The Ambivalent Potentials of Social Media Use by Unaccompanied Minor Refugees

Nadia Kutscher[1] and Lisa-Marie Kreß[2]

Abstract

In 2015, an unprecedented number of unaccompanied minor refugees came to Europe. To verify reports in mass media as well as professionals' and volunteers' impressions regarding the importance of digital media, this empirical study was conducted in the summer of 2015 in cooperation with the "Children's Charity of Germany" (Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk e.V.). The study focused on the question of how unaccompanied minor refugees use digital (social and mobile) media in the context of their forced migration to Germany. It explored how they use these media to stay in contact with family and friends in their country of origin and beyond, to establish new relationships, to orientate themselves in the receiving country, and to search for (professional) support. Thus, the role of digital media in maintaining transnational social networks and enabling participation in a receiving society is investigated. This article presents key findings and their theoretical implications as well as a methodological and ethical reflection on this research.

Keywords

forced migration, minor refugees, digital media, transnational social networks, social work

Introduction

In 2015, an unprecedented number of unaccompanied minor refugees came to Europe. To verify reports in the media as well as professionals' and volunteers' impressions regarding the importance of digital media, this empirical study was conducted in the summer of 2015 in cooperation with the "Children's Charity of Germany" (Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk). The study focused on the question of how unaccompanied minor refugees use digital media in the context of their forced migration to Germany. Empirical findings concerning the use of digital media by refugees are available primarily with respect to adults. Some existing studies focus on young people's coping with migration, but even in an international context, knowledge about young people's digital media usage while coping with forced migration was a desideratum for research, especially in the context of discourses on digitalized societies (Castells, 2007). The research we present here explores how young refugees use digital (social and mobile) media to stay in contact with family and friends in their country of origin and beyond, to establish new relationships, to orientate themselves in the receiving country, and to search for (professional) support. Thus, the role of digital media in maintaining transnational social networks and enabling participation in a receiving society is investigated. This article presents key findings and their theoretical implications as well as a methodological and ethical reflection on this research.

Research on Social Media and Minor Refugees

Literature Review

Due to global digitalization and migration, the function of digital media in the context of forced migration and its implications for young refugees' ability to cope with that migration comes into focus. Recent research refers to migrants being both "uprooted and connected" (Leurs, 2014, p. 89).

Central findings in this context focus on (a) the "affective dimensions" (Leurs, 2014), (b) the coping strategies and opportunities connected with digital media usage, as well as

[1]University of Vechta, Germany
[2]Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Nadia Kutscher, University of Vechta, Driverstrasse 22, D-49377 Vechta, Germany.
Email: nadia.kutscher@uni-koeln.de

(c) the limitations and (d) the conditions of young refugees in the receiving country (in this study, Germany). Aspects of the *affective importance* of the use of digital media focus mainly on being or getting in contact with family and friends as a vital need to share information on well-being and whereabouts (Charmarkeh, 2013; Leung, Emrys, & Lamp, 2009). Koen Leurs (2014) points on the basis of his empirical study to the relevance of "transnational affective capital" (p. 89) as a resource that can be mediated by media connectivity.

Coping strategies connected with forced migration often involve digital media, as the use of the Internet is important in receiving news from all over the world. Thus, the need to cope with the geographical distance from the family and "ambiguous loss" (Luster, Qin, Bates, Johnson, & Rana, 2009) represents a basic challenge for many of the young refugees. This latter issue marks the separation from relatives in the context of forced migration that, due to a lack of information, often leads to ambiguity regarding the whereabouts of relatives, whether they are still alive, and whether there will be a chance to see them again. This demands an ability to cope with insecurity, challenges in terms of orientation and information, and corresponding strategies of compensation.

Digital media can also be helpful in learning a new language. An Australian study focusing on the question of integration and participation (Alam & Imran, 2015) reveals that the participants of this study stress the urgent need for Internet connections to gain participatory options in the context of communication, information sharing, interaction, and integration in the host country. Overall, the researchers note that the availability of digital media offers basic functions for integration and participation. An ethnographical study with refugees from Somalia living in France (Charmarkeh, 2013) presents similar findings. Moreover, that study identifies some refugees using video platforms such as YouTube to watch movies, theater plays, and so on from their country of origin in their own language. These platforms are also used to acquire the host country's language and to bridge the gap between the refugees' culture of origin and that of the receiving country. Another ethnographical study conducted in Germany shows how "virtual practices enable people who are forcibly displaced to position themselves legally, socioculturally and politically" (Witteborn, 2015, p. 355). The importance of sharing technology is noted by results from a forthcoming study of Syrian refugees in Turkey (Smets, 2017). In Germany, Emmer, Richter, and Kunst (2016) carried out a study in which 404 standardized interviews were conducted with mostly adult refugees regarding their use of digital media. This study reveals the importance of interpersonal communication among refugees for orientation both during a forced migration and in the receiving country (p. 51).

The *limitations* of using of digital media for communication and orientation when migrating are centered on the lack or destruction of infrastructure in the refugees' countries of origin, which impedes communication. Moreover, the monetary situation of refugees in Europe as well as their families' resources in their home countries influence the communication possibilities. For example, Leung et al. report that some refugees own a SIM card but have to share a mobile phone. Newly arrived refugees report that they initially had difficulties in obtaining access to the Internet because of limited linguistic competences, their financial situation, and a lack of media competence (Alam & Imran, 2015).

