

Article

## Urban Refugees' Digital Experiences and Social Connections During Covid-19 Response in Kampala, Uganda

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath challenged economies and societal sectors globally. Refugees in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to the socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Uganda, refugees significantly compose the marginalized urban population, dependent largely on the informal sector, and are severely affected by the crisis amidst limited social protection interventions. This article draws on key informant interviews with refugees and refugee-led organizations to examine the diverse ways through which social capital within refugees and host communities in Kampala enabled and shaped digitally mediated responses to sustain livelihoods, social wellbeing, and access to information and economic resources in the wake of the pandemic. The findings indicate that digitally enabled and mediated social networks and/or connections through bonds, bridges, and links are crucial in supporting refugees to cope with crisis effects. Networks of friends, families, and institutions are sustained by digital spaces that support the everyday lives of urban refugees through communication, social protection, livelihood continuity and recovery, and service improvisation during and after the crisis. The fragmented digital infrastructure, digital divide, limited government support, language barrier, and circulation of fake news challenged the utility of digital social networks in mobilizing support for refugees during the crisis. Digital technologies offer opportunities to strengthen social support and potentially mobilize refugee livelihoods in cities with fluid programs for displaced communities. The best practices around sustained multi-platform communications, technological innovations, data collection, and robust community engagement should be leveraged to garner the opportunities offered by technologies towards stimulating inclusive crisis responses.

### Keywords

Covid-19; digital technologies; social connections; social networks; Uganda; urban refugees

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Cities are vital to the contemporary study of forced migration, with processes of expulsion, transit, and arrival inherent to their character. Refugees and internally dis-

placed persons increasingly move from village-based camps and conflict-stricken localities to towns, municipalities, and cities, which in turn influence the creation and expansion of urban centers defined by formal neighborhoods and self-established informal settlements.

Currently, more than 60% of refugees and 80% of all internally displaced persons are living in urban areas across the world (Park, 2016). Despite being periodically overwhelmed by the sudden mass influx of populations due to migration in all its forms, the economic growth and development possibilities or opportunities of cities facilitate the absorption of people on the move. However, the structural urbanization challenges in the Global South compromise the capacities of cities to assume greater roles in protecting, assisting, and promoting durable solutions for refugees (Muggah & Abdenur, 2018). Community-based mechanisms often spring up to address the needs of displaced communities, especially when support from existing governance structures and organization is limited. The Covid-19 crisis has added a layer of complexity to cities trying to mainstream inclusive response strategies targeting urban populations, including refugees. The urban-centric character of the Covid-19 pandemic has compromised socio-economic interactions (Lall & Wahba, 2020; UN-HABITAT, 2020), increasing all forms of inequality amongst urban populations.

Digital communications and service improvisation emerged as an appropriate strategy to support urban communities in response to Covid-19 and adherence to containment measures and guidelines (Mukwaya et al., 2022). Yet, digital inequalities (in terms of mobile phone and internet access and literacy) in Uganda have subjected refugees to exclusion and alienation while responding to Covid-19 (Sachs et al., 2020; Sekalala et al., 2020). Despite the varying levels of exposure and access to digital technologies, refugees have put in place locally contextualized digital responses to the Covid-19 crisis through a set of networks. This article draws on the concept of social capital to provide exploratory accounts of how digital responses and/or networks intersected with and shaped the actions and initiatives developed by different actors during the Covid-19 crisis response amongst Somali, Congolese, and South Sudanese refugees in Kampala city. We apply the social capital domains of bonds, bridges, and links to identify digital processes that enable networks to garner support and response actions for urban refugees. In so doing, this research contributes relevant insights into the mediating role of social capital on the impact of digital technology on urban forced displacement during the pandemic. The article also adds value to existing literature by engaging with perspectives from different urban refugee communities regarding their use of digital media for addressing pandemic-related challenges.

