

How Do Refugees in Rome Use Smartphones to Improve Their Wellbeing?

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Summary Report to the JNRC

Introduction

“The phone is as important to me as water”.
Drisia, JNRC guest.

Every day thousands of migrants cross the Mediterranean from Africa and the Middle East into Europe, fleeing conflict, violence, persecution and poverty. Many arrive in Italy with little more than the clothes they are wearing. But among their most precious possessions are their mobile phones or smartphones.

In 2015 news stories first began to surface about Syrian migrants’ use of smartphones to travel to Europe. GPS and Google Maps helped them to navigate safe passage, while free messaging services (via the internet) kept migrants in contact with their families. Smartphones appear to be just as ubiquitous among refugeesⁱ in Rome. Every day, in every corner of the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center (JNRC), refugee ‘guests’ⁱⁱ can be observed “plugged” into their mobile phones or smartphones. Even those at the foosball tables have at least one earphone in place, and their phones in their pockets.



The prevalence of smartphones among migrants and refugees has resulted in a rush by civil society groups and international agencies to develop a range of technical aid initiatives, including apps, help websites, SMS group services, map tools, online databases, and WiFi hot spots. As well-intended as these projects are, however, they must be based on a clear understanding *how* refugees use the technology and the constraints they may encounter. There is a risk of jumping to solutions before properly understanding the problem.

There is no doubt that “solutions” are urgently needed to help address refugees’ needs for information and support. Those arriving in Italy, for example, face considerable challenges. Reception services are fragmented and uncoordinated and information about what is available is hard to find. Gaining asylum or subsidiary protection can take 18 months and, in the absence of an adequate welfare system, newcomers struggle to meet even their most their basic needs. Money, the lack of it, is a constant concern, and refugees appear to have few material resources – with the exception of their smartphones. Why is this? Why are smartphones so important to refugees? How is the technology helping to improve their wellbeing in Rome? And what does this mean for agencies like the JNRC working to provide information and support to refugees in the city?

This study was undertaken in May 2016 in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master of International Development degree from Massey University in New Zealand. From an academic point of view, the research aimed to provide much-needed in-depth qualitative information in terms of what smartphones enable

refugees to be and do. However, it is also hoped that the findings may be of some practical use to agencies like the JNRC and others working to support refugees.

Aims & Objectives

The overall aim of this research was to investigate **how refugees in Rome use smartphones to improve their wellbeing**. The objectives were to:

- Explore what refugees regard as important to their wellbeing in Rome;
- Investigate the prevalence of smartphones among participants and how they use the different features of the technology;
- Understand what kind of capabilities participants need to use smartphones effectively and the factors influencing the acquisition and exercise of these capabilities.

Approach

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 12 refugee guests at the JNRC: 11 men and one woman. Participants came from Afghanistan (4), Pakistan (2), Senegal (1), Gambia (1), Mali (2), Turkey (1) and Liberia (1). Aged between 20 to 35 years of age, they included farm workers, hospitality workers, economics undergraduate students and writers. Some were tertiary educated and some had little education. Their time living in Rome ranged from three months to about three years. (N.B., all names were changed to protect the identities of participants).

Interview questions broadly covered their (a) current circumstances/constraints, (b) information needs and sources, (c) use of smartphone features and (d) plans for the future. This data was supplemented with interviews with two staff at the centre and with some informal observation of guests to gain a more comprehensive view of participants' smartphone practices. An interpreter assisted with interviewing participants who did not speak English. Permission to conduct and record the interviews was sought from all participants. Before commencing fieldwork, the research proposal was ethically evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk.

Findings

Notions of 'wellbeing'

Participants in this study must negotiate a difficult and challenging environment on a daily basis. The lack of a co-ordinated reception system in Rome, inadequate housing and welfare services, difficulties in finding work, as well as exploitation by employers and harassment by police, were cited as issues by participants. Centre staff estimated around half of guests were living on the streets. Salif (23), for example, came to Rome two years ago fleeing conflict in Mali and was sleeping outside. For those who have already experienced significant psychological distress, the lack of housing and welfare in Rome compounds these feelings. When Ashiq arrived in Rome from Afghanistan, for example, he had to live in a tent in the park for three months during winter before getting a place in a centre:

(I was in) a tent, in a park so ... about 2-300 people were in the tent sleeping and the weather was cold... At night it was impossible to sleep because the wind was coming... During the day, if it was sunny we went to the park and slept in the chairs because we couldn't sleep at night... we went to the Questura and asked for (help with) the housing ... we waited three months (outside)... Even when we got to the camps it was not a very good place... we were sleeping 10 people together in a very small room – it was better than a tent.... but every bed had bed bugs... we were always scratching ourselves... when we wanted to take shower the water was cold and the food was not good...

