

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR FUTURE-MAKING

The Cases of Two Entrepreneurs in Kakuma Refugee Camp

Claudia Böhme

Abstract: In this article I will look at the relationship between offline suffering and online happiness through the example of two young entrepreneurs living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya who strongly leverage social media for their business. From a basic communication device, the smartphone has become the door to a world of seemingly glamorous self-representation and a tool for future-making. I trace the young professionals' motivations and inspirations for their work, and how they make a 'brand' in efforts to find a way of being self-reliant. In showcasing what they want and aim to be, these entrepreneurs actively engage in creating a self-image that is 'beyond suffering', one that can widen the gap and exemplify the ambiguous relationship between their real-world uncertainties and online images of success.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, future, Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, migration, social media

I met Samir¹ in 2021 as one of my first contacts to work with in my research. He was known in Kakuma refugee camp as a tailor and had built up quite a large tailoring shop in an iron-sheet construction with several co-workers and even apprentices. He was known to be a talented and hard-working man amid the hardships and restriction of the refugee camp in the near desert of northern Kenya. The heat, lack of electricity, unstable and precarious customer base, and restrictions in mobility, freedom, and resources were the challenges he was dealing with. This picture changed tremendously when he showed me his phone and virtual appearance on social media. A whole new world opened up to me as I looked at the glamorously staged pictures of models wearing his fashions on Instagram. Moreover, as he told me, he had built up an impressive network of clients, followers, and fans around the world, from other fashion



designers to some German journalists. Online he thus presented himself as a globally connected fashion designer.

This article will explore the relationship between the restrictions of offline life, portrayals of suffering and struggle in a refugee camp facing an uncertain future, and the potential for self-representation and fame through social media. Everybody who engages in social media must manage their diverging offline and online realities, but the discrepancy for migrants—between their daily existence and their future imagined possibilities—is perhaps even more pronounced. Through the global distribution of new technologies like mobile phones and smartphones and easier connection to the Internet and social media, migrants² can access and produce knowledge; bridge the geographical distances and borders between their home, transit, or destinations; and engage in transnational social networks, form virtual bonds, and create new social spaces (Diminescu 2008; Doná 2015; Komito 2011; Leurs 2014; Witteborn 2015).

Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya has existed for over 34 years and together with Kalobeyei refugee settlement has a population of over 300,000 people from more than 20 nationalities (UNHCR Kenya 2025). According to Bram Jansen (2018), it has become an ‘accidental city’ with its own organic social organization, politics, cultures, and local economy. Living in a forced and marginalized home, life is characterized by restrictions, depression, and the constant hope to get out. As the future is unsure, people have to navigate their present existence to gain the most for their lives in the camp as well as a possible future beyond. With the many agencies and organizations active in the camp as well as the ongoing resettlement to countries abroad, Kakuma refugee camp has become a place of dreams, hope, opportunities, and chances for the future. This also becomes visible through the many refugee-led entrepreneurial, media, artistic, and educational projects and activities in the camp.

Based on fieldwork in Kakuma refugee camp between 2021 and 2023, this article takes a closer look at individual entrepreneurs in the camp and how they use social media to present themselves as “globally successful,” countering the image of suffering and voiceless camp inhabitants. Adding to studies that look at either social media and migration or migrant entrepreneurship (see Harima and Plak 2025), I want to explicitly focus on migrants’ social media use in relation to their entrepreneurial activities and the meanings associated with them. I will also look at the positives and negatives of being a simple entrepreneur living in a refugee camp offline and a successful, connected, famous businessperson on the World Wide Web. How do refugee entrepreneurs manage these two worlds, and how can social media help them work toward realizing their virtually presented and imagined futures?

This article engages with migrants’ dreams and imaginations as a form of social practice (Appadurai 1996: 31), situated at the interstices of digital life and everyday practice. Since living in Kakuma refugee camp is seen as a

temporarily necessary but unwanted phase of their lives, dreaming and imagination play an important role for its inhabitants to actively use their ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai 2004) to conceptualize and work on their futures. This is especially true for young entrepreneurs who use digital media to visualize and fulfill their dreams. This apparent disparity between the online and offline selves mirrors the tense relationship between life in the restrictive and rather immobilized environment of a refugee camp and the supposedly freeing power of the imagination (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), which becomes visible online as well as in the desires and hopes that emerge prior to actually moving on (Elliot 2021). Arjun Appadurai describes the future as a horizon that is spanned by the interaction of imagination, anticipation, and aspiration. This ‘future-making’ includes those practices that link the present with the future and thus create a relationship between ideas of desirable futures and actions that are intended to create them (Appadurai 2004; 2013: 286–287). The young entrepreneurs of Kakuma do actively create and shape their visions of the future, especially online where they imagine what their lives could look like and are able to articulate their aspirations.

