Proceeding Paper

Digitalization among Refugees in Malaysia †

Mohd Ramlan Mohd Arshad [1,2,*] **and Mohd Na'eim Ajis** [2,3]

1   Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, UiTM Negeri Sembilan, Seremban 70300, Malaysia
2   Research Institute for Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore (UUM-ITS), Sintok 06010, Malaysia
3   School of Government, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Sintok 06010, Malaysia
*   Correspondence: mramlan2957@uitm.edu.my
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Abstract: There are issues with connectivity and networking for refugees during their stay in Malaysia. Thus, this study aims to examine digitalization activities among refugees. This qualitative study with purposive sampling involved three informants representing the government, private sector, and NGOs based in Putrajaya, Malaysia. The conducted analysis found that a digitization process has taken place, but related parties must ensure digital systems function evenly when addressing the refugee problem in Malaysia. The results could benefit the government and other parties directly involved in refugee issues such as the UNHCR, local NGOs, the private sector, and civil societies.

Keywords: digitalization; internet; networking; migrant; refugees

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Therefore, it is not the official responsibility of the government to address the problem of refugees entering the country either legally or illegally through any entrance at borders such as air, land, or water. However, the government signed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 to ensure that human rights in Malaysia are protected, regardless of the background of the individuals. The refugee community is included in the group that has received compassion from the government through the concept of universal peace practiced by the government. Due to the government's lenient attitude towards refugees, most refugees from both the Southeast Asian region and outside the region have chosen to migrate to and seek refuge in Malaysia. This has led to an increase in the number of refugees in Malaysia. The situation is best described through statistics which show that there are a total of 179,830 refugees and asylum seekers who have registered with the UNHCR [1]. The breakdown of refugees is 155,030 people from Myanmar, with 103,090 Rohingya people, 22,450 that are Chin ethnic, and 29,330 representing other oppressed ethnicities in Myanmar. The remaining 24,800 people are refugees from various countries: 6690 people from Pakistan, 3700 people from Yemen, 3280 people from Syria, 3200 Somalis, 2730 from Afghanistan, 1680 Sri Lankans, 1200 Iraqis, and 770 Palestinians. The figures show a significant increase in previous years, with only 111,298 refugees in 2020 and 129,111 in 2019 [1]. Thus, the government's burden of managing refugees who enter the country is becoming heavier and needs to be resolved, as the issue of refugees has a direct impact on the sovereignty of the country. The efforts taken include ensuring human safety and the registration process. Therefore, the government has worked to ensure that every refugee who crosses the country's borders is officially registered. To officially register refugees, the government launched the Tracking Refugees Information System (TRIS), operated by a company under the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN) called Barisan Mahamega Sdn. Bhd, on 1 April 2017.

As there is a large influx of refugees into Malaysia, it is difficult to maintain a manual registration process. This is because the process involves various elements that need to be

recorded by ministries, government departments, and NGOs, including the National Security Council (MKN), Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (KLN), Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH), and the Ministry of Defense Malaysia (MINDEF); non-governmental actors and parties such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR); international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (Amnesty); local NGOs such as Islamic Welfare Organizations Malaysia (PERKIM), Islamic Relief Malaysia (IRM) and Humanitarian Aid Selangor Society (Human Aid); and organizations run by refugees themselves, such as the Rohingya Society in Malaysia (RSM) and the Chin Refugee Committee (CRC). The parties directly involved are responsible for ensuring that every refugee who seeks protection goes through a complete documentation process to avoid the problem of dumping refugees and foreign migrants who do not have the status to continue to occupy the country. The existence of refugees has an impact on various socio-economic aspects, including the harmony of life between local communities and refugees. In this regard, the process of digitalization among refugees is an effort that coincides with the government's mission to ensure that every person who enters Malaysia is officially recorded. Therefore, this study focuses on the digitization process to ensure the smooth management and administration of refugees in Malaysia.