Even those who have accommodation must devise creative strategies to meet their basic needs. For example, Hassan's daily routine started at 6 am, when he left the residential centre to take a train and then a bus to the JNRC for breakfast, and for Italian and English language classes. When the JNRC closed at around

2.00 pm he went to another centre to get lunch, then attended night classes before returning to the residential centre at around 8 or 9 pm. Clearly, when participants came to Europe looking for a better life, this was not what they had in mind. Yet despite these setbacks, most participants were clear about their long term goals. These included finding work and somewhere to live, becoming self-sufficient, supporting their families back home, obtaining a drivers' licence, learning Italian and English, leaving Italy, and staying in Italy. These were the things participants felt would improve their wellbeing.

Smartphones: as vital as water

Staff estimated around three-quarters of guests had smartphones and almost all had mobile phones. Of the 12 people interviewed for this study, 10 had smartphones and all had owned a smartphone at one time (some were onto their second devices). Participants used their smartphones for much the same purposes as other people, but the technology had much greater significance in their lives because of participants' displacement and isolation. The primary reason for owning a smartphone was because it enabled them to remain in close contact with their family and friends for little or no cost via the internet. Information-gathering took second place to the emotional and psychological benefits participants derived from hearing their loved ones' voices or seeing their faces using video calling.

When they could afford to, participants bought prepaid phone and data cards. Otherwise they used free WiFi at the few points around the city where it was available, although prepaid calling guaranteed the connection with family, day or night. For example, if Drisia had work, he chose to spend his precious euros on data/calling cards, rather than looking for free WiFi, because he wanted a reliable connection to family in Mali. This contact was so important to him he stated that even if he didn't have any money to buy food, he would try to buy credit for his phone: "The phone is as important to me as water". Ashiq said he "can't live" without his smartphone. Marie's phone was bought for her by her son in Senegal and sent to her in Rome. Hassan's friend in Germany sent him a smartphone after his was stolen on the journey to Italy. He said he would be "lost" without his phone.

Participants used a range of apps to send messages and make voice and video calls to their loved ones and friends in their home countries but also elsewhere in Europe and in Rome. They used What'sApp, Skype, Tango, and Viber, and Facebook and other social media sites. Abdul, for instance, liked the convenience of being able to contact his family at any time of the day or night. He used voice or video calling on WhatsApp, Skype or Viber, as his family was not literate and could not manage text-based communication such as email or messaging services. The ability to connect face-to-face was vitally important for Marie from Senegal, who Skyped her daughter every day, and for Abdul; much more so than having the latest model of smartphone.

That you have web cam... it's important if you are using Skype – so you have a front camera to watch your family ... and your family can watch you and it will be like normal... Maybe two GB internet on it to see your family and to talk clearly... If I am out of my country it's the only (thing) I have to use because I cannot go in the air to see my country so I have to see my friends and family, my sisters, brothers.. everyone... at least I have to see them in the camera....it's very, very important.

A world of social contact

Social media enabled participants to build and maintain friend networks internationally but locally as well. Hassan used his smartphone to communicate with people all over the world, including family in Europe, Africa and America. Because he had only a few friends in Italy and no family here, these international social networks were very important to him. Titus, who had travelled around Europe before coming to Italy, has one family member in Liberia with whom he regularly communicates, and a large network of friends in Switzerland and Italy. He used WhatsApp, Tango and Facebook, and Viber to keep up his friends. Facebook was used by most participants to maintain their friend networks – including to nourish local connections. For example Shahid, from Pakistan, did not know anyone when he came to Italy. He sometimes met up with people from Pakistan at the Mosque on Fridays, and on special religious holidays, but otherwise he kept up with friends on social media and via messaging or chat apps. When Shahid and his friends in Rome were too busy to meet face-to-face, they could catch up "virtually":

Some friends are working – they are very busy - and we don't have time to meet.... now we have Facebook, What's App, Viber and we are talking on Facebook and Skype... (it's easy).

Aimal posted content to his Facebook page every day. But not everyone enjoyed using social media. Abdul regarded such activities as “time wasting”. Most of us will admit to feeling such ambivalence about their mobile phones, for Abdul it may also be about where to prioritise scarce resources.

