6. YouTube Became the Place Where “I Could Breathe” and Start “to Sell my Mouth”: Congolese Refugee YouTubers in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Congolese refugees in Nairobi, in particular the youth, have recently engaged in the creation of YouTube channels. While some channels existed before the pandemic, this activity has considerably expanded since. This chapter explores this new form of business online that generates income through digital mediation. YouTube channels not only offer a potential way to earn money but also present a mediated social environment that can induce changes in refugees’ everyday lives. The ethnographic case studies indicate that Congolese refugees use these channels to potentially “make a living,” but more importantly, as a “way to exist,” to “make a life”; YouTube as You-to-be as mentioned by one of our interlocutors.

Keywords: Congolese refugees; Nairobi, YouTubers; diasporic belonging; everydayness.

6.1 Introduction

Kenya is currently hosting 654,147 registered refugees and asylum-seekers (as of 3 September 2023, UNHCR, 2023a), with Somalian refugees being the most numerous (335,142), followed by refugees from South Sudan (170,177), the Democratic Republic of Congo (58,779) and Ethiopia (36,654). The Kenyan government has an encampment policy, with the majority of refugees living in the Dadaab (42.9%) and Kakuma (42.2%) refugee camps. Today, there are approximately 92,778 urban refugees living in the city of Nairobi (14.9%...
in total), the majority of whom are Congolese, Somali, Ethiopian and South Sudanese (UNHCR, 2023b). The Congolese refugee community has reached a population of approximately 34,216 and is currently the largest refugee nationality in Nairobi.

The protracted conflict situation and the renewal of conflicts in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have led many Congolese from both North and South Kivu to flee their country. For safety reasons, the majority of Congolese refugees who have fled from the DRC to Kenya have sought refuge in the city of Nairobi. Many did not want to seek protection in the camps (including both the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps), either because they feared a lack of security or because of their past experiences in other countries of refuge. While a significant amount of research has been carried out on the topic of refugee livelihoods in Kenya, the second biggest refugee-hosting country in Africa after Ethiopia (see Betts et al., 2019), studies on the Congolese refugee community, in particular in Nairobi, are still quite rare, with a few exceptions (Tippens, 2019; Omata, 2020a; 2020b).

In Kenya, both the Citizenship and Immigration Act of 2011 and the Refugee Act of 2006 support refugees’ right to work. However, up to this point, refugees’ right to work has been extremely limited, with the majority seeking employment in the informal sector (O’Callaghan & Sturge, 2018). With the encampment policy in place, refugees living in the city also tend to be criminalized (Campbell, 2006). In November 2021, a newly signed Refugee Act acknowledged that a “recognized refugee shall have the right to engage individually or in a group, in gainful employment or enterprise or to practice a profession or trade where he holds qualifications recognized by the authorities in Kenya.” (Part V, 28 (5), Kenya Refugee Act, 2021).

In reality, however, many constraints persist. Many Congolese refugees do not have refugee status and those who have some documents are often not recognized beyond identification by UNHCR or other INGOs. Therefore, many refugees cannot use the documentation they have to either open a bank account and/or register their phone numbers. Another important limitation in terms of access to jobs involves resentment, discrimination and occasional violence from established small business holders within Kenyan society, as some perceive refugees to be a threat to their livelihoods (Campbell, 2006).

For all of these reasons, developing economic activities online has become more attractive, especially for young refugees. This chapter looks

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1 Out of 90,312 refugees and asylum seekers in Nairobi on 31 October 2022, there were: 33,616 from DR Congo; 23,543 from Somalia; 13,588 from Ethiopia; 8,587 from South Sudan (available at: https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/ken/187).
in particular at the development of YouTube channels as a new way to make a living. Whereas only a few YouTube channels existed within the Congolese refugee community before the Covid-19 pandemic, this number mushroomed during the pandemic as people were forced to stay at home. YouTube channels not only offer a potential way to earn money but also present a mediated social environment that can induce changes in refugees' everyday lives. The chapter argues that a focus on the economic component of these so-called livelihood activities tends to ignore other aspects linked to these pursuits.