A recent study by Gillespie et al. (2016) focusing refugees' smartphone and social media network usage broaches the issue that aside from the positive aspects of social media use, the "digital traces that refugees' phones leave behind make them vulnerable to surveillance and other dangers" (p. 2).

The *conditions of young refugees* are shaped by particular aspects, such as different reasons for migration (war, political crises, natural disasters, poverty, etc.; Parusel, 2009, p. 19f.) and heterogeneous resources (Echavez, Bagaporo, Pilongo, & Azadmanesh, 2014, p. 30). Opposing poles between vulnerabilities and competences include early experiences of self-responsibility, expectations of the family in terms of financial support (or repaying the money needed to finance the migration process), and a special need for protection (Bundesfachverband, 2008; UN CRC, 1989, p. 3f.). In Germany, the state declares itself responsible for unaccompanied minor refugees and takes them into child welfare institutions under the custody of social work professionals. In many countries, young refugees are often denied even basic rights such as family reunification or freedom of movement (Hart, 2014, p. 384). As soon as they attain the age of majority, their situation becomes precarious in terms of the right to residence, which places substantial stress on the question of being a minor and dealing with age verification. The experience of forced migration at a young age causes young refugees serious psychic and physical strain. This shared experience has different consequences according to the different socioeconomic resources, ages, specific cultural backgrounds, and the different methods and conditions of the forced migration. At the same time, strong discursive contexts focus on refugees in general as well as minor refugees in particular. Attributions such as specific competences or vulnerabilities derived from a certain picture connected to the experience of forced migration and the need to cope with that journey represent a highly discursive field which poses the challenge to critically reflect such imaginations and ascriptions (see also Eisenhuth, 2015, p. 23ff.; Hemmerling, 2002, p. 14ff.; Kleist, 2015, p. 158f.). In the context of minor refugees, "othering" (Cole, 2004) connects images of cultural difference and "foreignness" with images of vulnerability. Young refugees who are able to weaken this picture by showing a strong drive to integrate into the receiving society by subjecting themselves to its norms arouse positive images of "the stranger being able to integrate." Beneath that, the disenthralling "real" images of young refugees that do not fit with these assumptions seem to lead to pictures of young refugees as threats to the public

order (Pew Research Center, 2017). This leads to the conclusion that young refugees are confronted with thoroughly ambivalent challenges in a situation where their identity development experiences a precarious contextualization, especially in societies where right-wing political movements are on the rise.

The literature review reveals that only a few studies focus on the media use of (unaccompanied minor) refugees, especially in relation to transnational communication and the role of digital media. Overall, the empirical research in this area is limited, particularly with respect to the focus on underage refugees who are leaving their country of origin without their family.

Research Context and Reflections

Method and Sample

The empirical study "The Internet is the same as food" (Kutscher & Kreß, 2015) focused on the question of how unaccompanied minor refugees use digital media in the context of their forced migration. The title of the study is a quote from an interview. This statement expresses the essential importance of digital media; media use is regarded as equal to basic life requirements. Interestingly, a study of Gillespie et al. (2016) one year later presents an even more dramatic but rather similar statement: "many say that the smartphone is 'more important than food or shelter'" (p. 11).

Basic considerations were made regarding the design of the empirical study to address the current life situation of young refugees and possible language barriers. The target group of this study has had to endure different experiences on the way to Europe, an insecure future in Germany, changing places of residence, and questions of whom to trust. Challenges in the orientation process shape the time of their initial arrival in Germany. Language barriers have to be bridged. Thus, the recruitment of participants posed a challenge. Ethical issues such as how to deal with traumatic experiences and more generally how to address sensitive issues had to be considered. Additionally, experience-related mistrust on the potential interviewees' side had to be addressed. Although social work professionals overwhelmingly supported the study, the young refugees remained skeptical in the beginning. In this context, the researchers developed a detailed information sheet and visited refugee institutions for some time before beginning the research. Thus, the young people were able to get to know the researcher and establish a trust-based relationship, which allowed them to make an informed decision regarding whether to participate (for these challenges, see also, for example, Hopkins, 2008). This approach took more time than planned, but it was vital for a participation-oriented relation in the research; ultimately, more young refugees wanted to participate than we could interview. It took about three months to successfully cultivate contacts and start the interviews. For their participation, the interviewees received prepaid credit vouchers for their smartphones. In the study, we offered to allow the participants to decide which language they would prefer to use for the interview. The interviews were conducted in German and English with the support of interpreters in the youth welfare institutions. The language issue presented special challenges that will be addressed in the next section of this article.

The investigation was carried out in the form of 17 semi-structured interviews focusing on the living situations of young refugees, their media experiences in their country of origin, the software and hardware used during their flight and in the receiving country, the problems in the context of media use, the functions of digital media, and their social relations. To obtain not only narratives but also insights into practices and forms of media use, the youths were invited to show their Facebook profile or smartphone. The first results were introduced in a communicative validation in a focus group with five unaccompanied refugees. The group of 20 participants was aged 15–19 years and came from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Iraq, Kosovo, Pakistan, Senegal, Somalia, and Uzbekistan. They were living in different youth welfare institutions in three different Bundesländer (federal states) in Germany. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the qualitative content analysis method (Mayring, 2000). The explanations of the participants when showing their Facebook profiles were included in the transcripts and supported by memos on the profiles shown. The apps shown on the smartphone were examined through a focused artifact analysis (Froschauer, 2009), which will be deepened in further research.

