Research Note

Digital skills *of* and *for* lives marked by vulnerability: Being young, refugee, and connected in Europe

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Abstract
This article examines how teenage refugees in Europe develop digital skills in and through conditions of vulnerability. We argue that recognising vulnerability as a productive force, rather than merely as context, is crucial if we are to fully understand the emergence, limits and lack of skills among young people experiencing perpetual marginality. Drawing on 96 interviews and five creative workshops with teenage refugees in the cities of Athens, Brussels and London, we discuss three ways in which vulnerability and digital skills become entangled: (i) (dis-)connection, especially in conditions of scarce, interrupted and unsafe digital connectivity; (ii) learning, especially in contexts where digital and transnational literacies co-exist, compete or compensate for educational

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inequalities; and (iii) digital bordering, especially as this relates to restrictive regimes of mobility control that prolong risks for young refugees' wellbeing and even life itself.

> *If I don't have a phone, I have nothing.* Female, Afghan, 17, Athens.

> *I'm having a bit of trust issues, so I don't really post anything at all on social media, so I don't expect anyone to attack me.* Male, Iranian, 16, London.

This research paper starts with a brief glimpse into the lives of two young people as they imagine and narrate them through their digital experiences. These people are not just young. They are also refugees who have recently resettled in Europe and its cities – places where they seek to build new lives among many others, stranger others. Their narrations, revealing how needs, desires and fears are often channelled through infrastructures, such as smartphones and social media platforms, are anything but unique. In a research project we conducted with refugee teenagers ($N = 96$) from different backgrounds in the urban settings of Athens, Brussels and London, we repeatedly recorded the intricate entanglement of everyday experience, affect, and digital communications. This project set out to explore young refugees' digital skills. Very soon, it became apparent that these young people's digital skills could only be understood as skills *of* and *for* lives marked by vulnerability.

The discussion that follows approaches digital skills as situated within conditions of vulnerability but, importantly, also acknowledges them as products of these same conditions. We argue that recognising vulnerability as a productive force, rather than merely as context, is crucial if we are to fully understand the emergence, limits and lack of skills among vulnerable young people facing risks online and offline. Below, and drawing on our research findings from across European cities, we illustrate the paradoxical nature of digital skills observed among a specific, yet diverse, group – refugee teenagers. The paradox is this: many of the young people we met revealed impressive proficiency in navigating social media platforms, but, at the same time, struggled to do so safely and elaborately. Specifically, their navigation skills included being able to communicate across regions and linguistic zones, and mentally managing many of the risks embedded in their digital lives as migrants (e.g., online surveillance and interactions with smugglers), and as young people (e.g., invasion of privacy, upsetting content, and hacking attempts). However, most struggled to navigate online resources safely or to create elaborate content in support of their educational or professional aspirations and trajectories.

Young refugees' paradoxical relationship with communication technologies, we will see, is shaped by their lives circumstances: the perpetual condition of vulnerability. Specifically, many of them experience unending marginality and isolation: disrupted or limited access to education and housing; prolongation of insecure status that obstructs their ability to settle into educational, local and national communities; unstable and unsafe access and use of digital communications. These constraints, as we discuss

below, both limit the ability of many participants to feel secure, protected and content, and, at the same time, generate agentive capabilities (or put otherwise, critical skills) to resist these precise conditions of marginality and isolation.

We will briefly discuss below three dimensions of this paradox through the data generated during 96 individual interviews with young refugees of different ethnic backgrounds, aged 14–19, and during five creative workshops, each engaging between five and 10 participants of the same constituencies in the cities of Athens, Brussels and London.

In the course of our discussion, we learn from inspiring work on vulnerability and digital skills. Particularly influential in developing this discussion is the definition of vulnerability put forth by Butler et al. (2016). They invite us to understand vulnerability 'as part of social relations, even as a feature of social relations' (2016: 4), thus, as relationally, socially and historically constituted rather than as a fixed and permanent condition. In the case of young refugees, this means that vulnerability needs to be understood in the context of historical and ongoing injustices that have led to many young people's uprooting as well as to their continuing marginalisation (though neither this is the case for everyone nor expressed in homogeneous ways). It also means that we need to understand how vulnerability is relationally constituted, involving different actors: from the state, schools, families, and friends, to non-human entities such as digital platforms and smartphones. We saw how these actors are differentially but significantly implicated in shaping (including challenging) vulnerability when participants spoke about their lives: for example, when trying to manage disrupted family relations on social media, when compensating for gaps in education through YouTube tutorials, and when contesting isolation in unknown cities through Google Maps navigations.

