



Smartphones and social media –
How are they utilized to access information and communicate
and what role do they play for refugees and migrants?

Sophia Wyatt (University of Vienna)



The MIRROR project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation action program under grant agreement № 832921.

Aim and Framework

Objectives

- Deepen the understanding of migrants' and refugees' media use at different stages of the migration process
- Role of smartphone during the process of migration
- Identification of information gaps & (mis)perceptions

Theoretical framework

- Media-supported migration decision-making
- Contemporary migration is often characterized by its processual nature
- Many migration decisions are only made when already *en route*



Data and Methodology

MIRROR Field research

- 152 semi-structured interviews with migrants and refugees conducted between August 2020 and May 2021
- 6 different locations: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Jordan, Libya and Turkey
- 40+ expert interviews

Participatory research process

- Research ~~on~~ with *irregular migrants*
- Former refugees and migrants acted as interviewers – native language when possible
- Do no harm-approach



Role of smartphones

- Migration essential
- Most commonly used Apps used: Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram & Youtube
- 4 main functions: communicating, staying informed, GPS and navigation & entertainment
- Use of smartphone and relevance of functions changes throughout migration journey



Information seeking

3 main sources

- 1) Social network
- 2) Social media
- 3) Traditional media

Social media as an overarching vessel of information

- Immediate updates on the go
- Facebook & Facebook Groups
- Women prefer personal and informal channels



Challenges in information seeking

Restrictions & filters in country of origin (Iran)

“In Iran, we had a filter for social networks and we had to log in with a proxy and it is not easy to access them. But it is easier here, especially for using WhatsApp in Iran, I was afraid that our messages or phone calls might be checked and this fear does not exist here.”

(Woman, Iran)

Urgency of flight and limited time resources

“ I was not even planning to, to leave my country so I didn't seek for information.” (Woman, Nigeria)



Challenges in information seeking

Limited access to wifi

Phone confiscations by border police

„When we left Iran, we all had mobile phones, but unfortunately, during the games, our phones were confiscated by the police. My brother and I have lost six phones since leaving Iran.” (Woman, Iran)

Misinformation and (mis)trust

Dependency on unreliable sources

“You have to trust someone who can bring you over the border” (Man, Pakistan)

Personal judgement of being informed vs. situation in countries of destination



Sharing information

Indecisive about giving migration advice: half say every case is different, a quarter recommend it, a quarter do not recommend it

Women fear harassment online and take on more of a passive role in public or semi-public online spaces

“I share my experiences in Facebook groups that are restricted to women only. I can also, if necessary, share my experiences through private chats with these women.” (Woman, Iraq)



Conclusion

- Mobile media and smartphone are essential in migration processes
- Social media not decisive for leaving one's country but provide crucial support at all stages of migration
- Importance of media usage may change over time and at different stages of the migration process
- Institutional communication failed at large



Thank you!

Sophia Wyatt
University of Vienna
Vienna, Austria
sophia.wyatt@univie.ac.at



universität
wien

Freunde
FremdewerdenFreunde.at