## **2. Contextualizing the Situation of Uganda's Urban Refugees During the Pandemic and Beyond**

Uganda has long pursued an "open-door policy" for refugees fleeing their countries of origin and, currently, the numbers are significantly rising (Ahimbisibwe, 2019). To date, Uganda hosts over 1.4 million refugees,

which is one of the world's highest, mainly originating from the neighboring countries of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, and South Sudan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020). Since the late 1990s, Uganda has adopted multiple policies for refugees, including the Self-Reliant Strategy, the Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR), and the 2006 Refugee Act. Whereas the Self-Reliant Strategy integrated service provisions into public structures, land allocation, and free access to health and education (Hovil, 2018), the DAR fostered the development of partners' engagement, facilitated national development in planning integration, local capacity-building, and mainstreamed connections with UNHCR programs. However, by restricting freedom of movement, neither DAR nor the Self-Reliant Strategy addressed the ambiguity and precarity of refugees moving into urban areas (Bernstein, 2005; Hovil, 2007). Yet the decreasing food rations, small land size allocations, and inadequate meaningful refugee and host community integration continue to prompt refugees to move into urban areas. The Refugee Act continues to influence refugee settlement, with minimal (if any) assistance to urban-based refugees, but also created opportunities for the free movement and right to work of refugees.

The increasing number of refugees continues to intensify existing socio-economic, political, and environmental challenges, including involvement in the informal sector, security threats, and natural resources degradation (Lwasa et al., 2021; Twinomuhangi et al., 2022). Such challenges have combined with the rising mobility of refugees into different urban areas and shrinking resources to support humanitarian response. Moreover, it is estimated that urban refugees compose one-third of the total number of refugees (over 4.6 million) in the country, and these stretch the capacities of urban authorities. Current urban refugee programs are very different in character and scope in contrast to those in rural camps/settlements. Currently, over 100,000 registered refugees are believed to be part of the Kampala city population. The Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) adopted the Strategic Response to Displacement, Migration and Resettlement to mainstream multi-stakeholder support to the city's marginalized and displaced residents. Lately, actions have focused on refugee registration and access to services like education, health, legal assistance, and social protection. However, refugees in urban areas are not provided with solutions to basic necessities, such as food and shelter, but instead must find ways to become self-reliant (Easton-Calabria & Pincock, 2018). In the absence of adequate social protection, urban refugees have sought livelihood in the informal sector, which has been largely hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite global calls for inclusive, equitable, and just Covid-19 responses, less research focus has been given to urban migration, especially on refugees during the pandemic (Panwar & Mishra, 2020).

Most urban refugees in Kampala continue to be disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 crisis and its vast socio-economic effects. The prolonged shut-downs, partial lockdowns, curfew, and the restriction of specific business operations led to psychological stress and compromised the livelihoods of refugees. According to Bukuluki et al. (2021), urban refugees lost sources of survival, accumulated debts, and experienced feelings of numbness, isolation, and hopelessness. Access to adequate crisis-related social protection amongst refugees in Kampala was limited, save for a few who had contacts with international relief agencies (Lozet & Easton-Calabria, 2020). Besides weakening livelihoods, the Covid-19 crisis affected the physical social networks of urban refugees (Bukuluki et al., 2021), compelling them to seek alternative social connections through digital spaces. In the next section, we turn to the social capital concepts of bonds, bridges, and links within the digital refugee livelihoods crisis response.

### **3. Social Capital Bonding, Bridging, and Linking for Digital Covid-19 Crisis Response in Refugee Communities**

Early work on social capital was instrumental in establishing it as a form of currency or resource not dissimilar to building environmental or financial capital (Vallance & Rudkevitch, 2021). Bourdieu and Richardson (1986) define social capital as an important variable determining an individual or group's social mobility, while Coleman (1990) refers to social capital as intangible social resources based on social relationships that one can draw upon to facilitate actions and to achieve goals. Moreover, Putnam (2000) argued that community prosperity could be realized through the quality of local social networks. Generally, all these postulations portray that strong individual and group(s) connections are necessary to mobilize resources across and within networks during the pursuit of desired outcomes. In such a context, social capital has been and continues to be utilized to explain outcomes, including, among others, community development, status attainment, economic growth, advocacy, exploration, and attainment of new opportunities. According to Ritchie (2012), the stock of social capital lies in the connections among individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that ascend from them. Social capital is thus derived from an individual's observations, attitudes, and behaviors, identification with or in networks through participation and civic engagement, community activities, connections in work, religious and political environments, volunteering, social movements, and online platforms, as well as through symbolic relations of exchange.