Alongside this dynamic understanding of vulnerability, our inspiration for the concept of digital skills draws on its definition by Helsper et al. (2021). Learning from this research, we understand digital skills as encompassing both functional abilities (the use and attainment of knowledge through digital communication) and critical abilities (understanding how platforms and infrastructures function for specific purposes and with what consequences). As Helsper et al. (2021) argue, these functional and critical skills span across four domains: technical and operational skills, information navigation and processing skills, communication and interaction skills, and content creation and production skills. As we will see, all of these skills are intertwined with how people either succeed in or grapple with the aspects of social engagement, education, and well-being.

In the next section, we discuss how vulnerability provides a framework for understanding the emergence and limitations of digital skills among our participants. We approach this in relation to (i) the complexities of (dis-)connection, especially as these relate to unstable and unsafe access and use of digital communications; (ii) interrupted or limited access to education and the compensatory role of learning online; and (iii) the perpetuation of the border and the ongoing risks presented to young refugees' well-being and even life itself.

The complexities of (dis-)connection

We need to start from the fundamentals if we are to fully understand the entanglement of vulnerability and digital skills: the digital divide. In the European context, debates on the

digital divide tend to lie upon two assumptions: online connectivity is an individual affair, and internet access is essentially universal in the continent thus, and effectively, so is digitally mediated communication. Nevertheless, these assumptions, frequently found in industry-funded studies or European Commission reports, typically emphasise the transformative potential of digital technologies, highlighting the rise in connectivity. They often perpetuate a Eurocentric, universalist outlook on digital evolution. On the one hand, they presuppose that intra-continental connectivity fulfils all communication requirements universally. On the other hand, they assume that individuals possess adequate access to material resources (e.g., smartphones) and symbolic resources (e.g., education) necessary for even basic connectivity to be beneficial.

Research with groups at the social margins (Alencar, 2018; Helsper, 2021; Imani Giglou et al., 2022) has challenged these assumptions. It underscores the importance of considering diverse access barriers, contextual and geographical factors, and inequalities in connectivity. Moreover, it emphasises the need for comprehensive approaches to digital inclusion that address both access and the broader socio-economic and cultural factors that influence digital participation. Learning from this line of research, our analysis starkly exposes the myth of universal and individualistic connectivity, as we see below.

Stable, uninterrupted and safe access is anything but universal among many of the young people we encountered. Rather, digital connectivity is often unreliable, surveilled and overpriced.

> I call my parents in Afghanistan once a month, more contact is not possible because of frequent network problems. I have more contact with my friends in Belgium, France and Afghanistan, once or twice a week. On my way to Belgium, I did not have a smartphone with me. Sometimes I asked if I could use a friend's phone to reach my family via Facebook or Messenger. Each time, I made sure I logged off. (Afghan, male, 15, Brussels)

The risks they are often exposed to are similar to other users of digital technologies, but precisely because many of these young people's lives are torn by precarity, with little access to stable domestic, educational and economic structures, the risks can be much more acute. Such was the case described by a Syrian girl who had to rely on the only resource she owned so to safeguard precious personal data – her smartphone – with detrimental outcomes.

> They hacked my Instagram after I sent my account details, emails and passwords to myself on Instagram so that when I come to the United Kingdom, I am able to access them because I deleted everything on my phone. The person was able to hack my Instagram, go on all my emails and hack my Facebook too. (Syrian, female, 17, London)

Also, our research reminded us how digital communication is transnational for so many (and not only for refugees). Thus, connectivity and its benefits are as much about effectively connecting with others in Europe as it is about connecting with other parts of the world. In many ways, the global digital divide is also a digital divide affecting Europe, as we were painfully reminded by many young people who have lost all connection with their loved ones. One of them was a Sudanese teenager in London:

> Firstly, in Malta, I was not on social media, and I did not have any contact with my family as I couldn't access them. I made a Facebook [account] to try to contact my family, but I was sadly unsuccessful because they don't use social media and don't even have internet. I am keeping it in case I can find them one day. (Sudanese, male, 18, London)

The consequences for a young person's wellbeing after fully disconnecting from family are hard to full grasp. These words might hide pain and loss, but they also reveal hope. This young man acquired digital skills of navigation during his journey, as much as skills for life: his hope for reconnecting with family drives his desire to sustain a presence on social media, to stay connected.

