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# Advocating "Refugees" for Social Justice: Questioning Victimhood and Voice in NGOs' Use of Twitter

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This study examines nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs) use of Twitter as a space for communicating advocacy, analyzing 706 tweets of the two largest British refugee-specific NGOs. It conceptualizes NGOs' social media as an institutionalized space *for* and *about* social justice, facilitating refugee representation and articulating voices, and critically addresses how Twitter is used *for* and *about* social justice. The analysis reveals that NGOs actively use Twitter *for* social justice yet advocate refugees in ways that homogenize and silence their voices—both as *process* and *value*. This silencing produces *double victimization*, wherein the "refugees" remain outside the boundary of the "experts," physically and symbolically suppressing their personhood. An analysis in the pandemic context further confirms that this symbolic boundary between "us" and "them" is more likely to be heightened rather than dismantled. The study argues that social media may act as an active platform that invites us into NGO's humanitarian imaginary, privileging its institutional network and legitimacy. Implications for NGO-ized humanitarian advocacy in the digital sphere are further discussed.

*Keywords: advocacy communication, social justice, voice, refugee, social media, Twitter, NGO, representation*

## Advocacy Communication for Social Justice

Strategies for advocacy find ways to communicate messages to communities, publics, and policy makers, with the aim of social support on behalf of policy change. Advocacy communication thus accompanies direct support through mobilizing strategies as well as indirect support through addressing sociocultural normative change (Servaes & Malikhao, 2012). While the advent of social media has made it easier for advocacy organizations to communicate their strategies, organizational social media spaces used for advocacy have been largely examined for their functional practices (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011), but less for their representational practices (e.g., Kim & Wilkins, 2021). This study addresses this gap by examining nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs) use of Twitter through the lenses of advocacy communication *for* and *about* social justice. Particularly, the study examines the tweets of two British refugee-specific NGOs and their practices of representation with *victimhood* and *voice* as central concerns.

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A social justice approach to communication foregrounds communication processes as contingent on the context in which ethical judgments and communicative patterns are produced (Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996). Communication with a sensibility toward social justice, therefore, focuses on the ways in which "dominant discourses, social structures, patterns of interactions, and the like produce and reproduce injustice" (Frey et al., 1996, p. 111). Advocacy communication with an emphasis on social justice, therefore, recognizes that both material and symbolic inequalities within the communicative environment may serve the interests of those who have more power than others. In this regard, Wilkins (2014) suggests that strategies for advocacy communication must not only work "*for* social justice," but also strive "through a self-reflexive process in order to be *about* social justice as well" (p. 67, emphasis in original). This self-reflexive process may also critically concern the agency of the oppressed (e.g., Freire, 1996; Spivak, 2010), asking whose subject positions are being spoken *for* and *about* through the representations of advocacy communication.

This article examines this representational process by analyzing refugee-specific NGOs and their use of Twitter. Inspired by Spivak's (2010) seminal work on the *subaltern* and Couldry's (2010) notion of *voice*, I examine whether advocacy organizations advocating *for* social justice of refugees communicate in ways that are also *about* social justice in their manners of Twitter use. This work conceptualizes NGOs' social media as an institutionalized space of advocacy communication and adheres to examining this communication practice from a social justice framework.

Since the booming of the nonprofit sectors in the 1990s, NGOs have been criticized for their ambivalence in philanthropic spirit as they become more self-serving, commercialized, and institutionalized (Richey & Ponte, 2011; Weisbrod, 1997). Considering the empirical observations of the hierarchical flow of NGOs' organizational communication on Twitter (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011), it is likely that the ambivalent nature remains irreflexive of the voices of the marginalized. Moreover, given that the NGOs' tweets tend to gather more attention than other actors within the networks of advocacy (Stier, Schunemann, & Stieger, 2018), who gets to narrate what *about* the refugee from whose perspective and legitimacy is of vital importance. How are refugee-specific NGOs using Twitter for advocacy communication? Whose voices are spoken and heard through these Twitter messages? How are refugees represented and contextualized in these communicative spaces? By addressing these questions, this article aims to shed light on the challenges of establishing the ethics and practices of care through NGOs' advocacy communication on social media.

Furthermore, the current study aspires to illuminate the moral challenge further raised in the event of a global crisis by contextualizing NGOs' Twitter communication patterns within the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The unprecedented global unrest brought by the recent pandemic has elevated the level of urgency for communities in conditions where medical services are limited. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, n.d.) reports that, globally, 79.5 million refugees and asylum seekers in 134 refugee-hosting countries are vulnerable to the virus, and therefore in need of strengthened measures for humanitarian assistance. In line with this global call for action, international NGOs and independent charity foundations advocating for refugees and asylum seekers across borders have been striving to further support *for* the vulnerable communities. However, positing the aforementioned ambivalent nature, NGOs' communication patterns merit critical

attention to whether the increasing efforts striving to provide support *for* the refugees also communicate *about* them in supportive ways.

This work first builds on recent scholarship on the representation of refugees in the mainstream media and in advocacy organization's promotional materials with the focus on "victimhood" and "voice."

## Representing Refugee

Within the broader field of media and migration studies, copious studies exist examining various portrayals of refugees in the Western media (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Crawley, McMahon, & Jones, 2016; Ehmer, 2017; Horsti, 2013; Wroe, 2018). While these studies represent a mixture of literature from the studies of refugee representation in Western news reporting and in organizational communication by NGOs, it is worth briefly noting the different nature of communications between the two. Unlike NGOs that have a philanthropic mission to advocate for the marginal groups, such as refugees, news outlets do not always share this finality. Instead, the dominant manners in which the refugees are dealt in the news reporting are contingent upon the political climate of the refugee-hosting country toward the newcomers (Abid, Manan, & Abdul, 2017). Therefore, while NGOs' public communications tend to exhibit humanitarian rhetoric for the refugee, news media may oscillate between the humanitarian and securitizing frame, which legitimizes policies for stronger border control.