Mudwari et al. (2021) state that recent scholars of social capital have expanded the concept to allow for more nuanced interpretations of bonds, bridges, and links (see also Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital emerges from supportive relationships between people

within a family, group, or co-ethnic community as a form of belonging. On the other hand, "bridging social capital" is built by relationships within heterogeneous groups, like workmates and between members of differing socio-cultural and ethnic communities, that facilitate access to valuable sources of knowledge and skills and inform one's belonging within the host population (Joyce & Liamputtong, 2017). "Linking social capital" makes references to networks across different social hierarchies represented in public institutions and agencies, possessing posts and positions of authority and power like NGOs, government agencies, and the private sector (Healy, 2002). Contextualized in refugee communities, social capital works to stimulate social connections of belonging among the refugees themselves, their relationship with host communities, and the opportunities and resources offered to them through their engagement with state institutions and civil society (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Though the connection between refugees and their loved ones (their families) can be strongly undermined by displacement, due to the very experience of displacement most refugees become key network actors, especially in environments and situations of deep constraints, such as the case of Kampala's urban settlements during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The importance of technologies in shaping different forms of social capital for refugees has been emphasized in the academic literature. Many studies have focused on the dynamics underpinning the networks formed by families and friends (strong ties) within the studies of transnational family relations (Miller & Madianou, 2012), migration and diaspora (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014), refugee journeys (Gillespie et al., 2018), and intercultural studies (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019), highlighting the role of digital technologies in sustaining networks. In addition, refugee-led organizations increasingly mobilize humanitarian support and opportunities through digitally mediated responses and networks (Easton-Calabria & Wood, 2021; Pincock et al., 2021). Previous research has also focused on the different uses of digital technologies as resources to help refugees rebuild social capital, agency, voice, and a sense of community (Xu & Maitland, 2017), and to mitigate language barriers (Brown & Grinter, 2016), leveraging social connections to bridge the socioeconomic digital divide in displaced environments. Whereas Calderón Gómez (2020), Ragnedda (2018), and Hampshire et al. (2015) indicate that a high level of digital capital and techno-socialization improves one's quality of life and reinforces societal relevance amongst individuals, the digital divide constrains access to, use, and transformative experience with digital spaces which culminates into loss of socio-economic, political, health, cultural, and personal opportunities within networks. A less optimistic view of the impact of digital technologies on the experience of refugees recognizes issues brought up by unstable information and communication environments that can limit refugees' agency in the use of digital media (Wall et al., 2017). In this

regard, it is also important to emphasize the part played by digital networks in the propagation of disinformation, hate speech, and forms of control in forced migration contexts (Gillespie et al., 2018), enhancing social exclusions and vulnerability among refugees.

To the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated the nexus between social capital and digital media as a phenomenon involving multiple urban refugee communities and their daily realities amidst crises in the Global South. This research, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining how social connections forged by refugees—not only within host communities but also within their own national, cultural, and religious networks—are enabled and shaped by digital technologies to sustain their livelihoods and well-being, and promote access to information and resources in the specific context of Covid-19 responses in an urban setting.

#### 4. Methodology

The present study was undertaken in Kampala city from October to November 2021, in settlements including Kisenyi (Central division), Kilombe (Makindye division), and Kawempe (Kawempe division), which significantly host Somali, Congolese, and South Sudanese refugee communities respectively. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with refugees ( $n = 12$ ) and high-level representatives of refugee-led organizations ( $n = 3$ ), which included the Congolese Community Association, the Somali Community Association, and the Norwegian Refugee Council. The interviews were conducted by graduate researchers (one of which co-authored this article) from the Urban Action Lab of the Makerere University, together with one community researcher from each of the refugee settlements in Kampala. Each of the interviews ranged between 1 to 2 hours. The community researchers were helpful in research participant selection and provided translation services where necessary. Data collection took place in the respective refugee settlements. The selection of respondents prioritized diversity in terms of gender, age, and education level, as well as engagement in informal business enterprises as critical components to define interviewee identification. Overall, the research participants included eight (8) female and seven (7) male respondents distributed across youthful, middle, and old age groups.

