCC 2017). Previous reports show that a majority of Syrian refugees who resettled in Canada are 25 years old and under (CIC 2015, 2016). Facilitated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), this population displacement and relocation is met by new forms of connections across space, place, and time. In many cases, in today's network society (Castells, 1996), refugees may bring their mobile phones and technological skills when they arrive at a new destination (Maitland and Xu, 2015). For example, 86% of Syrian youth in the Za'atari refugee camp based in Jordan were found to own a mobile phone and more than 50% were found to be using the Internet at least once daily (Maitland and Xu, 2015). Given the scope and speed of the Syrian refugee resettlement as well as its demographic composition, much can be learned by examining how Syrian refugee youth experience resettlement, adaptation and eventually integration into Canadian society, including the tools and strategies they deploy to do so and especially the use of social media.

Although there is an emerging body of literature on refugees' ICT use (Alegado, 2009; Charmarkeh, 2009; UNHCR, 2016), less is known about how they are used in refugee resettlement process, including the role of social media in meeting settlement related needs. Moreover, while some research exists on how migrants and refugees use various types of media (which vary along the lines of migrant status/category, ethnocultural groups, language skills, age, and gender, etc.) to assist in their settlement related information needs (Ahmed and Veronis 2017; Veronis and Ahmed 2015), the role of social media in the everyday life of Syrian refugee youth has yet to be studied in more depth. Adopting a gender lens to study these processes is essential given the growing body of work illuminating the gendered dimensions of mobility and migration (Silvey, 2004, 2006; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014) and in the use of ICT (Green and Singleton, 2013). From making migration decisions in the place of origin to settlement and integration in the receiving society, gender along with other markers of identity shapes individuals' experiences and outcomes of migration due to differentiated social positionings in relation to dominant norms and power structures. Indeed, scholars have noted gender differences in self-disclosure on social media (Sheldon, 2013), searching for health information (Allison et al., 2017), and self-presentation on social media (Manago et al., 2008). Yet these scholarly efforts are sparse or non-existent in the context of the everyday use of social media among Syrian refugee young men and women for resettlement and integration.

Furthermore, the usefulness of social media in assisting with resettlement is a timely topic considering the Canadian government is investing in the development of settlement services available online that can be accessed prior to arrival – a program known as Settlement Online Pre-Arrival (SOPA).1 This trend is part of efforts to decrease costs of settlement support while making access and use more convenient (by reducing constrains relating to location/travel distance and scheduling) (Mills 2016).

Drawing on focus group data, this article aims to answer the following question: How and why do Syrian refugee young men and women use social media in their everyday life? By doing so, we will offer insights into the role of gender in social media use among newly arrived Syrian refugee youth. Empirical evidence from this article can help to advance an understanding of the social media use practices of young Syrian refugee men and women – how they seek information, the nature of their information needs, information use behaviors, and challenges – and thereby help to improve existing refugee resettlement and integration efforts, both content and delivery of programing by service organizations, government, and other relevant stakeholders.

From January to May 2017, we conducted five focus group discussions with 29 recently resettled Syrian refugee youth both male (19) and female (10), aged between 16-25, who arrived in Ottawa, Canada, as part of the resettlement effort in 2015 and 2016 as government assisted refugees or under private sponsorship and were able to communicate in English. Our findings are organized around three main themes: (1) Social Media for Settlement, (2) Social Media as Sites of Connection, and (3) Social Media as Learning Platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SETTLEMENT

TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Emerging research reveals that social media play an important role in meeting settlement related information needs of immigrants and refugees, especially among younger age groups (Veronis and Ahmed, 2015). The omnipresence of social media has also touched the daily life of Syrian refugee young men and women. Participating Syrian refugee youth were found to be avid users of various social media sites and applications, namely Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Skype, Snapchat, Skype, Twitter, Viber, YouTube, and WhatsApp. While these websites and Internet-based applications are popular among participants, Facebook continues to dominate their social media use, because they find it is user-friendly and appreciate how it continuously updates its features. Participants shared how in Syria they used social media mainly for entertainment purposes, but after coming to Canada, social media have become very important in their daily life; they use social media more frequently and for most activities. Further, they explained that they use various social media tools in a multitude of ways. For example, participants, both male and female, rely on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp for communication purposes. They also use these tools to gather news about and from Syria, and refugee life in Canada, as well as to share pictures and videos of special events and occasions such as Canada Day and Christmas

with their network. A young Syrian young woman said, "I use Facebook and Instagram. Now WhatsApp. I use it to see the news, just in English, not in Arabic, to learn from videos. And I use WhatsApp to contact my brother in Syria. And to contact my friends in other countries" (FGD #3). Below, we delve further into the importance of these virtual social networks and their role during resettlement in Canada.