Networking for news and information

Most participants came to Italy alone, or with one or two friends, and few knew people from their home countries already living here. Some participants mentioned the lack of information on how to access services and support as a problem when first arriving in Rome. Ashiq explained:

When we arrived new here we struggled to find a place to go and eat... we came to the JNRC for breakfast here and then some friends (told us)...you take the bus to Caritas. They give us lunch... and then (you go) somewhere else and take a shower... and somewhere you can wash your clothes for free... so all of our day was like this for us.

Initially, word-of-mouth from other migrants and refugees in the parks and around the main railway station, Termini, was an important source of information. But some participants who had been in Rome for longer would also contact informal networks of people they had met on their journeys using SMS messages, calls, WhatsApp and Facebook. Few participants used employment or government websites to find work, for instance, but usually relied on tips from friends through calls and texts. Titus bought his phone mainly so that people could contact him about work. While Drisia was in a refugee camp in Catania, he found out about work in Spain from calling his friends there. They formed a WhatsApp friend group so that they could share information and tips about jobs. Ashiq relied on word of mouth to get work, and he used the internet on his phone to find out about places where there may be jobs. Abdul, preferred to look for work in the local weekly jobs paper, though friends also messaged him about work opportunities.

Many participants used their phones to visit mainstream news websites to keep up with current events in their home countries. Shahid, for instance, watched international and Pakistan news bulletins on sites like Rai, Pakistan Live and the BBC. Otherwise, participants used social media to keep up with current events. For example, Salif could not find much about Mali on internet news sites and so relied on Facebook. To find out what was happening in Afghanistan Malik also visited a news page on Facebook as well as BBC, CNN and Fox News websites. Hassan relied on his friends' Facebook postings to find out what was happening in the Gambia, but he also used Twitter to post about the situation in his country regularly. Some participants found it painful to read about the situations, the people and the countries they left behind. Ashiq, a political studies student, still followed current events there closely and posted about them to Facebook, although it made him sad.

Barriers to use

Technical Issues: Charging phone batteries, accessing WiFi and obtaining phone credit are major issues. For example, Salif's phone was so important to him, that his daily routine was organised so that it was always charged. He came to the JNRC as soon as it opened at 8.30 am to charge up and to get some breakfast. He used the free WiFi at the centre until it closed at 2.00 pm. He had three hours of battery life until he moved on to another centre to re-charge his phone. On the weekends, when the centres closed, he would go to video clubs to watch the football matches and to recharge his phone. I was told that the residential centres and camps do not typically provide free WiFi (it is password protected) and the WiFi at Termini is only accessible by registering, something which participants seemed reluctant to do. Ashiq would go to the library to use the WiFi there but rather than relying on this he generally bought data credit. Like the task of charging batteries, the pursuit of free WiFi can also dictate how participants spend their day.

Theft: Theft of smartphones is also a constant worry. Three participants had their phones stolen either in Rome or on the way to Rome. There is, apparently, a thriving black market for smartphones, so while this

means they are relatively cheap to purchase, they are also much sought after. Participants most fear losing their phones because they hold all their personal contact information.

Fear of Surveillance: Comments by some participants indicated that the risk of surveillance was a concern. For instance, Ibrahim had to leave his smartphone in Iran as he, and the people who brought him to Italy, were concerned about being found by the authorities. He and Yusef were both suspicious of having to register to use the free WiFi at the railway station. Malik would only Skype call his family as he believed this was safest as calls cannot be traced. A mobile phone can be empowering – but it can also be a threat to one’s safety and security.

IT Literacy: Several participants appreciated the utility and convenience of the many different features of their phones. Hassan, for instance, used Google Maps, Translate and could perform internet searches when he needed to know information to help him in the city. He taught himself to use all the features on his phone by reading the manual. Shahid often visited the Stranieri Italia website for foreigners in Italy, and he bought bus and plane tickets online, checked transportation timetables, and used Google Maps and Translate (to help with his language lessons) every day. Yet many participants did not appear as conversant with the technology – or “IT literate”. Aside from calling, Salif used the phone only for videos, games and music. Marie used her smartphone mainly to call her family. Titus was one of several participants who struggled to understand the concept of apps dedicated to providing information for new refugees in Rome. Knowing how to use the technology may be an obstacle for many participants in this study. While it is hard to rule out other factors, such as age or socioeconomic background, a lack of IT literacy may be related to peoples’ ability to read and write or their language proficiency (most official information is in Italian). For example, Hassan, Shahid, Yusef, Malik and Ashiq were all educated (to college level or above) and all used their phones for a range of information-related uses. Some others, with only a basic or no formal education, did not. Intermediaries, such the volunteer computer studies tutor at the JNRC, play an important role in facilitating information literacy. He commented that guests were far more comfortable using smartphones than lap tops or desktop PCs. Sporadic attendance of classes was an issue and made it difficult for guests to advance their skills. This may be a challenge to providing services to an itinerant population in Rome.