The interviews enabled the capture of information on digital livelihoods, social support and responses to the pandemic, socio-economic impact of the pandemic on informal livelihoods, everyday life/routines, aspirations, plans, and social assistance, stakeholders in refugee protection, and perceptions around government support, control of mobility, and digital responses. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for appropriate data analysis using NVivo. A thematic content analysis approach was used to develop themes from the collected data. The most significant themes from the data revolved around issues related to (a) digital health

communications, (b) digital livelihoods and social well-being, and (c) challenges and possibilities of developing digitally mediated forms of social capital in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Researchers secured research ethics approval and clearance from the Urban Action Lab of the Makerere University. Prior to data collection, researchers identified community researchers, introduced the research, and made courtesy calls to local governance structures and refugee organizations in each of the settlements. Each community researcher was engaged in following their respective community. The researchers/authors of this article acted as outsiders, whereas refugee community researchers were insiders who acted as a conduit for community penetration, respondent identification, and brokers of trust for the study. Community researchers were categorically insiders since they were part of the refugee communities under study and shared a similar refugee way of life and linguistic characteristics. Although most of the interviews were conducted in English and/or local dialects as preferred by the participants, community researchers offered to translate interviews that were exclusively conducted in Swahili and Arabic languages. Whereas university researchers transcribed interviews conducted in English, community researchers transcribed non-English interviews and generated reflection narratives about the entire research insights. Researchers sought informed consent from each of the participants and stipulated that all the information collected from the respondents was for only academic purposes. Further, the confidentiality of participants was guaranteed by ensuring participants that none of their details would be shared with anybody and having all direct quotes anonymized. Such experiences enabled researchers to gain access respectfully and collaboratively to refugee communities and willing participants, capturing an elaborate context of the subject matter while at the same time embracing trust and community engagement that are essential to foster care and respect in refugee research.

#### 5. Findings

In the sections that follow, we articulate how digitally mediated spaces of social capital facilitated digital health communications, livelihoods and social wellbeing sustenance, and responses to social injustices and hate speech across refugee communities in Kampala city.

##### *5.1. Digital Health Communications for and Within Urban Refugee Communities*

Like the case across the world, the Government of Uganda responded to the Covid-19 crisis through the institution of mobility restrictions to curb the spread and transmission of diseases, mass awareness campaigns, and the use of various digital platforms to provide essential services, especially attending to health-related

complications. Digitally entrenched mechanisms were put in place by the government for emergency services provision and response, enforcement of measures, and continuous mass awareness or sensitization about the situation regarding the pandemic. As such, digital media platforms—including social media and mainstream television, radio, newspapers, and e-papers—have been widely used by government actors to respond to the crisis. The findings revealed that public entities like the Ugandan Ministry of Health and the KCCA put in place toll-free communication lines to facilitate reporting of emergency cases and suspected Covid-19 patients within refugee communities and households. The government also partnered with telecommunication companies and service providers like Airtel Uganda, Africell Uganda, and Mobile Telecommunication Network that frequently shared mobile short messages on health information dissemination and awareness to influence behavioral change. Further, information on vaccination centers, type of vaccines, and the relevance of getting Covid-19 jabs was reported to have been shared across different social media platforms and refugee online networks. A youthful 21-year-old female research participant from Somalia elaborated on mediated digital government support in crisis response as follows:

We were able to receive messages on Airtel and MTN [Mobile Telecommunication Network] SIM lines. The messages showed and reminded us of the SOPs [standard operating procedures] and other information related to symptoms and precaution measures....We were able to contact the [Ugandan Ministry of Health] toll free number for help especially when the whole family was coughing.

At the same time, top-down digital communications from governance actors also work to reinforce inequalities regarding access to valuable information resources in refugee settings (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019). This can be seen in the case of digital initiatives by humanitarian agencies and government bodies that fail to account for the specificity and diversity of refugees' digital realities and experiences (Madianou, 2019). In this study, while it is acknowledged that the government extensively raised awareness about Covid-19, the modalities of the generated information and its dissemination were exclusively appealing to the native Ugandans, as such information was packaged in English and in the predominant native languages spoken in the country, curtailing the refugees' right to information concerning protection, prevention, and transmission of Covid-19. The Somalis and South Sudanese refugees participating in our study mainly speak Arabic, while their Congolese counterparts mostly communicate in French and Swahili. Our interviews showed that the predominance of such non-native languages reportedly limited comprehension of governmental directives, public health messages as well as information, education, and communication messages across

