



The digital gift and aspirational mobility

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Abstract

This article discusses aspirational mobility and the digital gift in the context of forced migration in Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It illustrates how gifting a mobile device and data enhances the aspirational mobility of forced migrants and intervenes into political codes, which promote social and technological isolation. Through the example of fieldwork with forced migrants and social media analysis, the article shows how participation, self-presentation, and social control were encouraged through the object and data gift. The migrants amplified their aspirational mobility by participating in urban life, presenting themselves in digital space, and maintaining romantic sociality with members of other marginalized migrant groups. The article elaborates on previous notions of technology as expanding social worlds for forced migrants while also highlighting the potential of technology for social control between migrant groups. The article also points to the potential dangers of social media use by asylum seekers for refugee status determination.

Keywords

Asia, aspirational mobility, asylum seeker, data, digital gift, domestic worker, forced migrant, mobile phone, refugee, social media

Mobility has been linked to the constellation of movement of people, things, ideas, and the sociocultural, political, economic and spatial mobility practices growing out of that movement (Urry, 2007). Mobility has gained a favorable, if not celebratory, connotation, with scholars warning against generalizations as several groups are still excluded from moving across space and time freely (Morley, 2017; Sheller and Urry, 2006). One such

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group is asylum seekers and refugees¹ who, due to persecution, war and poverty cross borders to survive or better their lives. Asylum seekers find themselves in spaces of arrest as they have to cross internal or international borders, live in camps, wait until legally recognized as *refugees*, often for years, live in segregated or sub-optimal living conditions, and have limited social mobility (Witteborn, 2011, 2012a/b). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data still show that refugees are 50% less likely to own an internet-enabled phone and two and a half times more likely than the general population not to have phones at all (UNHCR, 2017).

While political interventions into digital infrastructures are necessary to scale up connectivity for the displaced, the question remains as to how mundane social practices intervene into received digital infrastructures and governmental politics. The photo of refugees charging their phone published in *The New York Times* in August 2015 (Brunwasser, 2015) became worldwide news, refreshing the academic debate on the importance of technology for forced migrants as well as the public debate on how much technology is becoming for the poor. When looking at the picture, the eye is drawn towards a cluster of cables and a power outlet, with mobile phones waiting to be recharged and used for navigating flight routes or talking to family. This picture is not only about technologies and mobilities in a refugee context. This picture is also about the gift. In other words, gifting is one mundane social practice that intervenes into digital infrastructures and governmental politics.

Mauss (1966) discussed the gift as a main relational mechanism of society, evoking values and emotions that bind people and groups together through the social workings of obligation and reciprocity. Gifts maintain and strengthen social alliances but can also increase divides and enmity through the emotional and historical value a gift has. Gift-giving still happens in digital economies but through different rituals and by creating different relationships. Giesler (2006), for example, argued – using the example of p2p sharing platforms like Napster – for the existence of a gift-giving system creating solidarity through social distinction, reciprocity, and rituals. Reciprocity is still key in gift-giving and includes returning the gift through means other than material objects, such as through moral forms of social capital (Osteen, 2002). And yet, the object gift still plays an important role, especially in the context of migration, technologies and mobility.

Objects are part of mobilities (Urry, 2007), with the mobile phone, laptop or iPad being essential for navigating and coordinating not only physical but also aspirational mobility (e.g. Madianou and Miller, 2012). Aspirational mobility is defined as the desire and hope of ‘making it’ (Chamberlain, 2001: 8), which means a desire to better one’s life in material and social terms, for example through an increase of income, material possessions, founding a family and extension of friends’ networks. Research has illustrated abundantly in recent years how technology structures the lived experiences of people forced to move, including their desire for ‘making it’. Mobile computing devices and platforms enhance physical and spatial mobility for the displaced (e.g. Leung, 2007, 2010; van Liempt and Zijlstra, 2017; Wallis, 2013), expand social networks (e.g. Dekker et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2018; Witteborn, 2012a), enable the performance of memory (Horsti, 2017), and contribute to social inclusion and political mobilization (Andrade and Doolin, 2016; Khorshed and Imran, 2015; Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014; Witteborn, 2015, in press). And there are obvious dangers, including