However, leaving aside the explicitly discriminatory representations manifested in the discursive practices of *securitizing* frames—depicting refugees with depreciating metaphors such as "danger," "threat," "illegal immigrants" (e.g., Nguyen & McCallum, 2016; Van Gorp, 2005)—studies suggest that even the popular *humanitarian* frames, which mobilize empathy and care, too, may incur unintended consequences of weakening the solidarity and othering the refugee (Horsti, 2013). These studies commonly suggest that the subjectivity of the refugee is articulated within the homogenizing trope that subsumes the refugee category as essentially dehumanized by victimizing refugees and alienating their voices from the public genres (Crawley et al., 2016; Malkki, 1996; Wroe, 2018). Therefore, the ways in which "victimhood" and "voice" of the refugee are articulated become central constructs for investigating advocacy communication with a sensibility toward social justice.

### *Victimhood and Voice*

Victimization of the beneficiaries is a common trope used for public advocacy strategies, as it bespeaks a status of vulnerable subject to be protected. Thus, victimizing the refugee is often seen as a strategy for NGOs to garner public support and to challenge negative stereotypes (Ehmer, 2017; Wroe, 2018). However, victimization is a discursive practice embedded in the history of humanitarianism and advocacy (Malkki, 1996), operating on two key strategies of refugee representation that are both linguistic and visual. On the one hand, victimization relies on the *passivization* of the refugee, whereby the refugee is depicted as "vulnerable body-in-pain, lacking basic resources for survival" (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 616). Here, human life is reduced to a life-matter who needs immediate relief rather than recognized as a unique sociopolitical being. This discourse is "thoroughly dominated by a problem-solving mentality that defines refugee movements as a technical problem in need of rapid solutions" (Nyers, 2013,

p. 3). On another level, victimhood also operates through *collectivization*, whereby the refugee is represented as "a statistical percentage, as part of a mass of unfortunates, where one is indistinguishable from another" (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017, p. 616). As a result, victimization essentially fails to humanize the refugee, being reduced to a dehistoricized "object of knowledge, assistance, and management" (Malkki, 1996, p. 377).

The notion of victimhood resonates with the matter of voice. Much work has been done to question the voice of the refugee within the representations of Western media. These studies commonly raise concern that, regardless of the increased visibility of refugees in the media, their voices remain largely silenced when captured within the reductionist trope of victimhood (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Crawley et al., 2016; Georgiou, 2018; Horsti, 2016).

According to Couldry (2010), voice contains two distinct levels—voice as *process* and voice as *value*. The former, which he refers to as "giving an account of one's life and its conditions" (Couldry, 2010, p. 7), is a more straightforward form referring to the capacity to speak. The latter goes beyond mere presence of that capacity and recognizes the sociopolitical environments in which the meaning of that very presence can be rendered significant. Couldry (2010) elaborates that treating voice as value means "discriminating *in favor* of ways of organizing human life and resources that, through their choices, put the value of voice into practice, by respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them, not undermining or denying them" (p. 2, emphasis in original). However, in reality, the marginal voice is often unrecognized not only of its process but also its value. For example, both Rajaram (2002) and Wroe (2018) indicate that even the refugee-specific NGOs' publicity materials often silence the voices of the refugee by representing them as abnormal and helpless victims, denied of the right to present their own narratives. Wroe (2018) further notes that refugee members may actually intend to present themselves as active, ordinary individuals, as opposed to the dominant advocacy tropes that bound them to a passive and voiceless category.

Next, I conceptualize the main subject of this study—NGOs' communication on Twitter—as an institutional communication platform and draw critical attention to its communicative potential for achieving social justice.

## NGO Communication

The literature on organizational communication suggests the importance of an organization's mediated communication strategies in both promoting its economic goals and establishing their identities (Chouliaraki & Morsing, 2010; Turlow, 2018). As Vestergaard (2010) observes of NGOs' mediated communication, the operations of NGOs are, therefore, "fundamentally, and self-perpetually, tied to the media and their creation of visibility, transparency and legitimacy" (p. 169). In this regard, organizational use of social media is believed to serve an essential role for NGOs not only by providing cost-efficient tools for communicating with multilayered audiences but also by facilitating communities to establish a network of solidarity and mobilize supporters for a shared social cause (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Dessewffy & Nagy, 2016). Thus, NGOs' engagement on social media, such as Twitter, may strengthen the community of advocacy by acting as central nodes of advocacy networks, connecting

organizations, activists, and the public. However, it is this very centrality of their roles that calls attention to its *institutional* dynamics.

Critical studies on communication for social change have raised concern against the imbalanced nature in the ability to define and communicate *about* social change between those who have more power (i.e., donors, development institutions, NGOs) and those who have less (i.e., beneficiaries, recipients) (Escobar, 1995; Wilkins, 2016). While deciding who has more power, in this sense, may be subjective, it is often easily bestowed upon by asking who are more accountable and legitimate to conduct the process of social change on behalf of others (Wilkins, 2016). It is argued that those who have more power—therefore more legitimate actors, such as NGOs—communicate in ways that embed institutionalized discourses about social change, which define problems and solutions in their own right, and by extension, naturalize these conditions to maintain their hegemony and legitimacy (Escobar, 1995).

While social media is often regarded as democratic and dialogic communication platform within which such institutionalized power dynamics can be challenged, various studies on NGOs and their social media usage allude to the opposite picture. For example, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) identified that NGOs use Twitter mainly to provide information to wider audiences, and yet their communication strategies on Twitter tend to remain unidirectional and hierarchical rather than dialogic (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011). On top of their role as an informant, NGOs often strategically aim to provoke sympathetic responses by tweeting personal stories of suffering and predicament of the individuals (e.g., Guo & Saxton, 2013; Rodriguez, 2016). Moreover, others suggest that NGOs proactively use Twitter to gain prominence and attract attention to their agenda as well as to network with other NGOs (Guo & Saxton, 2018; Yang & Saffer, 2018). Other studies have demonstrated the privileged position of NGOs on social media in terms of their ability to mobilize public opinion and direct their attention to a certain issue (Barisione, Michailidou, & Airoldi, 2019; Stier et al., 2018).

