Affective Networked Space: Polymedia Affordances and Transnational Digital Communication Among the Rohingya Diaspora

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This study explores the intersection of affect, affordance, and agency of the Rohingya diaspora in maintaining the everyday transnational digital communication in a context of prolonged displacement and genocide. Drawing on a qualitative multi-sited research approach, I interviewed 25 Rohingya diaspora living in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh and in Brisbane, Australia. The findings show how affordances of technologies have facilitated affective practice that underpins the digital spaces to negotiate protracted experiences of sufferings. I develop the idea of "affective networked space" to unpack how the participatory digital connections have created a new avenue that acts as an alternative space to compensate the absence of Rohingya script and physical presence and play affective roles from disseminating (re)sources of information to everyday transnational communication. I argue that although transnational connectivity is formed with affordance of digital (poly)media, "affective networked space" is not only infused with pain, love, and intimacy, but also imbued with the affective politics of collective sufferings, solidarity, and identity negotiation.

Keywords: affective networked space, affordance, Rohingya diaspora, transnational connectivity, digital media, WhatsApp, forced migration, statelessness, refugee camp

Forced migration and displacement are always entangled with "spatial and temporal repertoires of emotions and affects" (Griffths, 2020, p. 99). Specifically, for stateless and forced migrants of the Rohingya ethnic minority who are unable to return to their home(land), maintaining connectivity is profoundly emotional and may create "transnational affect" (Wise & Velayutham, 2017) or "translocal affective networks" (Ray, 2007, p. 102). Their groundbreaking study on transnational paradigm (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995) has reconceptualized migrants as "transmigrants" to show how migrants preserve extensive links with their home (and other places); at the same time, they become incorporated or integrated (or not) in their host societies. Additionally, since the phone calls were recognized

as "social glue" of transnational migrants (Vertovec, 2004), many studies have examined how transnational migrants communicate with each other from a distance through new communication technologies (e.g., Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, 2006; Wilding, Baldassar, Gamage, Worrell, & Mohamud, 2020).

Being stateless, the Rohingya ethnic minority people have been fleeing their homeland in Myanmar for decades because of the Myanmar government's systematic persecution and genocide (Ibrahim, 2016; Leider, 2018). Consequently, the Rohingya diaspora has often been part of the extended transnational networks across many continents (Aziz, forthcoming). As the situation of Rohingya and their forced migration are still evolving, to date, no significant studies have focused on the Rohingya diaspora's transnational (digital) engagement, and there are only a few notable works on Rohingya lives in Malaysia (Huennekes, 2018; Nisa, 2019). So, we still know very little about how they connect with their dispersed community members in a digital age.

This study aims to explore the affective nature of digital media practices and to examine interactive mediation and transnational digital communication in the context of traumatized experiences of genocide and statelessness. In doing so, I foreground critical conversations on transnational digital communication by further exploring the sociotechnical aspect that combines the transnationally networked affects (see Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015; Ray, 2007; Wise & Velayutham, 2017) and affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015) of polymedia environment. The concept of "polymedia" allows me to better grasp how diverse media (plat)forms in cross-cultural settings are used in relation to digital transnational connections (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Furthermore, boyd's (2011) concept of "networked publics" informs this study, intended as both "the space constructed through networked technologies" and "the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice" (p. 39). This approach explores the Internet both as a space for social connections and as a cultural space and product that has stimulated the "platform society" (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018).

While the largest Rohingya communities have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, many have settled in Australia. Drawing on a multi-sited qualitative approach, I interviewed 25 Rohingya diaspora in Cox's Bazar refugee camps, Bangladesh, and in Brisbane, Australia. I mainly seek to answer the following overarching question:

RQ1:   How are digital technologies used to maintain transnational connectivity among the Rohingya diaspora living in Brisbane and the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh?

The central point framing this study concerns the strategic and affective practices of transnational connection through different forms of digital and social media. The findings of this study show the use of a broader range of digital media that enables Rohingya to follow different forms of transnational communication, such as from using the voice feature of WhatsApp in absence of the Rohingya script to everyday affective practices of sharing resources and displays of collective solidarity on social media platforms. While migration studies often fails to include the digital aspect of affect circulation, the focal point of media studies on affective practice remains "technocentric" and limited to specific social media platforms. Additionally, although emerging studies on digital migration studies pinpoint the aspect of affective culture

of digital diaspora and forced migrants, most studies focused on a single unit of analysis that includes either city or state in the western context. Identifying these gaps, this study contributes to our understanding of digital (poly) media environments and affective digital culture in cross-cultural settings that combine the Global South and the Global North in a context of forced migration. Overall, this study proposes the concept of "affective networked space" to show how affective practices and technological affordance work as core components and resources that trigger the displaced Rohingya minorities to maintain strategic digital practices at different levels of individual, social, and transnational connections.

