

Displacement Trauma and Digital Silence: Narrating Survival Before Connectivity Among South Sudanese Refugees in Uganda

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Abstract: This article investigates the traumatic aspects of forced displacement of South Sudanese refugees in Morobi Refugee Camp, Uganda, with a focus on the time before digital media is used. Through an analysis of 25 in-depth interviews using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), the article explores four sub-themes from a main Theme (Trauma and Adaptation): (a) Violent Displacement and Flight, (b) Physical Deprivation Endurance, (c) Family Separation and Informational Void, and (d) Conditional Camp Adaptation. Findings suggest that the process of being displaced is simultaneously continuing and fragmented, with the body as the center of survival. The article also introduces the concept of digital silence to capture the absence of digital media use during acute flight and the understanding that digital engagement becomes possible when physical safety is reached.

Keywords: *Displacement Trauma, Digital Silence, South Sudanese Refugees, Uganda, Forced Migration, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Digital Activation Threshold.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is a cold, misty morning as a South Sudanese mother packs her belongings, her children close behind. The distant sound of gunfire reminds her that this is not a vacation. She does not know when or where she will be able to return home. Together with her children, she is about to embark on a journey that millions of South Sudanese people have made in the past decade, fleeing from war, political unrest, and violence to seek safety in neighboring countries such as Uganda (Johnson, 2016; UNHCR, 2020).

I empathize with the people I study as a member of the same community. I have personally experienced the feeling of being displaced, having left my home country, South Sudan, to seek refuge in Uganda. I understand the complex situation from first-hand experience. My experience as a refugee shapes my understanding of South Sudanese refugees' lived experiences, allowing me to contribute a more reflective perspective to the discussion.

When researchers discuss refugees, they often refer to people who have been forced to leave their homes due to conflict, persecution, or violence (Betts & Collier, 2017). This definition applies to the South Sudanese context, where

many people have been displaced due to the country's ongoing civil war. Displacement can be a traumatic experience for refugees, involving a range of psychological and physical challenges (Fazel et al., 2005; Porter & Haslam, 2005).

A significant number of South Sudanese refugees have sought asylum in Uganda, which has accepted a considerable number of refugees during the conflict (UNHCR, 2020). A primary source of tension for South Sudanese refugees is their uncertain status as displaced persons. Many people in South Sudan have had to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere.

My interest in the digital experience of refugees is informed by the importance of digital media in their lives. Digital media can be a valuable tool for refugees, providing them with a means of communication and a way to stay connected to their communities (Helsper, 2015; Van Dijk, 2019). For South Sudanese refugees, digital media is essential in maintaining a sense of belonging and connection to their cultural heritage.

There is a need for further research on the temporal aspects of digital media use among refugees. Studies have

shown that digital media plays a significant role in the lives of many people, including refugees (Helsper, 2015; Van Dijk, 2019). However, there is limited understanding of how and when refugees engage with digital media, especially in the context of forced displacement. When exactly do they start using digital media, and what are the conditions for connectivity? Do they use it immediately after becoming displaced, or is there a period of digital silence before they can engage with it?

In the present article, I contribute to the discussion by exploring the Theme: Trauma and Adaptation from my larger qualitative study about the role of digital media in the lives of South Sudanese refugees in Morobi Refugee Camp, Uganda (Marle, 2026). From the initial analysis, four sub-themes were identified and developed: (a) Violent Displacement and Flight, (b) Physical Deprivation Endurance, (c) Family Separation and Informational Void, and (d) Conditional Camp Adaptation. I argue that digital media is largely absent during acute displacement, and when it is present, it is used in a different way than in non-displaced populations.

I propose the concept of digital silence to refer to the period of time after displacement when digital media is unavailable or inaccessible to refugees. When they are in this state of digital silence, their bodies are their sole means of survival. I also discuss the idea of a digital activation threshold, beyond which a person is able to use digital technologies actively. My findings indicate that the physical body is the primary mode of being for the participants at the time of displacement, and meaningful digital engagement is only possible when a certain level of physical safety is reached.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a theoretical background and conceptualizes the study within the framework of relevant literature on displacement trauma, digital media, and Appadurai's theory of global cultural flows. Section 3 describes the methodology of the study. Section 4 presents the findings of the research, which are organized around the four sub-themes mentioned above. In Section 5, I discuss the findings in detail, and Section 6 concludes the article with recommendations for further research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Displacement as Ongoing Trauma*

Literature on the mental health of refugees has shifted focus from event-based trauma to that of continuous trauma (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). In continuous trauma, the stressor is accumulated through the process of flight and settlement. South Sudanese refugees in Uganda are experiencing such trauma as several factors have triggered multiple waves of displacement. Decades of civil war, violence between ethnic groups, and the establishment of unstable peace accords have led to the creation of what some scholars refer to as permanent temporariness (Hyndman & Giles, 2017; Boswell, 2021; UNHCR, 2023).

The impact of displacement on the mental health of South Sudanese refugees is well-documented (Fazel et al., 2005; Porter & Haslam, 2005). For instance, Fazel et al. (2005) found a high prevalence of severe mental disorders among the resettled refugees, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. Similarly, Porter and Haslam (2005) discovered pre-displacement and post-displacement risk factors for mental health disorders. South Sudanese refugees have been through years of civil war (Johnson, 2016), and the trauma of being forced to leave their homes or being subjected to gender-based violence can trigger mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD long after they arrive in Uganda.

However, much of the literature on the impact of displacement on mental health fails to acknowledge the timing of trauma and its implications on the use of digital media.

➤ *Digital Media in Displacement*

There is a growing body of literature on how refugees use digital media to reconnect with their families back home, coordinate their communities, and advocate for their rights (Alencar, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018; Leurs et al., 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, 2012). For instance, literature on Syrian refugees reveals that digital media play a critical role in helping the displaced stay connected with their families, access vital information, and rebuild their lives (Alam et al., 2015; Kaufman et al., 2017). One of the most popular digital media platforms used by refugees is WhatsApp. WhatsApp has been used extensively by the displaced due to its affordability, accessibility, and low data usage (Alencar & Camargo, 2022; Church & de Oliveira, 2013).

Most of the literature reviewed acknowledges the fact that digital media allow the displaced to stay connected with their families and communities. However, these studies assume that the use of digital media is constant throughout the entire displacement process. For instance, a study on the role of social media in the lives of Syrian refugees discovered that the displaced used various social media platforms while on the run and during their stay in Europe (Wall et al., 2017). Additionally, Gillespie et al. (2018) revealed the infrastructural and affordance configurations through which smartphones were utilized by Syrian refugees traversing the digital passage to Europe.

➤ *Appadurai's Scapes*

The concept of scapes proposed by Appadurai (1996) offers a theoretical basis for understanding the phenomenon of displacement. Specifically, this paper focuses on ethnoscares and technoscares in explaining why digital media is only utilized by the South Sudanese refugees after their arrival in Uganda. Ethnoscares refer to the distribution and circulation of peoples and populations (Appadurai, 1996). The refugees' stories about fleeing their homes and country illustrate ethnoscares as the flight takes away their sense of belonging and attachment to the land. The double displacement (Hyndman & Giles, 2017) experienced by the South Sudanese refugees is a form of ethnoscares as it

uproots them from their homelands and subjects them to harsh conditions in the camps with no or limited digital connection.

On the other hand, technoscapes refer to the global configuration of technology and technological change (Appadurai, 1996). Technoscapes explain how the South Sudanese refugees' use of digital media is limited by their access, control, and competence in the utilization of the available technologies. For example, the refugees experience a form of technoscapes as they flee their homeland, leaving behind their phones and other digital devices. It is only after arriving in Uganda that they gain access to smartphones and the internet.

