How Refugees in South Africa Use Mobile Phones for Social Connectedness

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ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT— Refugees struggle to integrate into a host country due to a myriad of challenges. Mobile phones have become one of the main tools which refugees may use to promote their wellbeing and to support their integration into refugee communities. The main objective of this study was to examine how the use of mobile phones by refugees in South Africa contributes to their social connectedness. This research employed a qualitative method and an interpretivist epistemological perspective. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp group chats, and analysed using thematic analysis. The interviewees comprised 27 refugees and the WhatsApp group had 15 members. The findings demonstrate that the refugees face a multitude of obstacles; these included language and culture barriers, the challenge of obtaining legal status, physical separation from their friends and family, and feelings of being judged, insecure, and excluded. Mobile phone usage offers refugees several benefits, especially through their affordances. These include accessing information, pursuing economic and institutional opportunities, enabling communication, and developing linguistic and cultural knowledge of the host country. This study adds to perspectives on utilising mobile phones to achieve social connectedness for two categories of refugees: newcomers and old-timers.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Refugees live in challenging circumstances due to being separated from families, friends and everything they are familiar with. This causes instability and insecurity [43]. Furthermore, some have been affected by violence (such as xenophobic attacks) [39]. They suffer during their displacement and because of the difficulty of securing refugee status in the host country; they may struggle as well to access social services such as healthcare services [3], [47]. Due to

these barriers, it is arduous for refugees to achieve social connectedness. In particular, culture and language are among the main challenges the refugees face in relation to their social inclusion [2], [21]. These difficulties result in victimisation and miscommunication in accessing services of government and private organisations [47].

Mobile technology may help mitigate many of the challenges the refugees face. Mobile phones have become the main tool of communication in contemporary societies [11]. They assist people to solve the connectivity issues induced by physical separation. They also facilitate access to different types of support, thus increasing the chance of wellbeing. Further, mobile phones offer an opportunity to share information and transfer assets over borders for those who are completely isolated [31]; in doing so, they improve the standard of the services that refugees may access.

Mobile phone usage have different effects on community engagement [20]. Marginalised and vulnerable communities such as refugees may use digital technology to communicate [22] and increase their social connectedness [55]. Social connectedness refers to the subjective awareness of experiencing a close relationship with an individual, a group of people, or the social world [57]. This study investigates how refugees in South Africa achieve social connectedness through the use of mobile phones. The latter proves to have a positive impact on social change. For example, it allows individuals to access services at their convenience, promoting equality, and saving time. This has led to the general availability of services and the empowerment of the people who use the connecting devices [36]. In this paper, we analyse the opportunities offered by mobile phones to refugees in South Africa, and enquire about their use to achieve social connectedness. The paper seeks to answer the research question:

How do mobile phones help refugees to achieve social connectedness?

In South Africa refugees live amongst the local community, as opposed to being confined to designated refugee camps, as is the case in other countries [45]. There are no camps in South Africa. Refugees embed themselves in the social and economic development of the host country, send their children to host schools, find jobs, and may set up their own businesses [1]. Many studies tend to generalise the term ‘refugees’ to refer to people who have been granted refugee status and those who have not yet obtained the status. Furthermore, in the literature on social connectedness among refugees, it is not explicit as to whether it references ‘refugees’ who live in camps or ‘refugees’ who are integrated into the local social environment. Another important distinction in assessing social connectedness is the duration over which a refugee has stayed in the host country. The longer a refugee stays in a country, the

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more skills they acquire to navigate their lives. This study takes into account how the duration of stay in a host country affects how the use of mobile phones affects social connectedness amongst refugees.

The study expands the existing literature focusing on the use of mobile phones, social connectedness, and the situation of refugees in South Africa. It provides researchers with evidence of their situation and experiences, and some understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of their use of mobile phones. The study's results may contribute to reducing some challenges faced by refugees in the host country.

The remainder of the article presents the literature regarding refugees, social connectedness, and mobile phones usage in South Africa. The section is followed by the conceptual framework used to analyse the data collected and the research methods employed. Findings and their implications are presented in the same section organised in accordance with the framework factors. The study concludes with contributions and future research in the area of inquiry.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 An Overview of the Refugees Crisis

A refugee is a person who has fled from their country of origin to another country due to unbearable living conditions such as persecution, war, or violence [41]. It is important to differentiate between the terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker', even though they are often used interchangeably [22]. In general, a person entering a new country as a potential refugee applies for an asylum seeker's permit. This is a temporary permit, pending the decision by the government to grant the applicant refugee status [18]. The asylum seeker permit is temporary, indicating that a "request for sanctuary has yet to be processed" [32], while a refugee is a person who has been granted a refugee's permit [18]. In this paper, we use the word 'refugee' to refer to people who have been granted the asylum status and protection, as well as those who are still seeking recognition.