turning the forced migrant into a totalizing topos of threat through digitization (Broeders and Dijkstra, 2016; Latonero and Kift, 2018; Leurs and Smets, 2018; van Liempt and Zijlstra, 2017) or having migrants circulate in migration infrastructures and industries (Peile, 2014; Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Despite the recent discussions of the traceability of the displaced body, research tends to support the positive accomplishments of technology for those forced to be on the move, such as mobile intimacy (Hjorth and Lim, 2012), absent presence (a concept developed by Gergen, 2002; see also Madianou, 2016; Robertson et al., 2016) or scalable sociality (Borgerson and Miller, 2016), including the creation of weak ties that enable refugees to cope with information precarity before, during and after flight (Dekker et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2015). The arguments in this article texture previous notions of technology as expanding social worlds for forced migrants by the example of social participation, self-presentation and romance. And while the arguments confirm the potential of technology for social control (e.g. Katz, 1999; Ling and Helmersen, 2000; Witteborn, 2014), they show nuances by examining them in the context of marginalized migrant relations, relations between domestic workers and forced migrants in particular.

Social relationships and gifting

I use the term *digital gift* to gesture to the materiality of the mobile phone, computer and SIM card, digital skills taught to the gift-recipient, as well as information authenticating the user to access and engage within the network and interface. The meaning of gifts can only be determined when looking at the social relationships which they are part of. Social relationships like friendships, romantic relationships and social roles are the basis of gifting (Fiske, 1991; Komter, 2005). Komter argued that gifts and social relationships are intertwined as gifts gain their meanings in social interactions and hold the social fabric of a community together, creating social solidarities without which a society cannot function. Thus, Mary Douglas's argument (in Mauss, 1990 [1923]) that theorizing the gift means theorizing solidarity is still true today as *The New York Times*' picture of the charging stations has illustrated and as this article will show.

Komter (2005) proposed affect, power, self-interest and equality as main motives for gift-giving. Identification with a community, sharing and friendship satisfy the need of humans to belong and maintain meaningful relationships with others. But people also engage in gifting to enact superior social relationships, to embarrass others, or get them to reciprocate through means other than material things, such as supporting the superior social role. Power is related to self-interest and gifting is done also to instrumentalize others by coercing them to reciprocate (see Fiske, 1991). At the same time, reciprocity in the form of sharing and companionship is the basis of productive human relating, so Komter argues, with equality being the moral dimension of reciprocity.

In his model, affect and equality tend to be related to intimate relationships between family members or friends, with family being the most self-interested social unit, creating strong bonds at the cost of other social units (Komter, 2005). The question is what happens to newcomers who cannot count on these family ties, which leads to the larger question of how gifting works within the context of (forced) migration and in interactions between migrants and locals. The study illustrates that the binary between

newcomers and locals is highly nuanced and that one way of bonding is the digital gift between friends, romantic partners and interest groups, making those relationships highly important for debates on how to improve the well-being of newcomers (Andrade and Doolin, 2016).

Hong Kong SAR as case study

Aspirational mobility is shaped and enacted through digital technologies, skills and spaces which make possible the representation, witnessing and archiving of desires and imaginations. As such, gifting technology and skills can become a political act as the amplification of aspirational mobilities challenges the sovereign, in this case the Hong Kong government, by making newcomers digitally mobile while in physical and social arrest in the city. Hong Kong is situated in a part of the world that historically has received less attention in communication studies. It still comes as a surprise to many that this wealthy city is a city of migrants, due to British colonialism, refugees from China from the 1950s to the 1980s, so-called 'new immigrants' from Mainland China, and highly skilled migrants. From the 1950s to the 1980s, 1 million Mainland Chinese were estimated to have settled in Hong Kong due to famine, persecution and the Cultural Revolution (Chen, 2010), being joined by thousands of Vietnamese refugees during the Vietnam War in the 1970s. There are currently 9900 asylum seekers and refugees in the city, with the majority being Convention against Torture claimants.² Those seeking protection come mainly from South Asia, Southeast Asia and African nations.