all refugee communities. In this regard, Bukuluki et al. (2020) and Ssali (2020) stressed that the lack of culturally and linguistically accessible information and services contributed to further the exclusion of urban refugees from efforts to contain the pandemic. Language barriers and limited literacy skills widened refugee inequalities and exposure to risks associated with the enforcement of Covid-19 measures in Kampala. The interviews with different urban refugees revealed that they mostly faced arrests, beatings, and extortion from security personnel enforcing directives due to miscomprehension of messages aired on different digital media platforms. According to the refugee community leaders interviewed, some refugees do not know how to read and use much of the information on different media platforms, as most of them operate in English, which is not known by many refugees.

In a bid to address linguistic and literacy challenges, refugee associations were actively involved in creating viable communication channels to translate official information on Covid-19. Previous studies that have noted the importance of digital technologies to support refugees' access to healthcare emphasize the role of refugee-led community networks in promoting and sustaining digital health services in the community (Talhouk et al., 2017). For instance, there was an emergence of locally grounded initiatives by those who know English to translate and circulate information amongst the different refugee WhatsApp groups. This, coupled with the distribution of voice notes, SMS, and information streaming live on Facebook, facilitated the communication made around the pandemic. When asked about these channels, community leaders said that their associations had WhatsApp groups for the different refugee communities in Kampala city, interpreting and sharing official information with refugees in the languages they know. Other initiatives included reaching out to the refugee community through phone calls or going around the villages telling people to adhere to standard operating procedures and measures. As the leader of the South Sudanese community stated: "You know we are in different groups, some can live in Kampala on their own, but there are some who are badly off and cannot afford a phone, those are the people we are trying to reach out." In line with findings from previous research (Brown & Grinter, 2016), our study established that refugee-led organizations bridged social capital to interpret the communications made to the public during the fight against the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The Congolese Association and some Congolese nationals reportedly interpreted the presidential speeches on Covid-19 in French and Swahili dialects that were shared across the different social media platforms for the Congolese people in Kampala. In the same spirit, the Somali Community Association also translated information delivered on Covid-19 in Uganda and beyond into Arabic and Somali languages that were shared on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp digital platforms for Somalis in Kampala. Further, the

Somali Community Association also put in place a team to monitor, track and respond to questions raised by the Somalis during the crisis:

Our WhatsApp and Facebook accounts were useful because, after receiving information from television, we could interpret the information [in] our languages [Somali and Arabic] and share it on our digital platforms. In turn, our people may ask questions or seek clarity, and we promptly answer them through the same platforms. (male youth participant from the Somali community)

Within this context, it is also important to highlight those mediated forms of social capital that shaped changes in community dynamics and relationships during the pandemic (Betts et al., 2021; Dodd et al., 2021). The interviews revealed that non-state actors, including the Uganda Red Cross Society, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the Refugee Led Associations in three communities, developed technological interventions through the engagement of displaced persons to identify health-related complications and collection of data to inform decision making on Covid-19 response within refugee communities. Specifically, the creation of toll-free communication lines and telephone numbers linked to WhatsApp was identified by respondents to have enabled meaningful information collection, management, sharing, and decision-making amongst support organizations and the refugees in Kampala. The respondents from the Somali community indicated that such a strategy facilitated the timely removal of suspected Covid-19 cases to isolation centers and health facilities across different localities in the city. Moreover, the Congolese said that information about refugee associations was largely spread through networks online and that this helped the community develop an understanding of the latest updates on Covid-19. As a male respondent from the Congolese community said: “Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram helped us to continue updating our people on the status of Covid-19 in the country [on] standard operating procedures like social distancing, face masking, sanitization or handwashing, and lockdown restrictions.”