The number of refugees and asylum seekers continues to rise [52]. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) annual Global Trends report, in 2017 there were 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum seekers globally. By 2019, the number had increased to 26.0 million refugees and 4.2 million asylum seekers [53]. According to the 2019 UNHCR annual report, South Africa hosts 189 491 asylum seekers and 90 513 refugees [53]. South Africa is a peaceful country with a relatively stable economy, and this attracts asylum seekers from countries around the African continent [41]. The majority of refugees in the country originate from African countries [9].

South Africa is one of the most developed countries in Africa. The country has a strong economy and an advanced degree of social development [26]. This is helpful in the daily lives of refugees living in the country. However, they face many challenges, such as language barriers, lack of cultural knowledge of the new country, and concerns arising from ethnic differences [47]. Furthermore, the UNHCR is concerned about the ongoing abuse of migrants, including refugees, in South Africa.

2.1.1 South Africa Refugees Legislation. South Africa is a signatory to treaties recognising the rights of refugees [41]. It was party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1967 UN Refugees Protocol, and the 1969 African Refugee Convention concerning certain aspects of refugees in Africa. Furthermore, the country issued asylum legislation to endow the rights of refugees with standards and principles initiated in international law protecting refugees. The South African Refugees Act, No. 130 of 1998 authorised the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) to grant the right documentation to refugees and asylum seekers to secure their freedom and become legalised in the country. The DHA is responsible for implementing refugee policies and managing the issue of permits for refugees and asylum seekers [18].

The Refugee Act stipulates that the outcome of the asylum seeker application should be issued within six months, at which time the applicant can be granted refugee status or be asked to leave the country in the absence of any other legal immigrant status [9]. However, in practice, this procedure is not strictly adhered to. Only a few people receive the outcome of their application within the prescribed period. The applications are often delayed and many wait for as long as 10 years before receiving an outcome [18].

2.1.2 Challenges that Refugees in South Africa Face. A main challenge that refugees face in South Africa has been xenophobic attacks that have recurred in the country since 1994 [39]. There are a number of theories on the causes of the xenophobic attacks. One of the chief theories has been the high unemployment in the country. The xenophobia arises from the belief that immigrants "are the cause of unemployment among nationals and that they frustrate efforts of trade unions to achieve realistic wages for the workers and improve the working conditions of the employees" [3: 11].

Xenophobia has increased over the years, with xenophobic violence mainly targeting the migrants who share phenotypic, linguistic, and cultural commonalities with Black South Africans [14], [50]. Refugees are viewed as a burden on the host society and a threat to national security [6]. Survivors of xenophobic violence experience xenophobia in the processes of seeking and receiving medical treatment [59]. The other main concerns of refugees are a lack of money and basic needs such as nutrition, English language competence, and the IT skills necessary to achieve social interaction [9].

2.2 Use of Mobile Phones among Refugees

Mobile phones are important tools for promoting and facilitating the wellbeing of people, especially refugees [16]. The sharing of knowledge, support, and the exchange of information through electronic communication are progressively impacting the integration of refugees [32]. Mobile phones can also help them to integrate in their new community by facilitating learning new languages, cultural participation, and bridging into a new society [17]. The ability to link up with other refugees is hugely reassuring and helps them to establish trust, gain happiness, and start to build their future [4]. In the process, there is a reduction in negative feelings such as fear, anxiety, and stress [4].

Mobile phones enable refugees to develop ties in their new environment and provide options for participating in various services

Figure 1: The proposed conceptual framework for the link between social connectedness and mobile phones

[56]. They enable refugees and residents to know each other, resulting in mutual wellbeing and stronger social integration [12]. The value of mobile phones for refugees is highlighted by aspects such as the cost-efficiency of communication through social media [4]. Furthermore, using mobile phones can play an important role in the development of social capital, thereby aiding in the social and economic integration of refugees into the community [30]. Gaining social connectedness has helped refugees to become strong in their self-advocacy [33].

