

The Dilemma of Unlawful Digital Interventions and Their Impacts on the Rohingya Community During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

This study explores the impact of unlawful digital interventions on the Rohingya community in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Rohingya refugees, who have faced severe persecution in Myanmar, found themselves in refugee camps in Bangladesh, where they initially had limited access to technology and the internet due to legal restrictions. However, by using the Ethnoscape and Mediascape of globalization theory devised by Arjun Appadurai, the study aims to understand the unlawful digital interventions in the camps during the Covid-19 pandemic. This unauthorized access to digital platforms played a crucial role in raising awareness among the Rohingya population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study conducted in three Rohingya camps employed qualitative methods, including focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and observations, to understand the significance of unauthorized digital platform usage, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adolescent males and females with smartphones acquired knowledge about COVID-19 through social media platforms like Facebook, Imo, WhatsApp, and YouTube, leading to intergenerational debates within the community, as the elderly relied more on television broadcasts. The study highlighted the critical role of social media in shaping the community's knowledge and perceptions of the pandemic and to take precautionary measures, though they also encountered misleading content. While digital platforms facilitated information sharing and financial transactions, gendered restrictions on smartphone usage were evident, reflecting patriarchal control over young girls' mobile phone access.

Key Words: Social media, Covid-19 pandemic, Unlawful digital intervention, Knowledge and practice, Information dissemination, Rohingyas. Bangladesh.

Introduction

In order to escape indiscriminate rape and inhuman torture led by the Myanmar authoritarian regime, approximately 700,000 Rohingyas fled into Bangladesh by mid-August 2017 (Khan, 2018). In addition to the recent influx of Rohingya into Bangladesh in 2017, the

Rohingya crisis, triggered in the late 1970s, resulted in a strained relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The United Nations has described the Rohingya as the 'world's most persecuted minority' and has called for international collaboration to address the ongoing

peril they face (Al Jazeera, 2018).

While the entire displaced Rohingya population faces numerous challenges due to their displacement, it is essential to acknowledge the effects of illicit digital interventions in the camps, with a specific focus on Rohingya women and girls in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Rohingyas, particularly those who arrived in Bangladesh after August 2017, are highly unlikely to possess the necessary legal documents for obtaining mobile data and voice services in Bangladesh legally (Hussain, Wall, and Heeks 2020). Since most of these Rohingyas are living in camps for refugees, they have limited access to technology and the Internet (Hussain, 2018a). The Rohingyas are not permitted to possess SIM cards by Bangladeshi law, and in September 2019, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission ordered mobile phone service providers to stop selling to the Rohingyas. Authorities have seized more than 12,000 phone cards from Rohingya refugees since September 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

It is noteworthy that in both Myanmar and Bangladesh, Rohingyas are denied access to the internet and cell communications. The Rohingya's home state of Rakhine was completely cut off from the internet by the Myanmar authorities. Rohingyas who fled to Bangladesh have endured a similar lack of resources. Only individuals possessing Biometric National Identification (ID) cards are authorized by the Bangladeshi government to obtain a SIM card for internet or mobile services. Since they lack these ID documents, Rohingya refugees are unable to lawfully obtain a Bangladeshi SIM card (UNHCR, 2020).

In the Rohingya communities of Bangladesh, women and girls make up about 52% of the population. The Rohingya refugees experience a significant gender gap. Rohingya girls and women's access to resources from outside their immediate family mainly relies on the males in that group. The opinions of their male spouses, the male head of their joint families, or their religious authorities must be taken into consideration when making decisions for Rohingya women, who do not

enjoy complete freedom. Women in Rohingya families are primarily responsible for all household chores, which further restricts their ability to move outside the home (BRAC, 2021).

The Rohingya refugees, a severely persecuted minority group in Myanmar, have been settling in the southeast portion of Bangladesh in numerous Registered Camps since August 2017. In the subsequent years, these camps have expanded rapidly that included 51% under-18 people, 52% were women or girls, and 4% were people aged 60 or above (UNHCR, 2020), living as refugees in Bangladesh on the margins of society or in confined camps since August 2017. Due to their refugee status, they possessed limited access to technology and the Internet (Hussain, 2018a).