Hong Kong has not signed the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and, until 2014, claims were processed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Since then, the Unified Screening Mechanism has been introduced, through which the immigration department selects affirmative refugee cases, with refugee recognition and resettlement still being processed by the UNHCR. Asylum seekers in Hong Kong are not allowed to work; they receive housing assistance, food stamps and some transport money, which amounted to around US\$385 per month at the time of the research. As the monthly housing allowance is only approximately US\$190 in the most expensive real estate market in the world, people have to share small apartments with strangers, often for years. Connectivity is a requirement of the government. The following quote by one asylum seeker illustrates this claim:

The Hong Kong government did not give us a telephone. But the thing is that they need us to give them a number so that they can contact us for different matters. If we cannot respond, it may be a crime and we can be jailed.

The fact that Hong Kong has one of the highest mobile subscriber penetration rates in the world (232%), and the fact that there are more than 17 million mobile subscribers in a city of 7.3 million (Office of the Communications Authority, 2017) amplifies the digital disconnect that asylum seekers find themselves in. Gifting a mobile device and data thus helps asylum seekers to fulfill the requirements of the asylum policies in Hong Kong, but also to challenge them by becoming aspirationally mobile qua the computational device.

Methodology

The data consists of two parts. First, my research assistants and I collected 90 personal interviews and 20 participant observations from 2013 to 2017 in churches and mosques, non-governmental organizations, and private houses, focusing on digital practices and their meanings for asylum seekers from African, Southeast Asian and South Asian countries.³ The interviewees were predominantly male (74), with the main group falling between the ages of 20 to 56. Their educational background ranged from eighth grade to Master's degree, and their professions from car mechanic, small business owner and journalist to social worker. Females tended to decline to participate in the study as they were too busy taking care of family or felt uncomfortable being asked questions.

The interviews and participant observations were conducted in English, Cantonese or Urdu, as those were the main languages the interviewees were comfortable with.⁴ After translation by my native-speaker research assistants, I identified the repeated usage of phrases like 'My friend gave me a mobile phone as a present,' 'My girlfriend gave me a phone as a gift' or 'My lawyer gave me a nice present when I felt so low. He gave me data [smiling].' Receiving data or a device thus became the focus of analysis, and as there was no expectation of returning the material or data gift, the practice was identified as *gifting*. Gift and present were taken as synonyms as the interviewees identified shared characteristics between those concepts, including the gift being a material or immaterial gesture that produces positive feelings like happiness or humbleness but which can also lead to feelings of obligation to 'give back' at a later point in time.

Gifting is communicative as it relates the discursive utterance and physical act of being given a phone, computer or data to communicative materiality and practices such as calling a friend, searching for information or posting on Facebook. The latter was highly meaningful to interlocutors, especially using and learning how to use Facebook. Therefore, Facebook practices such as posting, commenting and sharing were analyzed to understand the implications of the digital gift better. My research assistants and I analyzed 13 Facebook profiles of asylum seekers through an individual profile analysis of types of posts and main themes of photos displayed. Although one can argue that 90 interviews is disproportionate to 13 Facebook profiles, the small profile number can be explained by the fact that most of the interviewees had not yet been recognized as refugees in Hong Kong and were careful about who they connected with. Informed consent processes asking for access to their Facebook profiles often resulted in their declining to give their consent. However, the small number of profiles is included as the analysis produced some important data and insights. Ethical considerations in the study were extensive due to the vulnerable nature of the population. Therefore, a dummy Facebook page was created where people could sign up and find information on digital knowledge and skills.⁵

I applied the heuristic SPEAKING frame by Hymes (1972), which enables identification of setting of a practice, participants, goals of an interaction, acts involved, norms for interacting, and genre. As the purpose of this article is to understand the practice of gifting, I paid particular attention to the participants in the gift-exchange, the ends of the interaction, and norms for interacting. Aspirational mobility was identified as one main meaning when engaging with practices, enabled through the digital gift.