This study is structured as follows: following this introduction, the opening section outlines the theoretical framework to understand the affects and affordances of digital media. Second, it outlines the methodology, including the data collection process in Bangladesh and Australia. The third section presents the empirical findings that foreground the idea of "affective networked space" and discusses different aspects of mediation of affects and technological affordances in negotiating transnational digital connectivity. Finally, the conclusion summarizes findings and reflects on the proposed concept for further studies.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding Affects and Polymedia Affordances in a Forced Migration Context

Scholarship maps how emotions and affects[2] are entangled in the everyday transnational experience of migrants in navigating identity, belonging, and integration (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Skrbiš, 2008; Wilding et al., 2020; Witteborn, 2014). Although affective dimension is not new in sociology and migration studies (Clough & Halley, 2007), digital communication and Internet studies have shown a growing interest in digital mediations of emotion and "networked affect" (Hillis et al., 2015). In a response to contributing to an emergent analytical lens of "affective turn" in digital media studies (see Eder, Hanich, & Stadler, 2019; Lünenborg & Maier, 2018), this study draws on the affective nature of digital media practices to capture the richness in interactive mediation in forced migration.

I apply the concept of "transnational affect" (Wise & Velayutham, 2017) and "polymedia" affordances (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nagy & Neff, 2015) as an analytical framework for this study. First, literature within diaspora and migration studies has addressed a specific type of social relationship that has increased the interest in understanding affects and emotions (Skrbiš, 2008; Wise & Velayutham, 2017). The idea of "transnational affect" is "a methodological and theoretical lens through which to understand how affects and emotions reproduce (and sometimes redirect) transnational social fields" (Wise & Velayutham, 2017, p. 117). It explores the emotion in transnationalism that includes grief and pain for "home" and a sense of commitment to those left behind. Additionally, the idea of Ahmed's (2004) "affective economies" is relevant to my argument as she argues emotion "is economic: it circulates between signifiers in

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[2] While affect and emotion are not the same concepts, they are closely related and interwoven with each other. In this study, I use "affect," like Andreas Reckwitz (2012) does not differentiate between affects, emotions, and feelings. For Reckwitz (2012), affects are "not psychological or mental processes, but they constitute an integral part of the practical activities within which human bodies relate to other objects and subjects" (p. 251).

relationships of difference and displacement" (p. 119). Digital and social media facilitate the circulation of emotions and act as resource that can be shared and exchanged within the group and beyond.

Second, the growing empirical work in media and communication studies highlights the impact of emotions and digital practices. For example, Döveling, Harju, and Sommer (2018) have further developed emotion on digital media platforms by theorizing "digital affect culture" to describe how emotion is connected or mediatized through digital cultural environments (p. 2). Hillis (2009) coined "digital affectivity," arguing that "the emotional influence on individuals and groups induced by digital media's specific kinds of psychic and experiential effects" (p. 263). Similarly, Papacharissi's (2015) notion of "affective publics" involves the issues of how affect functions and shapes within digital platforms. In addition, the recent trend in digital migration studies highlights the affects and emotions in digital media use of (forced) migrants (e.g., Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020; Leurs, 2014; Twigt, 2018; Witteborn, 2014). For example, Savaş (2019) finds that affective digital media provide a place for collective imaginations and hopes for Turkish migrants. With this respect, several concepts like "affective capital" (Leurs, 2014), "emotional banking," and "affect storage" (Elliott & Urry, 2010), highlight the centrality of affects and emotions in the use of technologies in our everyday "mobile lives" (Elliott & Urry, 2010).

The idea of "affordance" usually underscores possibilities and prospects. As Gibson (1966) claimed, affordances are "properties of an environment relative to an animal" (p. 285). The idea was further developed by Hutchby (2001) as he considered technologies as objects while referring affordance to the "possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object" (p. 444). In line with this, Nagy and Neff's (2015) idea of "imagined affordances" advance the sociotechnical approach as they argued, "with imagined affordances, we try to bring together the various ways of theorizing affordance to create a concept flexible and robust enough for the complex emerging socio-technical relationships in social life" (p. 5). In this context, the theory of "polymedia" (Madianou & Miller, 2012) is particularly relevant to my argument as it extends our understanding of new media as a "communicative environment of affordances" that foregrounds the "social and emotional consequences" of selecting specific medium in a social and cultural setting (p. 170). Following the theories of affect and affordance, Bareither (2019) has proposed the idea of "emotional affordances" to explore the digital media and emotions in taking selfies at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Similarly, examining how Iraqi households living in Jordan use digital technologies, Mirjam Twigt (2018) has addressed the idea of affective affordances in "different media forms to bring about affects like hope and anxiety" (p. 1).