Furthering the concern is the nonprofit sectors' ambivalent characteristic, whereby they increasingly struggle to establish their identity between a philanthropic organization and a legitimate actor to receive external funding (Benthall, 1993; Weisbrod, 1997). Such ambivalence, as scholars argue, encourages NGOs' institutional operation to thrive on the "economy of victimhood" that is dependent on funding by the Global North (Abu-Assab, Nasser-Eddin, & Seghaier, 2020, p. 482), and therefore prone to exploit the discourses of victimhood to brand their identity as legitimate advocates (Hahn & Holzscheiter, 2013).

As such, while the institutional characteristics of NGOs' organizational use of social media raise concerns about voice and representation of refugees, existing studies tend to focus on their representation in the mainstream media (Crawley et al., 2016; Horsti, 2013, 2016) and NGOs' public communication content outside the social media space (Ehmer, 2017; Georgiou, 2018). To the best of my knowledge, limited studies have examined the representations of NGOs' social media. Siapera, Boudourides, Lenis, and Suiter's (2018) recent big data study reveals that refugees are often dehumanized within the public conversations happening in the Twitter space. These studies inspire a closer examination of this understudied area.

## Research Approach

This study examines how refugee-specific NGOs use Twitter in the name of social justice. It conceptualizes NGOs' social media as a communicative space *for* and *about* social justice in which refugee representation and voice are articulated. Therefore, the study addresses the following questions: How are refugee-specific NGOs using Twitter for advocacy communication? Whose voices are spoken and heard through refugee-specific NGOs' Twitter messages? And how are refugees represented in these communicative spaces?

The study conducts a content analysis examining the Twitter feeds of the two major refugee-specific NGOs in the UK (Refugee Council, which has 60,000+ followers, and Refugee Action, which has 50,000+ followers on Twitter). The UK is one of the five major countries in Europe to have received the highest asylum applications in 2019, following France, Germany, Spain, and Greece (see Table 1). The NGOs were selected through an online search of UK-based NGOs provided by the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (WANGO), using the keyword "*refugee*." The selected organizations represent the two largest among the six Asylum Support Partnership organizations in the UK active in their organizational Twitter account.

***Table 1. Asylum Application and Refugee Resettlement in the Top Five Receiving European Countries (2019).***

| | France | Germany | Spain | Greece | **UK** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total number of asylum applications* | 191,816 | 165,857 | 118,252 | 92,661 | **54,072** |
| Total number of resettled refugees** | 3,311 | 9,640 | 1,193 | NDA. | **3,507** |

*Data queried from UNHCR, Data Finder (unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/).
** Data queried from UNHCR, Resettlement Data Finder (rsq.unhcr.org/en/).

Content analysis allows researchers to systematically examine a wide range of media texts over an extensive period to identify patterns and make inferences of their meanings (Macnamara, 2005). The analytic process contained an inductive analysis of reviewing the sample texts to come up with appropriate variables, which were then deductively coded for quantitative analysis.

The study sampled all 706 tweets posted by the organizations during the first six months of 2020 (January 1 to June 30). These tweets were manually screen-captured and copied to a separate spreadsheet for analysis. The tweets include original tweets directly posted by the organizations and the retweets forwarded by the organizations. The rationale for selecting the sampling period was as follows: to limit the sample to a manageable amount for manual coding, and to possibly measure the impact of the pandemic on the tweets' characteristics by comparing them before and after the World Health Organization's (WHO) announcement of the pandemic on March 11, 2020. Consequently, the sample consisted of 242 tweets before the pandemic (January 1 to March 10) and 464 tweets after the pandemic (March 11 to June 30).

Most variables were adopted from the analytic units validated and conceptualized in previous literature, notably Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017), Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), and Rodriguez (2016). Although these studies offered resourceful models for the codebook, to make

sure the codes were apt for the current study and theory driven, the adopted categories were revised and others newly devised for this study (e.g., "message normativity" and "refugee modifier" variables). Subsequently, the variables and their categories included *the tweets' functions* (whether a tweet is for information, community, or action function; information topic; community function type; action function type; message normativity), *message characteristics* (original tweet/retweet; message direction and link; retweet source), the *process* of refugee's voice (the subject of voice; information source), and the *value* of refugee's voice (descriptions of refugee; refugee modifiers: victimizing or empowering). The intercoder reliability test was conducted by two researchers and exceeded above the .80 benchmark for all variables in terms of Krippendorf's alpha coefficient score. The definitions for each variable are integrated into the sections where corresponding findings are discussed.

All variables contained mutually exclusive categories. While most of the coding process relied on manifest content, some clarifications and revisions were needed for coding the main "information topic" categories (see Table 2 for information topic categories). Specifically, a distinction was made between the topic of "refugee human rights" and the "status of refugee." The former more focused on delivering information about a particular incident, issue, or story concerning refugee's human rights and their basic needs, whereas the latter more heavily weighed on reporting a general trend about refugee data. When a tweet contained an external "link," only the headline provided with the link was analyzed given that the click-per-follower rate of Twitter is significantly low and that most of the users read only the titles and headlines (Gabielkov, Ramachandran, Chaintreau, & Legout, 2016).

Although it is not at odds with Twitter's legal terms of service to use Twitter data for noncommercial research purposes, a more reflexive approach to using public social media data has been called for within the academic communities (e.g., Williams, Burnap, & Sloan, 2017). In an effort to correspond with these voices, the screen-captured sample will not be shared for purposes other than academic research.