What we also repeatedly observed was that, in conditions of precarity that so many participants experience, for example, having very limited material resources and low literacy skills, access and use of digital communication becomes a collective rather than an individual affair. Often, digital skills, from the most fundamental to the most advanced, develop through a collective experience of *learning by doing* (De Coninck et al., 2023; Vissenberg et al., 2023), and doing so collectively, while learning from each other. This is both a common and vital practice for many young refugees who find themselves within the unending temporariness of the migrant experience; within contexts of interruption and uncertainty, peer networks often substitute missing structured and stable systems of support, we repeatedly heard. Thus, learning together is core to migration experiences – a necessity and an outcome of conditions of vulnerability. This does not mean that collective knowledge is produced in an untroubled manner. It is often subjected to gatekeeping and interveillance within the group (Christensen and Janson, 2015) and it reveals the intersectionality of transnational lives. Networks of co-learning and sharing information, as well as getting access to precious technologies, such as second-hand smartphones, are conditioned to gender, ethnic and religious affiliations, as well as to the structural limitations of their current life (e.g., in the case of rural Afghan boys hosted in Belgian shelters for unaccompanied minors, learning together was gendered and often hierarchical, with older male members of the community – an older brother, an uncle or a male friend met on the journey or in the asylum centre – mediating digital skill development).

Educational lives and transnational literacies

Research has recorded the persistent inequalities young refugees face in western educational settings, because of 'inadequate language support, failure to acknowledge and meet psychosocial and emotional needs, racism, discrimination and cultural insensitivity' (Beadle, 2014: 15; cf. Eynon and Geniets, 2015). In our research, we repeatedly observed these educational inequalities, but we also became aware of the fact that for many young refugees, education is not only locally and institutionally constituted. In fact, education is also transnationally and digitally mediated.

Many participants spoke of difficult experiences in school, especially when they reported feeling isolated and marginalised, either as a result of difficulties with language and content (taking their many educational gaps), or because they experienced discrimination in the classroom and the schoolyard. While speaking of schooling in Europe as a challenging and often interrupted experience, many of them also described how they

often had no choice but to develop skills for independent learning on their own. Importantly, these skills are digital, transnational, and mobilise other life skills learned in the context of migration. Often having no choice but to navigate on their own diverse linguistic zones, as well as different educational and institutional systems, many young refugees develop digital skills entangled with transnational literacies, that is, capabilities to autonomously assess, benefit and filter infrastructures and information in different linguistic, spatial and institutional settings.

> Here in Greece the way I use the phone has changed. I also use it to learn and read a lot of lessons and look for different ones that interest me. I want to study political science, learn about law and philosophy and I'm looking for how I can do this after school, in Greece or at a university in Europe – but I have to get a scholarship. And I'm looking to find out who gives relevant scholarships, what I need to do and such to be ready. (Afghan, male, 16, Athens)

> I watch YouTube for video tutorials to study Dutch and stay abreast of Pashto music. (Afghan, male, 15, Brussels)

In some cases, independent learning expands to acquiring advanced digital skills, as in the case of an Iranian boy.

> Well, the computer was always interesting for me. I remember when I was 13, I saw a book in a school library lab that was a C sharp programming language. I started doing that and I've managed to finish the book in one day and then I started to do C sharp programming. (Iranian, male, 15, London)

Though we rarely record this kind of advanced digital skills, it is worth noting that such learning, like different forms of learning (from languages to physics), often takes place outside national school structures and while young refugees navigate multilingual and transnational resources in trying to respond to educational and societal demands. Sometimes they do so effectively, yet we also often hear of their struggles to succeed. This comes as no surprise when so many of them have to navigate on their own and from a very young age learning environments that, if not exactly hostile, are often unhospitable towards their transnational and intermittent relation to educational institutions.

The perpetuation of the border

This discussion on vulnerability, and the presentation of compelling evidence that reveals how it becomes both a productive and a restrictive force for young refugees' digital lives, started by paying attention to the fundamental conditions of connectivity: the digital divide. The last dimension discussed in this third section moves from the fundamentals of connectivity to the fundamental realities of transnational life for those forced to migrate: the border.

Seeking safety in Europe is increasingly conditioned to strict and ever-expanding border controls (Tazzioli, 2019). These controls perpetuate the injustice and precarity many young refugees experience before and during their journeys to safety, especially

as they often come with separation from family, loss of parents, and exposure to risks for life. The words of a Pakistani boy capture in the most striking way the context in which he learned to be a young and digitally connected person:

> In Pakistan, I had an old cell phone, not a smartphone, and I used it to talk to my mother and play games like Snake. When I was 9 years old in Pakistan my mother put me to work in a mobile phone shop. There I learned a lot about mobile phones, changing cards, adjusting them, charging them, putting units and learning and repairing them. I left Pakistan when I was 10 years old with my uncle, we moved to Iran and then to Turkey. Eight times we tried to enter Greece from Evros [river between Greece and Turkey] and they caught us. I went to prison in Istanbul. Then we managed, we crossed. (Pakistani, male, 17, Athens)

Some of the skills we observed among the young participants reflect the resilience and the capabilities they had to cultivate out of necessity in conditions of precarity. For some, navigating risks has become an integral part of their learning process, as they adapt to the challenges of their environment through hands-on experience.