With this, I situate the terms *affect* and *affordance* bringing together a critical stance of the "third way" (Hutchby, 2001), which combines the "shaping power of human agency" (constructivist) and "constraining power of technical capacities" (realist; p. 444). Therefore, this study brings a special focus on both "the materiality, affect and media on which communication are built" (Nagy & Neff, 2015, p. 1), rather than describing the types of communication technologies that are involved in transnational communication.

Multi-Sited and Non-Media-Centric Approach

Although there is growing evidence of digital media scholarships that focus on forced migration and displacement, most literature has been on how forced migrants in the Global North or Western countries have used digital media such as smartphones and social media to form transnational connections (see Mattelart, 2019). However, although most forced migrants originated in the Global South, the developing countries (such as Turkey, Pakistan, Uganda, Jordan, Bangladesh, and more) are considered major refugee-hosting countries (Bank & Fröhlich, 2018). The overarching research focuses on the European or western context, therefore, (re)produces colonial and capitalist entanglements portraying the Global South as *sending countries* that fails to map the complex mobility of the contemporary forced migrants (see Narlikar, 2016). At the same time, although a few important works have focused on the Global South (e.g., Leurs, 2014; Twigt, 2018), these studies have remained confined to a single state (e.g., city, camp) with a notable exception of the works of Miriyam Aouragh (2011) on Palestinian diaspora. Therefore, this study offers the significance of the North–South focus to avoid "reifying the epistemic dominance" (Bank & Fröhlich, 2018, p. 10) of western perspectives in forced migration research. With this respect, this study draws on the transnational approach to migration research as Amelina and Faist (2012) focus on emergent "methodological transnationalism" (Khagram & Levitt, 2008) that rejects the nation-state as a unit of empirical analysis (Pries, 2005; Schiller et al., 1995; Vertovec, 2009).

The non–media-centric approach (Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014; Morley, 2009) helps us to rethink about which specific digital platforms, technologies or devices are prioritized. As David Morley (2007) puts it, "we need to 'decentre' the media, in our analytical framework, so as to better understand the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other" (p. 200). Such perspective shifts the focus away from the media technologies and digital platforms and places them in the context of everyday life and social environments (Krajina et al., 2014; Moores, 2016; Morley, 2009). In other words, media technologies and uses should be placed within the larger "contexts in which they operate" (Morley, 2007, p. 1) and that "it is everyday lives and habits, not audiences or media, that must take center stage" (Moores, 2016, p. 136). With this respect, drawing on Marcus's (1995) multi-sited approach, this study engages members of the Rohingya in Brisbane and the refugee camp setting in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, each distinctive but interconnected locations. Furthermore, following the multi-sited and non–media-centric approach, I emphasize that qualitative inquiry requires a revisit and rethink of conceptual and methodological approaches for analyzing and understanding the phenomena of migration and diasporic transnational connections in a digital age (see Marino, 2021).

Overall, applying this integrated framework, this study calls for a (re)conceptualization of affective culture in digital media and communication studies, bringing the digital culture of connectivity among marginalized communities from a transnational perspective in a cross-cultural setting that goes beyond a nation-state. On the one hand, this study contributes to a sociotechnical approach to digital communication research that intersects digital media, transnationalism, diaspora, and forced migration studies. On the other hand, it builds on the Global North–South relationship to identify the connections, discrepancies, and power geometries that exist in cross-cultural settings (see Aziz, 2022).

Methods and Data

Semistructured Interviews

Following the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews, I interviewed (n = 25) 15 Rohingyas from Brisbane and 10 Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh. I recruited the participants through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling, which included community leaders and activists, was employed to ensure diversity in participants' social backgrounds (e.g., citizen/noncitizen, asylum seekers), while snowball sampling helped me access "hidden" participants (Heckathorn, 2011). The face-to-face interviews were conducted in Brisbane, while online/mobile interviews were organized to collect data from the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 57 years old, and the interviews lasted 40 to 50 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Rohingya language, while some were conducted in English, Bangla, or a combination of them. With the participants' agreement, audio recordings of the interviews were made and then translated and transcribed into English. Six participants did not consent to be recorded because of their security concerns and legal statuses in Brisbane and in the refugee camps. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on all participants in Brisbane and the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, despite their diverse working experiences.

