

CHAPTER 11

MIGRANTS AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES; A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 Pandemic has affected every aspect of social life worldwide, from individuals to societies at local and global levels. Vulnerable groups are generally the most affected in societies during crises or outbreaks. Migrants are prominent among these groups. In the last ten years, millions of people have been forced to leave their countries due to numerous crises. Also, there have been a significant number of people who have decided to migrate because of economic, educational, and family issues. Turkey has not been left out of this sociological process. Turkey is among the countries most affected by the phenomenon of migration, especially with forced migration in recent years. Turkey, which is the meeting point of the continents as a geographical location and is on the migration route for many immigrants, is home to millions of immigrants and asylum seekers in recent years. The purpose of this study is to examine the social and psychological effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on migrants in Turkey. A literature review and situation analysis method will be used in this study to understand the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on migrants and asylum seekers. The study will mainly examine the impact of mobile phone and internet dependency on the daily life habits of migrants during the pandemic period, with a particular focus on educational challenges, digital divides, loneliness, alienation, and other psycho-social factors impacting migrants.

Keywords: Migration, Asylum Seekers, COVID-19, Communication Technologies

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus that has emerged in China, and which has subsequently impacted the entire world, has, within a short time, significantly impacted the lives of countless people around the globe. Societies have been significantly affected both socially and psychologically. People's living standards have changed, and they have had to acquire new daily lifestyles and new habits. Research has been done during the pandemic period, which shows that young people, in particular, have anxieties about their future; during the time that they stay at home, they feel alone, and they don't have any hope for the future. The collective sense of hopelessness is very high. It is well known that generally, poor or economically disadvantaged people are becoming affected more than other people during the Pandemic. In this sense, migrants and refugees are being affected more negatively by social crises and pandemics. This study employs literature and contextual analysis methodology in order to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of refugees and migrants, with a particular focus on the role and impact of communication technologies and their usage and adoption by these communities. The study concludes that the usage of digital and communication technologies have increased to an important extent during the pandemic period and that this has yielded particular advantages and disadvantages for the respective communities of concern. In the sphere of education and employment, communication and internet technologies have been pushed to the forefront and gained prominence and prestige. However, immigrant and refugee communities face particular challenges with respect to access to these technologies as well as potentially negative social and psychological impacts when accessibility is available. While the problems impacting these communities are complex, this research primarily aims to critically assess the rise of Internet and communication technologies with respect to impacts in the area of education and economics.

Immigrant and refugee communities have been experiencing many challenges with respect to their education. Among the factors responsible for such challenges are language, economic disadvantages, and perceptions of familial rights to education, social exclusion, peer victimization, and legal regulations. There are many other factors that add to these challenges and problems. It can be observed that immigration, especially when compounded with the limited possibilities and constraints of having refugee status, results in great difficulty in overcoming such problems. The Republic of Turkey, along with the assistance of international organizations, has worked with extraordinary effort and diligence in this area. However, with the sudden arrival of the COVID-19 virus, new challenges and difficulties have arrived that have neither been previously faced by locals, government administrations, or immigrants. For example, as

a result of the closure of schools, it has become a necessity to use communication technologies in the form of “distance education.” However, the limited accessibility of immigrants to these communication technologies has posed a significant challenge to refugees in terms of their level of accessibility to this newly emerging form of education. It is debatable concerning the extent to which internet facilities are practically accessible for refugee students in higher education as well as students who do not have television facilities in the context of primary and secondary education. The cost of online education is greater than in traditional offline settings, particularly when video presentations are factored in. It is also thought that immigrant and refugee communities, who try to stay at home during the Pandemic, spend more time on social media than they have ever done before. This situation thus brings with it new troubles.

This paper focuses on the impacts of problems faced by refugees and migrants as a result of the usage of communication technologies amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. By doing so, new light will be shed on various related subjects, which will encourage new studies and projects within the area of digital migration. In this paper, different sources compiled by WHO were obtained and used, along with sociological analysis of pandemic processes. Even if extraordinary academic literature showed up in a very fast way, the topic of immigration and Pandemic would still show a great need for further research and literature. Particular attention will be drawn to persons of concern who are economical, geographical, and culturally constrained by every kind of challenge and global-scale problem as a result of the virus. This study will both draw attention to this problem and contribute to the strengthening of the literature.

