Reflecting the Smartphone's (Imagined) Affordances in Refugee's Journeys

Claudia Lintner[1]

Abstract

The paper fosters the extent to which imagined affordances of smartphones help refugees to create meaning and thus maintaining a linearity/ continuity between their present, their past and their expected future. In doing so, the article is based on a social constructionist approach that expand the social construction of reality to include the digital level by reinforcing the necessity to rethink the implications of the digital for its basic concept of the social. In doing so, the article shed light to the importance of smartphones to construct or/ and maintain a linearity between refugee's past, their present and their future. Accordingly the results show, maintaining meaningful relations in the digital space and thus attributing meaning to their past and to their future helps refugees to bear the difficulties of the present. Smartphone thus offers new forms of agency to refugees during their experience of flight in constructing their mediated reality of meaningful relations connecting different temporalities.

Theoretical Introduction

The article follows the research question of how imagined affordances of smartphones help refugees in order to create meaning and thus maintaining a linearity/ continuity between their present, their past and their expected future. Linked to this, more than 60 years ago, Berger and Luckmann (1966) published one of the most influential sociological theories in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, in which they present a phenomenological perspective on the social construction of the reality of everyday life. Berger and Luckmann describe the reality of everyday life as organized around the "here and now" of individuals interacting in the face-to-face situation. Accordingly, the reality of everyday life, "organizes itself around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present," and "this 'here' and 'now' is the focus of my attention to the reality of everyday life" (Berger and Luckman, 1966:22).

However, as Giddens (1984:85) notes, the advent of modernity increasingly rips space away from place by creating relations between "absent" others who are spatially removed from any given situation of face-to-face interaction. In fact, with the rapid spread of the Internet across the globe, the zone of "there and now" continues to accelerate, expand, and thus further change the spatiotemporal structure of everyday reality. Thus, digital spaces have lost their "exotic edge" and have become an "embedded, embodied, and everyday part of social life" (Hine 2015: 164). In fact, we are reaching a situation where we live "in" rather than "with" the media as Deuze (2011) correctly points out. Therefore, more than ever before, new mobile technologies are rooted in the activities of daily life and are used in very different ways

[1] Claudia Lintner, Free University of Bolzano, Italyç E-mail: claudia.lintner2@unibz.it

depending on the needs and specific contexts of life (Madianou and Miller, 2012). In light of these profound changes that extend into our everyday lives, Couldry and Hepp (2017) set out to take Berger and Luckmann's (1966) approach further and expand the social construction of reality to include the medial level. If, as they introduce in their book, the basic building blocks of social life today are potentially themselves shaped by "media"-that is, by the content and infrastructure resulting from institutionally supported communication technologies-then social theory needs to rethink the implications of *media* for its basic concept of *the social*.

In their book, Couldry and Hepp (2017) focus on the question of the extent to which certain forms of mediatization/digitization offer agency to certain groups of people, giving them particular opportunities in the construction of the social world while limiting the agency of others. In line with this, this article concentrates on the subjective experience of refugees and the possibilities smartphones provide them in the construction of their digital reality that expand across time/temporalities and space. Different scholars (Eriksen, 2020; Kaufmann, 2017; Alencar, 2019) underline the importance of smartphones and Social Media in refugees everyday life, especially since the refugee crisis in Europe unfolded in 2015. The high usage of these modern means was triggered by the need to access information, to stay in touch with people back home, to save data such as pictures and videos and to have access to language translation tools. Research also shows that, upon resettlement, information and communication technologies (ICTs) can contribute to social inclusion through increasing participation, cultural expression, and understanding of a new society. In line with this, Kaufmann (2017) in her study defines smartphones as a key tool for today's refugees. However, in order to understand refugee's use of smartphones in a more nuanced way, I refer to the concept of "imagined affordances", coined by Nagy and Neff (2015). The concept of imagined affordances implies researchers to look not only on the technical affordances of a smartphone but also to the more symbolic- affective dimension of affordances (Alencar, 2019; Witterborn, 2018; Twigt, 2018). Affordances are thus understood as an achievement that "depends on people and their actions." The concept of imagined affordances contrasts therefore with a rather rigid and fixed notion of affordance. Gillespie et al (2018) underline, that the concept of "imagined affordances" (Nagy & Neff, 2015) helps theorize the ways in which media environments are perceived and shaped by users who exercise agency precisely because of the imagined affordances of technology. While there is an upcoming strand of studies that focuses on refugees imagined affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015) there is a lack of literature when it comes to understand imagined affordances towards smartphones from a temporal perspective.