Gifting aspirational mobility

The large majority of the interviewees owned a smartphone and used it for communication with family and friends (through WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook), to find new social contacts, for entertainment, and browsing for information. These baseline data are very similar to the data I collected in Germany between 2011 and 2013 (Witteborn, 2012a). The only difference is the sharp increase of smartphones due to a thriving second-hand market, the affordability of data packages in Hong Kong, and the availability of platforms like WhatsApp or WeChat. More than half of the study participants reported having received a mobile device at some point during their stay in Hong Kong. Some people had two phones: one smart and one feature phone. Data package gifts in form of a rechargeable SIM card or data plan were even more common. Rahim,⁶ for example, bought a second-hand Samsung Note 2 for HK\$805 (approx. US\$100), and with the data gift of a friend subscribed to an HK\$68 per month data plan (approx. US\$8.70). The sources of the gift were friends, romantic partners and members of civil society, who saw the need for asylum seekers to participate in the social life in Hong Kong and to learn, but also to be controlled. In the following sub-sections, I discuss each of those in turn.

Participation

Friends gifted mobile devices and data for asylum seekers to participate in the social life of the city, producing and amplifying aspirational mobility for the gift recipients in the process. Friends included members of diasporic organizations, other refugees and individuals supporting people seeking asylum. Franklin is a case in point. He brought his smartphone from his country of citizenship and tended to buy his own data plan but once in a while would run out of money and depend on friends to gift him data. Franklin lived in a three-room apartment on Hong Kong Island, sharing the kitchen and living room with three other asylum seekers. He had to pay HK\$2700 (approx. US\$350) per month for the shared rent and HK\$100 for the utilities. Since he could only get HK\$1500 (US\$190) rent subsidy from the Hong Kong government, he was required to pay the extra amount by himself. Franklin went to Kowloon Park every Sunday to see his friends, many of them from African countries. WhatsApp was one major way to connect to other (forced) migrants from his country, to socialize, joke, gossip and debate.

The phone and the app had become part of the informational infrastructure, enabling Franklin to engage with diasporic organizations in which he felt welcome and to move through urban space to escape his small room. I had met Franklin several times on the subway: he was formally dressed in a suit, with a headset connected to his mobile, resembling all the other office workers rushing back home after a long day of work. The difference was that Franklin did not have work and stayed out of his home as long as he could, as it did not give him room to breathe. When he was dressed like this, and connected through his phone, Franklin radiated the personality he had talked to me about: connected, professional and able to participate in the social life of a place. It was not only the smart suit he wore or the tasks in the community organization that he handled but also the mobile device, clutched in his hand, which connected him to the social and professional world of Hong Kong, a city, which defines itself through its hardworking

population, inseparable from their mobile devices. Even more, the device became a powerful symbol of his aspirations and the desire to project an identity other than that of asylum seeker. Aspirational mobility and the desire to belong amplified physical mobility and movement through city space. At the same time, the device and movement also kept digital connectivity as a desirable condition alive, making Franklin painfully aware of lack of connectivity when his or his friends' data packages ran out.

The gift of data from friends enabled Franklin to enact this aspirational mobility of 'making it' (Chamberlain, 2001: 8) in a material and social sense. He decided to stay on Hong Kong Island, despite the high rent, as the people kept him thinking positively about his life:

I like the atmosphere. They are working. I want to see people going to office, dressing nicely. I am an office guy, I want to see other office workers. If I lived in other parts of Hong Kong where most of the asylum seekers live, it would drag me down.

For him, 'making it' meant returning to a social and material status he had had in his former home, having a regular job and income, moving through urban space with the dignity of a trained professional and having close social networks. Aspirational mobility was thus not a desire for a one-dimensional upward social move but a desire to regain what had been lost through being forced to leave his home. The professionally dressed newcomer speaking on a phone was the enactment of those desires.