## Findings

### *Tweet Functions*

For tweet functions (see Table 2), the two NGOs resembled the previous findings of social media as instruments for building relationships with the public (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rodriguez, 2016). More than half ($n$ = 389) of the tweets played "information" function, the purpose of which is primarily to inform the audience. Within the information function, the most frequent topic was "refugee human rights" (38.3%), which mainly pointed out the issues attributable to violation of refugees' fundamental human rights and safety. Another sizable percentage mainly provided information about government policy and legislation (24.2%), while smaller proportions focused on the refugee's ongoing activities and efforts (12.1%), current status and trend in the refugee situation (11.8%), and descriptions about own works/organizations (8%). The frequent coverage of refugee human rights and government policy/legislation issues markedly reflect the NGOs' core agenda, which is to help protect the basic needs and safety of refugees arriving in the UK by advocating for policy change.

The next most frequent function was "action" (*n* = 186, 26.3%), which mainly aims to get the followers to "do something" for the organization. Within these tweets, the NGOs mostly wanted the followers to participate in petitioning/lobbying (28%), join an event (23.1%), volunteer or apply for a position (19.4%), and learn and share information by clicking through a given link (12.4%). An appeal for donations was made in a smaller percentage of the tweets (9.1%). The high percentage of petitioning/lobbying tweets may reflect the prioritized agenda of the two British NGOs, actively using Twitter to advocate for changes in the "unjust" refugee and immigration policy.

The remaining tweets played the "community" function (*n* = 131, 18.6%), which serves the purpose of building a community of followers (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). This function included congratulating/recognizing others (49.6%), expressing support for a cause/action/coalition (22.1%), encouraging/invigorating the followers (16%), and expressing solidarity/respect for others (6.9%). While these four categories tap into the indirect community function in which the primary purpose is to "say something that strengthens ties to the online community" without having an interactive conversation (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 343), another type may try to spark direct conversation by responding to public "reply" messages. However, only three tweets made direct replies/responses to the comments. This complements previous studies' findings of unidirectional message flow between NGOs and the public within social media.

The study also examined whether the tweets contained normative message (i.e., expressing a normative opinion, suggestion, and direction), either the "ought to be" or "ought not to be" dimensions on behalf of the refugee. For example, a tweet, "There are thousands of people in the UK who have been separated from their support networks by war and persecution. We need to step into these roles for them" (Refugee Action, 2020b) expresses normativity by urging that the refugee "ought to be" provided with support. The following tweet, although it references the situation, does not directly express the normative dimension: "People seeking asylum have been devastated by the coronavirus because they're forced to live on a scandalously low allowance of just over £5 a day" (Refugee Action, 2020c).

In total, 218 (30.9% of the total) tweets communicated a normative standpoint. The proportion of normativity was higher within tweets that played a particular function that strongly aligns with the organizational agenda (see Figure 1)—namely, providing information about refugee human rights issues (40.3%) and about legislation and policy issues (43.6%), expressing support (51.7%) and encouragement for community (81%), appealing for donations (41.2%) and participation in lobbying/petitioning (46.2%). This suggests that the selected NGOs not only tell the public what to think of and what action to perform, but also how to think of and why to act for by emphasizing the aspects of what "should be" done or "should not be" done.

***Table 2. Distribution and Description of Tweet Performative Functions.***

| Category | Description | Freq. | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Information** | | **389** | **55.1** |
| Refugee human rights | Informing about a particular incident, issue, or story concerning refugee's human rights and their basic needs. | 149 | 21.1 |
| Government policy and legislation | Informing about a newly established or existing government policy or legislation about refugee and asylum seekers. | 94 | 13.3 |
| Activities of refugee | Informing about the activities conducted or planned by the refugee such as charity program and educational services. | 47 | 6.7 |
| Status of refugee | Informing about the general trend of refugee data such as number of refugees and their origins. | 46 | 6.5 |
| Organization | Information about their own organization and other nonprofit or for-profit organizations detailing what they do or have achieved. | 31 | 4.4 |
| Other | — | 22 | 3.1 |
| **Community** | | **131** | **18.6** |
| Congratulate/recognize | Congratulating and recognizing other's achievement. | 65 | 9.2 |
| Support | Expressing support to other's initiatives and programs. | 29 | 4.1 |
| Encourage/invigorate | Expressing encouragement for a cause, or to invigorate the community. | 21 | 3 |
| Solidarity/respect | Paying tribute to or showing solidarity with others who have faced a tragic incident. | 9 | 1.3 |
| Reply to tweet | Replying to comments. | 3 | 0.4 |
| Other | — | 4 | 0.6 |
| **Action** | | **186** | **26.3** |
| Petition/lobby | Calling to sign a petition or to lobby for a cause. | 52 | 7.4 |
| Participate event | Calling to participate in a special event, exhibition, and the like. | 43 | 6.1 |
| Volunteer/employment | Calling to apply for a volunteer opportunity or an employment opportunity at an organization. | 36 | 5.1 |
| Learn and share | Asking others to learn more about something and share them, usually by providing a link that directs to further information. | 23 | 3.3 |
| Donate | Asking others to make donations. | 17 | 2.4 |
| Purchase product | Advertising and introducing a product. | 6 | 0.8 |
| Subscribe/follow | Asking others to subscribe and follow their website or social media. | 4 | 0.6 |
| Other | - | 5 | 0.7 |
| | **Total** | **706** | **100%** |