Kakuma refugee camp residents often evaluate their current life as an unwanted situation of living under extremely restricted and difficult conditions. In other words, themes of suffering are prevalent. However, they can also have a positive attitude toward their future rife with ‘hoping’ and ‘agency in waiting’ (Brun 2015). They navigate possible near and far futures in and beyond the camp according to their circumstances in the present. As I argue, in this context social media becomes one of the most important means to visualize what they want to be, to show it to their social networks, and to work toward actualizing those imaginaries. As they expressed to me, social media makes it possible for Kakuma inhabitants and entrepreneurs to move beyond their suffering and invest in a positive, hopeful, and successful self. As migrant entrepreneurs they draw from their experiences and positively envision and take active steps to make their future online in contrast to the challenges, obstacles, and difficult current offline lives in the camp. In renarrating their life, migration histories, and entrepreneurial careers, I aim to show how the use of social media helps migrants cope with their present situation and potentially reach imagined futures. At the same time, I will also look at the relationship and discrepancies between their offline and online selves—being a refugee entrepreneur and a globally connected famous person subject to many ambiguities.

Background and Methods of the Study

This article is based on a research project titled “Trust Building and Future Construction via Smartphones and Social Media at Intermediate Places of

Transnational Migration using the Example of Refugees from East Africa” from 2020 to 2023. In preparation for the project, I traveled to Kakuma refugee camp in 2017 together with a friend from Mombasa, who assisted me when we were able to visit the camp and talk to some camp inhabitants. At that time, we also met two young women from Somalia and South Sudan who had opened a photo studio called Dream Studio. Back home, I have maintained contact with them via social media and WhatsApp and have followed their online activities on Facebook (FB), Twitter, and Instagram (Böhme 2019). When the research project was funded, the project start was impeded by the Covid-19 pandemic, which prevented me from traveling to Kenya. Ethnographic research had to remain online and on a remote basis and focused, first, on the effects of the pandemic on migrants living in refugee camps (Böhme and Schmitz 2022; Böhme et al. 2021). Further contacts from Kakuma were gathered through snowball sampling online and through FB friends or posts of their contacts on social media. Fieldwork began in August 2021 until June 2023 in four phases between 1 to 3 months with research at Kakuma refugee camp and urban settlements in Nairobi, Eldoret, and Mombasa.

For fieldwork on the ground, I benefited from already established online contacts in the camp as well as with colleagues in Kenya. In this way, I made contact with two field assistants, both working and studying online in the camp and themselves interested in migration and social media. Their help was essential to moving around in the camp, making contacts, visiting people and places in the camp, and conducting interviews, as well as analyzing and interpreting the data. My positionality as a white female researcher from Europe put me in a privileged and powerful position, which could lead to false expectations on the side of the people I was meeting. Every outside visitor to the refugee camp is met with the hope that through this person one will get access to resources, networks, jobs, and perhaps a way out of the camp. Transparency, patience, trust, and adhering to ethics and morals when conducting research with vulnerable people are paramount. Another key issue was that asylum seekers in Kenya, as elsewhere, have to tell their life and migration stories to the UN for the administration of their files and cases to get eligibility as a refugee and possible resettlement (Jansen 2008). This means that migrants have to be very careful what they tell third parties. One should note that Kakuma refugee camp is regularly frequented by international organizations that undertake aid campaigns or study the living conditions in the camp, as well as a few anthropologists. People are therefore used to outsiders and may choose to work as research or project assistants through which they can gain income and experience.

The main research method was participant observation, meeting and visiting migrants at their homes and workplaces and following them in their daily activities. Being a fluent Swahili speaker and somebody who had previously

traveled to and conducted research in East Africa helped me to gain trust and make friendships in the camp. Although one can interact with camp inhabitants on a daily basis and take part in certain activities, participant observation is restricted by the rules and regulations in the camp. Visitors need a permit to enter the camp, are advised not to go to the camp alone, and have to leave the camp before a certain time, around sunset. Participant observation also entailed taking part in leisure or fun activities like going out to the nearby bar or joining the sports group called Fitgang as well as different WhatsApp groups (see Bachelet, this issue). Research on the ground was supplemented and related to the online activities of the respective persons. Offline and online activities were analyzed according to how people envisaged, imagined, and made their futures, and were affected by the role of trust in social networks and information and people they met online.

For this article I focus on two young entrepreneurs whom I met in the camp, showing their journeys and how they navigate their lives, both offline and online. The stories are based on my meetings with them on a regular basis, interviews, and participation in their activities, alongside social media interactions and digital ethnography. Through these methods, I have been able to analyze pictures, videos, and texts of their self-representation as well as in-person observations.