➤ *The Digital Activation Threshold*

Anecdotal evidence from South Sudanese refugees suggests that the use of digital media is dependent on certain factors such as physical safety and the level of technological infrastructure. This paper conceptualizes this phenomenon as the digital activation threshold. This section will discuss the reviewed literature to discover how South Sudanese refugees use digital media to advocate for their rights while in Uganda.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

The study employed a qualitative research design that was anchored on narrative philosophical orientations. The design was appropriate for the research problem as it allowed

the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, stories, and socio-cultural contexts of the South Sudanese refugees and how they influence the use of digital media to create connections (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). In addition, the design allowed the exploration of the role that digital media plays in helping the refugees stay connected to their families and advocate for their rights.

The study focused on a qualitative research paradigm and a narrative approach to examine the role of digital media in facilitating connections and advocacy in the lives of the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. Specifically, the narrative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the stories and lived experiences of the participants concerning media use, displacement, connectivity, and advocacy.

➤ *Research Location*

The study was conducted in Morobi Refugee Camp of Palorinya Settlement at the Obongi District, which borders South Sudan. Uganda is one of the most progressive countries in hosting refugees in East Africa (Betts et al., 2019). The Ugandan government allows refugees free movement, access to social services, and engages them in economic activities in Uganda.

Morobi Refugee Camp hosts a large number of South Sudanese refugees who were displaced during the 2013 and 2016 civil wars (UNHCR, 2023). Consequently, the camp provides a unique setting for investigating the role that media plays in the lives of the displaced.

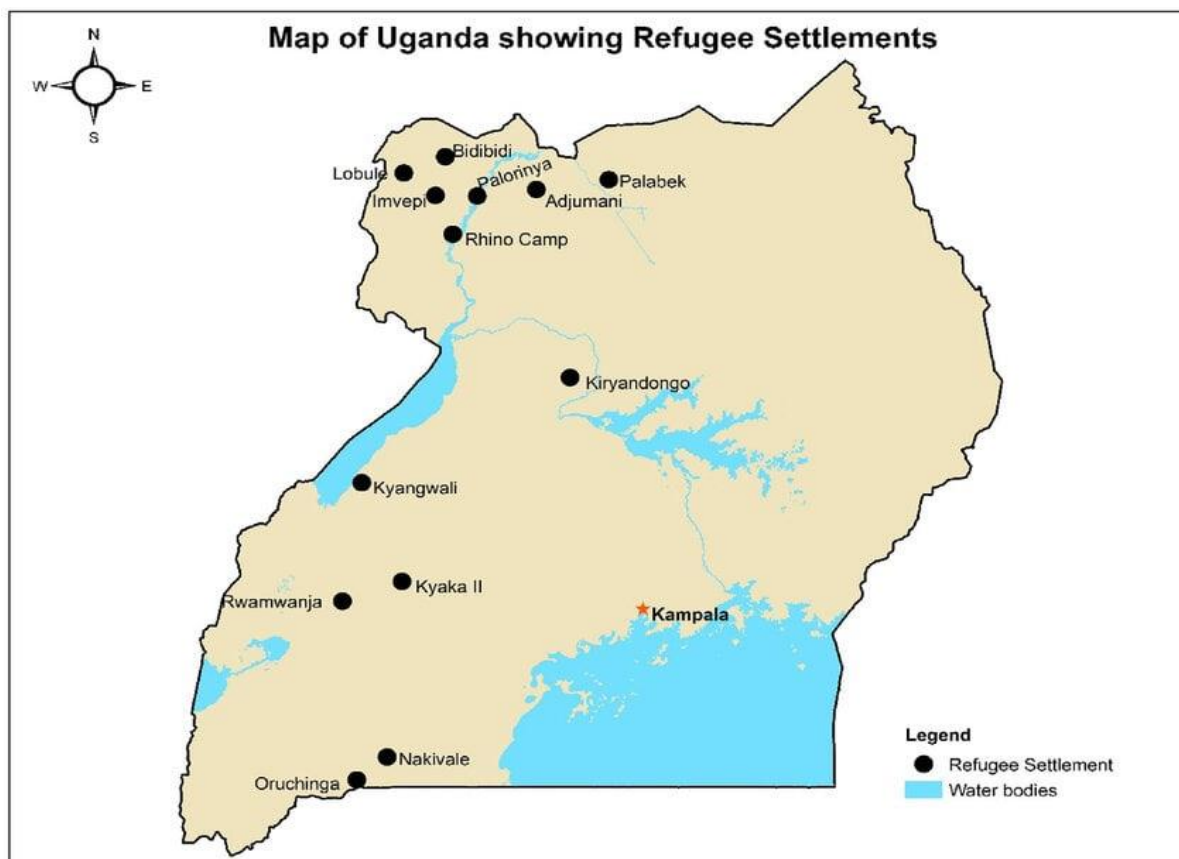


Fig 1 Map of Uganda Showing Refugee Settlements
Source: Baobab Research Program Consortium (2023)

➤ Participants

The study sampled participants from the overall target population of South Sudanese refugees who were staying in Morobi Refugee Camp. The sampling procedure followed a purposive strategy that was based on the inclusion criteria and the research objectives. Consequently, a wide range of participants was selected to ensure that the study obtained diverse opinions and views regarding digital media use among the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda. In addition, a special focus was placed on ensuring that all the selected participants were from diverse age groups and gender. This was important for analyzing the various ways in which digital media was used among the South Sudanese refugees.

• The Following Inclusion Criteria were Used:

- ✓ Use of Digital Media – This criterion ensured that the study sampled participants who could provide in-depth information on how digital media had been used by the South Sudanese refugees in general and the individual experience in particular.

- ✓ Above the Age of 18 – This criterion aimed at ensuring that the study obtained the views and opinions of the refugees and not children.
- ✓ Residency in Morobi for at Least Six Months After 2016 – This criterion aimed at ensuring that the sampled participants had lived in Uganda for a sufficiently long period to be able to comment on the research problem.
- Consequently, the Following Categories of South Sudanese Refugees were Selected for this Study:
 - ✓ Adults Who Experienced the 2016 Crisis – This category of refugees could provide information on the role of digital media in their personal experiences and those of their communities in Uganda.
 - ✓ Youth (18+ Years) Who May Have Not Experienced the 2016 Crisis – This category of refugees could provide additional information on how digital media has been used by the displaced in Uganda.

Table 1 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Years in Uganda	Digital Platforms Used
Agnes	Female	36–45	>5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Alex	Male	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp
Alfred	Male	18–25	3–5 years	YouTube, WhatsApp
Anna	Female	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Beck	Male	18–25	<3 years	YouTube, TikTok
Bosco	Male	36–45	>5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
David	Male	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Elly	Male	18–25	3–5 years	WhatsApp
Emmyln	Female	18–25	<3 years	YouTube, TikTok
Felista	Female	36–45	>5 years	WhatsApp
Hellen	Female	26–35	3–5 years	Facebook, WhatsApp
Henry	Male	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp
Ivan	Male	18–25	3–5 years	Facebook, WhatsApp
Jackline	Female	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp
Jackson	Male	18–25	<3 years	YouTube, TikTok
Jimmy	Male	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
John	Male	18–25	<3 years	YouTube, WhatsApp
Mary	Female	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Moses	Male	36–45	>5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Peter	Male	36–45	>5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Phillip	Male	26–35	3–5 years	Facebook, LinkedIn
Simon	Male	26–35	3–5 years	Facebook, WhatsApp
Sofi	Female	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook
Stephen	Male	36–45	>5 years	WhatsApp
Winnie	Female	26–35	3–5 years	WhatsApp, Facebook

- ✓ Note. 25 <30__ participants. Pseudonyms are used throughout the dissertation to protect participant confidentiality. Age ranges and years in Uganda are approximate and based on participant self-reports during interviews.

➤ Data Collection Methods

The study used interviews and observations as methods of data collection. Both qualitative research methods were appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of the lived

experiences, stories, and socio-cultural contexts of South Sudanese refugees and how they influence the use of digital media to create connections (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). Specifically, the narrative approach was used to gather data on the stories and lived experiences of the South Sudanese refugees on their media engagement, displacement, family connectivity, and advocacy efforts.