Their migration to Bangladesh witnessed a three-stage cycle that included their gradual access to internet technology—despite unlawfully—that had become an inextricable part of their existence in Bangladesh (Hussain, Wall, and Heeks, 2020). In the initial stage of the 'cycle', they had very limited access to technology and Internet connectivity which gradually opened ways for their alternative access to technology and Internet connectivity during January 2018 to mid-2018 through mobile phone repair and recharge shops around them. During mid-2018 to mid-2019, they found increased access to technology and improved Internet connectivity—thank to the pressure from UN/NGOs/INGOs to open up mobile and Internet services.

The massive growth in mobile phone repair and recharge shops consequently paved the way for a massive increase in demand for localized content which were met by the mobile phone repair/recharge shops (Hussain, Wall, and Heeks, 2020). However, these developments drastically assisted in raising awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic within the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh.

Admittedly, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have been accessing mobile networks and internet services illegally. Facebook, WhatsApp, Imo, and voice calls have been the most dependable digital

platforms for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Islam, et.al., 2021). While the entire displaced Rohingya population have been facing numerous challenges due to their displacement, it is essential to acknowledge the effects of illicit digital interventions in the camps, with a specific focus on Rohingya women and girls in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Rohingyas, particularly those who arrived in Bangladesh after August 2017, are highly unlikely to possess the necessary legal documents for obtaining mobile data and voice services in Bangladesh legally. In reality, refugees chose to buy SIM cards from Bangladeshis living nearby, frequently at exorbitant prices. They either have been using fake identification documents or borrow residents' identification cards to obtain these SIM cards. The refugees have been taking these risks even though doing so put them in a risky legal situation due to their urgent need for information and communication (Hussain and Lee, 2021).

However, using various digital platforms in the context of the Rohingya camps have presented a challenge, with poor network connectivity being the foremost obstacle they encounter in accessing any digital services. Given this fact, this study was conducted in three Rohingya camps in Bangladesh to explore and understand the significance of unauthorized digital platform usage in their daily lives, with a specific focus on the regime of Covid-19 pandemic.

More specifically, our study predominantly aimed at investigating an unexplored avenue that is investigating the significant role of unlawful digital interventions, particularly digital-based information, in raising awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic within the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh.

Related Literature

Very limited studies over the recent years have dealt with the issue of digital intervention in the Rohingya community. A comprehensive study by Hussain, Wall, and Heeks (2020), following critical realist philosophical and methodological approach, delved the underlying mechanisms which identify

the reasons and manners of digital innovation in the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. The writers explained three causal mechanisms as regards how the interaction of different structural, cultural and agency factors played influential factors:

First, the communications and technological infrastructure built around the mobile phone shops which meant digital audio and video content could be downloaded and distributed; Second, the motivation as well as the social, cultural, and political belief structures of the Rohingyas themselves which included factors like—attitude towards women having access to technology, the desire to access news and entertainment content of relevance, and the desire to keep in contact with disperse family and other social networks; and Finally, the legal and technical infrastructure which applied to the Rohingyas in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi authorities, under pressure from the UN and other various NGOs and INGOs, had to open up mobile and Internet services for Rohingyas. All these three mechanisms were deemed important to explain why the conditions necessary for digital innovation and the alternative Internet evolved and developed in the way they did (Hussain, Wall, and Heeks, 2020). The study allowed the writers to come to a theoretically informed and empirically rich account in promoting a wider research agenda regarding digital intervention in Rohingya community.

Another substantial study by Hussain, Jahangir, and Islam (2021) undertaken by BRAC showed several crucial findings which discovered the following features:

First, Marginalization of ICT usage in Rohingya camps: Since Rohingyas do not have any officially recognized and biometric information enabled documents, which eventually resulted in their exclusion from the legal SIM market in Bangladesh. Both mobile and internet service quality in and around the majority of the Rohingya camps have been very poor, adversely affecting the ICT access for Rohingyas as well as the humanitarian service providers.

Second, Usage trends and popularity of digital platforms: Voice call using any type of mobile phone have been the most used and trusted option among both Rohingya men and women for accessing information. Across the different age groups and gender identities, it was found that any kind of voice service over the traditional mobile network had been significantly more popular as well as more trustworthy than any other digital communication or access to information services. Further, voice calls, Imo and WhatsApp were the most popular and trusted ways of communication between Rohingyas within and outside the camp areas. Interestingly, Rohingyas have not preferred or used any digital media to communicate with local Government officials. And also, male Rohingyas were found to be more willing to pay for the digital services than their female counterparts.