Ethical and Methodological Reflection on Research with Refugees

The amount of empirical research in the context of forced migration is rising steeply. As this kind of research is positioned in a highly political field, many research projects are funded under the demand to present results very quickly, allowing them to be used for political interventions. These political conditions influence research, and the impact of political utilization interests as well as time pressure has to be critically considered. Refugee research is expected to be ethical and should—as a demand is formulated in forced migration research—contribute to a better life for the people who are taking part in that research (Kleist, 2015, p. 164). Ethical research means "that the rights and interests of subjects must be primary" (Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei, 2011, p. 1271).

There are some specific ethical and methodological challenges in refugee research. Unaccompanied minor refugees are a vulnerable group based on their hazardous experiences during the migration process, the challenges of living without family members nearby, having to change living areas and peers, and being confronted with a mostly

insecure future (Hopkins, 2008). However, these refugees are not a homogeneous group, as they all have different desires and needs, capabilities, and perspectives. Moreover, the agency of many of them is also based on the available resources. Here, research has to reflect how it subjectifies the young refugees as objects of research or as subjects able to express themselves and to take an active role in research.

The ethical and methodological reflection on this study focuses on three areas: field access, the relationship between researchers and participants, and the commitment of interpreters.

Existing studies have shown that the access to the field via gatekeepers is vital (Charmarkeh, 2013). Gatekeepers could be volunteers, social workers, and so on, who work with refugees and can establish a connection between the researchers and potential participants. In the first step of gaining access to the field in this study, the gatekeepers were contacted to get in touch with young refugees. This provided an important basis, as initially, the young refugees were mostly guarded since they could not classify the research project and were afraid of giving away information that could be dangerous to other refugees. Gatekeepers, as trusted people, were asked to address these uncertainties. This approach also poses critical questions, as Bray, Liebenberg, and Zinck (2014) indicate,

> Demanding that a gatekeeper consent on behalf of a young person could have the implication of reducing their ownership or voice within the research, as well as [. . .] working to exclude youth who do not have ready access to a gatekeeper from research. (p. 46)

For this reason, the next step in this study was to create a connection with the young refugees that was not framed by excluding some of them and thus reducing their voice. To accomplish this, information sheets in different languages were given to the young refugees. Even more important was the development of personal contacts between the researchers and the potential participants beforehand in informal contexts such as group evenings in the institutions. Therefore, the relationship between researchers and participants could be uncoupled from the relationship with the gatekeepers. The overall challenge here is to develop trust in an environment of mistrust (Krause, 2016, p. 9).

The relationship between researchers and participants is important for the whole research process and already starts developing during the first contact. Thus, the presence of researchers in the field to build trusting relationships with the young refugees in advance of the research itself is necessary. However, building a trusting connection with the aim of collecting data could also be criticized (Hopkins, 2008). As there are asymmetries in the power between researchers and research participants, it seems important to clarify who is talking to whom and in what context: "Ethical reflexivity is arguably essential when researchers and research participants have disparate lifeworlds" (Block, Warr, Gibbs, & Riggs, 2012, p. 71). The unequal structural distribution of power is linked to ethnic belonging, access to law and privileges, knowledge of languages, and so on (Block et al., 2012). When asking the participants to reveal their Facebook profiles or smartphones, we clearly explained they should feel free to refuse if they preferred not to do that and that this would not have any negative consequences. Although explicitly noting that we were aware that the power framework could, nevertheless, make it hard to say no, as it turned out, some of the young people showed us their profiles and some chose not to.

Moreover, we assumed that gender would play a role in the research process, as working as a female researcher has to be considered given that the field research is dominated by male unaccompanied minor refugees. In our actual field situation, we had the impression that this issue was less relevant for the participants than the basic structure of both the representatives of the receiving society and the research with which refugees interacted. Nevertheless, we reflected on the interview situation and very closely regarded this issue and whether it shaped the answers we received in any way. Although it seemed that this issue had no special influence on our interviews, we would recommend that future research address this explicitly with the participants and gatekeepers in advance. Hence, the research methodology has to reflect the subjectification of young refugees and their opportunities to express themselves.

The use of interpreters in the interviews or focus groups is another contradictory issue. Language barriers influence the research process (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). In our study, interpreters were appointed to translate during interviews with a number of young refugees who could not speak German or English. The interpreters were chosen by the social work institutions on the basis of previous cooperative experiences. The researchers accepted this but were aware that they could not control previous personal relationships and that could derive from possible interpretations on the interpreters' side that could be meant to be helpful for the process. Thus, the sample of interpreters was not preselected based on language skills, and the participants had the chance to decide in which language they wanted to engage in the research. However, the use of interpreters raised other methodological problems. The interpreters received an information sheet from the research team in which they were informed of the importance of translating closely and without further adding information or explanations as much as possible. This turned out to be partly successful, but nevertheless, the researchers could not control shifts of content or emphasis that were part of the translation process. Therefore, to address inaccuracies in the data quality, these interviews were interpreted very carefully.

Transnational Contexts and Participation Challenges of Young Refugees' Digital Media Use: Digital Media as a Basic Necessity

The results show that the use of digital media and especially social media is placed on par with basic requirements such as food and is regarded as indispensable during the precarious journey to Europe and for everyday life in Germany. Digital connectivity plays an important role in the lives of unaccompanied minor refugees coping with forced migration. To gain connectivity with family and friends who live in different parts of the world, social media services such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, and Skype are essential for young people in insecure situations characterized by different migration experiences and challenges, an uncertain legal situation, changing institutions of social services and professional caretakers, and changes in peers.