Aspirational mobility for Franklin also meant being connected to others, attending social functions of organizations like the African Community Hong Kong, which promotes participation of citizens of African nations in Hong Kong – their well-being and social justice as well as business opportunities. These organizations were important as they provided people like Franklin with a positive sense of belonging as membership was composed of professionals and a diversified group of people enlarging the social networks of newcomers. 'Making it' socially also meant creating social networks through attending mosque, temple or church, or having a night out like other young people in Hong Kong. Platforms like WhatsApp were essential for coordinating activities, from church gatherings and activities organized by community organizations to informal gatherings. This was also true for Franklin:

We always connect through WhatsApp. Most people come from the same country I am from. We sometimes exchange information on politics back home but this can lead to debates. So I have learnt to avoid those and only engage in joking or reading links related to news or entertainment. We meet outside this mall. There you can sit. Even better, on the upper floor there is a charging station for our mobiles. We can use it for free.

The main motives reported by asylum seekers for the digital gift were shared interests and caring for people who struggled with a system that tried to keep them in loops of uncertainty. The data gift by diasporic friends, Hong Kong friends, other newcomers or religious community members created social solidarity as the newcomer became part of interactional webs of social relations, whether in diasporic organizations or the church, and could thus break free of social isolation for moments in time. In return, the gift-giver

of the data package enhanced his or her moral capital by enabling the newcomers to move digitally, to coordinate their social life, read the news and gain information on the asylum process. For some, giving a phone or data was a one-off matter, which could support Chouliaraki's (2013) argument about the ironic helper, who supports the suffering to soothe his own ego and increase his moral capital. But for most friends of newcomers this was different. They were genuine in their desire to create a sense of community through repeated digital and embodied interactions in professional diasporic organizations, churches, mosques or sports groups.

Learning and self-presentation

The mobile phone and data also enhanced aspirational mobility for the newcomers through learning skills and, relatedly, self-presentation. Ahmed's case is an example. Ahmed is a recognized refugee waiting to be resettled. I met him during an art exhibition organized by a colleague in which another asylum seeker showed his paintings and Ahmed took pictures of the event. Ahmed was a journalist before he fled his country due to death threats. He was able to bring along his camera and owned a smartphone, with an Australian friend gifting him a monthly data package. He had learnt English on this phone and later on a laptop, which he received through a fund-drive by media workers and educators to help him enhance his media production skills. Ahmed emphasized several times that the computer changed his life as he could edit his videos and a documentary he produced about asylum seekers in Hong Kong and learn new media practices. 'It saved my life,' was a sentence he used repeatedly, referring to how meaningful media work had steered him out of despair during the long asylum process in Hong Kong and helped him prepare for his new life as a media worker elsewhere.

Ahmed worked on a documentary on asylum seekers in Hong Kong and had become the voluntary videographer of a local band, editing videos and posting them on Youtube. The digital skills he had acquired with the help of the mobile device and monthly data, in addition to his passion for journalistic practice, made him feel confident about his future and telling the story of refugees through visual means. He had learnt video production on Youtube, waiting patiently when his data package ran out or connectivity was slow. The lawyer friend who gifted data and the professional networks in Hong Kong who shared Ahmed's interest in journalism and documentary film-making are examples of creating social solidarity through the act of gifting. Gifting was based on a desire for equality, recognizing the other not only in his humanity but also in his quest for professional development. Ahmed himself stated that he was not just given a gift but a sense of solidarity, nurturing his dream of becoming a media worker. In other words, the gift helped Ahmed to believe in himself and strengthen his aspirational mobility.

Several studies have shown how the mobile device creates spaces for migrants in which aspirations can be articulated and archived. As Wallis (2013) has illustrated with internal migrant women in China, visuals stored on mobiles were important aspirational signposts. The spaces were representations of the women's longing produced by urban consumerism and performative moves of reaffirming a sense of a self which resisted the daily hardships of work and social isolation, keeping the belief in material and social prosperity alive (compare with *making it*; Chamberlain, 2001: 8). Something similar was

happening in the lives of the people seeking asylum in Hong Kong as they recognized digital space as a space of self-presentation with a future-oriented potential. The latter was liberating as it allowed the presentation of a self that was meaningful to the people and not reduced to labels like *refugee* or *asylum seeker*.