• *A Total of 25 in-Depth Interviews were Conducted. The Interviews Focused on:*

- ✓ Use of digital media: The types of platforms used (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, radio, etc.).
- ✓ Media engagement: How refugees interacted with digital media and the purposes (e.g., communication, access to news, education, advocacy, etc.).
- ✓ Role of media during displacement: How digital tools helped refugees stay connected to families, access critical information, and engage in advocacy.
- ✓ Post-displacement life: The evolving role of media in peacebuilding, social cohesion, and economic integration.
- ✓ The interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility while exploring themes such as access to digital media, challenges in media use, and community-building through media (Patton, 2015).

➤ *Language Considerations*

The interviews and observations were conducted in the languages participants preferred. Although several languages were available, participants primarily preferred to use English for the interviews. My proficiency in English, Simple Arabic, and Bari allowed direct communication without the need for interpreters, thus enhancing the accuracy and authenticity of the data collected.

➤ *Positionality*

The study employed a qualitative research design and a narrative approach to data analysis. These frameworks influenced the data collection and interpretation processes, as they required an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda.

My positionality in conducting this study was influenced by my experience as an international student from a displaced background. This experience provided a unique understanding of the refugee experience, which enhanced my ability to connect with the participants. However, I was also aware of the potential power dynamics in the research process and was mindful of not overshadowing participants' voices.

I acknowledged the potential for a power imbalance in the research process. While I shared experiences with the participants, they held authority as narrators of their lives. Being cognizant of the power dynamic ensured that I approached data collection and interpretation responsibly, thus guaranteeing that participants' perspectives were accurately represented (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity allowed me to reflect on the power dynamics and their influence on the research process.

To reduce the influence of my power on the research process, I employed strategies such as reflexive journaling and member checking. This ensured that the research findings reflected participants' voices and lived experiences, rather than my interpretations.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study to ensure the protection and well-being of the participants. The

study obtained IRB approval prior to data collection to ensure that the study aligned with the highest ethical standards and protected the rights and welfare of the participants.

- **Informed Consent:** Participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study's purpose and procedures. Informed consent was obtained before the commencement of data collection, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time.
- **Confidentiality:** All data were kept confidential to protect participants' anonymity. Identifying information such as names and personal details were removed from transcripts and field notes. Only I had access to raw data, and all data shared with collaborators were de-identified.
- **Emotional Well-being:** I exercised sensitivity when discussing potentially sensitive topics to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Participants were informed of the support services available and were encouraged to withdraw or skip questions if they felt uncomfortable.

These ethical considerations fostered a trusting relationship between me and the participants, thus ensuring a responsible and respectful research process that considered the vulnerable status of the South Sudanese refugees.

➤ *Data Analysis*

The study used thematic analysis as the method of data analysis. Specifically, the study followed the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) methodology is appropriate for qualitative research as it enables the recognition of themes that emerge from the research participants' experiences. In this study, the thematic analysis was used to determine patterns and themes in how refugees used digital media to connect to their families and advocate for their rights.

• *The Following Six-Phase Data Analysis Procedure was Used:*

- ✓ **Familiarization with the Data** – In this first step of analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by transcribing, reading, and rereading the transcripts of the interviews, field notes, and observations made during the study. This allowed me to obtain a global understanding of the data while also becoming familiar with the context and socio-cultural nuances of the study site and the experiences of the study participants.
- ✓ **Generating Initial Codes** – In this second step of analysis, initial codes were generated. These initial codes were used to represent patterns and themes discovered in the data. The codes were then organized according to their relevance to the research problem.
- ✓ **Searching for Themes** – In this third step of data analysis, the aim was to identify clusters of codes that could be grouped together to form a set of meaningful themes that were relevant to the research problem.

- ✓ Reviewing Themes – In this fourth step of data analysis, the themes were reviewed, refined, and consolidated by collapsing related codes and eliminating those that were not relevant to the research problem. This step also involved member checking to verify the accuracy of the themes.
- ✓ Defining and Naming Themes – In this fifth step of analysis, the themes were clearly defined and named based on their relevance to the research problem and the experiences of the study participants.
- ✓ Producing the Report – Finally, the report was produced to present the research findings, demonstrating how digital media influenced the lives of the South Sudanese refugees. The study highlighted the importance of digital activism (Castells, 2012) and transnational communication (Madianou & Miller, 2012) in the refugees' experiences.

IV. FINDINGS: THEME – TRAUMA AND ADAPTATION

This section presents the findings of the study using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) of qualitative data generated from 25 in-depth interviews with South Sudanese refugees who reside in Morobi refugee camp, Uganda. Each interview took place between 45 and 90 minutes exploring the participants' lived experiences of conflict-induced displacement and engagement with digital media after settlement.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase iterative process and was supported by manually created color-coded Excel codebooks. This process enabled systematic organization, comparison and refinement of the data close to the participants' language and meanings. Through multiple engagement with the data more than 200 initial descriptive codes were generated. These were progressively reviewed, refined and clustered into 10 sub-themes and five overarching themes to answer the study's three research questions.

The analysis began with repeated and immersive engagement with all interview transcripts to deepen the familiarity with the participants' narratives. Reflexive memos and analytic notes were recorded focusing on the participants' recurring experiences of displacement, digital media practices, emotional responses and everyday coping mechanisms. Participant observation notes taken during fieldwork were also reviewed to gain contextual understanding of the interviews and enhance analytic reflexivity and triangulation.

During the second phase initial coding was manually performed using Microsoft Excel. Each transcript was examined line by line highlighting meaningful data segments

with descriptive, semantic codes close to participants' own language (e.g., sudden flight, family communication, data challenges). Coding was inclusive, prioritizing analytic openness and breadth of themes rather than early reduction and interpretation.

Following initial coding, color-coding was used within Excel to visually organize and manage codes across transcripts. Each distinct code was assigned a specific color and consistently applied across the interviews. This facilitated systematic comparison across participants identifying patterns, overlaps and relationships between coded segments. Similarity of meaning of codes was then grouped into clusters.

During the fourth phase, the clustered codes were reviewed and refined developing sub-themes by examining what the grouped codes together described. Sub-themes were identified through reflexive analytic questioning such as What shared experience is being described here? Or, How this pattern responds to the research question? This resulted in the identification of 10 sub-themes each supported by multiple data extracts across the data set.

The sub-themes were then synthesized into five overarching themes through iterative two-levels reviews ensuring the internal coherence and distinguishing power of each theme. Each theme was developed from participants' accounts and focused on patterned meaning rather than topical category. Although patterns of similar responses were considered during the analysis, attention was given to depth and experiential meaning rather than frequency.

In the final phase, the themes were then clearly defined, named and organized into a hierarchical thematic structure (see Table 2). This structure – from initial codes to sub-themes and overarching themes – was represented in hierarchical thematic maps to facilitate analytic clarity and auditability. Reflexive awareness was maintained throughout the process by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role, revisiting analytic decisions, and considering alternative readings of the data.

This chapter presents the participants' experiences descriptively using illustrative quotations to document what and how participants experienced, which were patterned across the data set. Interpretation, theoretical engagement and analytic integration to literature will be presented in the discussion section.

Before presenting each theme in details Table 2 presents an overview of the themes and sub-themes developed across the three research questions. As this is a qualitative inquiry, the table presents descriptive rather than quantitative information.