Third, Inequality in digital space: Gender disparity among the Rohingyas was evident which affected the key development initiatives related to healthcare, information services, education, human resource development, clean energy usage, etc. In terms of access and applications of different digital platforms, Rohingya men and women used significantly different digital platforms for accessing emergency information on disaster, law & order, and seeking new job opportunities. Voice calls, Facebook, and YouTube were preferred by men while voice calls were preferred by women.

Fourth, Stakeholders' relationship and power matrix in digital communication: As regards the level of trusts, Rohingyas have maintained different digital platforms for connecting with major stakeholders within and outside the camp areas; while voice calls, Imo, WhatsApp, and Facebook have been the most trusted digital platforms for males, voice calls and Imo have been the most trusted digital platforms for females. 'Religious sermons' (*Waaj*) and 'English language learning' have been the most popular audio-visual content among Rohingyas.

Fifth, Digital platforms, social cohesion, and political leadership in Rohingya camps: In a slow-but-steady pace, a group of leaders has emerged out of the Rohingya population who are quite popular

among the general Rohingyas in the camp areas via various applied strategies with different digital platforms.

Sixth, Rise of the demand of audio-visual contents inside Rohingya camps: The emergence of mobile repair and recharge shops has helped in the distribution of popular contents among the Rohingyas, primarily the young males. A hugely significant difference between the access pattern of audio-visual content by male and female where men have been collecting and accessing audio-visual content significantly more frequently than women.

Access to and interaction with technology by displaced persons, as well as the conditions necessary for digital innovation in such contexts, are vital. Recent studies suggest that refugees' digital literacy and access, along with the associated risks of technology use, can have adverse effects on their empowerment and engagement with new digital tools and resources (Alencar, 2020). Therefore, access to lawful digital interventions can have the potential to significantly improve the lives of Rohingya women girls by offering them opportunities for communication, education, economic empowerment, and social support.

In an increasingly interconnected global society, characterized by the widespread consumption of media content and the overwhelming presence of social media platforms (Cooper, 2018), it has been observed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees that a significant portion of the global population, approximately 65 million individuals who have been forcibly displaced, lack reliable access to mobile connectivity and internet services (UNHCR, 2016).

It is evident that during infectious disease outbreaks, social media has functioned as a vital information avenue that enables users to stay up to date on the latest news about the disease at their own convenience, as well as provide information and guidelines for infection prevention precautions (Liu, 2020). Moreover, as information on social media is generated by users, such information can

be subjective or inaccurate, and frequently includes misinformation and conspiracy theories (Bridgman, et.al., 2020). Hence, it is imperative that accurate and timely information is disseminated to the public about emerging threats, such as SARS-CoV-2 (Tsao, et.al., 2021) is also important to consider.

Theoretical framework

The study employs Ethnoscape and Mediascape – which are coined by Arjun Appadurai (1990) – to understand not only the unlawful digital interventions among the Rohingya community in Bangladesh but also their significant impacts on daily life during the Covid-19 pandemic. While Ethnoscape and Mediascape reveal the trajectories of globalization, these concepts also have the potential to explain the life experiences of the refugee community. Let us explain the significance of using the globalization theoretical concepts underlying the subject matter. First, Ethnoscapes help us to understand the movement of people around the globe, both voluntarily and involuntarily. According to Appadurai (1990),

‘The landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.’

Ethnoscape, a concept denoting the movement of people across boundaries or borders, becomes particularly relevant when considering the Rohingya community's displacement to Bangladesh as refugees. The authoritarian government's actions led to the forced eviction of the Rohingya community, driven by the intention to establish Economic Zones (EZ) facilitated by China and India within the Rohingya settlement landscape, the Rakhine state (Khan, 2017; Child, 2018; BBC, 2018). In this context, it can be argued that the Rohingya community is a victim of globalization, and Ethnoscape emerges as an inseparable feature of globalization, as suggested

by Arjun Appadurai. Furthermore, the Rohingya community's experience can be termed as a 'forceful ethnoscape,' which resulted in the displacement of the community from their original place in Rakhine, Myanmar.