2.3 Social Connectedness and its Benefits

Connectedness could be an important need in the everyday life of human beings [51]. Social connectedness is described as an aspect of individuality that represents the subjective acknowledgement of being in a close relationship with another person or a group of people [57]. Social connectedness can be promoted by social relationships and emotional development among individuals [49]. The literature points out that social connectedness explains the capacity of an individual to collaborate [23]. Social connectedness can also be perceived as a strategy to increase social experiences and integration in society [42]. The term also alludes to a feeling of belonging, getting provided for, the process of acculturation, and being bolstered by family members, friends, and associations [20]. Acculturation is a process of socialisation which helps reproduce standards of culture, qualities, and ideas [25]. Culture comprises the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and arts. Acculturation is a process of change that involves connecting with a community that has a dissimilar cultural background from one's own [8].

An increased sense of social connectedness can help people to obtain emotional wellbeing and reduce feelings of isolation [57], to the point of diminishing the rate and prevalence of depression [15]. Moreover, relationships with family, ethnic group, and host country have multiple and interrelated integration outcomes, including language acquisition, cultural knowledge, belonging, identity, civic engagement, social and economic participation, and access to public services [17]. Networking with friends and family facilitates a sense of belonging and wellbeing [44]. Having a sense of belonging makes people feel secure, esteemed, and included [46]. Belongingness is a measure of individuals' participation, of the extent to which they can recognise themselves as part of society [29]. The most common source of a sense of belonging is the understanding of a particular set of human values, aspirations, and desires [29].

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The social psychology of communication indicates how it conduces to a sense of belonging and the achievement of social connectedness [54]. Further, they provide preliminary propositions concerning approaches to promote social connectedness, including relationship salience and social appraisal. These are the factors that help refugees to achieve social connectedness, and measure the extent of that achievement (see Figure 1). We contextualised this framework with the use of mobile phones by refugees.

Social appraisal deals with how an agent assesses inferences drawn from the behaviour of others [37]. Refugees are connected with the host society, local culture, and their own culture as well. Their relationships influence their perception of the situation in which they live. If many people in their community are worried about xenophobic attacks or feel discriminated against, the fear would spread through the community. On the other hand, if the refugees developed an understanding of the host culture, on top of the surviving link with their culture of origin, this would enable them to participate socially, integrate into the activities of the host country, and experience the positive emotional reward of doing so. For example, as they gain more knowledge of the local language(s), they would feel more accepted.

Relationship salience involves experiences such as the sense of being in touch and of continuing presence despite absence [54]. This can promote inherent selfless desire, and a willingness to sacrifice, as people pay more attention to their partners or relatives [58]. Refugees typically experience feelings of loneliness caused by physical separation from their loved ones. This has a negative effect on their life conditions in the host country. However, if they are able to communicate with their family and friends from their home countries, amongst themselves and with the local community, they can stay strong and not feel depressed. This would renew their sense of hope and help them become more integrated into their new home.

Belongingness relates to the key component of human wellbeing [34]. The more human beings integrate into a society, the stronger their sense of belongingness becomes. Integration into a community is significant for decreasing an individual's sense of isolation or exclusion [9]. Being excluded creates inequality and marginalisation for individuals [26]. Further, a sense of belonging reflects individuals' understanding of the extent of their social support and participation, the extent to which they can recognise themselves as part of a community [29]. Studies (e.g. Kavuro, 2015) that examine the comprehension of connectedness often approach it from the

perspective of a sense of belonging [24]. The anger, dissatisfaction, or sorrow accompanying the sense of not belonging can affect the capacity of the person to operate fully in life [10]. The more their sense of belonging increases, the more they feel integrated into the new place.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an interpretivist epistemology and qualitative methodology. These approaches facilitated a deeper and a detailed understanding of the use of mobile phones by refugees, and of the reality of the social connectedness that is thereby constructed. The social construct was investigated mainly from the perspective of the responses of the research participants. The data collection and analyses were guided by the conceptual framework presented above. This study adopted a deductive approach, making use of the conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp group chats. The interviews were conducted face-to-face to enable the researcher to obtain maximum information from the respondents, comprising details of their actions and attitudes. Since refugees are usually a vulnerable population category, this approach helped them to speak freely and explain the challenges they face about social connectedness in South Africa. Before conducting the interviews, participants were asked to consent to the interview being recorded. The participants read and signed the consent form. The researcher made them aware that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. She also emphasised that all information would be treated confidentially and used for research purposes only. A WhatsApp group was used for the second phase of data collection. The researcher created a group for the purposes of the study, to open the discussion to new topics or to elaborate answers to questions raised during the interviews. The group was created on 22 January 2020, with the researcher as group administrator. All participants were aware that the conversation will be used for research studies.