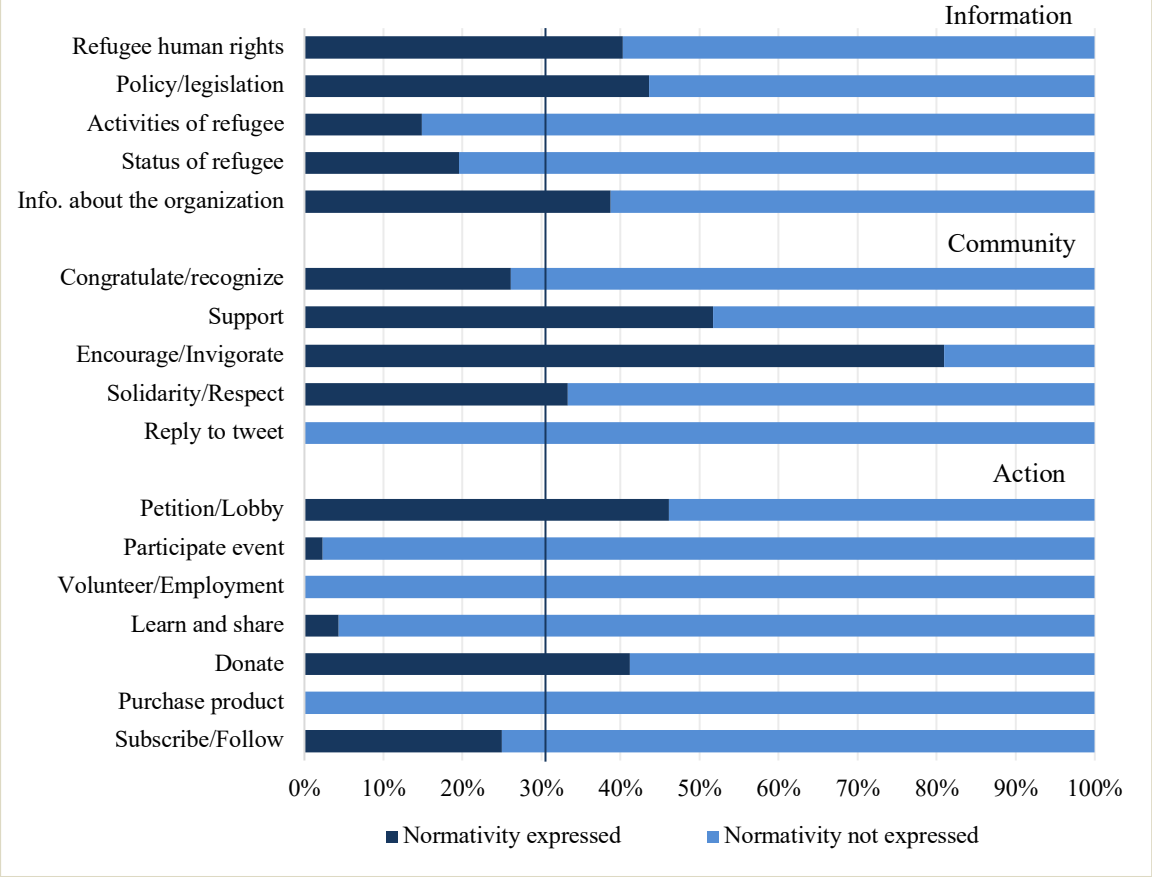


***Figure 1. Percentage of normativity expressed by tweet function.***

### *Message Characteristics*

The message characteristics of NGOs may reflect their institutional nature. Both organizations were quite active in their Twitter use with a respective average of 1.75 (Refugee Action) and 2.12 (Refugee Council) tweets posted per day. In terms of message direction, 433 (61.3% of the total) tweets directed users to other websites by providing a link. Within them, 37.6% directed the users back to the organization's respective website, 30% to news media, 9.7% to refugee-specific NGOs, 4.4% to other NGOs, and 3% to multi/bilateral organizations. However, a chi-squared test indicated that link direction was significantly associated with tweet function (see Figure 2). Notably, when the tweet directed users to news media and multi/bilateral organization, they were mostly to "inform" the users. When the messages were directed to NGOs' own website and to other refugee-specific NGOs, the dominant purpose was to call for "action"—mainly to petition and volunteer. Also, refugee-specific and other NGOs were frequently linked to build "community"—by recognizing and applauding their achievements and efforts. These patterns suggest the institutional characteristics of the two NGOs, in which their informational accountability is weighed on what the major institutions have to say, such as news media and intergovernmental/bilateral organizations, while

they strive to build community and expand their network among similar agencies, and direct users to act for refugee-specific NGOs including their own.

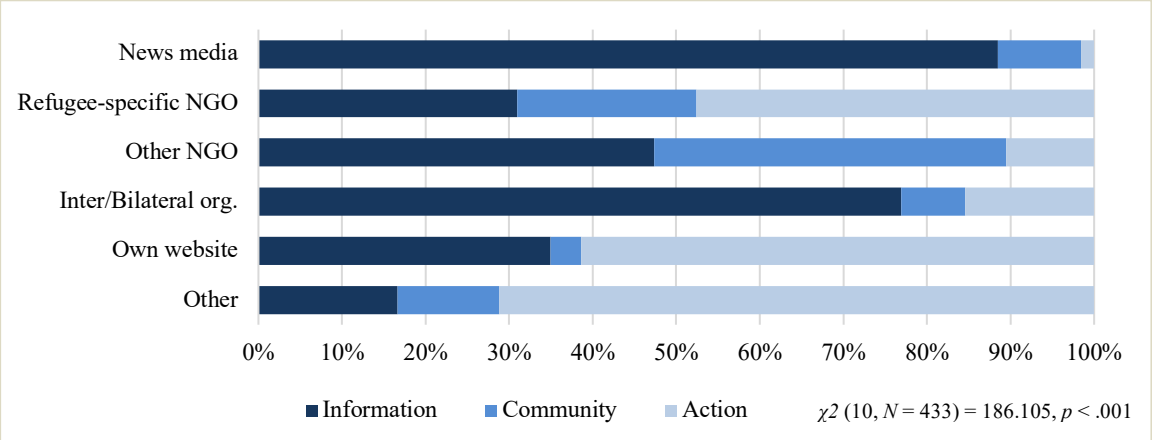


***Figure 2. Percentage distribution of tweet's performative functions by link direction.***

In terms of tweet origin, 556 tweets were original tweets (79%), and 150 were retweets of the posts created by other users (21%). The large percentage of original tweets may signal that the two NGOs are active in using Twitter as a platform to disseminate their own messages. The patterns of retweet sources further confirmed the construction of social capital among similar NGOs. When retweeted ($n$ = 150), sizable portions came from refugee-specific NGOs (38.7%) or other NGOs (19.3%), and a smaller percentage from individuals affiliated with their own NGOs (10%) and other activists (5.3%). Altogether, these four categories comprised 73.3% of retweets reposting the messages created within their social capital of advocacy, composed of networks with NGOs and the affiliated individuals.