Social Media Scroll-Back Interviews

After conducting semistructured interviews, scroll-back interviews were followed with selected participants who are active on social media platforms to understand their transnational engagement. The social media scroll-back method (Robards & Lincoln, 2019) is a qualitative research method in which a researcher and participant "scroll back" through the social media record of the participant. In this respect, it is a participatory method that enables participants to "co-analyse" and to contribute in the analysis of information shared on social media platforms. Although my plan was to sit with participants to explore social media practices, some participants felt more comfortable sharing their screenshots because of privacy concerns. Therefore, I asked the participants to share some screenshots of their social media posts by their choice, and then their screenshots were used as prompts to continue further discussion on the respective posts (such as the significance of shared images or videos) on social media platforms. In total, 28 screenshots were received from 12 participants in Brisbane and the refugee camps. This visual method helped me to understand the participants' affective practices of social media during the genocide in their homeland throughout their prolonged displacement. Such visual and social media data compensate the traditional interview findings as the method is useful to explore the "historical digital traces, collected over years of social media use" (Møller & Robards, 2019, p. 106).

Data Analysis

To analyze, the data were categorized with reference to participants' narratives of affects, transnational connectivity through digital media use in a context of trauma, pain, and forced migration. The interview transcripts and visual data were thematically analyzed with an iterative combination of two cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016). The coding of social media scrolls back interviews data such as snapshots of images and texts/social media posts, including a preparation of screenshot transcripts in printed versions

to ease analysis, as well as a close reading to see emerging themes via words and images. First, through open coding, which lets key themes emerge from the participants' narratives, I looked at the transcripts carefully to understand the patterns and meaning and identified appropriate patterns of digital media practices highlighting the specific study focus on transnational communication processes. Then, through more structured coding, specific patterns were merged and compared across identifying similarities and differences between the two sample groups in Brisbane and in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and summarized, illustrating key themes. Further, my analysis reflects Doren Massey's (2005) understanding of "space" as socially constructed and negotiated to explore how the (online) social spaces are constructed and shaped by the mediated effects of solidarities and identities.

Positionality and Ethical Procedures

Conducting rigorous research in the context of media, forced migrants and conflict presents a range of ethical, methodological, logistical, and security challenges (Mazurana, Jacobsen, & Gale, 2013) as it includes field experiences affected by ethical and security issues related to violence, distrust, and social fragmentation. Considering the sociocultural and political concerns of the Rohingya diaspora, I was critical and aware of my positionality—being both insider and outsider—and any supposed power hierarchies (researcher vs. participant) during the data collection and analysis process. During my interviews with participants, I convinced them that I was aware of the various issues that the Rohingya face in Myanmar and the refugee camps in Bangladesh, and I did not want to abuse or take advantage of their experiences of statelessness. While the participants' native languages were used for interviews, they were allowed to switch to any language (e.g., Bengali, English) if any participant could have difficulties expressing any events or experiences clearly.

In addition, I had regular contact with several Rohingya community leaders who helped me to gain access to the participants, including several Rohingya cultural events (e.g., Rohingya food events) in Brisbane, praying together at a mosque, and informal chats in coffee shops. Such religious and cultural involvement helped me to gain trust and build a good rapport with the participants. Because of my previous voluntary work experiences in the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, as well as being a citizen of the neighboring country of Myanmar, I am familiar with the participants' language, religions, and culture that helped me to gain trust and to connect with "hard-to-reach" participants. For ethical considerations, any identifications (such as names and images of participants) were de-identified to confirm their privacy. The purpose of the study, voluntary participation and informed consent of all participants were confirmed before conducting interviews. A trained female research assistant was recruited to interview female participants. In the consent form, I allowed the participants to decide if they want to take part in the scroll-back interviews. Additionally, ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Queensland University of Technology before the interviews were conducted.

Findings and Discussion

The study outlines the key empirical findings to show how the everyday practices of digitally mediated transnational connections are shaped by affects and affordances of digital technologies. In the following section, I identify three key themes of transnational connections, which are mediated and

maintained by different strategies in affective mediation of polymedia affordances: (1) photographic practices of grief and mourning through storing and sharing digital images, (2) WhatsApp affordance for voice-messaging features and "virtual groups" connection, and (3) affective politics of collective sufferings and solidarities on social media. Put together, the idea of affective networked space shows how the digital media environment enables traumatic experiences (of genocide, displacement) to forge stronger ties, maintain family bonds, and articulate their collective sufferings and identity.

Photographs of Grief and Mourning

As the Rohingya diaspora are dispersed across the world, waiting in the camps and struggles for returning home are an intensely affective, embodied and mediated experience. For ASR, a 57-year-old Rohingya man living in Brisbane, Australia, he has no hope to return and see his family members in the refugee camps and Myanmar. Full of frustration, he said, "I left all of my family members in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. I have no passport. I cannot travel. I am stuck here. I have no hope to see them in my life." While being "stuck" in the refugee camps or in Australia in a context of social and spatial immobility (see Aziz, 2022), here I seek to (re)think how photography practices of the Rohingya act as an affective networked space.