The chapter first returns to the time of the pandemic and its impact on the lives of Congolese refugees living in Nairobi. The second section provides a theoretical framework to go beyond a Western- and Global-North-centric conceptualization of YouTube influencers looking at refugee-led tech entrepreneurship, as a way for refugees to organize and create opportunities outside or alongside the realm of the humanitarian/state system in the context of the city. The third section explains the methodology used to collect the data. The fourth section presents two empirical ethnographic case studies to highlight the type of social change Congolese refugees generate through their YouTube channels.

6.2 Covid-19 and its Impact on Refugees' Livelihoods in Nairobi

To prevent the spread of the virus in March 2020, Kenyan authorities rapidly implemented measures, imposing lockdowns and curfews on city residents, which made it extremely difficult for urban refugees to continue making a living in the informal economy. The government measures consisted of two extended lockdown periods involving both public closures and the outlawing of private gatherings to various degrees. One of the measures that greatly affected refugees' livelihood was the ban on hosting public gatherings; this made the lives of street vendors and hawkers almost impossible due to the loss of daily customers. In addition to the president's national curfew order, churches were closed, along with all other public places, such as restaurants and bars. Moreover, all of these measures were strongly enforced by the police. Public transport was limited (authorized to use only 30% of their capacity), and at one point all movement outside the counties of Nairobi was also prohibited, preventing refugees from doing business in the city as well as beyond it in counties such as Kwale, Kilifi, Mombasa and Tanariva.

As a result, many refugees lost their jobs, especially small business owners travelling outside Nairobi County to carry out their hawking activities. For
example, based on interviews conducted during the pandemic by Bahati Ghislain, the co-author of this chapter, those who used to sell two to three bitenges (Congolese print fashions) before the pandemic could go an entire day during the pandemic without selling a single kitenge. Many refugees who used to work in small shops, such as beauty or hair salons (“barbers”), started to lose their jobs as fewer customers came. Those working as watchmen were also asked to accept a much lower salary since many people were fighting for the same job. In addition, many refugees did not want to find themselves on the wrong side of the law, for example for not wearing a mask, especially during the first phase of the pandemic. Going out meant a greater risk of being arrested by the police in an increasingly hostile environment for refugees in the country. In this context, in March 2021, a 14-day ultimatum was given by the Kenyan government to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to develop a plan to close the country’s Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps (The Sentinel Project, 2021).

Refugees also avoided going out during the pandemic because they feared getting sick. Interviewees also mentioned the lack of support from organizations such as UNHCR and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) during the Covid-19 period. Their situation was worsened by the failure of the government to recognize refugees as “vulnerable” in the context of the new cash transfer programme created specifically to protect the most vulnerable households against the impact of the pandemic (Omata, 2020b). Thus, refugees who caught the virus did not have enough money to pay their hospital bills. As a consequence of all of these factors, many refugees lost much of their daily income and often had to use the only savings they had left to meet the basic needs of their families. As argued by Müller (2022), Covid-19 was not a major cause of change in refugees’ everyday lives, “but rather an additional stress that re-enforced pre-existing forms of precarity.”

As a response to these challenges, local churches and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) played an important role in raising the alarm within the community for vulnerable families and organizing the collection of food and medicine several times a week at the local level (Omata, 2020b; Betts et al., 2021). The solidarity among refugees increased over time, with friends sharing food or borrowing money from each other. As refugees did not

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2 *Kitenge* (singular) and *bitenge* (plural) are Swahili for a piece of fabric often worn by women.