Aspiration thus not only encompasses the belief of making it in the future but also requires the act of representation as a signpost of its achievement. When friends taught the newcomer digital and technical skills (on Facebook in particular), this act can be regarded as a gift. The asylum seeker is enabled to (re)present herself and her aspirations and have them witnessed by others (Miller, 2011) – an important interactional accomplishment. In other words, gifting produced reciprocity, and having gift-givers or other people witness a newcomer's well-being and future-oriented desires is one example of this reciprocity and the idea of 'giving back'.

When looking at the Facebook profiles, it became apparent that people had created a digital story about themselves, which was a story of mobility different from the stories heard in the interviews. The Facebook profiles, images posted, and *likes* portrayed a globally connected and consuming self. One striking similarity of all the posted pictures was their upbeat tone: selfies in a shopping mall, in front of global brand stores, in the streets, or in front of local attractions. There were no images of the experiences interviewees had described during the interviews: painful journeys, detention, endless boredom due to forced inactivity and being poor. The posted pictures told a story of people moving effortlessly in urban space, and being connected to global chains of consumption and flows of people, information and goods.

This representation is in line with extant literature on the positive performance of self in social media (Miller, 2011; Wallis, 2013). However, the presentation of self is not in line with research on asylum seekers and refugees and the ways they narrate their lives while seeking asylum. While previous research has illustrated that technologies can relieve the consequences of forced movement (Andrade and Doolin, 2016; Wilding and Gifford, 2013), the research presented here argues that forced migration narratives themselves are shaped through digital (re)presentation. The visuals not only tell the story of an accomplished self embedded in urban nodes of connectivity and consumption, they also tell the story of a socially connected self. The Facebook pictures show a happy and fulfilled life as a member of a community, including attractive selfies with friends in malls and on beaches, radiating youth and an appetite for adventure. While one can claim that users engaged in typical 'Facebook Relationship Maintenance Behaviors' (Ellison et al., 2014: 856) by posting in a positive way, giving advice or enhancing the face of others through likes, those presentations of self did something much more forceful. The posts made the profile owner unrecognizable as a bureaucratic and legal category, slipping past the political codes of the government, which were regarded by the people as keeping them in cycles of fear of deportation, hope of a successful claim, and poverty.

Social control

Self-interest was also a motive for gifting a mobile device and data with the goal of maintaining a romantic relationship. But this self-interest was different from the

self-serving support of the suffering that Chouliaraki (2013) discussed. Gifting a device or data was instrumental in maintaining romantic relationships between two groups with limited political and economic rights in Hong Kong: asylum seekers and domestic workers. Like asylum seekers, domestic workers⁷ are marginalized in Hong Kong and are predominantly from the Philippines and Indonesia (Association of Hong Kong Agencies for Migrant Workers Ltd, 2017). The workforce is mostly female. While many women are married with a family in the countries they were socialized in, there are also many single young women. Newcomers tended to meet domestic workers in the parks of Hong Kong on Sundays, where the women gathered on their only day off, as living spaces in Hong Kong are very small. They also met through dating apps. Romantic relationships developed through frequent interactions. The women tended to gift mobile devices and digital skills such as posting, liking and sharing, with an announced or implied moral obligation to reciprocate, which meant that the men should be reachable at any time. Here is an example.

During a visit to a young asylum seeker from Pakistan, Hussein, in the rural parts of north-west Hong Kong, the man showed me his Facebook page. 'I show you as I feel so happy,' he said. He showed me pictures of his Filipina girlfriend on a beach, posing at the camera in selfie-posture. The mobile phone was essential for the relationship as it was the main tool through which his girlfriend could reach him and document their relationship for others on Facebook. She gifted him a data package on a regular basis. The mobile phone connected them several times during her 10-hour workday. She called him, usually when she had a break, asking where he was, what he was doing, and with whom. 'At first I thought that she feels lonely but then I realized that she checks up on me. I got used to it. I am a man, have many male friends, and a lot of time,' he said laughing. In the relationship, the females tended to support the men, from contributing to their rent, to gifting data packages, to keeping the mobile phone and social media connections running.