2. Digitalization and Refugees

Over the years, interventions from the authorities to ensure technological connectivity have been developed to provide internet access to refugees, and are funded by both public and private sector actors. In several European countries, these initiatives have proliferated and involved coordination at the central level in response to the refugee crisis using broadband, mobile connectivity, Wi-Fi, GSM, mesh networks, satellites, drones, space, and the use of technology [2]. However, the lack of government funding and a comprehensive framework has led to resources, support, and funding being provided by the private sector, despite having very different values and interests in supporting digitalization services for refugee groups. For example, internet connectivity programs have been conducted by non-profit organizations such as UNHCR's Connectivity for Refugees and private projects such as Net Hope [2]. However, there is still an ongoing gap between the ideal vision of what digital connections can achieve (globally) and evidence of how new connections can be created [3]. Looking back at the lessons learned over the past few years, many human rights-related practitioners and research teams have challenged the assumptions that support the mainstream connectivity discourse and questioned whether connectivity provides the immediate benefits promised. This is because if all parties involved want access to connectivity to benefit from it, the impact on social dynamics in the refugee community also needs to be addressed. Currently, refugee communities face many restrictions as they move through various modus operandi to escape persecution, violence, and cruelty. However, space for them is often limited and isolated, and the existence of safe digitalized networking is uncertain once they arrive in a host country. This is because refugee groups consist of women, youth, the elderly, and groups formed from various types of sexual orientations as well as diverse abilities and skills, and varying medical needs. This situation limits their access to the coverage or signals of the internet; all the resources and benefits that come with an internet connection, such as the power of digitization, contribute to a greater asymmetry of power in the community.

Restrictions on the internet and the digital realm contribute to the social backwardness of refugees [2]. This is because the realm of digitalization is often framed as a borderless and egalitarian space. Therefore, digitalization solutions need to be prepared and presented as an attractive and viable method to enable refugees to face various challenges, either internally while migrating from their country of origin, or while residing in transit countries or host countries. Thus, from a conceptual point of view, access to digital space is always limited by the constraints of mobility and access to certain physical spaces. As long as connectivity depends on the varying quality and reliability of internet signal strength,

access to charging points, network administrators, and mobile agents, it is unlikely to offer benefits to users equally, especially for refugees. Some refugees continue to experience limited digital mobility because of lower digital literacy rates (especially among women, girls, and the elderly) and the lack of online content in their native language [3].

When we imagine and describe how internet connections work, as was the case with telephones and other communication tools before the high-tech era, several spatial metaphors are used [4]. Spatial metaphors such as "cyberspace", "information highway", "electronic boundaries" and "global villages" not only serve as useful communication tools for explaining digital work through common terms, but they also allow us to imagine interactions between people either face-to-face or online [5]. The biased ways and cultural views of practitioners have influenced the design of these interventions; their position is particularly important in the context of continuity interventions because "metaphors can guide our imaginations about new inventions as they influence what can happen even before they exist" [4]. As internet access for refugees is often carried out through a top–down approach, there is a need to question the concept and approach of connectivity used and who manages the impact on services designed for refugees.

Next, a major concern in the digitization process involving refugee groups is the ability of an internet connection to provide immediate benefits to the refugees. This is due to the challenge of justifying benefits to refugees. Scholars say that "if internet connectivity is universally beneficial, then who can argue to determine it and whether the instruments created are appropriate?" [3]. From a theoretical view, digital connectivity and access to technology may provide undeniable benefits to refugees, as this can improve health and provide access to education and information, as well as opportunities to acquire new skills or employment [6]. However, from a practical view of real life, the distractions and conflicting narratives produced by the interference of various parties in this digitalization effort need to be minimized or eliminated. Although internet connectivity is a main objective in both the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Compact on Refugees, it is often described by humanitarian practitioners and the mass media as a one-size-fits-all solution to some of the problems faced by refugees [7]. The different narratives between the parties providing these actual services and applications have hampered digitization efforts among the refugee community.