3 Refugees working in beauty salons before the pandemic could earn up to 500 KSh per day before the pandemic; during the pandemic they were only earning 100 KSh or at most 150 KSh per day. Those working as watchmen, who previously earned 5,000 KSh to 8,000 KSh per month, were asked to accept 1,500 KSh or at most 3,000 KSh per month, since many people were fighting for any job (based on an interview with a businesswoman by Bahati Ghislain).
benefit from the government’s social protection programme, RLOs provided Congolese refugees with survival kits as well as soap, sanitizers and face masks, allowing them to continue their daily economic activities. During the pandemic, WhatsApp groups became a common platform through which information could be shared directly with the refugee community. RLOs colluded with refugee leaders as well as church leaders to ensure that every piece of information was translated correctly into various mother tongues and shared with community members. Before the pandemic, diaspora humanitarianism (Aden et al., 2020) was well developed, relying on WhatsApp and MPesa, the online transfer money system in Kenya, to collect funds in order to support communities back in Congo, in particular internally displaced peoples (IDPs). These channels were quickly redirected and re-activated to support the local refugee community during the time of the pandemic. These observations within the Congolese refugee community in Nairobi resonate with the strengthening of localized networks and relations to cope with both the material and non-material aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic as highlighted by Müller (2022) in her study of Eritrean and Ethiopian communities and lived citizenship in Nairobi, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and Khartoum (Sudan).

However, in addition to these new forms of “digital everyday humanitarianism” that mainly rely on local and diasporic networks, new types of income and jobs also appeared during the pandemic. One businesswoman told Ghislain in January 2022 that many refugees had entered the boda-boda (motorbike) business. This business was successful because most people preferred to ride a boda-boda rather than a matatu (a form of urban public transport). Riding a motorbike was perceived as a safer form of transportation than taking a small van carrying up to 14 passengers. With people forced to stay at home, mobile phone data usage increased, and as consequence, a new informal Internet-sharing market began to emerge. With their smartphones, Congolese refugees started to sell access to their WiFi hotspots for private use. For instance, people would commonly buy a certain amount of Internet data usage for 100 Kenyan shillings (KSh) and then share it with 10 nearby refugee households paying 20 KSh each. More generally, small business entrepreneurs were not only forced to change their working hours due to the government-imposed curfew but also decided to move their presence online by developing new ways to do business remotely. In some cases, going online during Covid-19 became a way to make a living and to connect with people in the community. As one of our interviewees who created his YouTube channel Kanyamukwengo comedy described (see after), referring to a Kinyamulenge saying:
Uhiriye mu nzu ntabura aho apfunda umutwe: When the house gets burnt and you are inside, obviously you will find a small space where you can put your head. Like if you can call for assistance or just to escape the smoke! That’s just what happened to me. I just found a small space where I can fix my head to be heard.

The outbreak of Covid-19 and the closure of local businesses was like the burning house, and the digital space—and more specifically, YouTube—became the place where he could breathe and start “to sell his mouth” through comedy, as he put it. He began his new economic activity by recording 30-second videos via his Techno smartphone—a cheap Chinese Android smartphone—and uploading them via WhatsApp and other social media platforms such as Facebook.

6.3 Forced Migration, New Technologies and YouTube Channels

Research exploring the use of new technologies by people on the move has increased swiftly following the so-called “European refugee crisis” that emerged in 2015–2016. Over time, the research focus on the dimensions of survival and navigation has slightly diminished (Gillespie et al., 2018; Dekker et al., 2018), giving rise to a more comprehensive research approach examining refugees' material, psychological and social needs and how these needs can be met by mobile technologies (Alencar, 2020). More importantly, while the majority of the studies have mainly focused on people fleeing the Syrian conflict as well as people from Afghanistan and Iraq for a very long time, a new set of papers are now looking at how refugees within Africa are themselves relying on new technologies when travelling within Africa as well as towards Europe with a particular focus on the planning, movement and immediate arrival (Ennaji & Bignami, 2019; Hounsell & Owuor, 2018; Stremlau & Tsalapatanis, 2022). Many studies have also shown that people often stick to basic websites and social media applications and services. These social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Snapchat, Skype, WhatsApp, and Viber are often considered as more reliable, easily accessible, and widely used (Dekker et al. 2018; Kaufmann, 2018).