## *Representing the Subjects of Advocacy*

### *Process of Refugee Voice*

The process of voice refers to the presence or absence of subjects within the communicative sphere. It asks, who gets to speak? And how much of that process is given to the refugee? For this analysis, the number of tweets that included quotes was counted—those that directly introduced others' voices through quotation marks and those that indirectly indicated the subjects' voices such as "according to~" and "~said that~." The results reveal only 116 of 706 tweets (16.9%) introduced a voice, within which 37.8% conveyed the voice of the refugee while the remaining 62.2% were voices of others, including NGO representatives (37%), politicians (11.8%), journalists (6.7%) and other nonrefugees (see Table 3). The fact that 128 posts of 587 tweets that presented "no voice at all" were retweets meant that the remaining 459 tweets (65% of the total 706 tweets) represented the voices of the two NGOs. This suggests that the voice of the refugee is largely absent within the communicative sphere of NGOs' Twitter, used as an advocacy communication channel.

***Table 3. Subject of Voice.***

| Subject | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| No voice (*s* = 587; 83.1%) | | |
| Original tweet | 459 | 65.0 |
| Retweet | 128 | 18.1 |
| Refugee | 45 | 6.4 |
| Own NGO representative | 37 | 5.2 |
| Other NGO representative | 7 | 1.0 |
| Politician | 14 | 2.0 |
| Journalist/News | 8 | 1.1 |
| Activist | 4 | 0.6 |
| Citizen | 3 | 0.4 |
| Celebrity | 1 | 0.1 |
| **Total** | **706** | **100** |

The study further explored whether the refugee's own account is incorporated in different ways, not limited to the inclusion of direct/indirect quotations. Given that "information" was the most frequent tweet function (*n* = 389, 55.1%), the sources of these tweets were recorded to examine how often refugees' own accounts were a source of information. Within 389 tweets that played the information function, 297 tweets identified an information source, and among them only 11.8% extracted information from the refugee, referencing from refugee's personal stories and refugee-featured articles. The remaining tweets pulled information from news media (23.1%), internal sources (13.6%), politicians and government (12.9%), published reports or studies (7.2%), and other information sources (7.7%). The relative insignificance of refugees' own accounts, both in terms of the presence of direct/indirect quotes and as information sources, further illustrates the marginalized status of the refugee's voice within NGOs' Twitter messages. Although the lack of the refugees' voice does not necessarily translate to the privileging of other voices, it nonetheless differentiates "the refugee" and "the experts" (composed of NGO representatives, journalists, and politicians) in which the former is relatively "uninvited" to the communicative spaces that are shaped and managed by the latter.

*Value of Refugee Voice*

If the *process* of voice focused on the presence of voice, the *value* of voice refers to the condition in which that presence can be rendered significant. It asks how and in what ways the refugee category is described? And, therefore, how refugee subjectivity is portrayed as capable of resisting the dominant representational order. It should be noted that despite the absence of refugee voice, the refugee subject was referred to (or described) in 72.5% of the total tweets (*n* = 513). However, when described, they were predominantly described as groups (87%) and less so as individuals (13%). Moreover, when the refugee was referred to, the descriptions lacked personalizing specifications such as gender (11.5%), name (11.1%), nationality (7.4%), profession (4.7%), and age (1.4%). In these manners, refugees are represented as amorphous strangers who do not have national roots, individual personhood, and jobs. Additionally, 11.3% of these tweets explicitly massified the refugee, describing them merely in statistical figures and numbers.

Also, the prevalent use of victimizing descriptions further threatened the value of refugee's voice. The study examined whether the tweets contained *victimizing* modifiers—such as vulnerable, risky, desperate, threatened, helpless, and suffering—or *empowering* modifiers—such as resilient, creative, strong, powerful, and determined—when they described the refugee subject(s). Of the 513 tweets that described refugee, 217 tweets (42.3%) connoted refugees as victims, and only 56 tweets (10.9%) engaged empowering descriptions. The remaining 46.8% either did not use any appending modifiers or were uncategorizable into the two categories. None of the tweets had both types of visibilities. There were no significant associations between the use of different modifiers and tweet functions. In other words, the victimization and empowerment percentages remained relatively consistent across the information, community, and action function.

Yet the victimizing description was significantly associated with the expression of normativity, $\chi^2(2, N = 513) = 17.294$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 3A). The NGOs were more likely to use victimizing modifiers and less likely to use empowering modifiers for describing the refugee subject when the tweet expressed a normative standpoint ($n = 175$) in contrast to when the tweet did not articulate a normative position ($n = 338$). For example, a post from Refugee Action (2020a) tweeted:

> Lack of safe and legal routes forces people to risk their lives to cross the Channel to seek refuge. Our Chief Executive @shalegeneva says government must open more avenues to safety and pledge long term to resettle 10,000 refugees a year #StandUpForAsylum.

Here, refugees are described in groups and victimized as people whose lives are at risk, while Refugee Action expresses their normative stance *through* the voice of its own Chief Executive, urging what ought to be done. This association between the positioning of refugees as victims and the urgency in the voice of NGOs signifies the subjectivity of the refugee as articulated through the victimization narrative, legitimizing "our" voice and decision making over "theirs." Essentially, the value of the refugee voice undergoes the process of *double victimization* whereby refugees are first represented as victims of *physical violence* (whose lives are at risk crossing the Channel), and a second time made victims of *symbolic violence* (whose presence is othered by the dominant narratives).