Despite the relevance of digital media in facilitating support and assistance through social bridges and links, our study found that users of social media platforms (mostly Facebook and WhatsApp) spread fake news about Covid-19 and how to prevent it across different digital networks of refugees and host communities (self-care therapies like steaming with local herbs, drinking of lemon and ginger, and other locally manufactured herbal fluids). While fake news about Covid-19 is a global concern, it is a particularly pervasive problem across marginalized communities like refugees (Mukwaya et al., 2022). Examples of misinformation reported by our respondents included allegations that eating vegetarian food can protect against the virus, warm weather can

kill the virus, and perceptions that Africans are immune to the virus. At the same time, there was and is a lot of misinformation about the vaccination initiatives on different social media. The affected refugee communities developed different strategies to tackle such misinformation, which often combined online and offline tactics of resilience (Lloyd et al., 2017), defined in this study as a relevant form of social capital. Refugee organizations reportedly confronted misinformation by maintaining digital networks with civil society partners and government agencies to continuously seek accurate and reliable information for sharing and raising awareness. For example, the Somali Community Association indicated to have used digital platforms to source information on Covid-19 across the world to inform refugees.

### *5.2. Digital Livelihoods and Social Wellbeing Responses Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic Shock*

It is well established that the Covid-19 situation aggravated existing structural inequalities and created new forms of exclusions for refugee populations in diverse contexts (see Martuscelli, 2021), especially under circumstances where social protection support systems are limited. In Kampala, our findings showed that refugees' economic lives were largely affected due to lockdown measures imposed by the Ugandan government to control the spread of the virus. Many research participants reported closing their small businesses (e.g., hair salons, cosmetics businesses, selling handcraft, making snacks, etc.) and having to use all their savings for basic household needs. Somalis' businesses were particularly hit during the crisis following the closure of non-food selling businesses and the shutting down of borders. In addition, interviews revealed that some households (the majority of which were South Sudanese and Somalis) were evicted for not being able to pay rent during the prolonged lockdown periods. To this end, refugees reportedly depended on digital platforms to garner support for livelihood sustenance and social wellbeing amongst the most impoverished individuals, households, and settlements.

The results indicated that social links were formed by humanitarian agencies like UNHCR, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the Urban Refugees Organization to mobilize financial resources through digital cash transfers to refugees during the first wave of Covid-19. However, the digitally induced support mobilization depended on one's positionality or relationship with workers in such agencies. For instance, some of the respondents mentioned that they had to have connections with insiders working in humanitarian agencies to be able to access financial resources. A female South Sudanese reported having received a call seeking her “mobile money number” from a friend working in the UNHCR who knew about her impoverished livelihood during the lockdown. She then indicated to have received UGX 300,000 (USD 82.47) from the UNHCR,

which she used to purchase food items and household essentials during the crisis. Similarly, Somali, Congolese, and South Sudanese respondents mentioned that some community members received digital cash transfers from humanitarian agencies on their mobile numbers to help them cope during the crisis. Such transfers were more pronounced within the Somalis and Congolese communities, which had historically developed stronger organized networks with humanitarian agencies compared to South Sudanese. Yet, in their accounts of the events, South Sudanese participants also highlighted the influential role played by their community leader in obtaining material support from international humanitarian agencies through the use of digital technologies: “Our leader has a smartphone and she is literate....I think she writes emails to find ways we can get funds to help us out” (South Sudanese male respondent, 45 years). The variation in digital use, exposure to and experiences of, and in livelihood support mobilization directly relates to the ideas of Calderón Gómez (2020), who underscored economic capital as the most basic form of digital inequality consequently resulting in access barriers across networks and connections.

Besides financial transfers from humanitarian agencies, refugees had to develop and rely greatly on their friends, relatives, and refugee-led organizations in resource mobilization to facilitate response and coping with the Covid-19 shock. Accordingly, refugee-led organizations have played a major role in providing different kinds of support and resources for refugees during the pandemic and beyond (Betts et al., 2021). Our results showed that Young African Refugees in Development, Somali Community Association in Uganda, and the South Sudanese Association lobbied for resources such as personal protective gear (e.g., facemasks, sanitizers) and food from partners, individuals within the community, and from local and international networks. The Somali Community Association, for example, was reported to have links with the Urban Refugees Organization to support female business entrepreneurs in the community. Specifically, the community WhatsApp group facilitated the mobilization and identification of severely affected business enterprises, and later the screening of qualified enterprises was done by leaders within the community. Such findings highlight how digital social connections have been leveraged to reduce gender inequalities arising from the pandemic. Moreover, social networks have been found to bridge the social and economic divide (Yerousis et al., 2015). The deployment of digitally mediated modalities in determining recipients of recovery funds indicates the strength of online social networks to facilitate the sharing of opportunities amongst refugees. In the case of the Congolese community, they were found to have created WhatsApp groups based on the five divisions of Kampala where targeted support was appropriately mobilized and distributed. A 36-year-old businesswoman from Congo said she learned that the Congolese association was distributing food to the