More recently, there has been a growing research and media interest in the role of social media platforms, in driving and enabling migration. For instance, a short BBC documentary has recently asked the following question: “Are migrant YouTubers influencing others to travel to the EU?” (BBC, 2021). “Migrant TikTok” is used as a term to collect the public posts of
migrants on the road; it has become a way to capture the constant stream of new information through the logics of the algorithm and its viral component. In this media ecosystem, TikTok video comment sections can also be used by migrant brokers to advertise their services (Herbert & Ghoulidi, 2019). In parallel, international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are also interested in the use of social media platforms to broadcast specific messages. For instance, the IOM Regional Office for Central America, North America and the Caribbean recently launched a campaign highlighting migrant YouTubers called the #IamaMigrant Challenge aimed at “combating negative discourse against migrants through the creativity of migrant YouTubers who are ambassadors of their countries of origin” (IOM, 2018). The idea behind the campaign is to cultivate empathy and change perceptions towards newly arrived migrants. However, as argued by Myria Georgiou (2022, p. 272), while migrants are more and more present as agentive speakers in digital mediascapes, they are often allowed to do so within a “digital order of appearance” as outsiders and as individuals who fit within given categories: between the entrepreneurial or vulnerable migrant with no claim to equality of reparations.

In the context of the Global South, where the majority of refugees originate, many studies have been conducted to understand how current tech solutions put into place by humanitarian actors meet refugee needs (Hounsell & Owuor, 2018). Awad and Tossel (2021) have argued that a common critique of the development of digital innovations in forced migration contexts is that they often rely on a needs-based approach, where needs are being defined by humanitarian agencies in order to protect and assist refugees. The underlying belief is that access to mobile phone and Internet services has become as important and crucial to refugees’ safety and security as access to food, shelter and water (UNHCR, 2016). Still, few studies examine how migrants and refugees on the move or in protracted displacement situations have developed their own “digital making-do practices” (Alencar & Godin, 2022). As argued by Galis and Makrygianni, ICTs create imaginary passages for migrants “between the ground zero/war zone and the desired destination spaces, and between the route and destination spaces and the homeland” (2022, p. 8). In a recent chapter, Alencar and Godin (2022) reviewed the case of Venezuelan refugees in the city of Boa Vista, Brazil. They found that some refugees have been creating YouTube channels to showcase their experiences in the city as well as their frustration at being deprived of useful information as well as being misrepresented (p. 377). Similarly, the work of Jaramillo-Dent et al. (2022) on Hispanic migrant TikTokers living in Spain and the US is also relevant. Based on an analysis of 198 TikTok
videos, the authors develop the concept of “platformed belongings” enabling migrants “to reclaim their rights and negotiate existing symbolic boundaries by achieving different levels of visibility within this platform” (p.5578, see also Chapter 10 by Jaramillo-Dent, Alencar and Asadchy).

Our chapter sheds further light on how Congolese refugees living in Nairobi have been investing in YouTube channels in order to improve their everyday lives. As argued by Ponzanesi and Leurs (2022), the focus on the everyday allows to capture transactions happening with and through the use of various media, including digital platforms, allowing for a diversification of co-presence as creating possibilities for alternative counterpublics (Fraser, 1990) that can emerge outside of the mainstream representation of demonization, vilification and othering of the migrants. Theoretically, it builds on the work of Candidatu and Ponzanesi (2022, p. 266) and others that understand “digital diasporas as part of everyday practices by situating them in particular contexts and revealing the socially diverse practices and engagements of different groups and generations.” This chapter therefore aims to question the nature of Congolese refugee YouTube channels and the emancipating and transformative dimensions of the digital space during migration processes. Before discussing the two ethnographic case studies, we will briefly present the methodology in the next section.