‘Forceful ethnoscape’ refers to the hybrid movement processes experienced by the Rohingya community. For example, not only was the Rohingya community displaced as a religious ethnic community in Myanmar, but the community's lands were also converted into business enterprises by the authoritarian government (Child, 2018; BBC, 2018). This process triggered landlessness and marginalization, and the community became reliant on aid in Bangladesh. Therefore, the forceful eviction led by the authoritarian government of Myanmar, resulting in a mass movement towards Bangladesh, created opportunities for powerful global south actors, especially India and China. This consequently led to a humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh with the influx of refugees. Understanding the circumstances mentioned above, it can be claimed that ethnoscape evolves as a negative connotation in the context of globalization when considering the forcible displacement of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh.

Secondly, in understanding the forcible movement process of the Rohingya community in Bangladesh, Mediascape facilitates an understanding of the process of unlawful uses of digital interventions among the Rohingya community in Bangladesh during the Covid-19 pandemic. Mediascape refers to the dissemination of information across borders. According to Arjun Appadurai (1990; 1996), Mediascape denotes both “the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” and “the images of the world created by these media.” The dissemination of information through global media swiftly influences human behavior.

Not only do the telegraph and the telephone play important roles in our society, but the Internet, including social media, is far more easily and rapidly shared regardless of geographic borders.

Having understood the overarching features of globalization, the mediascape created opportunities for the Rohingya community using digital intervention, albeit termed as 'illicit interventions' in the camps, during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the Rohingya community has become victims of either ethnoscape or mediascape due to forceful evictions driven by the overarching features of globalization. In this context, numerous international players have interplayed, introducing ethnoscape or mediascape to forcibly displace the Rohingya from their original places in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Therefore, Arjun Appadurai's theoretical contributions not only provide insights into understanding illicit digital interventions in the community but also aim to comprehend the significant impacts of ethnoscape and mediascapes on the lives of the Rohingya community during the Covid-19 pandemic. Succinctly, the land-grabbing led by the authoritarian government in Myanmar introduced two terms, ethnoscape and mediascape, which prove valuable in understanding digital interventions in the camps during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Methods

This exploratory formative research was conducted in Ukhiya, a sub-district of Cox's Bazar

District in Bangladesh dealing with the Rohingya community. At the outset three Rohingya refugee camps were selected based on their prominence on location, population size and density, which we considered as most vulnerable to Corona virus infection. More specifically, the three camps were selected based on the proximity of their locations, and the point of data saturation was considered during the fieldwork.

The study employed several qualitative methods, including Focus group discussions (FGD's), In-depth interviews, and observations. For example, the study conducted Focus group discussions involving both males and females from the Rohingya community. Each Focus group discussion comprised 6 to 8 individuals from the community, totaling 14 group discussions. Gender balance was maintained in the interview process,

with 7 FGD's including males and 7 FGD's including females. Therefore, the study was conducted through the following sessions: 14 FGDs (Focus Group Discussions), 24 In-depth Interviews, and 10 observations during three months of fieldwork.

These interviews aimed to understand the importance of digital interventions during the Covid-19 period among the Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh. Additionally, the study used different methods along with observational techniques to comprehend how digital interventions contributed to shape their knowledge regarding Covid-19.

Finally, the observations took place at tea stalls where community members gathered during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite researchers wearing masks and maintaining social distancing, it was made possible to record observations regarding how the community used digital devices to stay updated on Covid-19 information. Finally, data saturation was achieved, leading to the cessation of further empirical evidence collection regarding the issue.

A range of techniques was used to analyze the data. Thematic coding proved particularly useful when the data sets were composed of texts from a diverse range of interviews. Themes guided the researcher in drawing links between diverse sets of information (Patton, 2002). Data source triangulation was conducted through extensive fieldwork. A wide range of documentation was reviewed and analyzed to corroborate evidence, verify certain facts stated by interviewees, and to gain detailed information to satisfy the objectives of the study.

Research Ethics

The study was conducted between January and March 2021, amidst the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given these circumstances, stringent health precautionary measures were diligently adhered to minimize the risk of Covid-19 transmission. These measures included the mandatory use of masks and hand sanitizers during all phases of interviews and observations. Additionally, participants were furnished with

masks as a protective measure during the interview procedures.

In conjunction with these health precautions, prior informed consent forms were meticulously provided to all interviewees, ensuring their voluntary participation and comprehension of the study's objectives. Furthermore, to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants, their identities were carefully anonymized throughout the research process. Pseudonyms were also thoughtfully employed during the data analysis phase to further safeguard their anonymity and protect their personal information.