Despite the security control and surveillance in the camp, a group of Rohingya youth in the camp has been quite active in taking and sharing photographs on social media (see Figure 1). Photography practices among young Rohingya have played a significant role in raising their voices of everyday struggle in the camp. I found some participants like OMF, an amateur photographer who coordinates camp-based photography practices on social media platforms. OMF, a 25-year-old Rohingya man from the refugee camp, said:

> I use Facebook and Instagram to share images of the camp. I have some friends who also take pictures and send me to post on social media. Like, if anything happened in the camp, I run there to take photos. You know, there are many problems in the camp. Recently, there was a massive monsoon rain and fire incident, in which many people were affected and lost their makeshift homes in the camps. I take photos and share them on social media to show the *sufferings and grief* of our people and their everyday struggles in the camp. (emphasis added)
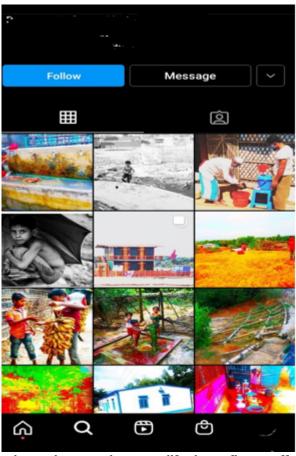
Figure 1. The image shows the everyday camp life that reflects sufferings and livelihood struggle of the Rohingya in the refugee camp. Source: OMF (personal communication, February 6, 2021) wanted to show others about refugee life in the camps.

A Rohingya man in Brisbane, MHU (49), who was granted Australian citizenship, lived around 20 years in the Cox's Bazar camp before resettling in Australia in 2010. He recently traveled to Bangladesh to see his ailing mother. He stayed there for around two weeks and came back in late February 2020, just before the COVID travel ban in Australia. He lost his mother during the pandemic, as well as two of his relatives in the Cox's Bazar refugee camp. He felt upset that he could not attend their funerals. During the conversation with him, he showed me images of his brothers, parents, and other family members with whom he used to live in the Kutupalong refugee camp (Cox's Bazar) and elsewhere in Bangladesh. I suggested that his mobile has been like a "repository" of his family. Nodding, he opened his smartphone and showed me, saying, "Look [at] this. It was me when I was 33 years old. Can you recognize me? But my youngest son recognized me at first glance. I was a bit surprised." Then we talked about his life in the Cox's Bazar refugee camp and in Brisbane. He again opened his smartphone and showed me, saying:

> See this [image of] graveyard in the camp, where my mom is buried recently, closed to
> my father. I could not travel to Bangladesh due to COVID restriction[s]. My brother sent
> this picture of *janaza* [funeral program]. Look, she is my sister. I lost her a few years ago.
> This is my younger brother who is now in Saudi Arabia, I met him many years ago. And
> he is the youngest, my only brother who still lives in Bangladesh. (MHU, 49, Brisbane)

Like MHU, other participants who also deploy storing photographs recognize the logic of "displaying" as well as "doing" family (Finch, 2007). Some participants told me about storing digital images of their burning houses, fleeing, crossing the border, and camp life to sustain family ties, which are mostly collected from social media platforms such as Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups. In this way, their smartphones become "personal digital archives" (Georgiou & Leurs, 2022, p. 669). Besides this, as a strategy for preserving digital images, Rahman, a participant in Brisbane, uses external hard disks to store the images to keep memories more secure and sustainable. The experience of storing the image denotes material aspects of transnational digital connectivity as well as reflections on affective practices through spaces and objects. Such affordances of smartphones provide a digital (virtual) space to share and feel other family members that help to bridge the emotional gaps because of feelings of isolation, pain, and traumatized experiences (Caruth, 1995). Participants' empathetic expressions and feelings in this condition addressed the transnational care through sharing resources, emotional care, and support. Thus, smartphones as polymedia particularly comprise a wide range of affordances (Madianou, 2014) that can be directly entangled within media practices, including taking photos, sharing with others, and on social media.

Showing me photos and sharing their family stories is a way of revealing grief and mourning. Such practices potentially advance affective capital and solidarities in imagining family members and kinship as it "moves across or between subjects, objects, signs and others" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 348). The affective circulation (Ahmed, 2004) of photographs from Cox's Bazar refugee camps to Brisbane and vice versa facilitates transnational connections as well as affective artifacts of agency and solidarity in everyday practice (Pink, 2011), which extends the "fluidity" of "doing family" (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011) processes beyond home. Such findings are like Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford's (2016) study, which found that Karen refugees in Melbourne use digital photographs to build a "family imaginary" that refers to "the persistence of family against all odds" (p. 233). Similarly, this is what Baldassar (2008) defines as "proxy co-presence," (p. 262) as an additional form of care where physical and digital formats (e.g., photography) embody the absences of others.