During the interviews, the respondents were asked if they were keen to be added to a WhatsApp group with other participants to further discuss the research topic. The 15 participants who consented (out of the 27 interviewed) were added to the WhatsApp chat group. The 17 of all participants used the English language, 10 used the French language, and openly shared their views without mentioning their names. WhatsApp group chat was open for the group members to communicate anytime. In the WhatsApp group chat, the group members debated and shared their understanding of how the usage of mobile phones helped them to achieve social connectedness. This offered the researcher an opportunity to engage with the participants.

The sample for the study was drawn from refugees residing in Cape Town. The sample consisted of 27 refugees for the interviews and 15 refugees in the WhatsApp group chats. We selected participants from among the refugees who the main author knew or who had been introduced to her by a local organisation that supports refugees, and who were willing to participate in the research [19]. We balanced the sample according to age, gender, location, and level of education. The sample also included old-timer refugees and newcomers, the former being those who had lived in the country

for more than a year; the latter, those who had lived in the country for less than a year.

For ethical reasons, we confined the sample to people with valid permits. The researcher interviewed only refugees who owned or used mobile phones and were at least 18 years old. South Africa has a mixed refugee population of people from various countries with different cultures and languages. All participants come from African countries. The interview questionnaire was designed in two languages, French and English, as these are the languages used by the majority of refugee communities. A mobile phone and recording device were used in gathering data. The researcher took notes during the interview sessions to capture ideas and key points highlighted by participants. The recorded interviews were transcribed as Microsoft Word documents.

The study used thematic analysis to analyse the data. The process of thematic analysis went through six phases. The researcher transcribed the interviews and interpreted their content by carefully reading each statement to better understand the context and intent of the speaker. The themes that emerged were tracked and populated across different constructs within the conceptual framework. The analysis of the data was done using the concepts of the conceptual framework. For the analysis we used NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software.

South Africa was chosen as a case for this study for convenience. The authors were based in the country and had direct knowledge of the legal system and processes, as well as connections with local organisations. The first author could work directly with the participants. She used herself to be a refugee in South Africa and had first-hand knowledge of the challenges which the refugees faced. Furthermore, South Africa has one of the highest refugee populations in Africa, as well as one of the highest mobile phones penetration on the continent [13].

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Situation of the Refugees in South Africa

The majority of participants felt “*happy and excited*” when they arrived in South Africa. They were hoping that their lives were going to change for the better. They were fleeing various challenges and were searching for peace and stability. After settling down, most refugees began to feel lonely and isolated. Being separated from their friends and family impacted on them negatively. Of the 27 participants, 26 expressed grief over the separation from their families and friends.

“I was very sad because I was separated from parents and friends” [Participant 17].

This finding is in line with Rugunanan and Smit [40] who found that refugees in South Africa felt that their social life was better in their home countries. Some found living alone in a new country surrounded by strangers a significant challenge.

Twenty-three participants reported that they faced challenges with language and culture. Due to low fluency in the local languages, they were not confident to speak to South Africans. They found the local accents different from what they were familiar with. These challenges were especially common among newcomers who were not yet familiar with their new community and surroundings.

Table 1: The differences in experience between newcomers and old-timer refugees

Old-timer refugees	Newcomer refugees
-Better connection with the local society -Developing and developed language knowledge	-Lonely and isolated -Feeling desperate and -hopeless -Language barriers -Lack of social participation

Table 2: Mobile phone applications used most by the refugees

Application	Reason to use
Social media	Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter are used by refugees to be in touch with families and friends in their countries of origin. GPS helped them to navigate the city. For newcomers, it assisted with getting to know the country.
• GPS	
• Audio recorder	The audio recorder was used to improve refugees' knowledge of local cultures through making recordings and taking videos of cultural practices.
• Google Translate and Dictionary	The Google Translate and Dictionary apps assisted in learning South African languages and navigating the situations. It was easy and fast to translate from one language to another.
• Search engines	Google Search was used for many things, such as searching for information needed for business or how to obtain assistance in an emergency, searching for jobs, and doing research about South African cultures (e.g. dates of festivals and holidays).
• Gumtree	Gumtree had a significant impact on business. It was used to advertise jobs or products.
• Mobile email	Students used school email for their studies, for sending and receiving schoolwork.
• YouTube	YouTube was used to develop the knowledge of culture: <i>"I use my phone to watch how South Africans sing and dance. It helps me to learn about their culture."</i> It was also used for entertainment, to listen to and watch audio and video clips.