Unraveling the issue of digitization from this perspective offers an opportunity to explore how the spatial imagery of practitioners and researchers in the field is changing "not just how we imagine connectivity but how we formulate it" [8]. Critically examining the spatial quality of relevant discourse and stakeholder interventions can be performed using frameworks from human geography, urban planning, and design and information science that allow critical analysis of work through the creation of "imaginary spaces" or simulations [6]. Therefore, understanding this narrative dimensional space of what technology can achieve is an important research task. This spatial dimension is just as important for drones and radars, as is the use of technology for the emerging "Internet of Things", for high-powered broadband, and for virtual reality spaces that add to the online experience, as each reconfigures the connection between the actors involved in the technology's operation [3]. Based on the conceptual framework related to digitization, this study will look at the issues and elements related to the connection between technology and the refugee community in Malaysia.

3. Method and Materials

This study uses qualitative methods through interviews and content analysis. An interpretive approach is used to understand the phenomena that occur by performing an analysis of the responses of the informants. Therefore, the interpretive method is recognized as the best method to explore this area. Administrators of refugee-related organizations are the social actors involved in this study, and were selected based on their experience in handling refugee communities in Malaysia. Bryman explains more about social actors as people who can significantly change social structures [9]. Several scholars propose interpretive

methods, such Burrel and Morgan, who state that the traditional philosophy of knowing the world by dealing directly with issues and phenomena is considered a phenomenological technique [10]. Moreover, the method of interpretivism through a phenomenological approach in qualitative research is effective for studying social phenomena [11,12]. Thus, to meet these objectives, an in-depth study of social phenomena and phenomenology among the administrators of the organizations that manage refugees in Malaysia is needed. This technique is suitable for studying the process of digitization among refugee communities. In this study, qualitative design is used because the researcher must study, in-depth, the phenomena related to the effects of digitization that occur. Therefore, in-depth interviews as a tool provide more information related to the phenomena. Many scholars recommend interviews if researchers want to obtain valuable reasons for the phenomena that occur, such as Creswell and Poth, Flick, and Ryan [10,13,14]. Creswell and Poth suggest that high-value study designs can be created through qualitative information because the information from informants explains the causes of the social phenomena [13]. Moreover, Flick explains that it is best to use a qualitative design where assumptions from subjects are valued for the phenomenon [14]. Furthermore, Ryan also suggested a qualitative design in the interpretive approach, which is the assumption of the informants [10].

Therefore, this study used semi-structured in-depth interviews between January and November 2021 to obtain primary data from informants. Semi-structured interviews have allowed flexibility in answering questions and allowed informants to obtain primary data from informants. Semi-structured interviews have allowed flexibility in answering questions and allowed informants' "perspectives" to be explored [15]. Thus, the researchers chose semi-structured interviews to ensure that sufficient information was collected about the digitization process among refugees in Malaysia. Online interview sessions of approximately 45 min to 1 h were conducted with three representatives from organizations managing refugees from the government, UNHCR, and non-governmental organizations. An interview protocol outlining nodes such as using a smartphone and internet connection was used as a reference for the researchers. All the informants were fluent in English, so there was no language barrier in this study. To protect the confidentiality of the informants, fictional names were used in this study, namely, Informants A, B, and C. A purposive sampling technique was used because special considerations were made to only select informants who involved in managing refugee affairs in Malaysia. Researchers questioned the informants on how the digitization process in Malaysia impacts refugee groups in the short and long term. Informants were given full authority to explain and illustrate their views on the questions posed by the researchers. In addition, during the data analysis, the researchers used thematic analysis with the help of NVIVO 12 (QSR International, Burlington, MA, USA), which is software for qualitative research. In this method of data analysis, researchers shape the received information, summarize and analyze it into themes according to nodes, and report the findings in terms of a relevant thematic discussion and analysis [13]. This analysis meets the needs of qualitative scientific research, and the findings can be trusted in explaining the process of digitization among the refugee community in Malaysia.