Table 2 Overview of Themes and Sub-themes

Initial Codes (Examples from All 25 Participants)	Sub-theme	Theme
Family Connection (John 1, Simon 4, Henry 18, Agnes 19, Bosco 3, David 10, Felista 7), Reduced Isolation (Moses 5, Felista 7, Jimmy 9, Hellen 15, Alex 8), Building Connections via WhatsApp Groups (Moses 5, Andrew 6, Mary 2), Group Belonging (Felista 7, Anna 14)	1.1 Family & Community Ties	1. Social Resilience via Digital Media
Community Event Coordination (Mary 2, Bosco 3), Organizes Activities (Andrew 6), Cultural Event Organization (Bosco 3), WhatsApp Navigation Aid (Jimmy 9, Alex 8), Sharing Life Events (Felista 7, Jackline 12)	1.2 Event Coordination & Support	
Sharing Cultural Traditions (Bosco 3), Cultural Sharing via Facebook (Simon 4), Shares Cultural Dances Online (Andrew 6), Cultural Pride through Videos (Hellen 15), Music/Dance Posting (Jackson 16, Elly 17)	2.1 Tradition Sharing	2. Cultural Preservation & Identity
Identity Reinforcement (Bosco 3), Cultural Identity Maintenance (Ivan 20, Phillip 21), Youth Digital Mediation for Elders (David 10, Beck 22, Anna 14), Tribal Integration (Peter 13)	2.2 Identity Reinforcement	
Online Learning (Jimmy 9, Alfred 11, Jackson 16, Elly 17), Job Application via Social Media (Mary 2, Moses 5, Phillip 21), YouTube Skills Training (Agnes 19, Henry 18), Vocational Training Navigation (Ivan 20, Peter 13)	3.1 Skill Development & Jobs	3. Economic Empowerment & Opportunities
Scholarships Opportunities (Moses 5, David 10, Anna 14, Peter 13), Business Advertising (John 1), Entrepreneurship (Andrew 6), Facebook Business Marketing (Ivan 20), Savings Groups (Peter 13)	3.2 Livelihood & Scholarships	
Data Cost (Felista 7, Alex 8, David 10, Jackline 12, Peter 13), Network Issues (John 1, Simon 4, Jackson 16), Device Access (Moses 5, David 10, Emmyln 25), Power Issues (John 1, Hellen 15)	4.1 Structural Barriers	4. Digital Access Challenges
Language Barriers (Felista 7, David 10, Alfred 11, Jackline 12), Digital Literacy Challenges (Mary 2, Jimmy 9), Gender/Age Disparities (Andrew 6, Jackson 16, Anna 14)	4.2 Social Barriers	
Device Sharing (Mary 2, Alex 8, Agnes 19), Data Pooling/Hotspots (Jackson 16, Henry 18), Cross-checking Information (Bosco 3, Simon 4), Youth Mediation (Beck 22, David 10)	5.1 Resilience Strategies	5. Coping & Responsible Use
Misinformation Vigilance (Mary 2, Bosco 3, Hellen 15), Advice for Responsible Use (Andrew 6, Jackline 12, Peter 13), Caution Against Misuse (David 10, Anna 14)	5.2 Advocacy & Caution	

Initial Codes (Examples from All 25 Participants) Sub-theme Theme

✓ Note. Themes and sub-themes were developed through reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021).

✓ RQ1: What are the stories of displacement of South Sudanese refugees in refugee camps in Uganda?

This research question focuses on the stories of displacement told by South Sudanese refugees who reside in Morobi Refugee Camp, Uganda. The emphasis is on how participants narrate their experiences of forced flight from South Sudan and subsequent settlement in the camp environment. During initial analysis, data segments describing war, fear, loss, forced movement and adjustment to camp life were coded at a descriptive and semantic level

which closely followed participants' own language and meanings. Maintaining participants' phrasing at this stage was key to staying close to participants' lived experiences following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis approach.

Through iterative cycles of color-coding, constant comparison and cross-case clustering across interviews these descriptive codes revealed a consistent temporal and experiential pattern. Participants' narratives repeatedly moved between interconnected phases of acute displacement and settlement adaptation. Rather than only two sub-themes, the analysis identified five analytically distinct yet interconnected sub-themes: Violent Displacement & Flight, Physical Deprivation Endurance, Family Separation & Informational Void, Conditional Camp Adaptation and Collective Coping & Gendered Labor.

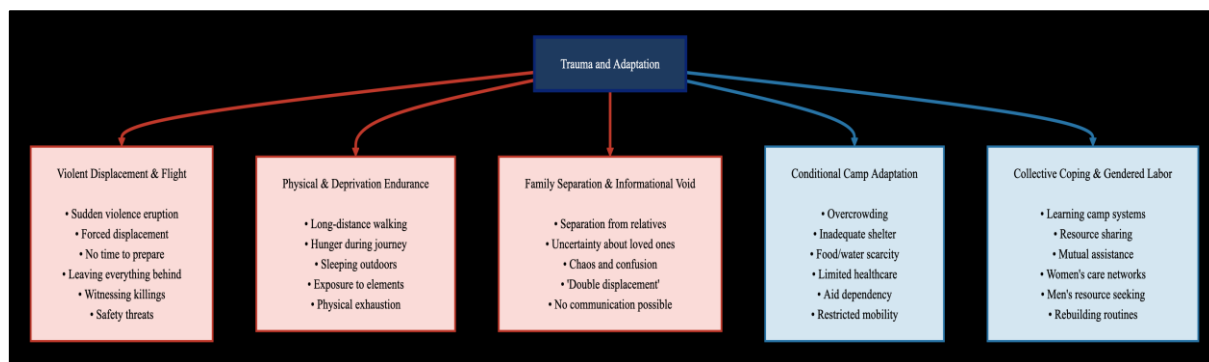


Fig 2 Thematic Map Illustrating Trauma and Adaptation (Five Sub-themes)

✓ Note. Thematic map presenting the five dimensions of Trauma and Adaptation which were identified through reflexive thematic analysis.

➤ *Sub-Theme a: Violent Displacement and Flight*

This sub-theme captures participants' experiences of the sudden and violent circumstances that forced them to flee South Sudan and seek refuge in Uganda. Participants described displacement as abrupt, frightening and unplanned, occurring in contexts of armed conflict, insecurity and immediate threats to life. Many described that violence erupted without warning in their villages and communities, leaving little opportunity to prepare, gathering belongings or making decisions. Flight was therefore described as an urgent act of survival.

Participants recounted fleeing after hearing gunfire, witnessing attacks or receiving reports that armed groups were approaching nearby communities. In many accounts, departure happened within moments or hours, forcing families to abandon homes, food supplies, livestock and personal possessions. Participants frequently emphasized that there was no time to think other than to escape. "We had to leave everything behind. The fighting came to our village and we feared for our lives. There was no time to think – only to run." Moses, personal communication, 2025

Several participants described the journey itself as physically exhausting and emotionally distressing. Many travelled long distances on foot, often without adequate food, water or shelter. Parents described carrying children while moving through unfamiliar or unsafe areas while others recalled periods of hiding, sleeping outdoors or relying on strangers for assistance along the route to Uganda. The uncertainty of the journey, where participants often did not know where they would eventually settle or if family members had survived was also repeatedly emphasized. Experiences of violence and loss were central within participant's memories of displacement. Some described witnessing killings, destruction of homes or separation from relatives during the conflict and flight. Although several participants were reluctant to provide graphic details, their accounts highlighted the lasting emotional impact of these experiences and the continued presence of fear, grief and trauma in everyday life. "What I saw during the fighting is something I still remember even now. Sometimes when I sit

alone, these memories come back to my mind." Emmyln, personal communication, 2025

Participants also distinguished from other forms of migration by emphasizing the absence of choice or preparation. Unlike migration undertaken for employment, education or economic opportunity, participants described refugee displacement as forced movement driven entirely by insecurity and survival. They repeatedly stressed that they did not leave in search of better opportunities but because remaining at home had become too dangerous. "People think moving to another country is always by choice, but for us it was not like that. We did not plan to leave South Sudan. We ran because staying meant death." John, personal communication, 2025

Overall, this sub-theme illustrates how participants experienced displacement as a violent rupture which disrupted family life, social belonging, livelihoods and personal security. Their accounts highlighted the physical dangers, emotional distress and profound uncertainty which accompanied forced flight from South Sudan to Uganda.