"...the first time I came to South Africa; I had the big challenge of the South African language and culture when they talked to me. I could not figure out what they said" [Participant 6].

Furthermore, the refugees were confused and concerned about the validity period of their legal documents. For example, temporary documents have a validity span of between one and six months. Those who had obtained refugee permits claimed that they had earlier received documents that were valid for four years. This situation subsequently changed: those who had previously qualified for a four-year permit were now issued with a six-month one.

The lack of security and feelings of being judged and excluded were the principal factors contributing to the anxiety all the participants experienced. They felt insecure and wanted to leave the country. The likelihood of integration was low since there were limited future opportunities. The lack of employment opportunities was one of the challenges many refugees faced. Participants who

were employed felt that they were not treated equally or paid the same wages as other people with the standard work permit, even when they had similar responsibilities or did the same job.

"All the rights and advantages go straight to them [South African citizens]. For example, in my work, they are more privileged than us. We have the same work, same position, but we don't get the same salary" [Participant 9].

Table 1 summarises the experiences of the refugees in the host country.

5.2 Mobile Phone Applications Used by Refugees

Table 2 summarises how the refugees used mobile applications to access various services.

5.3 The Use of Mobile Phones for Social Appraisal

The refugees used mobile phones to learn local languages, become involved in the host culture, and maintain ties with their own culture. These practices helped them to feel more integrated in the host country.

5.3.1 Mobile Phones in Learning Local Languages. The majority of participants used mobile phones to learn local languages. A dictionary and Application of Google Translate on their mobile phones helped to mitigate the challenges associated with their lack of local language proficiency, specifically English. They used Google Translate to learn meanings and pronunciations of local words. Three student participants noted that the Google Translate enabled them to increase the speed of their learning.

“When I was learning English, the teacher told us to install the Google Translate app on our phones. It helped me a lot in learning. When I got stuck with a word, for example, I immediately used that app to find out the meaning in my local language” [Participant 12].

One participant explained how spending time in a chat on social media with South African residents contributed to his awareness of language and his writing skills. The more they interacted, the more they gained the skills. Interacting with local communities forced them to use the common language.

“Just being friendly with them, helps me to learn their language. Once we spend like two/three days on chat, I have to make sure that I learn something from them” [Participant 9].

5.3.2 Mobile Phones for Involvement in, and the Learning of, Local Culture. The findings of the study highlight the different ways in which the affordances of mobile phones assisted the refugees in developing their knowledge of local cultures. They used mobile phones to watch local dance and song, and to learn about the new culture. One participant stated that the mobile phone recording function helped refugees to participate in host cultural clubs or associations.

“I get a chance to participate in a club where they perform South African cultural activities; I record them on my phone so that I can watch it later” [Participant 13].

This role of mobile phones was more effective where the host population used mobile technology to support their cultural. This was not always the case. In some cases, refugees did not identify with this role of mobile technology. Some participants noted that they achieved this without the use of a mobile technology: *“I learnt about the culture by meeting and interacting with South Africans”* [Participant 20].

5.3.3 Mobile Phones in Navigating Situations. The majority of participants reported how mobile phones assisted them to resolve language challenges. For instance, they might call friends or family to ask the meaning of words when at a loss. The driver participants stated that the Google Translate application on their mobile phones assisted in communication with foreign customers. In addition, as language barriers limit communication between refugees and citizens, one participant stated that the mobile phone helped them to

avoid feeling judged by the South Africans, by fulfilling their needs without physically meeting.

“It is easier to place an order or buy something by using a mobile phone and you can get your needs without judgment of local people” [Participant 21].

One participant underscored the importance of a mobile translation application to resolve language challenges: *“It helps me in translation because the local languages for me are the big issues”* [WhatsApp chat].

These findings are consistent with those of Bacishoga et al. [5] who demonstrated that refugees use mobile phones to enhance their ability to communicate in English.

5.3.4 The Implications of Findings. Information Communication and Technology (ICT) contributes to involvement of the refugees in the cultural activities of the host country through the use of mobile phones. Mobile phones have made a tangible contribution in helping refugees to participate in the community and create a social network with members of the society. Technologies help individuals to feel less isolated while playing an important role in their acculturation, thus enhancing their feelings of integration [28]. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Phillimore [38] who said that “Too much change, lack of support, pressure to adapt too quickly or inability to follow the desired strategy can all result in acculturative stress, and when major problems are experienced, individuals can be susceptible to mental illness”. The research shows the impact of mobile phones, and especially of their affordances, in decreasing the pressure associated with the challenges that refugees face. These challenges limit their ability to build trust with local people and disqualify them from participating in social activities or accessing services offered by institutions and organisations to communities.