4. Findings

4.1. Global Virtual World

The global virtual world is an interpretation of how internet connectivity has created a shared, egalitarian, and digital space that benefits refugees just like other individuals. The study by Poll and Informant A stated that the term "global village" has preceded internet-related issues and it is a general interconnected world phenomenon resulting from the spread of media and communication technology. It is also the dominant term to express global coexistence altered by transnational trade, migration, and culture [16,17]. This was also stated by Informant A: "This global village is easy to understand as the way internet connectivity works and what is offered is described as a two-way relationship between refugee individuals wherever they are" [17]. According to this delusion, simply

bringing refugees into the digital or online space has the potential to re-create interpersonal relationships that have been weakened by long physical distances. However, the existence of virtual villages has bridged the interaction gap among refugees. This can be illustrated by the following explanation by UNHCR: "When refugees are forced to leave their homes, it leads to families being divided, community relationships being broken, and people being divided". The benefits of digitalization to refugees are clear: bridging communities online is the only way to communicate with families who left or went to another country. Informant B clarifies that it is the best way for them to access trusted sources of information about the asylum process and its procedural changes [18].

Informant C stated that the connectivity created through the global virtual world is not merely a prerequisite for reuniting separated refugee families; here, it acts more generally as a variable, and is capable of providing refugees with other extraordinary benefits exclusively in this digitally shared space [19]. For example, the private sector often describes how their services work throughout the global world. For example, referring to Mark Zuckerberg's statement that "promote access to the Internet as a variable of human rights and security because companies will help the UN bring internet connectivity to refugee camps". The inclusiveness in the connection involving the refugees will benefit all parties involved in this effort [20]. Thus, broadband services for refugees are a reflection of digitalization involving a growing population of refugees around the world, whether they live inside refugee camps or outside camps. Moreover, the process of digitization requires financial and non-financial investments in long-term solutions to address the issue of internet connectivity and broadband access for refugees [21]. These efforts are part of the idealistic digitalization of refugees. Reflections of idealistic delusion came in 2015 when the refugee crisis in Europe received a lot of media coverage. From 2015 to 2019, there is shift in digitalization as more organizations are working to improve refugee digital access, and it seems that every person or organization is developing apps, producing more than 1000 different apps to help refugees [22]. This was also emphasized by Informant B, who stated that "narratives related to the virtual world have become part of the conversation among the public, such as the use of digitization in conveying news related to refugees, which often issues related to this community will be blocked by the government". However, in the virtual world, information will almost certainly spread widely [18]. Informant C stressed that "the virtual world is not an isolated idea for the refugee community because they often use digital platforms to connect with family in their home country or connect with friends in the country or other host countries such as the USA, Canada, and Australia" [19]. A study by Paul proved that, in Japan, there are "internet cafes for refugees" used by the refugee community and homeless people to rent to obtain an internet connection [23]. Thus, this study found that the global virtual world has contributed to the process of digitization among refugee communities. Informant C said that, despite some physical barriers and broadband connectivity, refugees still benefit from sustainable development strategies that emphasize internet connectivity fairly and equitably [19]. However, the global virtual world alone is not enough to accelerate the process of digitization among refugees, so digital augmentation (enhancement) is needed to complete this effort.

4.2. Digital Augmentation (Enhancement)

Apart from the global virtual world, the rise of digitalization can be seen from a critical ICT perspective; there is no perfect 'cure' to the digitalization problem among refugees. Graham stated that digital augmentation looks at aspects of how to integrate existing technologies and advances into structures, networks, and locations to address the problems of refugee communities in the world [5]. Informant A clarifies that internet connectivity is now not only focused on connectivity alone, but has shifted to digital escalation, which involves the structure and network of virtual imaginations, new thinking, technology, and design, as well as encouragement from service providers and recipients [17]. This is because "no magic device can solve all communication problems and every need requires information from various angles as well as more advanced technology" [24]. It is agreed