2. Educational Challenges

Despite the problematic existence of a “digital divide” with respect to the practical affordability of Internet access for migrants and refugees across the globe, there has been an increasing emphasis and growing consensus on the importance of internet access for displaced peoples during the COVID-19 Pandemic period (UNFPA, 2020). Turkey is among the countries most affected by the phenomenon of migration, especially with forced migration in recent years. The phenomenon of migration has changed shape since its history, and with the development of technology and increased transportation opportunities, the number of people migrating has continued to increase day by day. In addition to these developments, the number of people who had to leave their country and seek refuge in another country has increased day by day due to wars and internal conflicts in various parts of the world. Turkey, which is the meeting point of the continents as a geographical location and is on the migration

route for many immigrants, is home to millions of immigrants and asylum seekers in recent years. Millions of people have had to leave their homes due to internal turmoil and violence in Syria since 2011. Forcibly displaced people have migrated intensively to the surrounding countries. Turkey is one of these countries. According to the data of the Directorate General of Migration Management of the Republic of Turkey, there are 3,645,140 Syrian asylum seekers under temporary protection status in Turkey as of 28.01.2020 (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2021).

In Turkey, Syrian asylum seekers are regarded as being at a distinct disadvantage due to their low economic status and limited access to media technologies such as laptops and reliable internet. To combat this situation, charity groups and other organizations have looked into ways in which important information can be relayed to the refugees by Syrian-owned small and medium-sized businesses that act as “seeds.” These business owners are more likely to have access to the internet, and this type of media is thus presupposed to be the most important channel during the epidemic (Poverty Action, 2020). The internet has also gained prominent importance as a distance-education source for many Turkish school children who have been unable to go to school as a result of the Pandemic. However, Syrian refugee children have been left at a distinct disadvantage as a result of the dependence on the internet as a medium of learning. This raises serious questions as to whether the internet itself has gained too much power and prominence during the pandemic period, and it also raises questions about the lack of competitive advantage of more redundant technologies for distance education (such as Interactive Radio Instruction) to meet the needs of those who cannot afford the laptops or the internet connections required for online interactive learning (McBurnie, 2020). For Syrian families who can afford the television sets in which state educational lessons are broadcast, there are still learning challenges that result from the lack of social engagement that the medium provides. School children miss the interactive face-to-face engagement with their students and pupils, and some have commented that television learning can be like “watching a boring documentary” (Hefzi, 2020). On the other hand, some studies have shown that online learning has more potential for increasing student engagement as a result of the inherent advantage of interactivity, particularly for younger students. Yet, despite this, a digital divide still exists within the refugee and migrant community with respect to access to more advanced digital learning platforms. In addition, there are serious questions as to whether communication technology can be of any significant benefit for refugees and migrants given the distinct language needs of Syrian refugee students and lack of instant feedback from teachers in a classroom setting, as well as the need for social play and a calming and structured setting.

Research has shown that despite handicaps and setbacks with respect to possession of technologies to receive effective distance education, smartphones have been of crucial importance for Syrian refugees since both their upheaval from their country and throughout their attempt to integrate into Turkish society. Of such importance is the smartphone that it has come to outrank the possession of furniture or carpets in many of the dilapidated residents in which Syrian displaced persons are renting. Smartphones are used to maintain a connection with relatives and loved-ones outside the country and at a rate far more affordable than making a traditional phone call. Interviews with refugees prior to the Pandemic have shown that some regard the smartphone as being given equivalence to that of “hands and feet” and even that of “life” itself. Among its diverse users are women and house-wives who use it to combat social isolation and to share their experiences with friends and family (Narli, 2018). In this sense, it is not only a means of connectivity but also a “virtual diasporic space” (Ponzanesi, 2020) which allows diaspora to maintain some kind of solidarity and connection that overcomes their geographical separation within the new country. Without the smartphone, it would be much more challenging for Syrian refugees to scrutinize the availability of job opportunities as well as access vital information pertaining to things such as health, legal aid, and other public services such as on-the-spot translation.

3. Asylum Seekers and Communication Technologies

There is a need for further research as to how the Pandemic has impacted the usage of smartphones amongst Syrian refugees, but every indication from studies that analyze pandemic-derived refugee job losses suggests that smartphones remain a vital practical lifeline for these communities. The main question that this crisis has brought to bear is perhaps a more fundamental one: Does such a high dependence on communication technology reflect a wider socio-cultural set of problems that give it prominence and importance? Syrian refugees have voluntarily chosen to depend on smartphones for their survival in a different culture and society. Media ecologists such as Neil Postman, while writing before the advent of the internet, qualitatively describe the emergence of the technological domination of culture in which “the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology” (Postman, 1993, p.71). Applications such as “Life Fits Into Home,” designed by the Turkish Health Ministry, require citizens to record their health status on the application in order to be given the right to use public transport between cities. The usage of communication technology in such a way provides a compelling argument for the role of Postman’s “technopoly” concept in shaping society and the perception of reality itself during the pandemic period.