Refugees who did not speak South African languages faced difficulties in obtaining information. This challenge extended to information on the internet. To be able to live in the host country, they had to learn at least one local language and understand the local cultural knowledge. Mobile phones helped them with this and enabled them to be determined to rebuild their identities, and strive for a purposeful life in the host country.

The findings showed how the use of mobile phones can advance the social appraisal of refugees by helping them develop the cultural skills of the host country, and enabling them to participate in the new culture. Cultural knowledge was often transmitted through social media platforms by those who were more knowledgeable. The aptitude to associate with a new culture can decrease the probabilities of self-isolation [6]. Conversely, developing cultural knowledge was hard for those who did not use a mobile phone. The study found that social appraisal is an important concept in understanding how mobile phones can help refugees to achieve social connectedness.

In sum, it is evident from this research that mobile phones enable refugees to interact with local communities and develop the extent of their adaptation [1]. Mobile phones help refugees to develop ties with the local people and access public services [56]. Furthermore, refugees with a common language and culture choose at the same time to strengthen the bonds among themselves [9]. This research confirmed this. Certain participants sought not only to explore local

cultures, but also to reaffirm the culture from their home countries. This is evidenced by their shared desire to socialise through social networks with those who were culturally similar. Some participants were not motivated to learn the culture of the host country because they felt more connected to their communities and home countries than to the host state. This could be because of the challenges posed by language barriers. For those who saw mastery of English as an insuperable obstacle to social ties, mobile phones at least provided access to social relationships inside their community [56]. Refugees might also hesitate to interact with residents because of a more general lack of confidence [9].

5.4 The Use of Mobile Phones for Relationship Salience

Mobile phones afforded refugees the opportunity to connect and chat with family and relatives in the host country, from their countries of origin and from other parts of the world [9].

5.4.1 Maintaining Relationships with Families and Friends in the Country of Origin. All the participants indicated that mobile phones helped them to stay in touch with relatives and friends in their home country. The families and people close to the majority of participants had remained in their home countries. This made them depressed and lonely. The use of mobile phones enabled them to remain in contact with their relatives and remain abreast with the developments at home:

“The mobile phone contributes a lot to improving social life and making refugees connect with their families and friends from their countries of origin” [WhatsApp chat].

The refugees used mainly social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to communicate with families and friends in their home countries. The WhatsApp video call was the most common method of communication between participants and their family and friends in their country of origin. They also used voice calls, chat, and Short Message Service (SMS) to communicate with them.

5.4.2 Use of Mobile Phones to Connect with Fellow Refugees. The findings of this study show how mobile phones help refugees to connect with other refugees in the country. Refugees utilise mobile phones to develop a network with their relatives and search for opportunities in the host country [56]. Mobile phones help them to exchange updates via text messages on social media platforms. The participants reported that there were foreigner forums comprising people originating from the same country, many of whom were refugees. These forums used WhatsApp group chat to keep refugees in touch with other refugees and enable them to exchange ideas. Some members of the chat group could solve their problems by getting help from old-timer refugees. One of the participants explained that in the event of a problem on the way to work, for example, other refugees could help out via the social media group. This enables the refugees to stay connected and created bonds.

“If something bad happens in a certain area, other refugees on our WhatsApp group can warn me. Maybe there is a manifestation of crime in a certain street so I can try to avoid it” [Participant 26].

The participants reported that they helped each other regularly in different ways through the use of mobile phones. In doing so, they became more united and their self-confidence was enhanced. Their feeling of loneliness abated as they felt the presence of people who cared for and supported them in difficult situations. This concurs with Liamputtong et al. [28] who argued that the presence of mobile phones enabled refugees in the host country to develop connections and to network among themselves. Even though many of the participants did not live with their families, interacting, meeting, and living with other refugees helped them to heal their emotional wounds. This renders the mobile phone an essential tool in establishing and maintaining a way of life, for both newcomers and old-timers.

5.4.3 Using Mobile Phones to Connect with the Host Community. The majority of participants used mobile phones to forge bonds between refugees and the host community. In everyday life, refugees needed to find employment opportunities that could sustain them. For this reason, they needed to connect with other people living in the country. This encouraged them to network with the local people in the host community. They called and texted with hosts for different reasons. The majority of participants stated the importance of mobile phones in connecting with their customers who are primarily South African citizens.