by Informant A stated that "I also think there is no solution to the problem related to digitalization involving these refugees because there are some ethical issues when third parties (service providers) network design that affect the dynamics of social refugees due to not seeking consent from them." [17]. From the spatial perspective, as explained by Informant B, "it can be understood that ICT needs to be developed through existing social networks among refugees as attempts to build a new network have less impact due to ethical problems and difficulty finding solutions to all problems" [18]. This is also stated by Smart et al., who stated that improvements in the use of digital and technology need to be made through existing relationships because building new structures is unprofitable [3]. This is because social connectivity among refugees needs to use existing beliefs, as it further facilitates the augmented digital process. Informant B stated that "the use of new systems in the flow of information will affect digitization and the physical ecosystem among refugees as a result of the things they replace and as a result of questionable third-party interventions on ethics and security levels" [18]. In addition, to ensure that digital augmentation among refugees can become a reality, community centers are key for meeting the physical space requirements that ensure success. Creating physical space and meeting software requirements can ensure better connections. Informant C explained that "the increase in digitization allows for greater professional development and employment opportunities for the refugee community" [19]. This is also explained by Balestra, who stated that access to digital learning requires more effort in line with the growing number of refugees, as life in refugee camps often has barriers to the internet [25]. Based on informants and scholars, it can be understood that digital augmentation is an important process of digitization involving the refugee community. This not only involves the appropriate physical space to meet the needs of digitization, but also other needs such as internet networks and software in the area of refugee camps. This needs to be completed to ensure that the digital divide between the refugee community and the population in a country can be bridged and achieve the goal of a sustainable development strategy that emphasizes digitalization at various levels of society. In addition, service providers must also meet ethic requirements in the provision of broadband procedures to ensure that personal and security issues are protected.

4.3. Scattered Information Landscape

Currently, there is no official platform that explains virtual images to the refugee community, so those who are users of this service need to identify a method that is most suitable for them to use. Therefore, it must be ensured that the disruption to the flow of information can be overcome to achieve digitalization among refugees. Hannides et al. said the information landscape can help in understanding disturbing information [26]. This is because the information landscape identifies the process of information dissemination that occurs through various communication media. However, the problem is that the scattered and decentralized information landscape is causing problems for refugees. This was explained by Informant A: "in addition to technical problems such as connection to the internet, refugees also have problems with fragmented information. No information center explains all the facilities and services to the refugees" [17]. This situation, according to Lloyd, has caused many refugees to be left out of the digitization process because they cannot obtain enough information from those responsible for managing refugee affairs in an area [18,27]. This matter is also explained by Informant B, who stated that "we have different ways of understanding information, either individually or in groups, through a normative cultural, political, and economic background". For example, references such as newspapers, community message boards, or certain posts that contain various types of information. We also personally go to certain places to find information, such as libraries, museums, schools, or traffic stations. We often rely on fellow refugees to explain certain things to each other [18]. Based on these findings, the information landscape for refugees is disorganized and makes it difficult to digitize information on virtual platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and others. This is supported by the UNHCR, which states

that refugee settlements in Malaysia are scattered and information cannot be channeled in an organized manner [28]. The UNHCR also clarified that the majority of refugees do not have access to accurate information because of weaknesses in the digitization of information that occurs. This statement links with Informant C's response, which is, "There is a problem with the flow of information, especially among refugees who mostly do not get a formal education in their country of origin. The refugee community is also unfamiliar with the pattern of information disseminated in Malaysia. Refugees must re-learn how to understand local customs to obtain information when confronted with an unfamiliar and unreliable information environment [19]. As a result, this scattered information landscape has made it difficult for the refugee community to understand the digitization that is taking places; for example, the UNHCR and other government departments have used electronic and online approaches. In addition, scattered information makes this situation more difficult. Refugees require a new-centered information landscape to be created. Smart et al. support the creation-centered information landscape as a mechanism for communication between refugees and the parties directly involved [3]. Lloyd also explained that a study on consolidating all information on one platform is a good effort towards full digitization, i.e., refugee-related information needs to be re-adapted to their new environment through links and broadband connectivity to overcome information gaps, adjust and modify the way information is obtained, and to understand and reconstruct new information that is more complete and structured [27]. Therefore, it can be concluded that the scattered information landscape is one of the factors that can contribute to the success or failure of the digitization process among refugees in Malaysia. If the flow of information can be controlled and consolidated on a virtual platform, then the process of digitization for refugees will be easier, because refugees are largely illiterate in relation to technology and high-tech tools.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Digitization is a catalyst for strong social connections and networks that benefited the refugee community in Malaysia. However, the limitations of broadband and internet networks provided by service providers have the potential to create a digital imbalance between the refugee community and local communities, especially in terms of limited information and different levels of technological literacy. This is aligned with the Informants' statements, which clarify that these digital gap leads to the virtual world being neglected among the refugee communities in Malaysia [17–19]. Moreover, the UNCHR states that the inability of refugee communities to gain access to information, education, and employment further enhances the digital divide that exists between them and local communities [28]. In addition, the informants' statements supported the problem of access to the internet and equipment, which causes refugees to lag behind in the ongoing digitization process [17–19]. According to Hannides et al., most studies on refugees show that low economic status, disability, gender, and age are the main factors influencing internet access and the ownership of technology-friendly devices, resulting in difficulties in the virtual world [26]. These factors have resulted in uneven access to connections and devices, making the digitization process difficult.