Digitalized practices in the context of social media range from bonding with people emotionally close but geographically far away to bridging into the receiving society. At the same time, the twofold position of being a refugee and a young person can be reconstructed in the ambivalent practices and narratives of the young refugees. The question of digital children's rights is also raised in the context of commercial service providers, which are marked by poor data protection. Moreover, beneath their communicative function, Facebook profile arrangements, postings, pictures, and quotes of the young refugees show the dimension of identity representation. This is connected with expressing feelings of longing for relatives as well as "symbolic acculturation" in the sense of demonstrating one's successful integration into the receiving society. In general, the findings show the vulnerability as well as the competences of young refugees when coping with using digital media and the contingencies and limitations of digital media in bridging distances in a transnational context.

The implications for theoretical reflections based on the empirical findings can be systematized in three central dimensions in the context of digitalization and forced migration. The media-related practices of the young refugees serve to produce and maintain *transnational social networks* with their family and peers. Beneath that, inequality issues arise when reflecting on the *chances and limitations* digital media present for coping with forced migration. In this context, we suggest a systematic theory-based analysis focusing on the *capabilities' approach* to reflect how the refugees' media usage exposes actual chances of allowing refugees' participation in a receiving society.

Transnational Networks Produced via Digital Media and Their Use for Young Refugees

The idea that the relationships between migrants and refugees and their country of origin become less important has been disproved by research on transnationalism (Herz, 2010, p. 41). Maintaining contact with family and friends is ultimately very important, especially for unaccompanied minor refugees, "I miss my parents, my siblings, then sometimes my whole family wants to Skype with me. And, my sister and my brother and my dad, my mum, we are talking about how are you and what's going on."

> The concept of transnational spaces covers diverse phenomena such as transnational small groups, transnational circuits and transnational communities. Each of these is characterized by a primary mechanism of integration: reciprocity in small groups, exchange in circuits and solidarity in communities. (Faist, 2000, p. 191)

Unaccompanied minor refugees develop transnational lifeworlds, which are supported by the use of digital media. They exchange information about well-being, actual status, and so on in private conversations via different messaging apps. Moreover, during their passage, transnational circuits and communities are important for sharing specific information via Twitter or Facebook groups about migration-relevant issues such as closed borders, prices for traffickers' services, and so on. These transnational spaces offer young refugees different types of support in diverse circumstances. Above all, the contact between young refugees and their family and friends is most important. Through social media (WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, Skype, etc.), it is possible to communicate across national borders, and the communication is not linked to territorial spaces and times. These connections are important for exchanging news, information, and ideas and receiving emotional support. Sometimes, these networks are even used to exchange goods or money (Schiller, 2014, p. 156).

The following post of a participant represents an example of emotional support in the context of bonding social capital (Utz & Muscanell, 2015, p. 420). The participant showed one of his Facebook postings during an interview: "What do you miss when you are separated from your parents? The maternal warmth, the conversation with your mother, her cooking and her love." For these sentences, he received substantial validation through likes and comments from his Facebook friends.

The interviews and the group discussion with young refugees have revealed different practices of "connected presence" (Robertson, Wilding, Gifford, 2016, p. 223) via social media. According to Robertson et al. (2016), families "dispersed by forced migration" realize a kind of "sustaining a sense of being together." The use of Facebook plays an especially important role, as examples from our study show that families of young refugees are sharing things such as family pictures via Facebook and communicating through likes or comments. For example, one of the participants showed a photo from his nephew who he had never met face to face but got to "know" via the Facebook communication. This can be described as a kind of "doing family" via social media in the sense that

family is something that is being worked on (Jurczyk, Lange, & Thiessen, 2010) and produced during interactions via digital media. However, contact with family and friends is not always possible. One of the participants of the study expressed his experiences in the following sentences:

> Believe me that I'm always thinking about my own family, but especially I miss my brother and sister, but, er, I don't know what to do. I don't have contact, but I'm, I have been searching for my friends, the two were with me and who were with me in school, but still I didn't find them on Facebook or on Yahoo, like, but in especially in Facebook. I didn't find them yet and because there [. . .] the main reason that in our village the Internet doesn't work that's why [. . .] don't want to use and don't know exactly what is Facebook and how to use it and now we are here [. . .] and I'm safe, but I'm thinking about my brother and sister.

Transnational social networks offer informal support structures through methods such as organizing the procurement of a smartphone via Facebook contacts or disseminating information on escape routes. Moreover, transnationalism is a relevant socialization dynamic that simultaneously includes new forms of diversity in social life in one place and across different places. It also includes new forms of social cohesion beyond local fragmentation (Pries, 2013, p. 891).

Digital Inequality and Other Challenges

Young people's media usage varies not only between the respective countries of origin but also within a country. Some participants had numerous media experiences and others did not. Existing media experiences were relevant in terms of further methods and capabilities of using that media. On the way to Europe, digital media are being used to communicate with friends and family, to exchange information, and to call for help during emergencies. These crises could include being in distress at sea on a refugee boat in the Mediterranean. Using a smartphone provides the contact basis for getting in touch with human traffickers. Navigation apps are used for spatial orientation. Although the smartphone is a vital tool for managing challenges during migration, it is often no longer available due to robbery, imprisonment, and other issues.