6.4 Methodology

First, a mapping of existing initiatives in the digital economy led for, by and with refugees was conducted both locally in Nairobi and remotely between September 2021 and December 2021. The majority of refugees lack access to laptops; smartphones are the most common mode of internet access. After this first exploratory mapping, the decision was made to focus only on the case of YouTube influencers, a new phenomenon emerging within the Congolese community which has been amplified since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on a snowballing method sampling different Congolese neighbourhoods, more than 60 YouTube channels whose owners live in Congolese-concentrated areas in Nairobi were identified. In particular, these covered neighbourhoods in Kayole, Kasarani, Githurai and Umoja 1, 2 and 3 (and to a lesser extent Mihango, Nijiri, Rongai and Kitengela). These neighbourhoods are mainly populated by Congolese refugees from the Banyamulenge community. Most of them speak Kinyamulenge, a mixture of the Kinyarwanda language and the Kirundi language. Following this mapping, we then conducted 20 in-depth face-to-face interviews with
YouTube channel owners during two periods of ethnographic fieldwork: one in February 2022 and another in August/September 2022.

During these periods of ethnographic fieldwork, we were able to “follow” both online and onsite several Congolese refugee YouTubers, subscribing to their channels in order to get a better understanding of their videos. It was critical to move between an analysis of digital artefacts (YouTube videos) and the context of the videos’ production and consumption. As argued by Leurs and Prabhakar (2018, p. 252), migrant experiences of communication and mediation should be considered as “situated in distinctive power-ridden social, cultural, historically and localized settings.” For instance, in locally following some influencers in the field, we could capture the extent to which their YouTube channels constituted their primary economic activity or if they were more secondary. We could also understand the series of other economic activities taking place around the production of digital business. Based on this mapping, it appears men are more represented than women and that young people are much more prevalent in this niche compared to the elders in the community. YouTube influencers exert widely varying levels of impact. Some are followed by thousands of subscribers at the local level as well as beyond it, in the broader diaspora. Others have only hundreds of subscribers at the local level, circumscribing their influence. These channels serve a vast range of purposes. Some channels are mainly dedicated to creating a positive narrative about refugees in Nairobi, offering a platform for people within the community to appear online and reveal their talents. Channels can also be used for entertainment purposes, to raise awareness about refugees’ rights, to promote Banyamulenge culture and reconnect with people and traditions back home and in the diaspora, to inform about current events in the DRC, to preach the gospel and promote Congolese music.

In the next section, we analyse two ethnographic case studies that illustrate how these channels are about more than just making money. The first YouTube channel was selected for its content, which primarily aims to challenge social norms within the community increasing the sense of belonging to the local Banyamulenge community. The second was selected to illustrate how these video channels can expand, diversify and consolidate the connections between refugees and diasporas near and far (and sometimes beyond) subverting the local and national political economy dynamics.

First Case Study: The Grand Nile Studio YouTube Channel

Bonheur arrived in Kenya in 2014 at the age of 18. Originally from Minembwe, she had first moved to Rwanda at an early age with her family before coming
to Kenya, a common destination for resettlement. When they arrived, they decided not to go to a camp but to travel instead to a settlement called Kayole in Nairobi. With these moves, Bonheur’s education was interrupted many times; by the time she arrived in Nairobi, she had not completed her primary education. Despite trying to re-enrol in the Kenyan school system, she eventually dropped out. In addition, her family needed her to work. She first tried to make a living by singing in a choir in a Kenyan church while also helping her mother in a small hotel restaurant in Kayole. Working at the hotel, she could earn up to 1,000 KSh per week. In 2018, she married. While she and her husband sang in the Kenyan church to make a living, they would also invite young people from the community into their homes, where they would talk to them about marriage and provide counselling and advice. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, it became much harder to pay their bills and rent, even with support from the Kenyan church. During the first lockdown, her husband started a YouTube channel called Grand Nile Studio. As Bonheur says:

Yes, like, we were stuck in the house, like, finding way to ... You see, like, doing nothing. So, like, by that time you think a lot. You spend, like, big time together. So, that’s when he had that inspiration to start a YouTube channel ... I think Covid-19 has changed, like, our lives a lot, not even just for the refugees, even for other people. Because you see in this time of lockdown, people came to realize that it’s not all about getting something from your boss. Maybe we should not be waiting for someone to call you and hire you and give you a job. By then, like, the restaurants were shut, the churches – we couldn’t go to sing. There were no jobs. So, many people started even to think, what can I do? How can I use my talent? So I think COVID-19 has helped people to see their potential.