REASONS FOR USING THESE SOCIAL MEDIA

When discussing specific reasons for using social media, Syrian refugee young men and women mentioned how social media have become useful since they arrived in Canada in terms of helping to get settled. Participants use various social media tools and sites as GPS tracker, to access health care services, find jobs, and for educational purposes. Syrian refugee young women in particular expressed keenness about using social media for educational opportunities. They talked about everything now being accessible online and how with social media they can search for universities, colleges, look at specific programs, and even take online classes.

Participants discussed how social media help them to integrate into Canadian culture, for instance, by providing tools to reduce language barriers they face. Syrian refugee young men in particular shared how they find the language translation features of some social media sites very helpful in school, during social interactions, and even for simple tasks like grocery shopping (e.g., to check food ingredients in unfamiliar products). A young Syrian refugee man explained, "I spend my time on Facebook because it makes me learn another language [English], information about another country [Canada]" (FGD #5).

Participants brought attention to the socializing aspect of using social media. Both Syrian refugee young men and women use social media to mostly find other Syrians in Canada. A number of participants also said they use social media to interact with their sponsors on a regular basis, including when they need to undertake complex transactions for which they need help. Generally, many feel that social media make things easier. For example, through online social networking, they learned about access to free services for Syrians (e.g., free gym for Syrians), Canada Day, events in the community, and Canadian culture, especially through advertisement in social media sites.

Hence, social media are important sources for refugees as they seek various types of resources and information, orienting (relating to everyday events) and problem-specific (relating to individual tasks) (Caidi et al, 2010), at different stages of their settlement process (Ahmed and Veronis, 2017; Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach, 2011).

SOCIAL MEDIA AS SITES OF CONNECTION

CONNECTING ACROSS SPACE AND PLACE

One important role that social media play in the lives of Syrian refugee young men and women is to help them stay connected with family and friends who have stayed back in their place of origin, have been displaced in countries neighbouring Syria, or have resettled to other countries. Participants said they miss their loved ones and social media provide a relatively easy and affordable means of communication, especially allowing for an instantaneous way of communicating on a regular, daily basis. Further, they explained that they use social media to check on the safety of those who have stayed behind, and for whom they worry almost constantly. Social media allow them to be in the know about the whereabouts of family and friends and also to be informed of any developing situation affecting them. Given the hardships associated with family separation through migration, especially in contexts of conflict (Svašek. 2010), social media thus provide a novel and unique form for refugees to communicate with those who stay behind, and thus ease the need for them to focus on the resettlement process. One main challenge, however, is connecting with those who remain in conflict zones or refugee camps as access to technology (Internet, smart phones) or basic infrastructure (electricity) may be limited (see UNHCR 2016). Moreover, participants shared that they use social media to follow news and events in their country of origin, and access detailed information about the conflict. Often, mainstream news media in host societies do not cover events in migrants' countries of origin in depth, and thus transnational and diasporic media can help fill this void (Signer et al. 2011), a role that social media also play. In addition, we learned that participants actively participate in sharing and disseminating information through social media by posting photographs and videos as well as by producing their own material. This was especially the case among Syrian young men participating in the study, a number of who had advanced digital skills. They explained that they did so to keep others informed and also as a form of activism to raise awareness about the conflict in Syria and the plight and needs of Syrian refugees. This use of social media speaks to the novel field of "migrant digitalities" whereby displaced persons use technology as part of their struggles (Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou, and Tsianos, 2015).

From a different viewpoint, participants mentioned that social media have been helpful to communicate with others in Canada. In addition to meeting other Syrian refugees, a number of Syrian refugee young women said they meet new (Canadian) friends on social media and can stay connected with new people they meet. A Syrian young woman explained, "I got some new people, and for my school, I use [social media]. There was a girl, I never knew her, but I knew her name, so I went to Facebook, I searched her name, I added her, she added me back, now she's my friend" (FGD #4).