After arriving in Germany, digital media obtain a different everyday significance. The mobile smartphone is central, as communication and contact with family and friends represent a top priority for young people. Some of the interviewees report desperate attempts to get in touch with faraway family, but this often remains unsuccessful, as social networks, Internet, or telephone are not always available in the countries of origin or for the family along their journey.

Interviewee:	Interviewee: Maybe one day I will find my family. family, mother and brothers family find them.

Interviewer:	Interviewer: And do you think also of finding them via f-
Interviewee:	Yes, I search (all day).
Interviewer:	So you think maybe they um also get a Facebook account and one day you will find them-
Interviewee:	Yes, I will get one day, my family. That's why I opened Facebook. (Lm 255-266)

Contact with family often turns out to be difficult or produces frightening information that needs to be addressed:

Interviewee:	Like um to . . . my only important t- to use Facebook to get my family, only thing. That's why I'm using my . . . (Is) um my picture is on my picture (in the) Facebook, but uh if they see on my picture they know me th- I put my picture on the Facebook. good things, 'cause I see my friends in Facebook.
Interviewer:	Friends, um, all over the world or,
Interviewee:	No, friends in Ethiopia, I see them on Facebook. And, I talk to them. Mh . . . some (and, and) some my friends tell me they uh police uh people arrested my uncle and my mother sleeps at home and she don't, she, no one knows where she is, and the childrens is alone there. I have uh (eight) brothers and sisters in uh in Land, 6 five brothers and three girls. (Lm 313-329)

For young people who had no mobile phone until then or lost it on their way to Europe, acquiring one is important in order to establish a communication and information base to try contacting family and peers. Some young people manage to acquire smartphones from relatives living in Germany or in their country of origin, but it is quite common to have to purchase a smartphone oneself, which often consumes all saved pocket money. Different media experiences also have an effect on the ability of young people to address supposedly self-evident services. For example, not every interviewee was able to create a Facebook account, although it is regarded as vital by all of the interviewees as a basic means of contact with lost relatives and friends over long distances:

Interviewer:	So um, if you have the chance to go on the internet, like, we have now here a laptop with internet; what would be the first thing you do on the internet?
Interviewee:	I want to open Facebook account.
Interviewer:	Ok, (.) ok. Do you now, do you know how to do it?
Interviewee:	No.

Interviewer:	No, ok. So you need support to, um, get a Facebook account. Ok. Do you have an email address?
Interviewee:	Yes.
Interviewer:	Ok, do you use your email account or-
Interviewee:	No.
Interviewer:	No, ok. So but, if you want to have a Facebook account, you need an email account.
Interviewee:	account, yes
Interviewer:	But, you have already seen or already see how Facebook works or, or you have an idea,
Interviewee:	No.
Interviewer:	No. But, you heard everyone is using Faceb-
Interviewee:	Yes.
Interviewer:	Yes. And, then you decided: I also need Facebook?
Interviewee:	Yes. (Im 258-280)

In many youth welfare institutions, computers are available, but often restrictions in using digital media exist. In several institutions, young refugees have to share one computer among six people, and there is a time limit of a few hours each day. Restrictive media policies and the fact that buying a smartphone or a prepaid card is generally not funded by youth welfare seem contradictory when taking considering that—as the interviews show—professionals in youth welfare tend to use messaging apps such as WhatsApp for communicating with young refugees quite often:

> Right, he [the social worker] can send us pictures. For example, [interviewee], today there will be a party there . . . he sends me pictures; I don't know, there is the address or something . . . appointments . . . there you have an appointment at the dentist's. He makes a picture, or I have to when I buy a bus ticket. I have to take a picture and then send it to the youth welfare office; this is the proof that I bought the ticket with my money and then WhatsApp helps because I take picture and send it to [the social worker]. (Group discussion 728-735)

The results present relevant answers to the question of how far social media can support the refugees' chances of participation in the receiving society. Research on the "Digital Divide" shows that the availability of cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) shapes the ways in which digital media is used (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; Kutscher & Otto, 2014). This is also mirrored in the refugees' statements. According to their socioeconomic situation in their country of origin and their cultural and economic capital, their experiences and strategies in dealing with digital media differ. On the way to Europe, cultural and social capital becomes central next to economic resources. Depending on refugees' relations during the migration process, mobile phones are only available through peers in prisons, on boats and in other situations in which a mobile device is borrowed and the refugee uses their own SIM card to write messages or call the family or traffickers. Depending on the country of origin, there are a number of analphabets among the refugees, which narrows their chances of making use of social media. One of the interviewees reported that he could watch films and pictures but could not conduct searches via the Internet and could not fill in his own social media account (set up by a refugee friend to help him) or write messages. To compensate, he used s strategies such as recording verbal messages and sending them via the smartphone, but as soon as there was a written message, he relied on others who could read the message to him. These findings point to the relevance of different ways of accessing information and the need for alphabetization as a basic support function. Cultural capital in terms of knowledge of differentiated technology leads to strategies to save data independently from the mobile device in a cloud to ensure that the loss of a mobile phone need not mean the loss of contact data, pictures of the family, and so on. IT knowledge also helps in addressing Facebook account locks when crossing the borders of several countries. One interview participant explained that he created several Facebook accounts to use after crossing borders, as he knew that Facebook accounts became locked (as several of the interview participants reported) when the algorithms conclude that there is an unusual login to the account. Other interviewees had the problem that they could not reactivate their account after being locked out from Facebook.