> I know that there are many dangers online, I know because something has happened to me personally. I received a message to invest in bitcoin and I did. I put 200 euros and then they sent me other messages that my money had been invested and they asked me for my card information to open a bank account in England to put there the money I had earned. I gave it, and they took money from my account. Then I realised it was a lie – it was a scam. But I was both small and stupid. and I got in trouble when I received this message, and I thought it was an opportunity for me. And that was wrong. But I learned that things are not as they seem online. (Syrian, male, 15, Athens)

The risks faced by many young participants are intricately linked to the intersection of marginalisation and digitisation, especially when many hope to find a way out from the former by putting their hopes in the latter. The convergence of marginalisation and digitisation is also manifested in the intensification of risks young refugees are exposed to through the technologies of migration governance. The digital border, Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022) argue, mobilises technologies of monitoring and surveillance on refugees at various junctures of their journey – spanning from pre-migration preparation to post-settlement life in cities. The digital border, thus, increases risks for those who are already vulnerable through uprooting and trauma. One of the young Syrian refugees we spoke to in Athens, among others from Syria and Afghanistan sharing similar stories, explained how the digital border can wield a profound impact on security and life itself.

> Because we came in an illegal way, and they told us that we shouldn't have a phone. In general, not just when we crossed the border. I left it back in Lebanon and nobody had a phone. At the border, they have something to monitor, a radar, and they detect mobile phones. Nobody had a mobile phone. It was difficult not to have a phone during this time. My mother was very worried about us. I was worried about my mother. She didn't know anything about us. Because she read on the news in Syria that some people died [while crossing to Europe]. Or that some people died because they were shot, so she got worried because of what she read in the news. It was very dangerous because they shot them in the sea. They died. (Syrian, female, 18, Athens)

This young woman's words reveal that digital skills can become, at the same time, life-saving skills and life-threatening risks. In the context of the digital border, paradoxically, the same technologies that can protect refugees during treacherous journeys – smartphones – become pocket-size instruments of risk, especially as authorities use their tracking affordances to surveil and deter those seeking safety in Europe from crossing (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2022; Tazzioli, 2019). These words become a stark reminder of how vulnerability is not a property of particular identities (e.g., young and/or refugee identities). Vulnerability is relationally constituted and implicates, not just young refugees, but a range of human and nonhuman actors, including the state, digital infrastructures, border guards and smugglers.

To conclude

While writing on vulnerability, Butler (2016) invites us to challenge the binary distinction between resistance and vulnerability as opposing states of being. Instead, she suggests that agency and, by extension, resistance, often find their roots in vulnerability, which is shaped relationally while implicating a range of social structures and actors. As we saw through glimpses into the rich, complex and contradictory narratives of young refugees in Europe, vulnerability both limits the potentials to use communication technologies for fulfilment – ontological, educational, social – and generates capabilities to develop skills to manage, and occasionally at least, resist and contest marginality and isolation. Vulnerability, we saw, is not a pre-existing and fixed position of young refugees, but instead, it is manifested and contested through experiences these young people have in the transnational fields that they occupy, in schoolyards, on urban streets, and as they navigate, often in risky ways, information, connections, and opportunities through their smartphones and on platforms.

The research findings discussed above recognise the value but also the fragility of young refugees' agentive capabilities, as these emerge through and within conditions of vulnerability. These agency-driven capabilities enable many to develop both functional and critical digital skills, for example by being able to manage online risks, by practically *and* mentally blocking harmful content and contacts, or, by benefiting from certain online resources to advance their educational achievements. It is important to recognise how many young refugees mobilise these capabilities to contest their perpetual marginalisation. Yet, it is equally, if not more, important to acknowledge the huge obstacles they encounter in the process of honing a broader range of skills that would enhance their abilities to fully, freely, and safely participate in the online and offline environments they live in. With so many of these young people lacking consistent access to care, basic resources such as housing, and learning, developing digital skills, like all kinds of capabilities, will continue to be an impressive achievement, yet a daunting struggle.

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