➤ *Sub-Theme b: Physical Deprivation Endurance*

This sub-theme captures participants' descriptions of the intense physical hardship experienced during the journey from South Sudan to Uganda. Participants described displacement not only as exposure to violence and insecurity but also as a prolonged struggle for bodily survival under conditions of hunger, exhaustion, exposure and uncertainty. Many accounts focused on the physical demands of moving long distances on foot while lacking adequate food, water, shelter or medical assistance. Participants consistently described journeys which lasted several days or weeks, often through unfamiliar terrain and unsafe conditions. Walking long distances while carrying children, assisting elderly relatives or transporting limited belongings was described as physically exhausting. Hunger was a repeated concern in participants' accounts with many explaining that food became scarce soon after leaving their homes. Some described surviving on small amounts of food provided by strangers or shared amongst travelling groups while others recalled going for long periods without eating. "It took us three days to reach Uganda. Sometimes we slept outside, hungry, unsure of what would happen next." Alex, personal communication, 2025

Sleeping outdoors without protection was also a common experience with participants describing resting in bushes, forests or open spaces while remaining fearful of attack, theft or further violence. Exposure to rain, cold nights and harsh weather conditions intensified the physical strain of the journey, particularly for children, older person and pregnant women. “The journey was long and dangerous. We walked for days without enough food or water. Every step was a risk.” Jackline, personal communication, 2025

Participants’ accounts of this phase were also notable for the absence of digital communication or technological support. Unlike later stages of displacement where mobile phones and digital platforms became important for communication and coping, participants described the journey itself as centred on physical survival. Several explained that phones were unavailable, uncharged, lost during flight or impossible to use due to insecurity and constant movement. “During the journey we were not thinking about phones or communication. We were only thinking about reaching somewhere safe and staying alive.” Peter, personal communication, 2025

Survival during flight was therefore described less in terms of planning or strategic decision-making, but as a process of enduring continuous hardship. Participants emphasized persistence despite exhaustion, fear and uncertainty. Continuing to walk, protect children and remain with family members became central features of survival during displacement. “Even when we were tired, we could not stop. We just kept moving because stopping was dangerous.” May, personal communication, 2025

Participants’ narratives therefore highlight displacement as an embodied experience in which the human body became the primary site of struggle. Survival depended on physical endurance under extreme conditions rather than access to resources, information or technology. This sub-theme highlights the material and bodily realities of forced migration and illustrates the depth of hardship experienced before participants eventually reached relative safety in Uganda.

➤ *Sub-Theme c: Family Separation and Informational Void*

This sub-theme was identified based on the participants’ descriptions of their experiences of being away from family members in the flight from the conflict and the resulting fear, uncertainty, and lack of information. The sense of insecurity was particularly acute as participants were often forced to flee the conflict while in a state of panic, confusion, and chaos. Moreover, the fear of losing family members, friends, and loved ones was compounded by the uncertainty of what happened to those they had to leave behind or had lost contact with on the flight, as well as the search for family members who had gone missing.

In their recollections, participants described the flight as a period of extreme confusion, during which families and friends had to run and hide for dear life. Families often had to split up while fleeing the conflict, with some participants recalling losing contact with family members at night or when

trying to cross rivers and other obstacles during the flight. Additionally, some family members and friends had to be left behind because they were too old, young, or incapacitated to continue fleeing or had fallen during the flight. “People were running in all directions; I lost sight of my younger brother and for weeks after, I did not know whether he was dead or alive” (David, Participant 2025).

The fear and lack of information were also frequently mentioned by the participants as the most traumatic parts of their experience. Even once reaching safety, the flight from conflict continued to haunt them as they were often completely in the dark about the fate of their family members and friends. “The worst part was that I had no idea where my children were; every day, I feared the worst” (Anna, Participant 2025).

The loss of contact was further exacerbated by the inability to communicate due to the lack of electricity, phone signals, and other means of communication. The inability to communicate was a major source of trauma for many participants, who had to pray that their family members and friends were safe. “When we escaped, there was no network, and no one could contact anyone; all you could do was pray that your family was safe” (John, Participant 2025).

For some participants, the first call to a family member or friend once they reached Uganda marked the end of their ordeal and was a deeply cathartic experience. “The first thing I did when I got my hands on a phone was to call my brother to ask whether he was safe; I had not heard his voice for months, and when he answered, I could not stop crying” (Anna, Participant 2025).

Besides the sense of loss and inability to communicate, participants recalled the help they and their families had received from well-wishing individuals who offered them food, guided them to safety, and helped carry their children and belongings when they were too tired to continue. “A kind woman helped me carry my child when I was too tired to go on; I do not think I would have made it without her” (Mary, Participant 2025).

During the flight, participants experienced extreme hardship and distress, and the last thing they expected was for people to offer them assistance. However, as noted by several participants, the kindness of strangers was often the only thing that kept them going when their strength ran out.

The experiences of loss, lack of communication, and kindness of strangers during the flight were recalled differently by female and male participants. While women often focused on their fears of losing children and had to count them several times during the flight to avoid losing them, men recalled having to worry about their parents, spouses, and other family members they had to leave behind or who had to stay behind during the flight because they could not flee the conflict quickly enough. “I always feared that my children would get separated from us while running; I had to count them at least three times to make sure they were all there” (Felista, Participant 2025).

“I did not know whether my parents were safe or had managed to escape after us, and the thought haunts me even today” (Moses, Participant 2025).

➤ *Sub-Theme d: Conditional Camp Adaptation*

This sub-theme captures participants' experiences and perceptions of adapting to life in the Morobi Refugee Camp following their arrival in Uganda. The accounts demonstrate the complex set of challenges that came with adapting to living in the camp while simultaneously illustrating how participants made the best of the circumstances to improve their living conditions.

When asked to describe their experiences and perceptions of adapting to life in Morobi Refugee Camp, most participants associated it with hardship, as they had to contend with frequent shortages of food, water, and other necessities. They had to learn to live with the camp's inadequacies while also having to acquire new skills to improve their quality of life and adapt to the conditions. “Life in the camp is not easy; sometimes there are just not enough supplies, the water is inaccessible, and it is hard to get treatment when you are sick” (Winnie, Participant 2025).



Fig 3 South Sudanese Refugees in Morobi Zone 2 Crowded at a Shared Borehole

- Note. Photograph taken during fieldwork showing refugee residents gathered at a public borehole within Morobi Refugee Settlement. The facility experiences overcrowding – particularly during the dry season – limiting access to clean water.

The participants also recalled having to deal with severe overcrowding and poor living conditions in the camp. “We were at least safe from the conflict, but it was not easy living in the camp because there were just too many people” (Peter, Participant 2025).

Most participants described the early days in the camp as overwhelming due to the need to learn the ropes and familiarize themselves with the systems and processes that made life in the camp sustainable. Moreover, the systems were not always easy to navigate, and participants had to learn how to interact with them to maximize their benefits. “I was a bit lost in the early days because everything was so confusing; I had to learn how things worked before I could do anything meaningful” (Felista, Participant 2025).

Some participants noted the importance of understanding the procedures and systems set by the relevant authorities and agencies before obtaining any form of assistance or support. “If your documents do not meet the required criteria, it is easy to be excluded from certain services; you had to know how the procedures worked before you could access anything” (Andrew, Participant 2025).

The participants recalled taking advantage of various humanitarian and NGO initiatives designed to improve their living conditions in the camp. Most noted the wide range of services that had been made available to them, including farming initiatives, training programs, business development, and education. However, it was noted that such opportunities were often difficult to access due to the procedures and systems that had to be followed. “Some people used to get trained, but it was not always easy as some had to apply several times before being considered” (Hellen, Participant 2025).

“There were always people who knew where to get certain services and those who did not know” (Bosco, Participant 2025).

The participants noted the multiple challenges they had to overcome to adapt to life in the camp, including the lack of access to necessities such as food and water, overcrowding, poor sanitation, and the need to learn to navigate the camp's systems. The conditions were further complicated by the fact that most participants were women and children, who were often more vulnerable and had to rely on the support of others to survive. As a mother, I had to make sure that there was always food, and it was heartbreaking when there was not enough for my children (Hellen, Participant 2025).