“The main reason is to communicate with customers; they call me when they need something” [Participant 4].

The impact of mobile phones in developing connectivity for refugees with local people was regarded as significant by the participants. It enabled them to arrange meetings for pleasure or work. One of the participants explained how the mobile phone helped him to communicate with the South African lawyer who assisted him with an asylum seeker application when it was denied.

“I called my lawyer several times asking for an update on my asylum seeker application” [Participant 9].

5.4.4 The implication of Findings. Literature shows that refugees are affected by physical separation from their people [7]. We found that refugees depended on mobile phones to communicate with members of their families in their respective home countries, as well as with friends and acquaintances within the community where they lived in South Africa. This is in line with Bisimwa’s [9] finding that the use of mobile phones empowers refugees to enhance their connection with those residing in the new country, as well as with families and friends back in their home country [9]. Refugees experience a multitude of challenges resulting from physical separation from their friends and family. These challenges have negative effects, notably feelings of sadness, depression, and loneliness [4]. Mobile phones helped refugees to overcome these challenges through effective communication, perhaps especially through the advice and emotional care received from relatives in their home countries [27].

Mobile phones are significant in connecting people with their communities and relatives. Through the use of mobile phones, refugees maintain stable relationships with family and friends from their countries of origin. At the same time, the mobile phones help refugees develop new relationships in the host country. They can

manage their lives and focus on finding solutions in the new country. They are not stressed about what is going on back home. Without the mobile phones, the refugees would struggle to maintain contact with their people at home and this could lead to feelings of worry, anxiety, and stress on both sides. The study outcomes show that the use of mobile phones help the refugee respondents to alleviate the hardship linked to a lack of connectivity. In this regard, there are no significant differences between newcomer and old-timer refugees. Communication through mobile phones brings stability and hope to both these refugees and their families and with friends from their countries of origin.

Relationships developed on social networks also provide them with access to information about what to do for a living. Developing relationships in the new country, maintaining mental health, and achieving minimum integration are the factors that most help refugees to begin to settle in the host society. Mobile phones provide efficient communication between participants and fellow refugees, and access to social relationships inside the refugee community. Communication between refugees and the local community is important for increasing relationships and connections. All forms of communication enabled by mobile phones strengthen the salience of refugees' relationships [54].

5.5 The Use of Mobile Phones for Belongingness

The study confirms that refugees in South Africa have a low sense of belonging. The lack of legal status is described as a barrier to their integration in the country.

5.5.1 The Use of Mobile Phones in Creating a Sense of Belonging. In general, the refugees did not initially feel confident and comfortable in the host country due to a myriad of barriers such as being excluded, being denied access to services, insecurity, discrimination, and a lack of employment opportunities. These challenges affect the development of their sense of belongingness. Most refugees do not consider themselves part of the host community. The instability caused by the uncertainties of legal documentation affects their integration into the country and, indeed, the very course of their lives.

One participant stated that mobile phones offered assistance in the process of applying for legal documents.

"I use mobile phones to communicate with the organisation that helps foreigners. Let me say, like, you got an issue of the legal status, for example. You were using an asylum seeker permit of six months then you go back for extension; they reduced it to three months for no reason. You can call and talk to that group about your issue and they can assist in that matter . . ." [Participant 9].

Mobile phones are useful in protecting and improving the well-being of refugees. The newcomer participants use various mobile phone services in their efforts to rebuild their lives and adjust to the new place. As they engage with mobile phones regularly in their lives, they are able to access more options. However, they are still not happy. They cannot feel truly comfortable and self-confident in life. Furthermore, the findings show that the respondents are living in the country temporarily while waiting for an opportunity

to return to their country of origin or move to another country. The challenges posed by the need to obtain legal documents and by the treatment they received from people discourage them and perpetuate feelings of insecurity and instability. These conditions create a barrier to development in other aspects of life.

"Mobile phone helps in communication and to get different opportunities. However, it didn't help me to feel comfortable because of paper issues. Without paper [refugees documents], you can't get a proper job" [Participant 18].

Mobile phones helped some of participants to secure work and fulfil their responsibilities, the difficulty of obtaining legal status permits remains a serious challenge and negatively impacts on the quality of their lives. The fact that some have been in the country for a long time does not mean that they are willing and happy to live in the country. The use of mobile phones does not contribute to refugees achieving a desired standard of living. The majority of participants concluded that they did not feel that they belonged in South Africa.