community from her connections in WhatsApp groups. Similarly, a Somali woman, 21 years old, also mentioned that she was in contact with members of the Somali community association through digital platforms and that they used Google maps in their WhatsApp group to locate refugees who needed relief support during lockdowns. A respondent from the Somali Community Association indicated as follows:

We tried to use digital platforms to mobilize support, both locally and internationally, and across donors, individuals, relatives, and the private sector. The private sector however didn't help much due to the losses incurred during the crisis, and we launched and scaled up a relief mobilization campaign named “Harambe.” This is a campaign where the Somalis gather efforts to collectively help those in need....Through the “Harambe” campaign, Covid-19 crisis-related challenges of rent dues, health, and food were ably addressed amongst the severely affected households and individuals, especially during the lockdown.

Furthermore, the connections of refugees with friends and relatives within and outside Uganda through digital means enabled them to access monetary support to help them respond to crisis-related challenges. In our study, the Congolese, Somalis, and South Sudanese said that they communicated with friends and relatives in Norway, Britain, Canada, and the US through WhatsApp and direct phone calls, and narrated their ordeal during the crisis, prompting monetary transfers via digital financial technology. Locally mobilized digital financial resource flows were reported to have been common amongst South Sudanese from a different ethnic group and a higher socio-economic class (living in affluent settlements of Kansanga), who had friendly and similar nationality connections with their poor counterparts residing in informal settlements in Kawempe division. Such social networks built around kinship and friendship bearing local and diasporic bonds and bridges helped refugees address livelihood hardships during the pandemic. The use of digital tools is increasingly recognized as central to community interaction and organization, realized through virtual bonding and bridging (Golan & Babis, 2019). Similarly, resource mobilization through digital communities created in host countries has been found to strengthen social capital amongst refugees (Wijaya et al., 2018). The Somalis respondents also reported having initiated online communications with relatives and friends in Kenya who wired cash to them during the lockdown periods of the crisis.

Our study also highlighted varying experiences in digitally mediated social capital responses during the crisis. In the case of South Sudanese refugees, respondents reported not receiving much support from initiatives by the refugee community. A South Sudanese male respondent, 53 years old, reported: “South Sudanese are

united and love each other....However, there was no such initiative for resource mobilization at [the] community level...only at [the] individual level." The lack of a strong organization amongst the South Sudanese community subjected several refugees to alienation regarding possibilities offered by digital responses compared to the Congolese and Somalis who had created stronger online networks with friends, relatives, and civil society. On the other hand, the wide digital divide in access and connectivity to digital communications infrastructures like smartphones, laptops, and the internet worsened the situation within the South Sudanese community. The findings also indicate that the existing internet tax limited the use and utilization of digital platforms to extend and mobilize support across urban refugees in Kampala. This reflects Bryant et al.'s (2020) arguments that marginalized groups are already at risk of being excluded by digital approaches exacerbated by the deployment of such tools remotely as necessitated by the Covid-19 crisis.

### *5.3. Digital Responses to Social Injustices and Hate Speech*

Digital platforms also acted as channels through which social injustices between the refugees and host communities were circulated and addressed during the Covid-19 crisis. Our findings showed that the adoption of digital responses to the Covid-19 crisis by government, city authorities, and non-state actors came along with digitally influenced social injustices against refugees. Such was revealed to have mostly manifested through xenophobic sentiments and extortion by some members of the host community and security forces that enforced curfew and lockdown directives. While the Congolese community reportedly experienced xenophobic actions during the response to the pandemic, extortion by security forces was widespread, cascading across all refugee populations and host communities. The interviews revealed that there were awareness campaigns that advocated for the arrest of Rwandese and Congolese nationals as perceived importers and potential spreaders of Covid-19 across the city. Since Covid-19 is highly perceived as "imported," refugees were assumed to be potential transmitters, consequently exposing them to stigma and isolation (Bukuluki et al., 2020). Such perceptions were revealed to have subjected most Congolese, Rwandans, and South Sudanese refugees to arrests, exclusion, and beatings during the enforcement of Covid-19 restrictions, especially lockdowns and curfew directives. Consequently, such information was widely spread across social media platforms especially Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, creating negative attitudes towards refugees within host communities. The Congolese people who participated in this research said that they have depended highly on different WhatsApp groups as a way of linking social capital to profile cases of mistreatment amongst refugees, which they in turn used to seek justice, and truth against