As is evident in the next section, the affordances of social media platforms such as WhatsApp also catalyze the flow of emotions and resources to maintain everyday communications within the Rohingya diaspora.

Affordances of WhatsApp

Being "Heard and Felt"

The idea of "*heard and felt*" is a strategy of getting together with family and friends through using voice options on social and digital platforms like WhatsApp and Messenger. Particularly, utilizing the voice-messaging feature in WhatsApp has been so common and popular within the Rohingya diaspora. During my fieldwork, I observed that most participants felt it was more convenient to use voice messages than writing

texts for daily communication. I had a similar experience of using voice messaging while communicating with my prospective participants in this study. Many participants identified the key reason for using voice messages as a lower literacy rate among the Rohingya members and, importantly, the absence of a uniform, written script of Rohingya's *Zuban* (language).[3] In this context, the networked and participatory nature of WhatsApp has enabled a substantively new forum for the "voiceless" in which they create an alternative networked space to compensate for the absence of a Rohingya script and to play integral roles in disseminating and responding to everyday information. Importantly, operating such features does not necessarily require more complex digital literacy or skills as SUD, a 45-year-old Rohingya man in Brisbane said:

> My mom, who is around 72-year-old does not know how to write and read English. But she has always been busy with WhatsApp, receiving other voice messages as well as sharing her voices and images with my relatives and family members. So, when she wakes up, her first and mandatory morning task is to check WhatsApp messages and respond to them.

Despite a lack of digital skills, the affordance of voice features in WhatsApp allowed SUD's mother to play an active role in maintaining relationships with her long-distance family members. Receiving audio/voice messages from others with WhatsApp numbers allows her to build up a voice archive that facilitates fluidity in keeping diasporic intimacy and psychological proximity through listening to voice messages multiple times and responding to them accordingly at her convenience. Similarly, EML, a 36-year-old Rohingya man in Brisbane said, "We mostly use voice messages option, which is also more convenient and easier to share with other (family) members. Once (voice) messages are sent, everyone gets it simultaneously." He also shared his experience with the family members who are now living in the refugee camp:

> My parents and wife (who now live in the refugee camp) always prefer using the voice messaging option as they cannot write in either Burmese or Rohingya on social media. Also, they sometimes get emotional and suddenly start crying when I talk to them directly over mobile phone. So, I prefer sending voice messages. (EML, 36, Rohingya man, Brisbane)

The quote from EML shows the ambivalence that lies in the mediated co-presence of phone calls and becomes a communicative obstacle within a family context. Thus, voice messages allow the deployment of "strategies of control" (Lincoln & Robards, 2016, p. 932) in managing pain and tension of mobile intimacy (Cabalquinto, 2018). In this way, the affordance of voice messages becomes an effective strategy to avoid disappointment of family members. In the next section, I will further explore how virtual practices as a mediated connection further feed into the affectivity within family settings to share pain and grief in the prolonged displacement.

Connecting Through "Virtual Village"

During the genocide in 2017, it was impossible to communicate with community members and keep them in contact because of unforeseen and adverse consequences and subsequent sudden

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[3] There are multiple factors in losing the originality of Rohingya language. See https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/language-crisis-rohingya

displacement. Participants in this study expressed their concerns about their home(land) and "left-behind" family and friends in Rakhine, who were unable to take shelter in Bangladesh or who migrated to somewhere else. Such unpredictable and evolving conditions led them to be grouped in a social media platform called WhatsApp, even based on a specific area of Rakhine state in Myanmar, which can be thought of as a "*virtual village*." EML, a 36-year-old Rohingya man who came by boat and applied for asylum status in Australia, said about the transnational connection strategies during genocide. While the Rakhine crisis is still evolving, social media platforms such as WhatsApp facilitate the community members to stay united and connected across the world. Such affordances of "virtual togetherness" have been tremendously helpful during and after their forced migration to Bangladesh and any other countries. According to EML, it helped him connect with those who used to meet each other in Rakhine and now come together virtually. He said:

> We have a WhatsApp group based on our *para* (village/suburb) in Rakhine. Before and during the genocide, many relatives and family members of our *para* fled to Bangladesh and later, to other countries scattered across the world. We created a WhatsApp group where we all (from the same village) are connected. We shared our daily struggles and helped each other if someone needed help for migration and settlement in a new country. (EML, 36, Brisbane)

Such ideas of area-based *virtual group* practice made it easier to communicate with everyone who are from a specific area within a very short time. Some other participants also followed the same strategy to connect with their loved ones virtually. Although they are engaged with multiple other Rohingya-related groups, the groups created based on villages have been used more than other groups. As EML said, he is involved with many other groups on WhatsApp but is more connected and comfortable with the village-based group, as he knows all other members *connected* through this group. Such a group is more private and provides an array of affective connections. As EML said, "We do *glopo gojob* (informal chats), share family stories, make fun as we used to do together in our village in Rakhine (state)."