"I still feel like a foreigner in this place. I cannot say the mobile phone would help me to have a sense of belonging here, due to different factors; I have been here for ten years and I still have an asylum-seeker paper. I was expecting maybe to be a permanent resident in South Africa. It is why I don't have any feeling of belonging here" [Participant 5].

Since the refugees struggle to get decent employment, they seek alternative means of earning a living, such as small businesses. Many such businesses use mobile phones, including a GPS navigation app for taxi drivers, social media for marketing, Facebook Marketplace home services for the sale of products, and other businesses.

5.5.2 The Implication of Findings. Refugees in South Africa use mobile phones to rebuild their lives and integrate into society. In developing and accelerating these processes, mobile phones facilitate their taking action in looking for and creating opportunities. Nguyen et al. [35] argue that the mobile phone, through its many affordances, empowers marginalised communities. Refugees are considered marginalised and vulnerable within their new society, and mobile phones can help them overcome this, and achieve a sense of belonging in the host community. This ameliorates their integration and is an aid to their comprehension about what is effective in promoting social connectedness. The literature reviewed agrees that the use of communication technologies such as mobile phones can improve a sense of belonging of refugees [54]. However, the respondents in this study found the role of mobile phones limited in creating and increasing their sense of belonging in the host country. The factors that detract from a sense of belonging among refugees include the lack of legal documents; a sense of insecurity and employment-related challenges (having to accept an available job as opposed to what they are qualified for); and being far from their families.

The use of mobile phones can support activities such as gathering information on how to apply for legal status, how to stay in contact with other refugees who can help them in the process, finding a way to get their family to join them in South Africa, and acculturation.

The small contributions that resulted from the use of mobile phones did not lead directly to the achievement of a sense of belonging among respondents, but they helped build towards integration and connectedness with the host country. Mobile phones assisted the refugees to obtain certain important feedback that could improve their lives. Even if the participants in the study did not yet feel a strong sense of belonging, the literature highlights the connections between the elements listed above [54]. Newcomers can start with a temporary legal document, and eventually they could obtain their permit and/or can apply for a residence permit. At this stage, the person starts to feel better and might even be able to bring their family into the new country.

We noted above that a prerequisite for generating and increasing a sense of belonging among refugees was their acceptance of the new society. Individuals who were able to develop a positive attitude and behaviour were able to achieve this. They could develop strategies for integrating and participating in the host community's activities. Access to mobile phones played a significant role in this process. The study shows that mobile phones are supporting refugees to start feeling better, become more hopeful, develop financial activities, connect with other refugees to maintain relationships, and increase their knowledge of the new culture [48]. Developing linguistic skills enabled the refugees to network with local people and provided opportunities to sustain their livelihood. The more the refugees were acculturated and felt integrated, the greater their sense of belonging grew.

6 CONCLUSION

This study investigated how refugees in South Africa might achieve social connectedness through the use of mobile phones. The literature shows that ICT contributes to the enhancement of the social connectedness of refugees through communication by mobile phone. The findings show that social networks created excitement and satisfaction since the participants and their relatives/friends were able to see as well as hear each other. Furthermore, the use of mobile phones unquestionably helped refugees to cope with adjusting to an alien environment by developing the host culture knowledge. Mobile phones assisted the refugees to obtain important feedback that could improve their lives and integration in the host country. The results showed limited differences in the use of mobile phones between newcomer and old-timer in the acculturation process, in creating a sense of belonging, and in connectivity with their families in their country of origin.

The study contributes to theory in the area of Information Systems by adjusting the social connectedness framework to analyse how the use of mobile phones serves to enhance social connectedness among refugees in South Africa. Secondly, this study contributes to knowledge on the methodological level by showing how to use instant messaging tools such as a WhatsApp group chat for data collection. Thirdly, the study contributes to practice by achieving an understanding of a new phenomenon, the use of mobile phones by refugees, and the benefits accruing from this. Aspects of the research can, therefore, help non-profit organisations and the UNHCR to develop a strategy and process for conducting interventions on behalf of refugees. For instance, the use of mobile phones can provide advocacy assistance to address the issue of legal

status. Since the experiences of the refugees might differ depending on how long they have lived in the host country and their legal status in the country, it would be interesting for future research to evaluate the varying use of mobile phones for social connectedness in relation to specific categories.

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