Discussion

Regarding the extent of participation in the receiving society, the quality of social capital has a high relevance. Depending on the relationships available to young refugees, bridging, bonding, and linking social capital could enable the reproduction (bonding), the expansion (bridging), or the access to new resources (linking) relevant to the factual realization of participation (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). In the context of close informal relationships, *bonding and bridging social capital* lead to the reproduction of privileges as well as disadvantages, as close relations with persons with similar resources and in an increased radius with persons on a similar resource level provide access to a limited range of resources, such as information, access to institutions, and so on. Depending on the respective relationships that are formed in the context of social media use (and in addition to the face-to-face context), these relationships can provide a function in terms of increasing or narrowing options for participation in the receiving society. Through institutionalized relations such as contact with social workers, volunteers, and other stakeholders in support services, *linking social capital* can become available via "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1983) and open access to widened resources, such as information, support, and so on. Thus, it becomes relevant to understand the

everyday contexts and practices as well as the institutional, legal, and social frameworks in which refugees' social media practices are embedded (Kutscher, 2017).

Another participation-related issue is the question of digital children's rights, which refers to the realization of children's rights in the context of digital media use. Regarding young refugees, the question becomes relevant first in terms of which rights in the sense of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are being violated when they use social networks that provide a basic logic that makes the refugee minor recognizable, and users' data becomes fully transparent for the providers while the providers offer very limited transparency regarding the further use of data in the context of metadata aggregation. Here, the autonomy rights of the young persons (as well as of adults, but minors in particular have a right to be protected) are affected according to provisions such as Article 16 UN CRC ("No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, or correspondence") and Article 32 UN CRC ("States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation"—here, exploitation can be understood as data mining). Second, there are doubts as to whether the right to media education is fulfilled as a basic means for participation in a digitalized society when young refugees receive no professional or pedagogical support in dealing with digital media.

In general, the subjective capabilities (Nussbaum, 1999; Robeyns, 2006; Sen, 2000) and the resources of the refugees as well as the structural situation in institutions and the context of the receiving society are clearly relevant for expressing the realization of refugees' rights in the digitalized society.

The chances of young refugees participating in a digitalized society depend on the availability of resources such as hardware, software, and Internet access. Further aspects then become relevant such as (a) the existence of one's own media experiences and competences (according to the socioeconomic background as mentioned above as well as the infrastructure in the home country and on the way to Europe) and linguistic capabilities, (b) the availability of social capital such as relationships providing access and support regarding media use and other needs in everyday life, and (c) the existence of legal rights to receive support from institutions and professionals who are skilled not only in working with refugees but who also have knowledge about social media and infrastructure at hand and who are able to understand the needs of refugees and enable the perspectives of agencies according to these needs and necessities (e.g., searching for the family and communicating, finding information about asylum procedures, orientation in the receiving society, pursuing hobbies, etc.). Only in this context can social and mobile media expand capabilities to realize social media use under sufficiently free conditions in order to foster relationships, inform themselves, and so on. Then, social media can play a role in the realization of young refugees' participation in society and pave the way for the acquisition of a new language, access to education, and the establishment of relationships with family and friends abroad and in the receiving country.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that social media play a vital role in connectivity in refugees' transnational networks between the countries of origin and the receiving society. However, the availability of cultural, social, and economic capital as well as public infrastructure such as Internet access, hardware, and professional assistance in youth welfare institutions form opportunities and literacies in the context of digital media usage on the refugees' side as well as on their families' and peers' sides. Subjective capabilities and structural conditions together frame the set of capabilities available to the young refugees. Chances are unequally distributed and cannot be attributed only to individuals. In this context, participation in society and education requires "Bildung" which emphasizes self-formation (Sorkin, 1983) as "the inner cultivation of the self which is both a 'formative' process and a 'transformative' occurrence" (Bauer, 2003, p. 133). It is closely linked to the ideas of "self-dignity and the right of self-determination" (Bauer, 2003, p. 134).

The results of this empirical work offer indications for further research that point to the necessity of interdisciplinary and multidimensional perspectives. The dimensions of digital inequality and the differentiation of social media users' practices in the context of forced migration need to receive more attention, greater differentiation, and deeper empirical approaches (such as ethnographic) in order to gain insights into the different conditions and practices that form the chances and limitations deriving from social media use. Artifact analyses as well as practice-oriented methods such as ethnography (following the actor) focus on the interplay between technology and human actors to provide detailed insights into the media-related processes of appropriation and integration on a microlevel. Research on the well-being of young people and their vulnerabilities often does not include sufficiently digital technologies, that is, social media and their meaning for the life situation of children and youth. In the context of social media research as well as research on forced migration, the interplay between public infrastructure, legal framework, children's rights, individual resources, and their implications for refugees' chances of participation in a receiving society is connected with social media. The analysis of and their logics and potentialities, as enabling and limiting artifacts, have to be included in research designs since the digitalization not only of national societies but also of forced migration produces new relations between those. Finally, social work research focusing on social services in the context of refugee support also has to reflect the relevance of social media in its ambivalence for practice as well as for disciplinary perspectives.

In all these contexts, ethical and methodological challenges of research with participants in precarious life situations and the framework of power relations that are also mirrored in the encounter of researchers and refugees challenge researchers to reflect even more on the reproduction of inequality in different dimensions.