Findings

Adolescent males and females with access to smartphones acquired knowledge about various aspects of COVID-19, including symptoms, the vaccination program, and precautionary health measures. The respondents widely used social media platforms such as Facebook, Imo, WhatsApp, and YouTube on their smartphones. These devices enabled them to access up-to-date information about the global COVID-19 situation, in addition to the latest updates specific to Bangladesh.

An adolescent girl shared her experience: *'I saw information about the vaccine on Facebook. I learned that the vaccine is now available in Bangladesh through a friend's Facebook profile. I believe that getting the vaccine can protect someone from the coronavirus'* (Interview: Josna, 17). The influence of social networks, including friendships, is evident in how individuals access information.

The knowledge accumulated through smartphones has polarized the debate surrounding the contemporary COVID-19 situation. In contrast, elderly people tend to rely on television broadcasts as a trustworthy source of information. In essence, digital information has fueled intergenerational debates, typically occurring between adults and the elderly in society. To gain a better understanding of the tone of these debates, the following conversation prompts further reflection:

'Some people have expressed their intention to take the vaccine, while others have stated that they won't. Some individuals who lack education tend to spread unfounded claims. For instance, there are those who allege that the vaccine contains adulterated materials and that some people have died as a result. A few days ago, a cholera vaccine was administered to everyone, and similar rumors circulated regarding that vaccine as well.' (FGD: adolescent boys; aged between 16 and 20).

While exploring the learning process via smartphones on this issue, adolescent girls expressed concerns about the misleading information that spreads through social media. The discussion unfolded as follows: *'Some individuals create fake Facebook profiles, and these fake IDs contain illogical comments and posts. For instance, some claim they will take the vaccine, while others assert that taking the vaccine will lead to death. Many people discuss various topics'* (FGD: Adolescent girls, aged between 16 and 19). This narrative reflects the analytical thinking of the respondents, especially adolescent girls and boys, who were critically assessing both the sources and the reliability of the information.

Digital applications, particularly those operating on social media platforms like Facebook, provide a means to access information related to precautionary health measures, including vaccination programs. The study identified that predominantly young individuals aged between 16 and 30 use smartphones. Depending on the reliability of the information, respondents also shared the knowledge they acquired with their family members. For example, one adult male participant, aged 25, stated, *'I found information on Facebook that the vaccine arrived in our country, so I informed my parents'* (Interview: Adult male, 25).

Not only did the respondents share their acquired knowledge with their family members, but they also offered guidance to the elderly household members on how to make the most of digital

applications. For instance, adolescent girls registered the names of eligible family members for vaccination by accessing the designated website: *'We can register to get the vaccine on www.surokkha.com. After that, you will be scheduled for vaccination.'* The adolescent group demonstrated awareness of websites and online resources that can be used to access COVID-19 prevention services, such as vaccine registration. This awareness suggests the potential for expanding certain COVID-19-related health services to communities through online platforms. Additionally, the adolescent group was familiar with local online news portals, which could be leveraged to disseminate relevant information and awareness messages effectively.

The knowledge of the respondents about the COVID-19 pandemic was influenced not only by mainstream media but also by social media. When the pandemic struck Bangladesh between March and April 2020, respondents who had smartphones and used social media shared information about the severity of the disease with their family members, which they had gathered from social media sources. For example, one elderly respondent acknowledged:

'My son received information about the coronavirus on his mobile phone, and he would share it with us. He advised us to be cautious and maintain cleanliness, emphasizing that if we didn't follow the rules, we could become infected with the coronavirus. Similarly, if a neighbor has a television, they share the information with everyone around, and the same thing happens with mobile phones.'

Social media is believed to have altered the perspective of the respondents regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. To support this claim, they argued that the religious conflicts instigated by non-Muslim leaders in the contemporary world had contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about this assertion, the respondents unequivocally stated that they acquired knowledge about the issue by browsing social media.

For instance, information about the Chinese government's mistreatment of the Muslim community in the country was censored and not widely reported, but it was available on social media. As one adult female, aged 25, explained, *'We learned that the Chinese Government was oppressing the Muslim community. That's why some believed the coronavirus was a punishment from Allah'* (Interview: Adult female, 25). Therefore, the respondents, especially adolescent boys and girls, heavily relied on information from social media regarding COVID-19.