Many participants claimed that maintaining a group offers a "repository of contact list" of the most closed one with their phone numbers and profile images. WhatsApp provides multiple options like audio-visual and voice messaging that can also be shared within a very short time through *forwarding* features to other groups, family members, or individuals who are not connected in the same group, especially news and information about conflict, loss, and violence. For the Rohingya diaspora, WhatsApp enables a "virtual copresence" to compensate for the physical absence and to get engaged in everyday experiences from a distance. Such findings reflect the study of Eva Nisa (2019) that shows how Rohingya in Malaysia have found a "virtual heaven" through polymedia. Overall, while the displaced Rohingya communities have been living full of uncertainty, WhatsApp embodied virtual "homes" (Doná, 2015) within the material and deterritorialized transnational spaces that reinforce "affective networked space" to maintain transnational connectivity.

While these findings and the discussion above suggest that digital connections help to maintain "togetherness" through strategic practices, it is also about affective politics of collective suffering, transnational solidarity, and identity construction. How these collective sufferings as an affective practice take place on social media will be further explored in the next section.

Affective Politics of Collective Sufferings and Pains

During the social media scroll-back interview, participants shared screenshots from their social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) that reflect their pain and traumatic experiences of displacement and statelessness. For example, OMF, a 24-year-old Rohingya man from the refugee camp, shared the image (see Figure 2) from his Twitter posts to show how the Rohingya in the refugee camp in Bangladesh gathered in front of a temporarily set digital big screen to get the update on a preliminary ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2019 (Strangio, 2021). The image shows the expression of happiness among the Rohingya refugees in the camp for getting the Internet connection back after a year-long Internet blackout that enabled watching the preliminary ruling by the ICJ. The ruling of the ICJ brought joy and confidence among the Rohingya as it ordered provisional measures to prevent the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar following the UN 1948 Genocide Convention. Witnessing such a joyous moment together is an affective phenomenon that connects the transnational Rohingya diaspora, including those who were present in the Netherlands' ICJ premises on the same day. Such digital participation establishes an affective networked space between the transnational Rohingya diaspora as well as global audiences. Athina Kuntsman (2012) describes "affective fabrics" as "the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics and sensory energies" (p. 3) and calls for analysis of "the ways in which affect, and emotions take shape through movement between contexts, websites, forums, blogs, comments, and computer screens" (p. 1). Mapping images of refugees on Twitter, Geboers and Van De Wiele (2020) argue that online social networks offer a visuality that "perform" affective behaviors within platform affordances. Collective witnessing with gratitude during the ICJ ruling envisages affective hope and media solidarities (Nikunen, 2019).

Figure 2. The Rohingya refugees gathered in the Cox's Bazar camp in front of a temporary set digital screen to watch the update of the ICJ ruling in 2019. Source: OMF (personal communication, February 6, 2021) stated that he was happy to share this special moment of the Rohingya refugee in the camps.

Similarly, another participant (HJR) from Brisbane shared the images from his Facebook post (see Figure 3) that show forced displacement and influx into Bangladesh during the Rohingya genocide in 2017. The participant called the situation a "catastrophic and traumatic" abuse of the Rohingya ethnic minority by the Burmese government. He also sought everyone to pray for the Rohingya, the "victims of genocide." Such visual practices on social media affectively engage transnational diasporic networks to show collective feelings of grief, suffering, and victimhood. Chouliaraki's (2021) recent study on "victimhood as an affective politics of vulnerability" (p. 16) is useful to explore the Rohingya's affective practices on social media. Situating victimhood within the (digital) communicative context, she focuses on how "the circulation of affective claims to suffering" has formed "platformized pain" as an emerging reality of digital culture (Chouliaraki, 2021, p. 10). Additionally, witnessing and sharing the images of collective sufferings of the Rohingya diaspora can also be relevant to Al-Ghazzi's idea of "affective proximity," as the Rohingya "captures the feeling of being close to violence in one's own country and community" (Al-Ghazzi, 2021, p. 3).
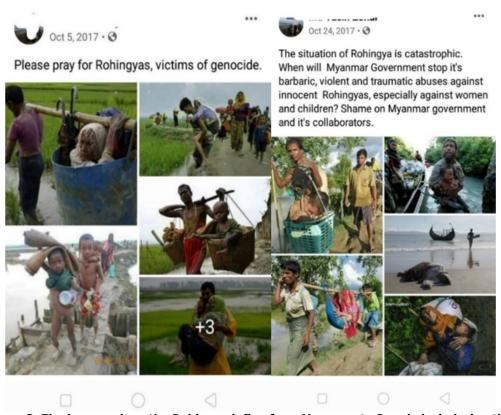

Figure 3. The images show the Rohingya influx from Myanmar to Bangladesh during the genocide 2017. Source: HJR (personal communication, December 10, 2020) raised his concern about the Rohingya genocide with his emphatic expression.