Authors' Note

Nadia Kutscher is now affiliated to Department Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Alam, K., & Imran, S. (2015). The digital divide and social inclusion among refugee migrants: A case in regional Australia. *Information Technology & People*, *28*, 344–365.

Bauer, W. (2003). Introduction. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *35*, 133–137.

Block, K., Warr, D., Gibbs, L., & Riggs, E. (2012). Addressing ethical and methodological challenges in research with refugee-background young people: Reflections from the field. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *26*, 69–87. Retrieved from http://jrs.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/05/07/jrs.fes002.full.pdf+html

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 15–29). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Bray, J., Liebenberg, L., & Zinck, E. (2014). *Ethics and research with young people in challenging contexts* (CYCC Network, Halifax, NS). Retrieved from http://www.cyccnetwork.org/en/pp/cycc-reports

Bundesfachverband, U. M. F. (2008) *Handlungsleitlinien des Bundesfachverbands UMF zur Inobhutnahme gemäß § 42 SGB VIII (2008)*. [Guidelines of the National Association of Professionals for Unaccompanied Minors' Child Custody in Child Welfare according to § 42 Code of Social Law VIII]. Retrieved from http://www.b-umf.de/images/dokumente/handlungsleitfaden-inobhutnahme.pdf

Castells, M. (2007). *Mobile communication and society: A global perspective*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Charmarkeh, H. (2013). Social media usage, Tahriib (migration), and settlement among Somali refugees in France. *Canada's Journal on Refugees*, *29*, 43–52.

Cole, A. (2004). What Hegel's master/slave dialectic really means. *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, *34*, 577–610.

Echavez, C. R., Bagaporo, J. L. L., Pilongo, L. W., & Azadmanesh, S. (2014). Why do children undertake the unaccompanied journey? Motivations for departure to Europe and other industrialised countries from the perspective of children, families and residents of sending communities in Afghanistan. *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit & United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Kabul*. Retrieved from https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/why-do-children-undertake-unaccompanied-journey-motivations-departure-europe-and-other

Eisenhuth, F., (2015). Strukturelle Diskriminierung von Kindern mit unsicheren Aufenthaltsstatus. Subjekte der Gerechtigkeit Zwischen Fremd- Und Selbstpositionierungen. [Structural Discrimination of Children with Insecure Right to Residence. Subjects of Justice between External and Self-Positioning]. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.

Emmer, M., Richter, C., & Kunst, M. (2016). *Flucht 2.0. Mediennutzung durch Flüchtlinge vor, während und nach der Flucht* [Forced Migration 2.0. Media Use of Refugees Before, During and After Migration.]. Retrieved from http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/kommwiss/arbeitstellen/internationale_kommunikation/Media/Flucht-2_0.pdf

Faist, T. (2000). Transnationalization in international migration: Implications for the study of citizenship and culture. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *23*, 189–222.

Froschauer, U. (2009). Artefaktanalyse [Artifact Analysis]. In S. Kühl, P. Strodtholz, & A. Taffertshofer (Eds.), *Handbuch Methoden Der Organisationsforschung* [Handbook Methods of Organisational Research] (pp. 326–347). Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer-Verlag.

Gillespie, M., Ampofo, L., Cheesman, M., Faith, B., Iliadou, E., Issa, A., . . . Skleparis, D. (2016). *Mapping refugee media journey: Smartphones and social media networks*. Retrieved from https://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/sites/www.open.ac.uk.ccig/files/Mapping%20Refugee%20Media%20Journeys%2016%20May%20FIN%20MG_0.pdf

Granovetter, M. (1983). The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. *Sociological Theory*, *1*, 201–233.

Hargittai, E., & Hsieh, Y. P. (2013). Digital inequality. In W. H. Dutton (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of internet studies* (pp. 129–150). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hart, J. (2014). Children and forced migration. In E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. long & N. Sigona (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of refugee & forced migration studies* (pp. 383–394). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hemmerling, U. (2002) Von der Schwierigkeit mit dem Begriff „Flüchtling" zu operieren. In U. Hemmerling (Ed.), *Verwaltet, entrechtet, abgestempelt- wo bleiben die Menschen? Einblicke in das Leben von Flüchtlingen* [The Difficulties of Talking About "Refugees". In U. Hemmerling (Ed.), Administrated, Disenfranchised, Labeled - Where are the Humans? Insights in the Life of Refugees] (pp. 9–16). Retrieved from http://www.behandeln-statt-verwalten.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdfs/verwaltet-entrechtet-abgestempelt.pdf

Herz, A. (2010). Informelle Unterstützungsstrukturen in Zeiten der Transnationalisierung. Von push-pull und Integration zu transnationaler sozialer Einbindung [Informal Support Structures in Times of Transnationalisation. From push-pull and Integration to transnational social involvement]. *Sozial Extra*, *34*, 41–43.

Hopkins, P. (2008). Ethical issues in research with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. *Children's Geographies*, *6*, 37–48.

Hugman, R., Pittaway, E., & Bartolomei, L. (2011). When "do no harm" is not enough: The ethics of research with refugees and other vulnerable groups. *British Journal of Social Work*, *41*, 1271–1287.

Jacobsen, K., & Landau, L. B. (2003). The dual imperative in refugee research: Some methodological and ethical considerations in social science research on forced migration. *Disasters*, *27*, 185–206.

Jurczyk, K., Lange, A., & Thiessen, B. (Eds.) (2010). *Doing family—Familienalltag heute*. Weinheim, Germany: Juventa.