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Another useful role that social media play in the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugee youth is in providing a space for expressing emotions and receiving support. Syrian refugee young women in particular explained that they use social media to share how they feel, often on a daily basis. Others talked about turning to social media when they feel lonely or sad, and that talking to their friends and family, including those who have stayed behind, helps them cope. A majority of participants, both male and female, spoke about their ongoing worries for family and friends who remained in insecure conditions and the fact that being able to communicate via social media, or at least check on them, provided some comfort. But unfortunately, social media are sometimes bearers of sad news; in such moments, participants said that they further share this information through their networks, while also using social media to give and receive support. To this extent, social media afford a space for Syrian refugee youth to express and grapple with emotions, all while creating an emotional landscape of exile, trauma and support that stretches across space and place (Thien, 2005). This combined with the fact that some Syrian refugee youth use social media to advocate about the situation in their country appear to give these youth a sense of agency and of being able to contribute to advancing the well-being of their people.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS LEARNING PLATFORMS

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

A significant finding of the study is that participating Syrian refugee youth, both men and women, showed a critical attitude towards the use of social media, discussing their advantages as well as limitations. On the positive side, participants shared a number of ways that social media served as learning platforms that were useful in their resettlement experiences, for example to learn about Canada, its culture, its geography and its people. Furthermore, social media proved a useful tool to help learn the language – both English and French. A number of participants also mentioned that they turn to social media to access information about education, including postsecondary institutions and various types of training. This information was important because many were planning their professional development and job prospects, taking into consideration any formerly acquired education, their career aspirations and family responsibilities. Existing research shows that ICTs create economic opportunities for refugees (Robinson, 2016). A few participants in this study also talked about economic opportunities that ICTs afford, such as online businesses and the use of social media to promote small entrepreneurship (e.g., catering services, etc.).

Nevertheless, participants delved into a number of negative aspects relating to social media use. Many recognized that using social media can be addictive and time consuming and both Syrian refugee young men and women were wary of the time it may take away from their studies, and even sleep. This finding is consistent with social media addiction research (Griffiths, 2013; Griffiths, Kuss, and Memetrovics, 2014). Further, participants seemed generally aware of various risks associated with ICT use. Specifically, Syrian refugee young women spoke about online trust issues and of being selective in how they use the Internet and social media in order to avoid false information. Participating Syrian refugee young men focused on a different type of online danger; they were especially concerned with Internet privacy and security issues such as identity and personal information theft and other forms of cyber misbehavior. Thus ultimately, participants demonstrated agency in how and why they use social media, usually turning to them with a well-defined purpose, and awareness of needing to be informed on safe online practices and behaviours.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this article was to shed light on the daily use of social media among young Syrian refugee men and women. Although limited in scope, collectively, the findings reveal multiple functions of social media in refugee resettlement processes, from meeting various settlement related information needs, sustaining communication across borders and fostering new connections in place, to serving as learning tools. The findings also allude to distinct gendered practices in social media use among Syrian refugee youth for resettlement and integration purposes.

While many participants mentioned that social media have become an important part of their life, some underscored the negative consequences brought upon by heavy use of social media. Female participants in particular talked about the negative effects of social media more than male participants. By and large, participants demonstrated understanding of the risks associated with using social media. Nonetheless, female participants were vocal about online source credibility, while male participants were alarmed about Internet privacy and security issues. In other instances, female participants discussed using social media more to gain information, to pursue educational opportunities, and connect with family and friends, whereas male participants talked about using social media mostly for entertainment purposes and connecting with family and friends. Notwithstanding these gendered practices, both Syrian refugee young men and women appear to be social media multitaskers and thus if "used effectively," can help to bridge "cultural, gender and educational gaps" (O'mara and Harris, 2016, p. 639).

It is important to note that during the focus group discussions

with the Syrian refugee young men and women, no indication of social media's role in hindering integration was documented. This could be due to the fact the participants were recent arrivees and their use of social media is shaped by their experience with conflict back in Syria and forced displacement, and as such is different from and unique when compared to other types of migrants who might use such media to hold on to the culture and place of origin.

Considering the recent influx of Syrian refugee youth in Canada, empirically founded understanding of how social media are reshaping the everyday life of young Syrian refugee men and women can fill gaps in existing refugee resettlement and integration strategies. The nuanced gendered practices in social media use among Syrian refugee youth as evidenced in this article can help inform service organizations, government, and other relevant stakeholders to target and tailor their refugee resettlement and integration efforts.

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