As such, the data package was an instrumentalized gift, which served the interest of both involved parties related to maintaining and monitoring the romantic relationship through immediate response to a phone call or liking of a picture, and being reachable whenever and wherever possible. Hence, the phone monitored the relational contract between the couple and created relational pressures as the gift receiver and giver could be observed and questioned. In this sense, the mobile gift was similar to Mauss's (1966) gift in traditional societies, where the recipient was indebted to the giver. The noteworthy dynamic is how the digital gift calibrated romantic control over the newcomer and reversed gendered and social hierarchies between the socially and politically marginalized domestic laborers and the displaced. The domestic worker became the agent in connecting the newcomer and set the terms for interpersonal connectivity and exclusiveness as a couple, all mediated through Facebook. Although the men were grateful, it was difficult for them to accept the situation as they had always been in charge of family income and support. The reversal of gender roles could be problematic for men in many parts of the world but was especially compounded for the men who had grown up in societies where gender roles were clearly demarcated. Hussein said, 'I feel embarrassed sometimes as I don't have money and my brothers and father would feel ashamed for me.' The men felt emasculated because of their restricted financial situation and not being able to

support their girlfriends or at least to impress them by buying small gifts or taking them out for a day to the beach or to the mountains.

Despite the social control, the gift enabled aspirational mobility for the newcomers as romantic relationships were a source of emotional strength for the men. The romantic sociality countered the difficult conditions they faced on a daily basis, in particular the coupling between precarity and being an outsider. In fact, both forced migrants and domestic workers are social, legal, and political outsiders in Hong Kong. Neither would be able to exercise political rights as asylum seekers had to leave the city after recognition and domestic workers still cannot become permanent citizens (Association of Hong Kong Agencies for Migrant Workers Ltd, 2017). As soon as either the legal or the economic basis for the stay disappeared, the person also had to disappear. Both, those seeking asylum and domestic workers are legally made transitory, giving aspirational mobility through imaginations of romantic love and the significations that come with it, such as trips, gifts, and being together, a special place in one's life. Although there were cases of marriages between asylum seekers and former domestic workers turned asylum seekers, those couples faced the threat of deportation, including deportation of their children. The digital gift enabled aspirational mobility through instigating intimate relationships (e.g. dating apps), coordinating them and documenting them. Even more importantly, the gift enabled others to witness such personal bonding and make those relationships public.

The digital gift and the desire for human bonding can therefore be read as creating social solidarities between those who do not belong. Asylum seekers expressed repeatedly that meeting people in Hong Kong was difficult for them due to a lack of money and restricted ability to socialize in public spaces, and due to the negative image of asylum seekers, amplified by the media. The men felt acknowledged as attractive partners when their romantic relationships were documented on social media and confirmed during phone calls. Feeling attractive and desirable were uplifting experiences as the men typically found themselves to be perceived by the mainstream population and the media as poor victims or parasites wanting to benefit from the riches of Hong Kong, global topoi which have not changed much over the past decade (Leudar et al., 2008). Therefore, the emotional support given by the women through the digital gift, despite its challenges, can be regarded as a type of solidarity (Komter, 2005) that was important for people caught in legal and social limbo.

Implications

One of the implications of this article is to do with rethinking the humanitarian focus on asylum seekers and refugees and turning towards economic opportunities to better people's lives (Long, 2013). The mobile gift is a somewhat unexpected mediator of the relief-economic opportunity nexus (Long, 2013), as it creates opportunities for displaced people to extend social relations and bonds with people of a different economic status and to relate to discourses on mobility, economic aspirations and a cosmopolitan outlook. Long (2013) made a convincing argument about how refugees are tied to a discourse and practice of humanitarian aid while migrants are wrapped up in the discourse of betterment and social mobility. While it is important to retain the need for protection for refugees, this protection,

which is dependent on long asylum procedures and segregation of the claimant from mainstream society, needs to be intertwined with opportunities for social participation.