➤ *Sub-Theme e: Collective Coping and Gendered Labor*

The sub-theme Collective Coping and Gendered Labor focuses on participants' accounts of their experiences of finding ways to help each other cope in camp and re-establishing routines in their daily lives. It emerges from statements related to learning camp systems, sharing resources, helping with daily chores such as childcare and water fetching, women's social support networks, men's approaches to coping with the harsh conditions through seeking resources, and collective efforts to re-establish routine. It differs from the previous sub-theme in that it focuses on collective coping rather than the challenges of adapting to camp life.

The participants often spoke of the need to band together and support each other, particularly by sharing resources and helping with daily tasks such as water fetching and childcare. “Life in the camp is not easy, but we are always willing to help each other out whenever possible” (Mary, Participant 2025).



Fig 4 Mobile Phone Charging at Konyo-Konyo Market in Morobi Refugee Camp

- Note . Photograph taken during fieldwork showing a participant charging a mobile phone at a public, fee-based solar charging station at Konyo-Konyo market within Morobi refugee camp.

Such infrastructures shape the temporalities of digital connectivity: participants must plan communication around charging schedules, data costs, and network coverage.

The participants recalled that sharing resources such as food and water and lending a hand to each other whenever possible was often the only way to get through the day. “Sometimes it was difficult to get access to food, especially when a particular family had exhausted their supplies; in such cases, neighbors would come together and share what they had so that at least the children did not go to bed hungry” (Agnes, Participant 2025).

“We had to learn to rely on each other as much as possible because, most of the time, the only people who knew where to get certain supplies were our neighbors” (David, Participant 2025).

The participants also described how sharing and cooperating with each other helped them deal with the stress and uncertainty of life in the camp. Sometimes, the only way to deal with the anxiety was to sit together and share their problems.

“Sometimes when you are dealing with too much stress, it helps to talk it out with others; even if they do not know what to do, just having someone to lean on makes things easier” (Agnes, Participant 2025).

Women tended to talk about sharing domestic duties and caring for each other’s children, while men focused on supporting each other by seeking better opportunities, such as

identifying better places to reside within the camp, accessing better employment opportunities, and cultivating their own food where possible.

“Men would always look out for each other by seeking better opportunities, such as better places to stay or work, while women would share and help each other care for their children” (James, Participant 2025).

“Every day, I would look for opportunities to earn a living so that I could at least put food on the table, even if it was just a little” Moses, Participant 2025).

The participants also recalled how life in the camp continued to revolve around a number of routines, such as water fetching, cooking, and attending to personal needs. For many, life in the camp continued much the same way as it had before the conflict, except that they now had to adhere to strict routines. “Life went on much the same way as it did before, except that we now had to wake up early to fetch water, and go to bed early to rest and conserve energy” (Felista, Participant 2025).

Many participants spoke of the routines and shared activities that made up their lives in the camp.

“You cannot just sit in your tent and do nothing; you have to get up and do something, even if it is just to look for water or help someone” (John, Participant 2025).

It is notable that many participants relied on their support networks to get through the day and rebuild their lives following the conflict.

“People always come together to help each other out in any way they can” (John, Participant 2025).

V. DISCUSSIONS: DIGITAL SILENCE AS TRAUMA’S CONDITION

➤ *Reimagining Displacement Trauma*

The four sub-themes presented above collectively reframe displacement trauma as a phase-based, embodied, and largely analogue experience. During acute flight and early settlement, digital media is absent—due not to the refugees’ interest or capacity but survival consuming all available attention and infrastructure. We name this condition digital silence.

This finding has three major implications for theory and practice.

First, it challenges assumptions of ubiquitous connectivity in humanitarian crises. Much scholarship and policy assumes that refugees are, or should be, digitally connected throughout displacement. Studies of Syrian refugees, for example, have documented real-time social media use during flight and border crossing (Wall et al., 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018). The South Sudanese case suggests otherwise: connectivity is phase-specific, occurring only after physical safety is secured. This distinction reflects the

importance of contextual differences in displacement experiences and the caution of generalized assumptions about refugee digital practices.

Second, it reframes trauma as a precondition for digital practice, not merely a context. Digital resilience, the subject of our broader study, is not available during the most traumatic phase. It becomes possible only after the digital activation threshold is crossed. This threshold is not purely technological but emotional, material and temporal. Physical settlement within the refugee camp functioned as a critical enabling condition for digital practices by providing relative safety, access to devices, network coverage, and opportunities for social regrouping.

Third, it centers the body in accounts of displacement. Participants described hunger, fatigue, carrying children, sleeping outdoors, counting children in crowds. These are embodied experiences that no device mediates. The trauma of displacement is, in this phase, a trauma of the body and of not knowing. This finding aligns with Miller and Rasmussen's (2010) concept of continuous trauma, which argues that in conflict and post-conflict settings, stressors do not dissipate upon reaching safety but accumulate over time.

➤ *The Digital Activation Threshold*

The concept of the digital activation threshold emerged from iterative comparison of flight narratives versus settlement narratives. Physical settlement within the refugee camp functioned as a critical enabling condition for digital practices by providing relative safety, access to devices, network coverage, and opportunities for social regrouping.

To explain how this concept was derived: across all 25 interviews, participants consistently described an absence of digital media use during flight. Not one participant reported using a phone while walking to Uganda. This pattern—no digital engagement during acute danger, followed by gradual uptake after settlement—was so consistent that its conceptual naming was necessitated. The “threshold” refers to the point at which physical safety, device access and network coverage, and emotional capacity converge to make digital engagement possible.

Interpreted through this lens, trauma and adaptation form a continuum, not sequential or oppositional states. Participants' accounts traced a progression from acute fear during flight, to temporary relief, followed by disappointment linked to overcrowding and aid dependency, to gradually community rebuilding. This trajectory aligns with UNHCR's (2023) characterization of protracted displacement as sustained precarity while extending Easton-Calabria and Omata's (2018) conceptualization of refugee agency by highlighting the temporal and emotional prerequisites for its expression. Agency, in this sense, does not emerge at the moment of displacement but is reconstituted over time through stabilization and social re-embedding.

➤ *Theorizing Digital Silence Through Appadurai's Scapes*

Appadurai's (1996) framework of global cultural flows offers a useful lens for theorizing digital silence. During acute

flight, ethnoscares are violently disrupted: people are separated, communities fragmented, informational ties severed. The “double displacement” participants described—physical separation compounded by informational void—reveals that ethnoscares are not merely about geographical movement but about the severance of the informational and emotional ties that make movement meaningful.

Technoscares are virtually absent during flight: no devices, networks, or charging facilities. It is only upon arrival in the camp that minimal technological infrastructure becomes available. The disjuncture between ethnoscares (the people who might use technology) and technoscares (technology itself) is at its most extreme during acute displacement. Digital silence is not a failure of technology but a condition created by the violent disruption of both people flows and technology flows.

Ideoscares (the flow of ideas, ideologies, and political imaginaries) also shape how participants made meaning of this ongoing trauma. The absence of digital media during flight was not merely a practical constraint but shaped participants' ideas about what displacement meant: a phase of pure endurance, of being stripped of the tools that would later enable coping.

➤ *Gendered and Generational Dimensions of Trauma*

The sub-themes also reveal gender and age dynamics within trauma. Women described caregiving under extreme duress while men described resource seeking and coordination. These patterns prefigure the gendered digital practices that emerge later, suggesting that trauma does not disappear with connectivity but is reorganized through it.

Women more frequently described responsibilities related to childcare, food preparation, caregiving, and emotional support within households and community networks. Several women explained that displacement had increased the burden of caregiving because resources were scarce and families were often separated. Men's accounts more commonly focused on efforts to secure household resources and engage with external systems within and beyond the camp.