At a global level, the prestige of the internet as an apparent COVID-19 technological panacea has prompted various NGOs to contact the UNHCR in order to lobby for further assistance of refugees and other “Person’s of Concern” (POC’s) in acquiring internet access. The UNHCR has thus far focussed on ensuring a broad range of connectivity options for POC’s which includes older technologies (such as radios) rather than an emphasis on internet access per se (UNHCR, 2020). However, the need for the internet and access to mobile data communications is continuously emphasized by many charities around the world. One notable example being in Myanmar and Bangladesh, where up to 26 international humanitarian agencies have pushed for the governments of these respective countries to remove limits on internet access to refugees and displaced Rohingya populations. A report by Save the Children (2020) states that «restrictions prevent effective communication with the affected populations on hygiene, the COVID-19 Pandemic risks, symptoms, and preventative measures, making it much more likely that people will contract and die from the virus” (para. 5). The charity Access Now has also stated that internet access is the “key to the COVID-19 Pandemic response” with respect to refugees” (Access Now, 2020). Yet, at the same time, organisations such as the WHO have stated that we are amidst an “infodemic” situation, with an excess amount of the COVID-19 Pandemic-related information that is constantly accumulating on the internet. The highly variable reliability and quality of such information makes it a great challenge for online users to deal with. There are also a host of conspiracies being spread - both amongst internet users and even throughout camps without internet access (U.N. Department Of Global Communications, 2020). In light of this, it may be worth adopting a critical view towards the growing emphasis on the importance of internet access amongst vulnerable populations for gaining virus-related information. If indeed, the WHO is recommending itself as a primary source of reliable information, then is it worth asking why other more redundant technologies (rather than Internet access per se) are not given more priority? Additionally, there is a need for a greater number of studies and analyses on the impact of communications technologies on the lives of migrants and refugees during this crisis period.

With respect to the lives of refugees, smartphones have gained increasing attention for their growing importance for keeping refugees and other displaced peoples connected with friends and family. The smartphone is a means of communication that not only allows migrants to maintain contacts but also (via the usage of social media) allows them to become reunited with family members if they should become separated from them during the migration route. The benefits and power of social media in this respect are undeniable.

4. Dark Side of Technology

Yet, there is also a “dark side” to the beneficial effect of smartphones for refugees. Whatsapp and Facebook messaging services allow smugglers and refugees to communicate with each other through what some have termed a “dark digital underworld” that is outside the scrutiny of official channels. Yet such channels are quicker and more efficient, and hence they have gained the adoption of many migrants. However, misinformation from smuggler-sources and false advertising has led to a host of challenges. According to a UNHCR blog, the usage of specific Facebook groups by refugees has been a vital means of dealing with misinformation and rumors concerning the highly confusing migration process. An analyst at the Migration Policy Institute stated that “A lot of people were using those groups in order to triangulate information between the official government sources and then more word-of-mouth sources because it wasn’t clear what could be trusted and what couldn’t” (Kaplan, 2018, para. 15). Thus it appears that in the specific context of the migratory journey, the internet has facilitated the creation of collaborative strategies in dealing with the misinformation problem. Various agencies and NGOs have also assisted migrants and refugees within the same online medium. However, the largely online-derived “infodemic” concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic constitutes a problem on a scale far greater than specific migratory journeys, and within this context, there may be limitations as to the usefulness of online media for becoming more informed. The question remains as to what extent do people trust authorities and institutions both in online and offline spaces in refugee and migrant communities. Rumors and misinformation have spread in refugee camps despite lack of access to communication media, though radio and loudspeaker announcements have largely been utilized in response (Reuters, 2020). More modern communication media have also been utilized in tackling the “infodemic,” with a particular role played by refugee-led organizations in building the trust of camp residents and community leaders. However, as yet, there is no clear data as to the effectiveness of the different forms of information campaigns. A 27th May update from the Mixed Migration Centre demonstrated not only a variety of means by which migrants and refugees acquired information about the virus but also a relatively satisfactory amount of knowledge from respondents (Mixed Migration Center, 2020). The question again lies as to what extent the internet has played a part in this, whether directly or indirectly. Are the charities lobbying for further internet access amongst vulnerable populations justified in their argument?

5. Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Internet Connectivity

The economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has resulted in very difficult survival pressures for refugees and migrants, and because these groups tend to be within the lower income bracket of society, their level of adaptation to online work is much lower than other groups. A study by Bozkurt (2020) shows how the level of anxiety about future unemployment decreases as internet usage increases in frequency, and this reduction in anxiety is clearly corresponding with higher wage earners. Yet, it remains a fact that despite high wage earnings, there are jobs that simply cannot and have not been adapted to be performed online or via the internet. The efficiency and productivity of workers, as well as students, has reportedly not increased as a result of transitions to online work. The reality is that many refugees are dependent on work in the service sector in Turkey as well as informal work in the manufacturing sectors, both of which have been significantly affected by the Pandemic. While Internet connectivity has been of key importance in facilitating their survival inside Turkey, the internet itself cannot act as a source of direct income for the majority of refugees, given its connection with more abstract types of employment activity. While the connective power of smartphones has allowed refugees to connect with each other, to share news and memories, to access information pertaining to vital public services, as well as for language and other purposes - its power to act as a lifeline is becoming threatened as a result of the economic crisis that many families are now facing. Yet, for those refugees who are living through this crisis while still connected to the internet, there are concerns for their psychological well-being as a result of the anxiety created by the Pandemic and the increased usage of the internet during the period as a coping strategy.

6. Social Inclusion of Asylum Seekers in Pandemic Times

The inability to fully engage with the social and cultural milieu of the host country risks turning migrants towards either of two options - an ethnic ghetto or, alternatively, an online diaspora network that bypasses the organic, lived-in geographical community. Studies of migrant workers in China's Pearl River Delta show that their precarious and temporary employment creates a psychological sense of aimlessness in which some have aimed to remedy by forming "cyber-relationships" (Vincent, 2012). Social media acts as a substitute for the lack of secure relationships made in the face-to-face world and also compensates for their lack of time to cement more authentic relationships. The internet becomes a kind of escapism from boredom and the oppression and anomie of the working life, yet as a result

of dependence on the technology, the migrant is more and more alienated and withdrawn from the real world (Liu, 2015). African migrants to Europe were found in some studies to have developed a strong emotional relationship with their phone devices, even in some cases fondling their phones when thinking of a loved one. The mobile phone has gained a prominent status among migrants to the extent that some scholars have talked of it as being a sign of a new “public sphere” and as a “cyborg diaspora” (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018). While the internet has replaced traditional means of communication such as phone calls and hand-written letters, it has brought new problems as well as benefits. The hand-writing in a pen-written letter to a loved one, the feel of the paper, and the different style and content that typically appears in the medium of letter writing are arguably more emotionally significant than texts and emails. During the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis, the risk of increased anxiety from the virus as well as increased dependence on the internet may also erode the traditional intimacy and emotional bonds that keep families together. A point in support of this comes from a pre-COVID-19 Pandemic study by Pui-lam Law of Chinese internal migration in the Guangdong province over a 20-year period. The generation of migrants that started adopting mobile phones had started developing a less intimate connection with their families in comparison to some past generations. For example, some of the workers had friends and families at the top of their contacts lists, but this did not mean they were the people whom they contacted the most often. Job information and entertainment have attracted more time and attention as means of escape and distraction, which contrasts with previous past members of coping via letters and expensive phone calls that carried such crucial significance (Vincent, 2012). If migrants and refugees are to avoid becoming “alone together” as a means of coping with this crisis (to borrow a title from Sherry Turkle’s work), then more research needs to be done on the social and psychological impact of possible alternatives to convenient technological fixes to complex sociological problems that affect displaced people all around the world (Turkle, 2011).

7. Conclusion

It appears that the COVID-19 Pandemic will remain on the global agenda for a long time. People are still trying to get used to what has been popularly termed “the new normal”. Societies have been evaluated sociologically both before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, people still continue to migrate or be forcefully displaced. This displacement helps to increase social and psychological problems for immigrant and refugee communities as well as for local people in many ways. Undoubtedly, millions of displaced people have left all their

ties behind and have opened their eyes in a place where they do not know their language, symbols, and cultures, and this causes undeniable traumas amidst their inner worlds. On the other hand, it is a fact that both refugees and the communities that accept them have to deal with the sociological consequences of this most painful and traumatic phenomena. It is well known that migrants and refugees, who have limited opportunities in many respects, are the most adversely affected by global pandemics and economic crises. These and other such important global humanitarian issues continue to be answered with a global indifference. Immigrant and refugee communities face significant difficulties, especially in the accessibility and use of communication technologies. During pandemic periods, habits and the use and duration of communication technologies also change. Although this situation leads to advantages in certain aspects and contexts, it also brings about serious risks of social exclusion, alienation, and loneliness, especially with the usage of social media. Immigrants and refugees who have already been exposed to some degree of social and psychological trauma are also adversely affected by the dark side of technology. Considering the issues discussed in this article, it appears that immigrants were more adversely affected by the excessive reliance and promotion of communication technologies in society during the COVID-19 Pandemic period. The issue of refugees, in terms of its causes and consequences, is a great test and challenge for humanity as well as a unique burden for each individual, society, and culture. It is clear that all active actors in the areas of academia, government, business, and civil society must work together in order to effectively tackle this challenge within the framework of the most basic conscientious principles and to achieve multi-dimensional positive results.

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