This article has illustrated how asylum seekers are already merging the humanitarian and social mobility discourse in their aspirational mobilities, enabled through the digital gift. The discussion confirms the extant literature mentioned in the beginning on how technology helps maintain social networks through intimacy and co-presence, enabling a certain degree of social inclusion in the city through institutional and diasporic links and learning, as well digital self-presentation as a person beyond the bureaucratic asylum category. Within the logics of gifting, the newcomers did not reciprocate through objects. They reciprocated through learning skills, expanding their social circles, having others witness their well-being on social media, and keeping the trust of their partners (if not always). They also reciprocated by recoding the imposed category of asylum seeker. Instead of the dejected and poor person from the global periphery, the digital persona depicted an urban and globally connected, young and fun-loving self. This depiction and performance seems typical of the Facebook generation (Baym, 2015) but in this particular case becomes political as it intervenes in the received ways of coding the asylum seeker and restricting him or her in space. This self-presentation did not change the economic and political realities for asylum seekers in Hong Kong. However, the digital space became a space of partial personal freedom to dream and to meet others without being restricted by imposed categories. Thus, the digital gift was an intervention into political practices by giving asylum seekers a chance to speak and act by and for themselves.

In addition to enhancing aspirational mobility, the digital gift also posed problems. It controlled newcomers in their gender roles in at least two ways. First, it controlled the relational contract. Second, the gift was symbolic of the economic and social power of the women, and their calibrating the relationship based on the faithful behavior of the men. Mutual social exchange and dependency on either the financial support by the women or the love by the men was a consequence. As such, the digital gift not only expanded social practices and participation in Hong Kong but also structured relationships among migrant groups as well as gendered hierarchies. Although the women became the ones in charge due to their economic power, they still worked within received gendered imaginations, with the jealous woman controlling the lusty man.

Related, and as a closing remark, aspirational mobility and social media could generate additional, and potentially more severe problems, explicated elsewhere. Digital performance and user-generated content could play an increasing role in asylum claim assessments in the future, with several European countries like Germany and Denmark expanding existing laws, and countries like the UK and Norway already using social media data as evidence. Self-generated digital content can help asylum seekers to make their case but can potentially produce evidence contradicting their narratives of flight. The latter assumption implies that forced migrants need to learn about the consequences of co-producing their digital identity, and more generally about digital safety.⁸

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Notes

1. I use the terms *asylum seeker*, *refugee*, *displaced* and *newcomer* synonymously in this study to indicate the phenomenological nature and consequences of being out of place due to persecution, war and poverty. I acknowledge the legal implications of the terms. The term *newcomer* has been used increasingly since 2015 in Europe to position the people as new members of society instead of bureaucratic and legal entities. The term *newcomer* goes back to Hannah Arendt and her essay 'We refugees' (1943).
2. See <http://www.justicecentre.org.hk/facts/>
3. I thank Dr Aamir Muhammad Khan and Gordon Lee for their work as research assistants and their tireless data collection efforts.
4. Language choice did not pose any problems during interviewing or analysis as those were the preferred languages of the interviewees, with high quality translation enabled by the research assistants, who were native speakers in either Chinese (Cantonese) or Urdu and fluent in English.
5. The interviewees were given food coupons as tokens of recognition as well as information on legal, health, and educational matters.
6. All names in this study are changed and replaced by pseudonyms.
7. In Hong Kong, the people are called Foreign Domestic Workers or Foreign Domestic Helpers. I do not use the term *helper* here as they are more than helpers; the women are workers and laborers. I also avoid the term 'foreign' to give reduced space to the idea of them not belonging to Hong Kong.
8. Jason Li, a digital expert, and myself have created a workshop on digital safety for forced migrants, available on Github: <https://github.com/hongkonggong/social-media-safety-asylum-seekers/blob/master/README.md>.

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