These findings align with Parreñas' (2015) and Hochschild's (1983) work on gendered divisions of transnational care labor, demonstrating that digital resilience is not gender-neutral. The trauma of displacement is experienced differently by men and women and these differences shape the ways in which digital media is later used—for coping, connection, and coordination.

➤ *Implications for Humanitarian Policy and Practice*

The findings of this study have several implications for humanitarian policy and development practice.

Recognize the temporal dimensions of digital engagement. Humanitarian actors should recognize that digital connectivity is not a universal condition during displacement. Programs designed to promote digital inclusion must account for the fact that refugees may not be

ready or able to engage with digital media during acute flight and early settlement. The digital activation threshold suggests that basic security and stability are prerequisites for meaningful digital participation.

Integrate digital media into psychosocial support systems. Digital communication platforms can complement existing psychosocial support systems by enabling peer support networks, moderated community forums, and remote counselling services. Given that participants already used digital media for emotional coping—watching videos, listening to music, connecting with family—formal psychosocial programs should build on these existing practices rather than replace them. Such programs should recognize that digital engagement is phase specific and may not be appropriate during acute trauma.

Address structural barriers intersectionally. Interventions must address the intersecting nature of digital exclusion. Women, older refugees, and those with low literacy face compounded barriers that single-axis interventions (e.g., only providing devices/only training) cannot resolve. Programs should integrate device distribution with literacy support and gender-sensitive training and affordable data bundles.

Expand affordable digital access. Governments (particularly Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister) should negotiate with mobile network operators for subsidized data packages in refugee settlements. Humanitarian agencies (UNHCR, WFP) should allocate funding for community Wi-Fi initiatives and affordable device distribution programs. Mobile network operators (MTN, Airtel) should develop refugee-specific data plans that reduce costs without requiring formal documentation that many refugees lack.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has examined displacement trauma among South Sudanese refugees in Morobi Refugee Camp through four sub-themes: violent flight, physical deprivation, family separation and informational void, and conditional camp adaptation. Together, these sub-themes describe a phase of displacement characterized by digital silence: a condition in which survival is embodied, communication is impossible, and connectivity is cognitively unavailable.

The article argues that digital media's role in displacement cannot be understood without accounting for this silence. Digital resilience, platform sequencing, and cultural continuity (themes developed elsewhere in the broader study) are only possible after the digital activation threshold has been crossed. Trauma is not the backdrop to refugee digital practice but its precondition.

The findings demonstrate that displacement among South Sudanese refugees is experienced not as a single moment of rupture but as a sequential and layered process of trauma and adaptation. Participants consistently described forced displacement as precipitated by armed conflict, insecurity, and threats to personal safety. Flight was

characterized by abrupt departures, loss of homes and livelihoods, and separation from family members. A key insight of this study is that digital media played little role during the most acute phases of displacement. During flight and migration, survival relied primarily on physical endurance, social trust, and improvised decision-making rather than digital connectivity. Digital engagement emerged only after refugees reached relative safety within Morobi Refugee Camp.

This finding reveals what may be described as a digital activation threshold in displacement contexts: meaningful digital engagement is only possible once basic security and stability are established. This challenges assumptions of ubiquitous digital connectivity during humanitarian crises and highlights the continued importance of embodied and relational survival strategies during conflict-induced migration.

While initial settlement in the refugee camp was often described as a place of safety and hope, participants also described subsequent experiences of overcrowding, economic uncertainty, and restricted opportunities. Despite these constraints, refugees actively reconstructed everyday life through mutual aid networks, cultural activities, and shared resources. These practices illustrate how resilience emerges through collective adaptation rather than passive dependency.

The article contributes to scholarship on displacement, digital media, and resilience by reframing displacement as a digitally mediated social process, operationalizing Appadurai's (1996) theory of global cultural flows, and introducing the concepts of digital silence and the digital activation threshold. These concepts offer new ways of understanding the temporal and emotional prerequisites of digital engagement in displacement contexts.

Future research should examine how digital silence varies across displacement contexts, how it is remembered and narrated retrospectively, and how humanitarian policy might better account for the temporal and emotional prerequisites of connectivity. For now, the voices of Morobi suggest that before refugees can be digitally connected, they must first survive—and that survival is, for a time, silent.

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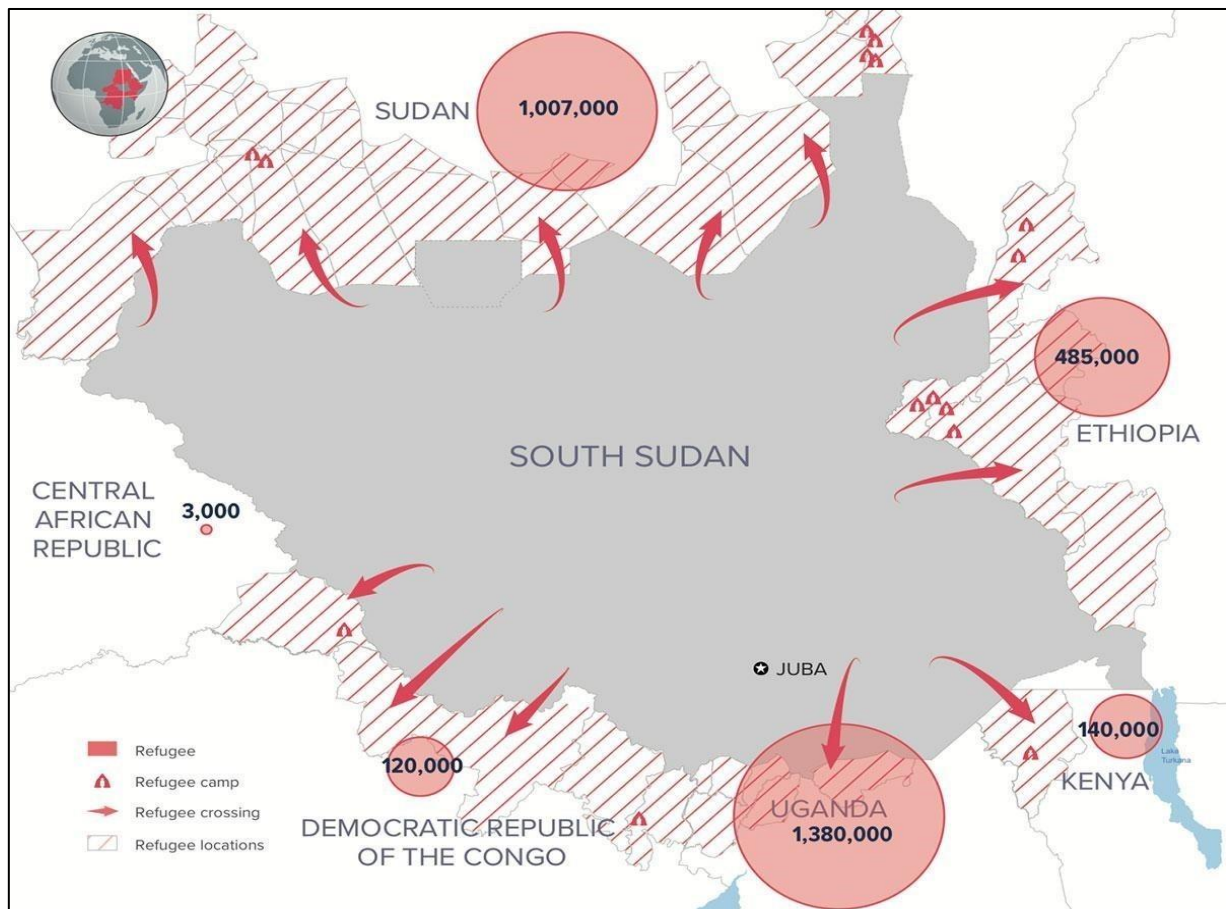
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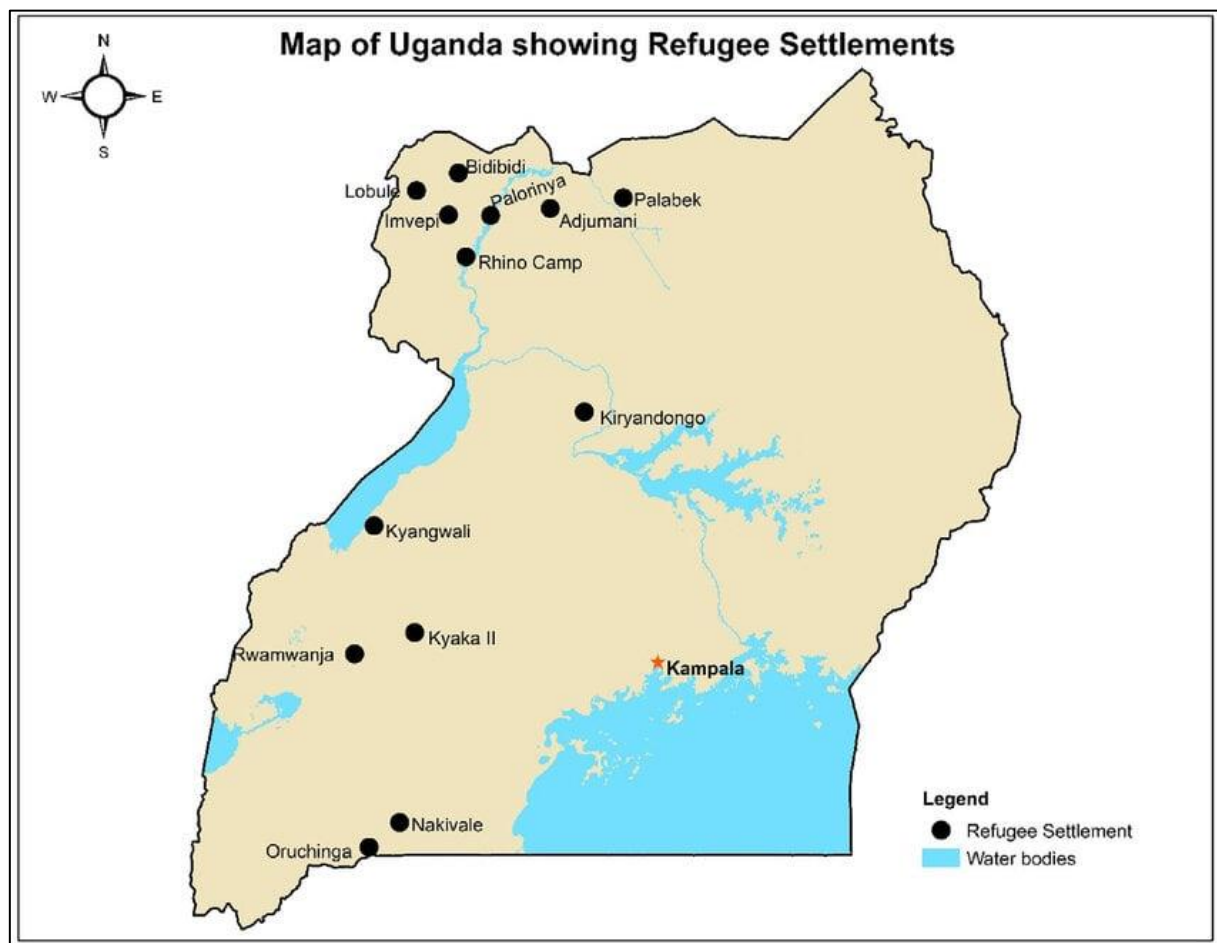
APPENDIX