The study also examined the implications of victimization in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the tweets that referred to the refugee subject ($n = 513$), 167 were posted before the WHO declared the pandemic (January 1 to March 13), and 346 tweets were posted after the declaration (March 14 to June 30). A comparison among the two periods showed that the victimizing tweets increased by 16.6 percentage points after the pandemic, while the proportion of empowering tweets remained somewhat consistent (see Figure 3B). A chi-squared test showed a statistically significant association between the use of victimizing modifiers and the two periods before and after pandemic, $\chi^2(2, N = 513) = 13.403$, $p < .001$.

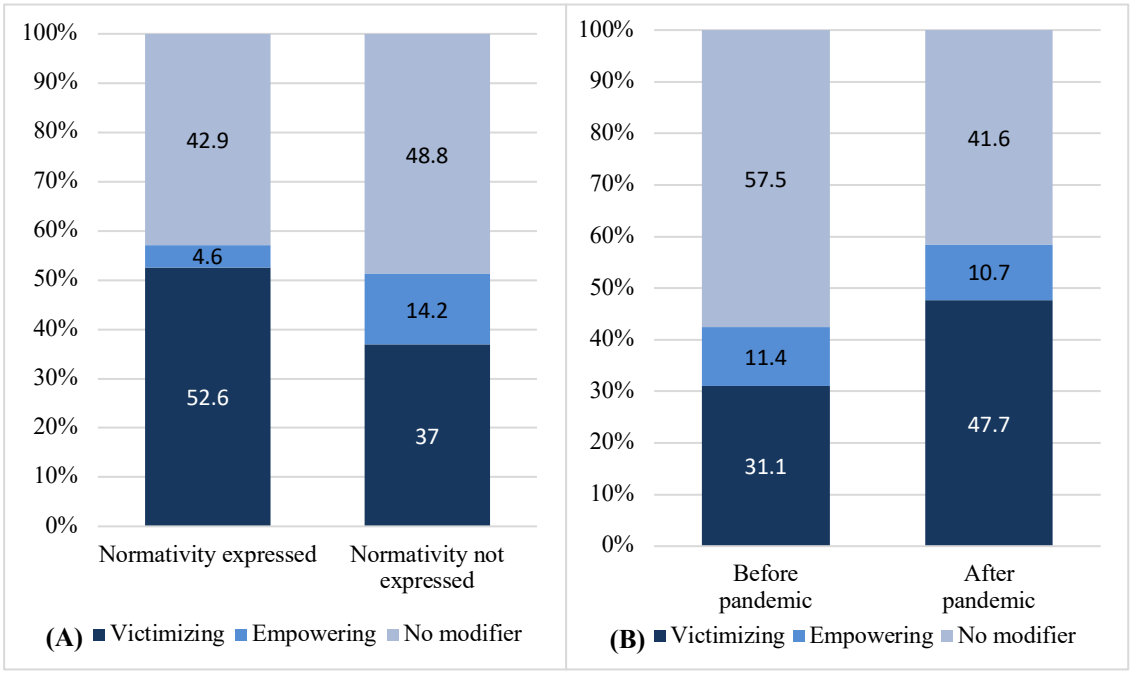


***Figure 3. Victimizing/empowering modifiers by normativity expression (A), and pandemic period (B).***

## Discussion and Conclusion

Literature on migration and media studies has consistently problematized the dominant regimes of refugee representation—the subalternizing portrayal of refugees as victims—within the Western media, including humanitarian communications by NGOs. The advent of new media, such as Twitter, has introduced new communicative venues for NGOs to practice advocacy communication. While copious studies exist examining NGOs' use of Twitter as an advocacy communication *for* social justice, little is known of whether these tweets represent in ways that are also *about* social justice on behalf of the subjects of advocacy. Conducting a content analysis of the tweets posted by two refugee-specific NGOs in the UK, this study examines whether and how NGOs' Twitter, seen as an institutionalized communication channel, is being used *for* achieving justice in ways that also reflexively show concerns *about* the refugee voice and personhood in their representation. The analysis reveals that NGOs use Twitter *for* the social justice of refugees by actively informing, building communities, and mobilizing followers. However, the study also reveals that the tweets are used in a way that bolsters the visibility of NGOs and other constituents within their own network, while suppressing the refugee's voice by adhering to the dominant representation of refugees as collectivized victims.

The patterns of two refugee-specific NGOs' Twitter use show active engagement of NGOs on Twitter as an advocacy communication channel to achieve social justice *for* refugee tweeting three major functions of informing, networking, and mobilizing. When informing the followers, NGOS' tweets tend to be

unidirectional rather than dialogic. While these findings are not new (e.g., Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rodriguez, 2016), the significance of it is complemented by a further analysis, which reveals an active *performativity* of these functions. The findings on "normativity" suggest the importance of recognizing NGOs' Twitter not only as a communicative platform that disseminates information but also as a theatrical platform that "performs" information, instilling us a sense of moral obligation on why and how we "should" feel about and engage with the subject matter. Humanitarian communications "nurture moral imagination not by simply referring to an external world but . . . by performing or bringing this world into being in the process of addressing it" Chouliaraki (2013, p. 49). In this regard, NGOs' use of social media can be seen as a performative practice in a sense that they function as a form of social action, inviting us to their own shaping of "humanitarian imaginary" (Chouliaraki, 2013, pp. 26–53). Nevertheless, if this invitation to their own imaginary is irreflexive of being *about* social justice, it may symbolically regulate our moral claim and define how we should relate to the vulnerable others, furthering the borders between "us" and the "refugees." As Rajaram (2002) contends, speaking for refugees and about "their" experience of forced migration risks turning their lives into "a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced" (p. 247). Social media eases such performance of NGOs by mundanely tweeting their messages out to mass audience. However, there is little knowledge on how NGOs' social media actually perform this symbolic regulation and invite us into their "humanitarian imaginary."