To share COVID-19 related information with acquaintances and relatives, the school or college-going adolescent girls and boys downloaded an app known as 'Corona Tracker.' An adolescent female added:

'I once downloaded an application called 'Corona Tracker' with the help of a friend. If you enter your name, the application assesses the likelihood of being infected with the coronavirus, but I usually don't keep up with updates. I don't monitor the number of deaths or infections. My primary goal is to stay safe' (Interview: Female, 21).

Furthermore, adult girls and boys also followed social media for information. For instance, one male respondent, aged 25, mentioned, *'I use Facebook to keep track of how many people have recovered or been infected'* (Interview: Male, 25). Introducing the app to the community became an innovative way to raise awareness. While prioritizing the app as an awareness tool, particularly by adolescent boys and girls, elderly respondents (aged between 40 and 60) were hesitant to use social media. Instead, they preferred to watch mainstream news on Bangladesh media outlets.

In addition to the process of accumulating knowledge related to the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescent boys and girls became acquainted with the origin and development of the disease through social media, including Facebook and YouTube. Using social media, adult respondents (aged

between 25 and 30) were able to access various news portals – including BBC and the national news media.

‘I gather a lot of information through social media, primarily by watching BBC news. I first learned about the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan from a BBC report. Initially, I didn’t pay much attention to it. However, as I watched more live news coverage about the coronavirus, I began to take it more seriously. I also have friends living in France and Spain. After discussing the situation with my relatives, I became certain that a pandemic was unfolding.’

The respondents not only acquired knowledge about the severity and symptoms of the disease through social media but also became familiar with some buzzwords associated with the pandemic, namely quarantine and lockdown. More specifically, the introduction of COVID-19-related specialized jargon through social media was noticeable. The discussion proceeded with the following tones:

‘I used social media, mainly Facebook. Initially, I heard that the virus had broken out in Wuhan, China, and those authorities had implemented a lockdown. At that time, I had no idea what a lockdown was; I simply thought it was happening in China and wouldn’t reach Bangladesh. I was also unfamiliar with the concept of home quarantine. As time went on, I learned about many new words like ‘Covid-19’ and many others.’

The narratives highlight the power of social media, which allowed the respondents to acquire knowledge about the issue, although the relatives of the respondents played crucial roles in raising awareness about COVID-19. Relatives of the respondents who lived abroad provided information about the severity of the pandemic. In this context, the flow of information was accessible through mobile phones, particularly via social media platforms like Facebook. An adult female respondent, aged 36, added, *‘I have a relative living*

in Malaysia. He informed me about the outbreak of a new virus, emphasizing its strength, and advised us to be cautious.’

In addition to obtaining COVID-19 information through social media, the respondents used various apps for different purposes. These apps not only helped the respondents share information with their family members but also facilitated financial transactions using platforms such as ‘Bkash,’ ‘Rocket,’ and ‘Nogod.’ However, when asked whether they were familiar with a health app in their locality, the respondents did not find such an app. Nevertheless, they expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of having a health app:

‘It would be really beneficial to have such an application. We need to inform people about these apps so that they can use them. The majority of people in our country are not highly educated, so they need encouragement to use these applications. Nowadays, most people have mobile phones at home, and they tend to watch more news on their mobiles than on TV.’

The usefulness of smartphones as access points to healthcare services can vary. Smartphones are more likely to be useful for people from the host community compared to those in the camps because any in-person services that an app can provide access to are generally more accessible for individuals in the host community. In both the host community and the camps, smartphones are likely to be more effective tools for reaching more affluent families rather than the poorest ones. Additionally, smartphone-based messaging or awareness programs are likely to reach more men than women and more relatively affluent young men than any other demographic group in both the host community and the camps.

The formation of groups using social media was a popular trend observed among adults aged between 16 and 30. Each group comprises 31 to 47 members. One respondent mentioned, ‘When I come across important information about raising awareness, I immediately share it with my friends in these groups. However, I do not always know the

original source of those videos.’ The group members shared various types of information, including information about the COVID-19 pandemic. Another respondent added, *‘They discussed coronavirus and informed us about preventive measures. We have both Facebook and Messenger groups.’* The students primarily relied on social media for their studies, with one stating, *‘We mostly share study-related things since our classes have been closed for so long. I prefer using my mobile phone to access information.’* Accessing information through social media has become inevitable in our daily lives.