In fact, money was not Bonheur’s primary motivation to get involved in the channel. It was only afterwards, when viewship began to grow, that she began to consider it a business opportunity. Bonheur now takes the stage to talk to people, typically a married couple or someone who is preparing for marriage. She explains that being a refugee is hard. Sometimes people are desperate to get married, especially young girls, who may view a husband as someone who can sustain their material needs. For that reason, she tries to raise awareness within the community, encouraging women to avoid getting married too early and supporting them in choosing the right husband. The challenge of transnational marriage between the refugee community in Nairobi and those who have resettled in Canada or the United States is a
topic close to her heart. On her channel, Bonheur also addresses the issue of intermarriage. She does not believe that “a Munyamulenge should [only] marry a Munyamulenge.” However, within the community, this expectation persists, leading to pressure—especially from parents and elders. Those who have entered into mixed marriages often feel the need to leave the community, and many go to live in other neighbourhoods where they can have more privacy and live in peace.

Today, Bonheur has become more popular than her husband, and she uploads the majority of their channel’s videos. Now she is even seeking training so that she can do more work by herself and rely less on other people’s skills to film and edit her videos. In terms of her audience, she targets both the local Congolese refugee community as well as resettled refugees in the “near” and “wider” diaspora (Van Hear, 2006) in particular to challenge gendered normativity. Men run the majority of the YouTube channels within Nairobi’s Banyamulenge community. It remains rare to see women on such platforms; when a woman starts a channel, gossip typically spreads quickly, casting aspersions on her reputation. Starting a YouTube channel has not been easy for Bonheur but has nevertheless been a transformative experience for her and other women in the community. For one, she has gained confidence by speaking in front of the hundreds of people who follow her videos and chatting with them in the comments. She has also strengthened her conviction that she can do the things that matter to her, rather than be confined to other people’s expectations of her as a Congolese refugee:

Being a refugee, you are recognised [because] you live here in Nairobi. So, like, for maybe UNHCR, it’s not a problem for them but it’s tough! It’s tough because, like, even though sometimes you walk, like, trying to find that small job, like, “You, refugee. Look at [the] Congolese!” But that can’t, like, stop you from doing what you love and do it fine. So, I think you can do better you can grow your business if I can say that. You can, like ... Yeah! You can do big things even though we are refugees. It’s you, working hard. If you can work hard and get that big audience ... Yeah, you can expand your dream.

Bonheur’s channel is not yet monetized,4 as she is currently struggling to obtain her refugee ID. Without this card, she cannot gain access to a PayPal or bank account and cannot receive money. Despite these limitations, she

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4 To know more about YouTube monetization requirements: https://vidiq.com/blog/post/how-to-monetize-youtube-channel-beginners-guide/. All the steps required to do so make it
strongly believes that digital is the way to go. The debate surrounding the digital livelihood for refugees often tends to be quite descriptive looking at the opportunities and obstacles that refugees face in the digital economy (ILO, 2021) without explaining the reasons underlying such decisions. Some refugees have been earning some money through their online activity, but many others are still investing in that space, hoping to move away from their current economic activity.

Second Case Study: Kanyamukwengo Comedian YouTube Channel

Kanyamukwengo was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1993 in Mibunda, in the Mwenga territory, South Kivu. In Congo, he worked as a livestock keeper. He moved to Kenya in 2016 at the age of 23, fleeing conflict back home. In the beginning, like many refugees, he worked in a barber shop in the municipality of Kitengela (in Kajiado county, located in south capital of Nairobi) where he earned around 50 KSh per day. Kanyamukwengo then moved to Lavington (a residential suburb of Nairobi), where he worked in another hairdresser's shop in 2019 and 2020. When the pandemic started, they had to close the shop due to the lack of customers. It was at that point that he decided to change career and do comedy on social media platforms. In the beginning, he just posted short videos on WhatsApp and shared them on Facebook, but it soon became something bigger as people were stuck at home. As he had not managed to open a bank account in Kenya due to the limitations that refugees face, he had to rely on someone else. It is with the support of an acquaintance who used to live in Nairobi but is now resettled in the US that he has managed to access to the money he made online. Because of their friendship, he sends Kanyamukwengo the money every month minus a commission via WorldRemit.