In order to understand the relation between the different time zones, I draw back on the work of George H. Mead (1932). For Mead (1932), people live in the present, and their interpretations of the past and the future are shaped by the present. All actions, even though appearing in the present, immediately become an event and a reference point for oneself and for others. Mead's main point is that without managing the present time, by creating temporal differences, one may become pacified and paralyzed in the sense that one does not manage to connect events in daily life in a way that provides direction or meaning. Refugees often experience time disruptions that lead to various difficulties in organizing their everyday lives. During their flight they have to adapt to unknown time frames. Thus they have to be flexible and react often in unexpected ways and in situations of emergency (Griffiths et al., 2014). At the same time they challenge to observe the daily routine/rhythm in the present which is often

difficult to maintain. Different scholars show, how unsecure and undefined futures left them unable to visualize the future and integrate their future expectations in their present by creating a sense of meaninglessness. Following Mead, the inability to link the past to the present and the present to the future could create a sense of insecurity and meaninglessness, which can lead to an impaired sense of reality. With this in mind, this study demonstrates the importance of the smartphones and the digital space in general to create a meaningful connection between the past, the present and the future and to balance a sense of uncertainty and meaninglessness along their journey's.

Methodology

The present study is based on a qualitative research approach. From December 2019- May 2020, 11 semi-structured interviews and 6 narrative interviews with asylum seekers were carried out in Italians northern border contexts. In the first research phase, 6 narrative interviews were conducted. This approach helped to encourage the interviewees to reflect their experiences and their strategies to organize their everyday life. While the influence of the interviewer was minimal, importance was given to the idea of reconstructing individual life experiences from the point of view of informants. The narrative interviews served as basis for the structure of the 11 semi-structured interviews; the most important issues pertaining to the research focus of the study, which arose from the narratives were examined in more depth during the semi-structured interviews. The narratives and the semi-structured interviews lasted from 60 to 120 minutes each. The interviews were conducted in English and German. The analysis of the data was based on the coding processes described by Strauss and Corbin (2008), which involved three levels of analysis: open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

Results

Imagined affordances of the smartphone during refugees' journeys

"We all have smartphones just like anyone else has a smartphone. There's not a big difference. There's no difference between me and you. We've all become accustomed, almost like cyborgs, we're using these technologies, right? So we rely, I mean". As indicated by Farim in this quote, refugees are not excluded from being enmeshed in the digital revolution. However, the imagined affordances differ when refugees reflect their smartphone use before and after their flight. When reflecting the use of the smartphone before the flight, interviewees underlined its importance but pointed in particular to the communicative aspect of smartphones in the now and the near future. Accordingly when they refer to the "before" (intending their life before the flight) they link its usage mainly to the organization of their everyday live in the present ("now") or in the near future ("when we are meeting after work for example") as Thao outlines: "When I was at home (Nigeria), I usually had my friends and my family near me. I used the smartphone but in another way. Calling someone to meet or to make an appointment just to communicate with them what we are doing now or tomorrow, where we meet and so on". Similar Shalim links the use of smartphones before the flight to the time of the present and the near future: "Of course you are connected to the whole world, but I used it (the smartphone)mainly to ask what are you doing, where are you, where are we going to meet, with people from here". In line with this, when reflecting the use of smartphones in their home countries Thao as well as Shalim outline that the expectations they had in relation to the affordances of the smartphone were mainly related to the reality of their

everyday life, the here and now, linked to specific social relations in a specific physical space ("with people from here"). Related to the life before the flight smartphones importance is thus referred in the interviews as a medium to navigate/ facilitate the communication and the organization of social relations along the time continuum of the here and now and the near future ("now or tomorrow"). When leaving the country the imagined affordances of the smartphone have fundamentally changed: "When I left, the smartphone was the only way to contact them and for them the only way to know where I am, if I am okay". Within the experience of the flight, Shalim indicates a time rupture that disrupted and uprooted him physically from a specific place and from meaningful face to face interactions in his home country. The flight altered social relations with significant others that are physically distant and thus only digitally accessible. As stated in the interview quote, the smartphone became the only medium ("the only way") through which Shalim was able to maintain meaningful interactions and to stay in contact with beloved ones, he has left behind. In the subjective experience of flight, the present and the near future are not linked to a specific place but extend by including a digital dimension that becomes significantly meaningful: "but now it (the use of the smartphone) is different. Being connected with them is essential for me". This is in line with what Diminescue (2008,1) means, when she writes, "migrants are the actors of a culture of bonds" which becomes more and more complex and dynamic in the era of digitalization. The smartphone in the interviews is now not only a tool to organize their everyday life around the present and the near future in a synchronized way, but "the only way to get in touch with them and the only way for them to know where I am, if I am okay". As Martin Shields et al. (2021:2) state "In the stress and uncertainty of being in a new place, a familiar voice or face can provide a moment of relief".