refugee stereotyping and aggression. Indeed, people with pain use digital peer-support groups to connect with similar others as a way of deriving benefits from feeling validated and heard (Merolli et al., 2014). The representative from the Congolese Community Association highlighted the use of digital platforms to mitigate the injustices associated with Covid-19 response: "The digital platforms were useful....We were able to register many cases of refugees that were beaten during the lockdown and curfew through our WhatsApp groups....Our digital platforms helped to get/share such information across our communities."

Attempting to seek justice and protect themselves from stereotypic communication, the Congolese reportedly engaged with the office of the Resident City Commissioner (RCC) that was charged with matters of security and coordination of all Covid-19 pandemic response activities within the city. It was indicated that the RCC took legal action and reprimanded the perpetrators of such xenophobic communications, as the respondent from the Congolese Community Association remarked:

We went up to the RCC of Makindye Division and found out it was not KCCA. It was found out that one man known as Kasozi [was] amongst those who were doing the publicization. We resolved to drag him into the courts of law. He was remanded for four months and later forced to ask for forgiveness, which we granted to him.

Social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp were more effective in disseminating information about the misconduct amongst security forces through extortion of money from and beating of both refugees and host community members. The interviews with refugees indicated that a number of video footage and audio clips were captured by mainstream media, and social media users, and shared widely across different social media groups and institutional social media handles for government and civil society organizations, highlighting the importance of linking social capital online to promote social justice within the community (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). Our study found that the frequent footage of local defense unit officers battering people led to widespread advocacy about such acts that in turn translated into the government's decision to totally withdraw local defense units from the enforcement teams within different communities of the city. The widespread advocacy against the social injustices committed by the local defense units influenced changes in government position regarding the enforcement of curfew and lockdown directives.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Covid-19 pandemic challenges have shed further light on the relevance of digitally mediated forms of social capital for refugees. During the Covid-19 outbreak,



constraints to physical mobility in the host country led to more dependence of refugees on the help of their ethnic community groups for obtaining information and access to resources to be able to sustain livelihoods through the pandemic and mitigate the Covid-19 shock. In our study, social connections included capital built around humanitarian organizations, NGOs, refugee-led organizations, and networks online and offline. This research showed that different typologies of social capital and connections played a crucial role in supporting refugees to face the pandemic effects and that the development of these connections, coupled with the respective support are in many instances enabled and mediated by digital technologies. These connections become the tools by which urban refugees mobilize or practice a form of (digital) support, sustain communication, and enable service improvisations, becoming key to their survival. Adequate response from digital technological platforms has been established through networks of families, friends, and connectivity to institutions at various levels, providing opportunities for increased engagement in digital economies, new avenues of social protection, resource mobilization, and increased virtual networking.

Moreover, it was possible to observe that limited linkages with government support can function both as a catalyst and a barrier to accessing support among refugees in Kampala. While refugees resort to connections both online and offline in response to the lack of government support and exclusion of refugees from official communication and assistance, precarious digital connectivity and unstable use and experience with infrastructures (i.e., internet and devices) may prevent these urban displaced populations to look for help from bridges, bonds, and links. Further, several challenges emerged from refugees' use of technology to respond to the pandemic, such as language barriers, low levels of literacy, fragmented digital infrastructure, and circulation of fake news and hate speech on social media throughout the entire period of the crisis. Nevertheless, the pandemic has augmented the rising role of digital technologies, especially under circumstances where a city like Kampala lacks a well-defined strategy for refugee integration programs. The applied best practices showcased around sustained multi-platform communications, technological innovations, data collection and robust community engagement need to be embraced by a diversity of stakeholders to garner the opportunities offered by technologies towards stimulating inclusive crisis responses.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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