As he describes to us:

You know YouTube, it is all about the talents or what you can do for people. It's not like selling kitenge ... if I wake up in the morning and then I take them and put them in the bag. I go on the streets and start asking people to buy. And eventually people will buy but on YouTube, I don't think it is for everyone. You must have a talent or content that you want to share.

It is extremely hard for refugees to receive payments via their channels and have to develop a set of strategies in order to get paid.
Although he started by targeting the local Banyamulenge refugee community living in Nairobi, he soon developed a much larger viewership. The language spoken on local YouTube channels in these areas is mainly Kinyamulenge, increasing the audience, previously limited to Banyamulenge, to Rwandans and even Burundians all over the world. Viewership of Kanyamukwengo’s channel is now greatest in Rwanda, followed by Kenya and then the USA, Burundi and Uganda. People from other countries are also watching, especially in countries where refugees have resettled: Canada, Australia and the US. The YouTube channel has now more than 57.7K subscribers and over 6.6 million views (as of December 2023). As the comedian has said himself, he feels like he is leading a government online: “it’s Kanyamukwengo nation.” His channel promotes Banyamulenge culture through comedy. As he explains:

In the Banyamulenge community we have some children who were born in exile. Others are growing up and others are even getting married yet they don’t know anything about the Banyamulenge community. So, when we are acting we try to act in a way like ... to show the culture of the Banyamulenge people. We show them those are the taboos that we can’t do in our culture. Those are the things that you cannot do and then other things are done in this way. So, you see in that we are trying like to bring
the flashbacks of what happened at home to those who were able to grow up there. And also for those who have not been there so that they know what used to happen there. It’s something that promotes our culture and at the same time we entertain larger audiences from other communities.

The channel aims at both education and entertainment. In August 2022 general elections in Kenya were organized and Kanyamukwengo and his team (two Congolese refugee women) decided to upload a video to warn refugees about not getting involved in the presidential election campaign. Not all refugees are connected to local and international non-governmental organizations and therefore can easily miss important notices. As many in the community follow Kanyamukwengo’s channel, the comedian took the official guidelines written by the Department of Refugee Services (DRS). He then translated them and uploaded a video entitled “Be careful in these days of election / Go back home earlier / It’s important” (Mwirinde murikigihe amatora / Gutaha kare ningombwa) and which gathered more than 15,000 views at the time of the elections (see Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2).

In this short drama, Kanyamukwengo plays the role of a local chief sensitizing dwellers of his area to follow the guidelines provided by the government, cautioning them against falling into the trap of getting involved with Kenyans talking about politics but also inviting members of the community to store enough food, gasoline and water during the time of the elections. As he says: “I am trying to protect my audiences which means the refugee community.” In addition, he also invites his local audience to share what they have with their fellows Kenyans living in the same neighbourhood referring to the time back home when you could find a man with 100 cows and one with one cow or even sometimes none, but all of them were drinking milk. He therefore asks his fellow citizens to do the same in this period: “Even if he or she is a national, please call him or her secretly and give a few kilograms of maize flour or rice so that all us we can survive.” The channel, therefore, fulfills multiple purposes that go far beyond making profit: it creates a community online that gathers the local refugee community with diasporic communities in the “near” and “wider” diaspora but also beyond with viewers located in the Great Lakes Region (DRC, Rwanda and Burundi). In addition, many other opportunities have emerged with the YouTube channel, thanks to the increasing popularity of the actors involved in the show. They are often invited to perform at weddings or record advertisements for refugees as well as Kenyan businesses on different YouTube channels. We therefore argue that there is no such thing as a digital economy versus an offline urban economy, showing how both
are often interconnected in various and complex ways, evolving alongside one another, supporting and/or complementing each other.