Connecting the past with the present

Shalim like others, move on this digital time continuum between here and there like a tightrope walker: "what is important now, is the digital space where we can meet. It is not important where I am and where they are. We are all together in this space anytime we want to get in touch. Now I am here I talk with you but afterwards I call my family, its good". Interviewees describe the digital space similar to what Packer (2015) intends when using the concept of 'third space', namely a networked place that can be inhabited by multiple remote users simultaneously or asynchronously. The hybrid notion of blurring the real and the virtual is expanded in the third space through distributed presence. The interpretation of third space thus suggests a hybrid space that allows refugees to engage in social relations with one another at a distance detached from time and space. This reflects the blurring of spatio- temporal time zones in which "distant zones" become all the more urgent because these same "distant zones" of the past and present are immediately accessible via digital devices. The Smartphone allows to recreate relations between "absent" others who are spatially removed from any given situation of face-to-face interaction: "Yes (...) the smartphone brings everything here. My family in Nigeria, my friends, I have their numbers, their pictures and I can call them, always". Interviewees describe the smartphone as the main digital device through which they hold an emotional connection to the "old life" that one has left behind: "Through my smartphone I was not alone, I had my old life with me. For me it was the most important thing I had with me". Hence, through their smartphones and the possibility it offers according to their imagined affordances (stay in contact with their families and friends) during the flight, it turns into a 'emotional survival tool'- a symbol of emotional attachment to what one leaves behind.

As interviewees make clear, smartphones offer access to communicative channels that provide support and reduce the feeling of helplessness, the fear of being alone. This ranges from daily conversations with loved ones, to sharing pictures, to digital participation in wedding services (Khoury, 2015: 94) or funeral services (Lintner, 2019). The powerful, affective dimensions of the possibilities of smartphones can open horizons that make the loss and the separation of exile just bearable: "Facebook, WhatsApp, all this stuff allows me to get in contact with my family, my life left behind. I am here but I am also there through [the] Internet". Being in contact with relatives and friends in the home country can be seen as crucial for maintaining the experience of ' being present'. Furthermore, interviewees provide evidence that people recreate everyday practices online in order to cope with emotions of love and belonging. Digital technologies are thus often the only way of maintaining and establishing social relations (Witterborn, 2012). In fact, the interview quote refers to the importance of new communication tools promoting a 'co-presence' that, as Diminscue (2014) outlines, is framed more affectively rather than territorially. Related to this, digital devices allow new ways of how people 'do' emotions via ongoing interaction to be created. In relation to this perspective, Hillis (2009: 263) uses the term 'digital affectivity', namely, "the emotional influence on individuals and groups induced by digital media". Refugees use the social media and communication apps like WhatsApp in order to get in contact with their beloved ones at home, to communicate to keep them updated where they are and if they stay well along the journey they are undertaking. The expectation they have to the smartphone is linked first and foremost to provide emotional support and "not being alone" but also to assure them that they are "ok": "They have to know that I am ok, that I am still alive. So it is important".

Connecting the present with the future

Reconnecting to meaningful relations in the present via the digital space allows them to create a kind of co-presence across time and space. As the interviews show, this co- presence can not only be related to their past and meaningful relations but also to their future to meaningful relations and expected future projects. Indeed, on Social Media and other communication features they can constantly switch to a imagined/ expected future with an idea of how you envision your own future: "*On Facebook, my friends who are already in Germany post pictures of how they are doing. Of their lives - it seems good. I want to go there too, that is my goal*". The future, or the idea of where you want to go, is something that Shalim always takes with him through his smartphone, and the pictures, videos and text messages that are shared on social media help him to construct an idea of where he wants to arrive: "*My friend is in France. He always sends me videos from there. It shows him and others laughing like they're doing well*". The future is mostly portrayed positively in the interviews and reinforces refugees like Shalim of his idea of a better life in the future. In the interviews, a kind of romanticization of the future emerges: "*I know that when I'm there, I'll be fine*". This positive outlook on the future is linked to the hope of overcoming the difficulties related to the past and to the present. Communication "with those who are already there" is also portrayed positively in the interviews: "*I am always in contact with my friends who are arrived to Germany. They made it and now they are there, working. This is what I want, going to Germany. So they give me advices how to do*". Linked to the future, refugees underline the informational imaginative aspect of smartphones. Via social media (pictures) and communication channels they hold on (reassure themselves about) to their goal within their refugee trajectories to reach a certain country, to build up a new life, to work and to find a shelter. Holding up and maintaining meaningful relations towards their expected future