This case study of two refugee-specific NGOs suggests that NGOs' invitation to humanitarian imaginary works in two dimensions. First, by proactively sharing tweets of similar organizations and directing followers into NGOs, they invite us into their institutionalized humanitarian network. This builds upon previous research that observed NGOs' use of Internet and social networking sites as an effort to forge reciprocal bonds, promote collective agendas, and maintain social capital (Rodriguez, 2016; Yang & Saffer, 2018). However, this has significant implications to the social justice approach of advocacy communication, which concerns the ways dominant discourses, social structures, and patterns of interactions reproduce injustice (Frey et al., 1996). NGOs' patterns of interactions on Twitter may simply be seen as an effort to leverage their social capital *for* social justice. It must be remembered, however, that the leveraging of humanitarian networks is intimately tied to the notion of "legitimacy"—organizations gain legitimacy by working in alliance with similar organizations and adhering to the principles shared by them (Hudson, 2001). Therefore, as I assert, this process of *leveraging* on the visibility of social capital may render the process also *privileging* the institutional discourses shared within that social capital of humanitarianism, eventually failing to be *about* social justice. This raises the critical question of whether NGOs' performativity of "doing good" *for* social justice is complemented by the performativity of "being good" *about* refugees in its representation.

Answering this question presents a second dimension of invitation to refugee-specific NGOs' humanitarian imaginary—once invited to their institutional context, the representational patterns bolster the voices of the legitimized actors over the victimized refugees. The findings suggest that NGOs' Twitter risks being locked into the dominant discourse that homogenizes the refugee category within the trope of "victimhood," rather than portraying the refugee as a unique human being whose sociopolitical "personhood" can be reflected upon. Subsequently, the subjectivity of refugee as a victimized homogeneous category is perpetuated by the *double silencing* of refugee voices. The first order of silencing is executed by the absence of the *process* of refugee voices from the communicative sphere in which they are uninvited to the realm of

visibility. The insignificant amount of their voices then deprives the opportunity of refugees to speak for themselves, and the opportunity of users to witness the refugee's personhood. Thus, the refugee subjects are not only unspoken but also unheard through the silencing of the *value* of their voice under the institutional performativity that privileges the narratives of victimization and collectivization of refugees. In such ways, personifying descriptions are detached from the refugee, leaving them as amorphous groups of vulnerable strangers whose identities, roots, and social status are unclear. Thus, while their *physical voice* remained uninvited, the descriptive subjectivity of the refugee category portrayed their *symbolic voice* as collective "objects" of management, and less as unique "subjects" of advocacy.

This resonates with previous research on the mediation of refugee representation (e.g., Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Ehmer, 2017; Georgiou, 2018; Horsti, 2013; Wroe, 2018), and complements the existing knowledge as it reveals the extension of this mediation process to the sphere of NGOs' social media. Also, the study confirms the underlying premise that NGOs' ambivalent tension between legitimacy and philanthropy is likely to exploit the discourse of victimhood, therefore failing to communicate social justice *about* refugee in their manners of Twitter use.

Overall, these observations present three significant concerns in the sphere of NGOs and social media advocacy. The first concern targets the medium of social media. Social media has now become an indispensable communication channel to advocacy organizations, ever magnifying public's exposure and accessibility to the organizational messages on a daily basis. However, beneath the volatility and triviality of these messages may hide highly politicized narratives of advocacy that depoliticize the subject of advocacy. Limited empirical knowledge in these dynamics call for more research on the subject.

The second concern is raised against the relationship between NGOs and news media. As NGOs gain their legitimacy, news media increasingly rely on NGOs for news sources, and NGOs strategically use this news-making process (Powers, 2018). NGOs' public communication and news media thrive in complementary relationship, reinforcing the traditional norms and power dynamics of professional news making (Powers, 2018). Thus, to challenge the dominant regime of refugee representation prevalent within news media (e.g., Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017), a challenge is also needed against the dominant ways NGOs communicate *about* refugees through their public communication channel, such as social media.

Lastly, a concern is raised specifically in the context of global pandemic. As this study finds, the existing mechanisms that produce hierarchy in subjectivities are more likely to heighten the symbolic borders between "us" and "them" during the global crisis. In other words, the subalterning rhetoric of victimhood will unequally affect between different subject memberships. For example, unlike refugees, health-care professionals in the West are repeatedly praised as "heroes" despite belonging to the social community at the highest risk during the crisis (Cox, 2020). In this sense, the rhetoric of the "global" crisis may be a double-edged sword, which potentially spotlights the socially vulnerable and yet simultaneously exacerbates the existing representational order that further reduces the refugee to mere vulnerable others.

These discussions do not conclude that refugee-specific NGOs necessarily fail in their use of Twitter, nor do they simply call for more inclusion of refugee voices. Collaborative efforts are needed more than ever, and social media can surely enhance that potential for collaboration across organizations and activists.

Yet the accountability for "doing good" must be accompanied by the accountability for "being good" to address both the material and symbolic justice over marginalized others. Addressing these issues, however, may be more complicated. As Couldry (2010) maintains, simply having more voices is not enough; a challenge to the hegemonic sociocultural forces is necessary by knowing that voice matters in its process and value. Efforts must be made beyond simply presenting more visibility to the refugee's voice and removing the victimizing modifiers, "for one would find underneath the silence not a voice waiting to be liberated but ever deeper historical layers of silencing and bitter, complicated regional struggles over history and truth" (Malkki, 1996, p. 398). Then, a challenge is needed against the institutional discourse articulated through the performative spaces of communication. In this sense, I hope to see more scholarly and policy efforts that concern the double silencing of nonprivileged voices within the sphere of NGO-ized advocacy, especially in the everyday spaces of digital media.

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