Similarly, as a form of transnational communication, the hashtag practices (such as *#RohingyaCamp*, *#SaveRohingya*, and *#StopGenocide)* serves as a "solidarity symbol" (Collins, 2004, p. 56) on social media. Practicing such pictorial symbols and social media practices, such as using emojis, facilitates "media solidarities" (Nikunen, 2019) and works as an "affective structure of communication" (Chouliaraki, 2021, p. 12) in maintaining transnational connections. Expressing collective feelings of pain in this way reflects what Papacharissi (2016) calls "soft structures of story-telling" (p. 321) that resonate and amplify the Rohingya's statelessness and forced migration.

Overall, the empirical evidence in this study demonstrates how affective practices have a crucial role in enhancing the sense of everyday interaction, community building, virtual togetherness, and transnational identity negotiation. Such communicative practices facilitate the idea of "affective networked space," as an emergent subjective form of networked space that acts as a (re)source for everyday media practices and transnational engagement.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the intersection of affect, affordance, and agency of the Rohingya diaspora in their everyday transnational digital communication. By employing the concept of "affective networked space," this study has mapped digital media practices among the stateless Rohingya to explore how affective mediation through technological affordances enabled them to connect and share collective experiences of suffering in response to genocide and forced displacement. I argue that the study of affect and affordances of technologies should be contextualized within the cross-cultural settings and power relations that shape affective affordances of transnational communication. While the proposed idea combines affective mediation and technological affordance, primarily, it provides three directions:

First, bringing a sociotechnical approach (e.g., "*heard and felt*"), "affective networked space" captures both the affective mediation of proximity, such as emotional attachment of pain, anxiety, and love, as well as affordances of digital media such as audio/visual practices in cross-cultural settings. The findings reveal different forms of transnational networks of connectivity to exemplify how the digital materialities (Pink, Ardévol, & Lanzeni, 2016) and affectivity are deeply entangled. Therefore, I argue that affordances of technologies are not only material but also affective and emotional that constitute the transnational networked space of forced migrants.

Second, the "affective networked space" illustrates how the participatory digital connections have created a new avenue that acts as an alternatives space as well as a resource to compensate for the absence of (Rohingya) script and a physical presence and plays an affective role in disseminating resources to everyday transnational communication that trigger the politics of collective suffering and solidarities through different digital forms in response to trauma and suffering. It shows how the affinities and the disjuncture of "self" and "other" are (re)formed, bringing people together through shared and collective sentiments (Wright, 2012). Additionally, the "affective networked space" offers unique features of coping with uncertainty as well as performing transnational identity to exert individuals' agency in the context of (im)mobility, power relations, and forced displacement (Aziz, 2022).

Third, the proposed idea is built on polymedia affordances (e.g., smartphones, WhatsApp), that focus on emotional attachment in selecting a specific medium in a social and cultural context. Therefore, the "affective networked space" is not only considered as a medium but is also viewed as the networked infrastructure that provides relatively flexible, participatory, and affective interaction. In other words, the idea advances a broader perspective of media that includes different forms such as images, texts, audios, and platforms in the "social processes of reception and consumption" (Silverstone, 2005, p. 188). However, although major scholarship about digital media, affects, and transnational communication focuses primarily on family connections (e.g., Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2005; Wilding et al., 2020), the proposed idea advances the current understanding of affective practices in maintaining multiple public and private spheres of diasporic engagement (Van Hear & Cohen, 2017), such as family, community, and transnational/imagined communities. With this, the proposed idea is built on digital practices, which is shaped by certain social and emotional aspects that lead to the broader participatory and communicative environment.

To conclude, proposing the concept of "affective networked space," this study offers a distinctive contribution to the work that Döveling and colleagues (2018), Hillis and colleagues (2015), Kuntsman (2012), Madianou and Miller (2012), Papacharissi (2015), Wise and Velayutham (2017), and other emerging scholarships (see, for an overview, Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020; Eder et al., 2019; and Lünenborg & Maier, 2018) have been to contribute to the "affective turn" (Clough & Halley, 2007) in digital culture, media, and communication studies and digital migration studies. As Sandra Ponzanesi (2020) argues that while the critical role of emotions and affect is overlooked in migration and integration studies, a special attention to the affective dimension of connections could bridge the gaps between the user and digital technologies through understanding "how the body and technology need to be rethought as flows and circulations of intensities" (p. 988). This study adds to the burgeoning research on the affective nature of digital media practice and opens room for further research to investigate how different media (plat)forms are used among forcibly displaced, vulnerable groups, and beyond.

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