fundamentally helps them to deal with what he is experiencing in the present time. The importance here lies in imagining how their future could be, as they can only guess it from pictures and news. Having the goal in mind helps them to find peace with the present. The difficulties in the past (leaving their families and friends behind) and in the present are easier to overcome when they have a clear picture of where you want to go. Social media like Facebook (pictures, videos) allow them: "*When I have the possibility to connect and to be in contact with my family I know, why I am doing this. I have to go to Germany, find a Job and send money back to my mother and my brothers*". Thus, the interviews have shown that refugees use digital connectivity as a third space that allows them to bring together different time zones and social relations that provide them with direction and meaning. This digital reconnection to what was meaningful in the past and what could be meaningful for the future helps them to survive the present situation and to constantly reassure them, "*why I am doing this*".

An old mobile phone: "It's of no use to you here"

However, the use of the smartphone and thus the possibility to interact in meaningful relations during the flight must be considered as precarious and as asynchronized due to ruptures in their refugee's trajectories and due to a precarious digital infrastructure that not always allow them to get connected. Farim for example when he arrived to Sicily, he only had an "old mobile phone", a device without multimedia features which did not offer him a significant expansion of the scope of action. Farim's smartphone was stolen while he was on the run. He had no money to buy a new one at that time. From a friend, he says, he got an old mobile phone (Nokia) that only had the functions of calling and texting: "*I then had an old mobile phone, Nokia, no WhatsApp/Facebook. It's of no use to you here. I can not call only text messages but it is not the same*". Similar, Shalim had a smartphone when he left his country. For months he says he was not able to get a connection due to environmental reasons: "*I had been walking alone in the mountains for months, and my situation was really terrible and horrible. I couldn't walk. I remember hurting my legs. When I finally reached a city I was able to charge and connect my phone. So I called my mum, she thought that I would be dead. When I arrived, I always tried to charge my smartphone. The battery had to be full before I continued my journey. You never know what's happening, where you're going, whether you have reception or not*". The temporal word "always" suggests that something is repeated in everyday life, becomes routine during the flight experience, and at the same time underlines the dependence of people on the run on a functioning infrastructure that is accessible. However, Korac (2009: 62) showed that people with experience as a refugee are eager to regain some sense of normality in their lives. In this context, refugees like Shalim recreate their normality around the smartphone making sure that smartphones are charged before they continue their journeys. Only a charged smartphone thus allows them to circumvent feelings of "being alone" and allows them to maintain meaningful relations and thus reconnect to their past and their expected future in order to bear their present. As Boellstorff (2016) argues: "the digital ontology depends on the physical one: If you unplug it or let the battery run out, the digital no longer exists".

Conclusion

The study contributes to and enriches the existing literature on the migration digitalization nexus by emphasizing the importance of using the categories of time and temporality as an analytical lens. By emphasizing not only a spatial but also a temporal perspective in digital migration studies, this allows a more nuanced understanding of how refugees act within

specific time continuums. In line with Alencar (2018), an analysis of the interviews stresses that smartphones, as the main digital devices used during refugees' journeys, increase the agency of migrants by establishing contact with other migrants/refugees, with family and friends in their home country and with those who have already arrived in the host country. In line with this, the article contributes to the existing literature by outlining the importance of smartphones in constructing and/or maintaining a linearity between migrants' past, present and future at the micro-level. As has been outlined, maintaining meaningful relationships in the digital space helps migrants cope with the difficulties of the present. As such, the smartphone offers agency to refugees during their experience of flight, by constructing their mediated reality of meaningful relationships in a 'third space' as described by Packer (2015). Refugees are thus not excluded from the era of digitalization, yet they must be considered as highly vulnerable digital users. As the examples in the article showed, in order to actively construct social reality in a digital era, one relies on a huge digital and material infrastructure (Latonero, 2015; Griffith et al., 2018) that must be considered precarious. In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased not only social but also digital inequalities. Thus, to understand how social and digital inequalities overlap and interact, further research is necessary that connects the micro-level to a more meso-level of social and digital inequalities. Moreover, in order to promote social and digital agency, policies are needed to invest in and enhance the possibilities of digital access, and to provide social and digital environments for socially vulnerable groups which will empower refugees as online and offline actors.

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