Furthermore, the informants stated that "the limited use of the internet and access to scattered information has facilitated the efforts of criminal groups such as smugglers and human traffickers to pass on false information to refugees trying to enter Malaysia" [17–19]. Due to limitations in information and internet access, refugee groups are easily deceived and trust the information provided by criminal groups, which causes them to be involved in human trafficking syndicates. In line with this, the parties involved in the management of refugees in Malaysia (both government and non-government actors) have to play their roles to ensure the refugee community is involved in the ongoing digitalization of Malaysia. Scattered information leads to a lack of privacy because refugee communities often share devices, which has compromised the quality of independent access to information [29]. According to Poole, barriers to individual freedom regarding access to mobile phones and the internet are key variables of human rights violations. For example, applications in the virtual world are often designed to provide sensitive information, such as health and safety

information [30]. The informants agreed that scattered information makes it difficult to access true information [17–19].

In addition, the main question of who is responsible for providing a connection to the internet and technology is a matter of policy that needs to be resolved. The Informants argued that they need an augmenter (enhancer) to ensure they can cope with the digitization process in Malaysia [17–19]. Thus, the parties directly involved, such as the government and the UNCHR, as well as the indirect actors such as the private sector and NGOs, need to work together to ensure the goal of digitization among refugees can be achieved. If the government, private sector, and NGOs work together, digitalization among refugees will be easier because a holistic approach is the main catalyst in complex digitization efforts [31]. Sengupta stressed that if only the private sector, which is a provider of internet and broadband services, is involved, then the issue of privacy and information leakage has the potential to occur [20]. Therefore, the cooperation of public and private organizations and NGOs can reduce the burden on one party only. The government may be involved in making public policy, which is the main reference for digitization for the refugee community, while the UNHCR can be a facilitator in implementing it, and the private sector and NGOs can contribute in terms of financial support and workforce strength. This can reduce the imbalance of carrying out responsibilities in the digitization process in terms of refugee registration, temporary placement in Malaysia, and repatriation to third countries. When these related parties are seriously involved in the process of providing facilities, technology-friendly equipment, and innovation, the goal of digitization among the refugee community can be facilitated.

Lastly, a barrier to digitization exists because the refugee community is forced to share devices. Apart from that, there are digital literacy issues among refugees related to privacy and freedom issues. The refugees do not have the ability to speak English, have visual or physical disabilities, and are not familiar with information technology, causing them to have to rely on others to operate devices and surf the internet. Caswell suggests that humanitarian organizations should use their resources to help refugees operate their electronic devices and supply technological hardware to address privacy issues [29]. This is important because if the problem of imbalance in browsing the virtual world occurs, then the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of reducing the digitalization gap among refugees may not be achieved. There is a need to assess the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of the refugee community themselves in building a model of internet connectivity and information technology, as they are a target group with special needs. This allows for meaningful and critical dialogue spaces related to interventions designed to ensure internet connectivity is configured to the current state of refugee communities, who face problems such as not being able to interact with electronics, and low technological literacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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