Implications

Despite multi-functionality of the smartphone, few participants regularly used its information processing functions to find and evaluate information about Rome or Italy, or how to access support. This has important implications for the development of dedicated digital resources for refugees. While there are a number of apps and websites that cater to refugees in Europe, participants seemed unaware of them. Furthermore, they may not have the capabilities to use them.

Access to WiFi and battery charging stations is certainly an issue in Rome. At the same time, central and local government also need to be more proactive about providing relevant, accurate, timely, information about topics such as the asylum application process, refugees’ rights and protections, and how to access accommodation, advice and support in Rome. They also need to use communications channels that are used by refugees (e.g. Facebook) in appropriate languages and formats. Support for refugees must also include a strong focus on improving their capabilities to use ICTs to this information. As centres like Rome move toward becoming “smart cities”, moving more services and information online, refugee and migrant integration policies must encourage and promote digital literacy. For example, funding IT tuition in residential centres and NGO agencies while asylum seekers wait for their cases to be considered, could help boost people’s informational capabilities. These solutions will not address some of the more entrenched constraints refugees must operate within Rome and in Italy, and they may seem unduly ‘techno-optimistic’ at a time when Europe seems focused on keeping refugees out, rather than welcoming them in. However with the refugee ‘crisis’ in Europe set to continue, the social and economic costs of not developing policies to actively support their inclusion could be very high.

What does this mean for the JNRC?

Digital resources: Refugees need different kinds of information to survive in Rome. This includes practical information on where to access WiFi and electricity but also where to go for health and social services, how the public transport system works, and so on. The JNRC plays an important and valued role in this regard and several participants praised the centre staff for assisting them with information, advice and support. Hassan, for instance, said centre staff were helpful and supportive in assisting him to negotiate the bureaucracy involved in getting his documentation.

When the study was undertaken, the JNRC was considering developing an app specifically for guests. A cursory search of the Internet, however, indicates that there are already many apps and websites that purport to help refugees in Europe (e.g. Crisis Info Hub, Infomobile – Welcome to Europe, the Village of All-together, Stranieri.it, RefugeeAid App). Some digital resources are better than others and to be effective they really require substantial and ongoing investment to ensure they are planned and properly resourced (Gillespie et al. 2016^{iv}). They also need to be effectively promoted to refugees. A more efficient approach may be to research and identify one of the more credible, higher profile pan-European apps, and to supply the developers with accurate information pertaining to the centre and to conditions for refugees in Rome and then to work to promote that app in communications to refugees (posters, “calling” cards, website, etc). . It is understood that the centre has been working on such an initiative with the creators of RefugeeAid App, and this should continue. Another option (though potentially more costly) may be to team up with other NGOs in Rome to develop an app that is Rome-specific.

Skills development: The JNRC provides computing classes to teach guests basic skills, such as how to conduct an internet search or use email, word processing, etc. However it is difficult to recruit and retain volunteer tutors. Based on the findings of this study, a case could be made to fund the employment of a computer tutor to provide basic training in navigating the internet (and in using the information features of the smartphone) so that guests can better travel the ‘Information Superhighway’, rather than being left to languish on the roadside.

My thanks to...

....The staff and guests of the Joel Nafuma Refugee Centre. The experience of hearing guests’ stories was extremely powerful and moving. I feel indebted to them for taking the time to speak with me. I hope that this study does them justice in reflecting their perspectives and that it may one day lead to better information and support for refugees.

This summary report is based on a larger study to be published in March 2017. For further information please contact: tanya.ok.6@gmail.com.

ⁱ For this study, I follow Leung’s (2010) definition of refugees as: “**All people who are exposed to refugee-type experiences and may include displaced people, asylum seekers and resettled refugees who have been granted residency,**” (p.1). This is an umbrella term. It does not assume that the experiences of refugees are homogenous but it does acknowledge that they have been displaced from their home countries for a range of reasons.

ⁱⁱ The term that JNRC staff use to denote the refugees and other displaced people using the services of the centre.

^{iv} Gillespie, M., Ampofo, L., Cheesman, M., Faith, B., Iliadou, E., Issa, A & Skleparis, D. (2016). *Mapping Refugee Media Journeys : Smartphones and Social Media Networks*. Research Report. The Open University/France Media Monde.