Gendered restrictions on smartphone usage were observed. While social media was heavily used by adult respondents, elderly people had mixed reactions to the issue. Some perceived that social media led to the deterioration of the morality of the younger generation. An elderly male respondent (aged 50 years) claimed, *‘Using mobile phones is a waste of time. Furthermore, I have heard that mobile phones contain harmful content. It is better not to expose oneself to them, as it can negatively influence young girls.’* An adolescent respondent also acknowledged that her father did not allow her to use a mobile phone. She added:

‘I had a cousin who was the same age as me. She got a mobile phone, fell in love with a boy, and eloped with him. Ever since that incident, I no longer had permission to use my mother’s phone. Before that, I had occasional permission to use it. (I’m saddened by the fact that the girl ran away).’

Their parents keep a strict watch over them. They believe that if their daughters have mobile phones, they may become spoiled and start talking to boys. They fear that people will spread rumors about them. That’s why they don’t allow them to have access to mobile phones. This reflects patriarchal modes of controlling young girls, driven by notions of ‘modesty’ and their perceived value as potential brides whose celibacy must be protected.

Discussion and Conclusion

Bangladeshi law prohibited Rohingya refugees from possessing SIM cards, and in September 2019, authorities ordered mobile service providers to cease selling to them, confiscating over 12,000 phone cards (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Despite these restrictions, the Rohingya’s journey in Bangladesh witnessed a three-stage cycle, leading to gradual, albeit unlawful, access to internet technology. The first stage involved minimal access to technology, which later evolved to alternative methods for internet connectivity from January 2018 to mid-2018, primarily through mobile phone repair and recharge shops. Subsequently, from mid-2018 to mid-2019, access improved due to pressure from UN/NGOs/INGOs to open up mobile and internet services (Hussain, Wall, and Heeks, 2020).

The unauthorized access to digital platforms played a pivotal role in raising awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic within the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh. However, accessing mobile networks and internet services remained illegal. Rohingyas, especially those arriving after August 2017, lacked the necessary legal documents to obtain mobile data and voice services legally. Consequently, they purchased SIM cards from nearby Bangladeshis, often using fake identification documents or borrowed residents’ ID cards, despite the legal risks (Hussain and Lee, 2021).

Adolescent males and females with smartphones acquired knowledge about COVID-19 through social media platforms like Facebook, Imo, WhatsApp, and YouTube, leading to intergenerational debates within the community, as the elderly relied more on television broadcasts. The study highlighted the critical role of social media in shaping the community’s knowledge and perceptions of the pandemic, even as they encountered misleading content. While digital platforms facilitated information sharing and financial transactions, gendered restrictions on smartphone usage were evident, reflecting patriarchal control over young girls’ mobile phone access.

It emphasizes the power of social media in disseminating crucial information and calls for bridging the digital divide while respecting cultural norms. Understanding these digital dynamics is crucial for supporting Rohingya refugees and policymakers in refugee contexts (Hussain, Wall, and Heeks, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; UNHCR, 2020; Hussain and Lee, 2021).

This research underscores the significant role of unauthorized digital interventions in raising awareness among the Rohingya community during the COVID-19 pandemic. It emphasizes the power of social media in disseminating crucial information and calls for bridging the digital divide while respecting cultural norms. Understanding these digital dynamics is crucial for supporting Rohingya refugees and policymakers in refugee contexts. It emphasizes the power of social media in disseminating crucial information and calls for bridging the digital divide while respecting cultural norms.

Understanding these digital dynamics is crucial for supporting Rohingya refugees and policymakers in refugee contexts. Additionally, due to restricted technological resources, Rohingya women and girls may encounter a deprivation of educational opportunities, so impeding their potential for empowerment and hindering the enhancement of their future prospects. The acquisition of digital literacy has become increasingly crucial in contemporary society, and individuals who lack these abilities may face heightened marginalization.

Finally, the globalization process—led by the authoritarian government of Myanmar—appeared as a negative force when understanding the Rohingya context in Bangladesh. While the overarching two features of globalization—Ethnoscape and Mediascape—provide intellectual contributions to understanding the contemporary social and economic systems of the world, these features also demonstrate the strategies of the authoritarian government in Myanmar, forcefully damaging the living and livelihood procedures of the Rohingya community. Therefore, Ethnoscape and Mediascape are not autonomous features of the Rohingya community. Instead, it can be argued that

Ethnoscape and Mediascape are forceful and unavoidable circumstances that have compelled the Rohingya to use internet devices, albeit illegally, shaping their awareness regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

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