### 6.5 Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory ethnographic project focuses on the emergent topic of digital livelihoods and refugees. It offers an original perspective on the ways refugees participate in the so-called “future of work” through in-depth case studies of YouTube influencers within Nairobi’s Congolese Banyamulenge refugee community. This research critiques the literature on refugee livelihoods and self-resilience for its excessive focus on the profits and benefits that refugees can accrue in the informal sector, describing mainly how people work and survive in the shadow of the state. In doing so, other dimensions linked to the expansion of economic activity among Congolese refugees are being overlooked.

When discussing this idea of “refugee digital livelihood,” the motivations to engage in the digital world are often overlooked as if it were a choice refugees make among others at one point in time. However, looking at Congolese refugees’ work and life trajectories, the digital world has often
come after many attempts to find a job at the local level. For many who are highly qualified, after having gained the skills from their country of origin, and/or after having been trained in the Kenyan system, the limitations they face at the local level often push them to consider alternative economic opportunities such as those provided by the online world. In a context where refugees do face exclusion and discrimination at the local and national level, the digital world has opened up new opportunities for refugees, in particular the youth who are trying to find alternative ways to make a living.

In investing in YouTube channels, Congolese refugees are creating their own digital economic niche in order to transcend the employment limitations they face. They reject discrimination by locals due to their refugee status while at the same time creating independent online businesses with resources spread across the local, transnational and diasporic communities. Congolese refugee YouTube influencers are also changing narratives about refugees not being a burden. The time and money refugees invest into the online space indicate that these activities are not just about income but close to what Duffy (2015) defines as “aspirational labour,” a “forward-looking and entrepreneurial enactment of creativity.” Congolese refugees, in particular the youth, invest in YouTube channels as “a space for recognition” (inspired by Honneth, 2020) in which their skills and talents can be recognized. As in this case, Bonheur contributes to improving the social inclusion of women not only on the platform but also in daily life by challenging diasporic gendered normativity. This way of venturing into the online world also reveal how refugees are finding new ways to integrate socio-economically—especially the youth—into changing refugee narratives at the local, diasporic level, but also at national and global level. In the context of severe restrictions experienced by Congolese refugees, as depicted in the case of the Kanyamukwengo Comedy YouTube channel, they are strengthening a sense of belonging to an imagined Banyamulenge family locally, back home and at different locals within the diaspora. The expansion of the “digital diasporic space” through YouTube channels has therefore become a source of both affective and economic support. The content posted on these channels is also about building a bridge between the local community and the refugee community such as in the case of Kanyamukwengo inviting members of the audience to reach out to Kenyans in need of assistance over the election period. Other channels not described here are also investing in English and Swahili content not only as a way to increase their income but also to create a “safe space” where both refugees and Kenyans can interact with one another.

Last but not least, new ways of engaging in everyday acts of diaspora humanitarianism have appeared since the pandemic, with the digital being
at the centre of it. While before the pandemic, the online communication platform WhatsApp was and still is the one more commonly used by Congolese refugees in Nairobi, YouTube channels have become invested as a way to share the stories of the beneficiaries back home. As the pandemic resumed, the needs of the local refugee community in Nairobi have decreased and attention has been redirected towards the homeland with YouTube invested as space to not only raise awareness but more importantly to share the stories of people back home. Moving between WhatsApp and YouTube, a new informal humanitarian system is taking place, that creates new avenues for “translocal spaces” where social relations between members in the diaspora and people back home can be maintained, restored and/or re-imagined.

These case studies of YouTube influencers indicate that Congolese refugees use these channels to potentially “make a living,” but also as a “way to exist” (“Yu-to-Be” as mentioned by one Congolese YouTuber), a transformative space in which they can expand their agency in the digital age (Nedelcu, 2018) as well as create “new spaces of belongingness” (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2022).

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References


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