Kleist, J. O. (2015). Über Flucht forschen: Herausforderungen der Flüchtlingsforschung [Doing Research on Forced Migration: Challenges of Research on Forced Migration.]. *Peripherie*, *35*, 150–169.

Krause, U. (2016). *Ethische Überlegungen zur Feldforschung. Impulse für die Untersuchung konfliktbedingter Flucht* (CSS Working Paper No. 20). Marburg, Germany: Center for Conflict Studies. Retrieved from https://www.uni-marburg.de/konfliktforschung/publikationen/wp20.pdf

Kutscher, N. (2017). Geflüchtete als Zielgruppe medienpädagogischer Arbeit in der digitalisierten Gesellschaft—Erkenntnisse, Potenziale und Herausforderungen [Refugees as Target Group of Media Education in the Digitalized Society – Findings, Potentials and Challenges]. In S. Eder, C. Mikat, & A. Tillmann (Eds.), *Software takes command* (pp. 203–217). München: kopaed.

Kutscher, N., & Kreß, L.-M. (2015). *Internet ist gleich mit Essen. Empirische Studie zur Nutzung digitaler Medien durch unbegleitete minderjährige Flüchtlinge. Projektbericht in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Deutschen Kinderhilfswerk*. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/1OAnwtI

Kutscher, N., & Otto, H.-U. (2014). Digitale Ungleichheit—Implikationen für die Betrachtung medialer Jugendkulturen [Digital Inequality - Implications for the Analysis of Youth Media Cultures. Revised Version. In K.-U. Hugger (ed.), Digital Youth Cultures]. Überarbeitete Fassung. In K.-U. Hugger (Ed.), *Digitale Jugendkulturen* (pp. 283–298). Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.

Leung, L., Emrys, L., & Lamp, C. F. (2009). *Technology's refuge: The use of technology by Asylum seekers and refugees*. Sydney, New South Wales, Australia: UTS Shopfront.

Leurs, K. (2014). The politics of transnational affective capital: Digital connectivity among young Somalis stranded in Ethiopia. *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, *5*, 87–104.

Luster, T., Qin, D., Bates, L., Johnson, D., & Rana, M. (2009). The lost boys of Sudan: Coping with ambiguous loss and separation from parents. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *79*, 203–211.

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, *1*, Article 2. Retrieved from http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1089/2385

Nussbaum, M. (1999). Gerechtigkeit oder das gute Leben. Frankfurt/Main, Germany: Suhrkamp.

Parusel, B. (2009). *Unbegleitete minderjährige Migranten in Deutschland: Aufnahme, Rückkehr, Integration* (Working Paper 26 der Forschungsgruppe des Bundesamtes) Unaccompanied Minor Migrants in Germany: Reception, Return, Integration (Working Paper 26 of the Research Group of the Federal Department of Migration and Refugees)]. Nürnberg, Germany: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge.

Pew Research Center. (2017). *The world facing trump: Public sees ISIS, cyber attacks, north Korea as top threats*. Retrieved from http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/01/12134513/01-12-17-FP-release.pdf

Pries, L. (2013). Transnationalisierung. In S. Mau & N. M. Schöneck (Eds.), *Handwörterbuch zur Gesellschaft Deutschlands* (pp. 881–849). Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer Fachmedien.

Robertson, Z., Wilding, R., & Gifford, S. (2016). Mediating the family imaginary: Young people negotiating absence in transnational refugee families. *Global Networks*, *16*, 219–236.

Robeyns, I. (2006). The capability approach in practice. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *14*, 351–376.

Schiller, GN. (2014). Das transnationale Migrationsparadigma: Globale Perspektiven auf die Migrationsforschung [The Transnational Migration Paradigm: Global Perspectives on Migration Research. In B. Nieswand & H. Drotbohm (Eds.), Culture, Society, Migration: The Reflective Turn in Migration Research]. In B. Nieswand & H. Drotbohm (Eds.), *Kultur, Gesellschaft, Migration: Die reflexive Wende in der Migrationsforschung*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer VS.

Sen, A. (2000). *Ökonomie für den Menschen: Wege Zu Gerechtigkeit Und Solidarität in Der Marktwirtschaft*. München, Germany: Wien.

Smets, K. (2017). The way Syrian refugees in Turkey use media: Understanding "connected refugees" through a non-media-centric and local approach. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, *43*, 113–123.

Sorkin, D. (1983). Wilhelm Von Humboldt: The theory and practice of self-formation (Bildung), 1791-1810. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *44*, 55–73.

Szreter, S., & Woolcock, M. (2004). Health by association? Social capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, *33*, 650–667.

UN CRC. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Retrieved from http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx

Utz, S., & Muscanell, N. (2015). Social media and social capital: introduction to the special issue. *Societies*, *5*, 420–424.

Witteborn, S. (2015). Becoming (Im)perceptible: Forced migrants and virtual practice. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *28*, 350–367.

Author Biographies

Nadia Kutscher (PhD, University of Cologne, Germany), is professor of Youth Welfare and Social Work and Ethics at the University of Cologne (Germany). Her research interests include youth welfare research, digital media in social work, education and inequality, and normative aspects of social work.

Lisa-Marie Kreß (MA, Cooperative State University Stuttgart, Germany), is a PhD student at the University of Vechta and works at the Cooperative State University Stuttgart (Germany). Her research interests are transnational networks of young refugees and digital media.