Appendix A: Map of South Sudan Showing the Seek for Refugee in the Neighboring Countries



Note. UNHCR public domain map

Appendix B: Map of Uganda Showing Refugee Settlements

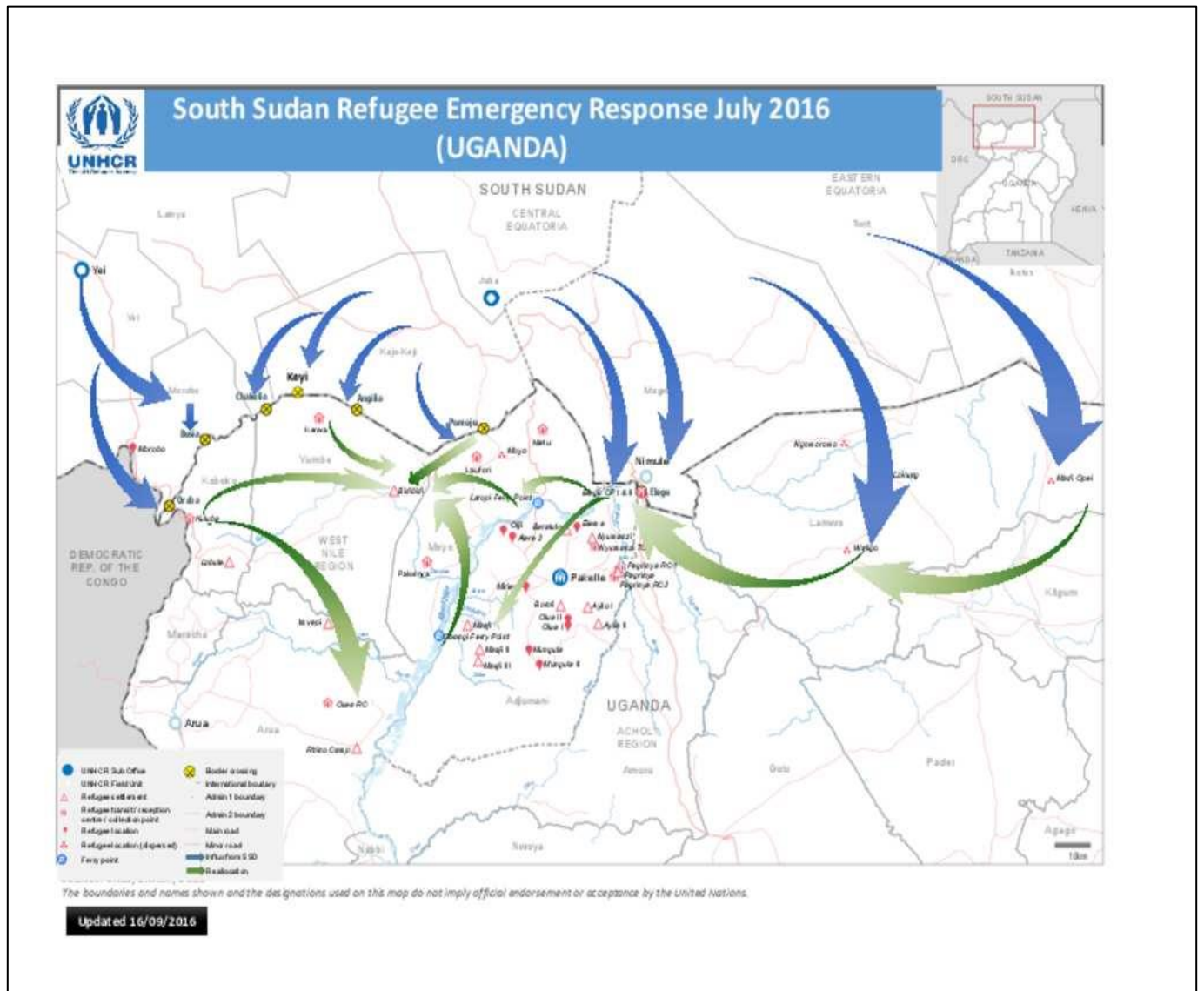


Source: Baobab Research Programme Consortium (2023)

Appendix C: Allocated Plot of Approximately 20 by 20 Meters at Morobi Refugee Camp



Appendix D: South Sudan, Refugee Projections Map



Note. UNHCR public domain map