The Role of Social Media for Agency and Future-Making in Transit Places of Migration

Before the arrival of digital technologies, communication with social contacts was very difficult for migrants whose only options were letters, radio, or land-line, which depended on time, access, and resources. Mobile telephones, the Internet, and more recently social media have made communication easier, cheaper, and more frequent. Social media helps migrants to maintain close relationships, strong ties to their social environment in their country of origin, on the road, at intermediate locations, and at their destination (Giulietti et al. 2018; Liu 2013) and instrumental rather untrustworthy weak ties (Granovetter 1973; Tilly 2007) for organizing migration (Haythornthwaite 2002).

Following transnational network theories, migrants can be described as embodying a ‘culture of bonds’ that they take with them on their journeys regardless of geographical spatial boundaries. The dynamics of these bonds increase with the use of modern information and communication technologies. Through “virtual bonds,” migrants can maintain distant as well as close relationships and activate them daily (Diminescu 2008: 567). The ‘connected migrant’ or ‘virtual migrant’ (Komito 2011) or ‘smart refugee’ (Dekker et al. 2018) creates a social space of ‘connected presence’ (Licoppe 2004), through

which he/she is in the 'here' and 'there' at the same time. Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) have created the term 'mobile commons' to describe migrants' communal practices as resistant and powerful practices against the sovereign control of mobility. According to them, the common experience of trans-migrants forms common worlds of existence (ibid.):

World 2—the world of transmigrants whether they are on the road, in a new country, or in a new neighbourhood, whether they are settled, clandestine, have refugee status, or are documented workers—is the world that exists as a common world in the making.

But not everything is better with social media. Looking at the unequal availability and harmful characteristics of social media, Witteborn (2015) speaks of 'digital heterotopias', a concept that describes being connected yet marginalized, empowered yet excluded. This is especially true for people who live in Kakuma and illustrates the limits of online freedom, as inhabitants ultimately still live as asylum seekers in a refugee camp in northern Kenya no matter how much they engage online. Koen Leurs (2014) takes up the concept of 'digital heterotopias' by showing how the connectivity of young Somalis stranded in Ethiopia creates resonance and 'transnational affective capital' (see also Mahar, this issue). This embodied form of capital is usually all that is left for them. Ponzanesi and Leurs (2014: 11) write:

Transnational affective capital is highly ambivalent; it both enables anxiety management and fosters a sense of 'ontological security' (Giddens 1990), but affects spurred through transnational communication are short lived, depend on financial remittances and although promising do not ultimately solve their precarious situation.

The need for constant communication helps transgress the precarities in this situation. The functions and meanings of new media for refugees in camps and other places of displacement were initially considered primarily in the context of applied humanitarian projects, in which digital rights for refugees are articulated and serve as a basis for media interventions (Schapendonk 2015). The UNHCR (2016) report *Connecting Refugees* showed that despite various limiting factors (gender gap, language deficits, culturally coded restrictions), refugees place a high value on connectivity. It is crucial for communicating with families and friends in the country of origin and host country, as well as for providing assistance (ibid.).

Further studies show how migrants in displacement negotiate their identities and create new identities via the networking and communication possibilities of social media, how they represent themselves online, how they create a home for themselves, and how they act as political subjects. In this regard,

‘technologically mediated sociality’ (Willson 2012), in the form of online calls or social media, plays an essential role according to Witteborn (2015). Social media can be a means for refugees to distance themselves from the label ‘refugee’ and its connotations of being a passive victim or an unlawful intruder. Refugees can become ‘invisible’ and assert themselves through co-presence and self-representation. Or they can use the online world to become visible as a kind of political force. Migrants can then use the label ‘refugee’ on their own terms and as a discursive force for online and offline political mobilization (ibid.: 352).

As the examples of young Congolese people in the UK in Godin and Doná’s (2016) study show, refugees make a multiplicity of identities visible through the use of social media as they make connections across categories beyond those of refugees or people in the diaspora. Borrowing from Anderson’s (1983) concept of ‘imagined communities’, Doná (2015) explores how ethnic and national groups create powerful imagined virtual communities on the Internet. When refugees use their mobile phones and the Internet to stay in touch with family and friends back home or with people who have left the camp, they interact in the form of “virtual home-making” (ibid.: 71).

How the use of social media creates agency also relates to the growing research and policy discourse on ‘refugee self-empowerment’ and ‘refugee economies’ (Betts et al. 2019). It is a common trend for humanitarian actors and bodies as well as the host country’s government in the Global South to vividly promote that refugees could be able to care for themselves and contribute to the economy, as they indeed do, but more in the form of shifting the problem back to them. This is the case in the creation of so-called settlements in which refugees would be able to live independently and productively in the same region where they have been encamped. Many authors have shown the failure of such settlement approaches in Uganda and Kenya as refugees were not able to provide for themselves under the harsh conditions or in the absence of economic and social networks at the refugee camps (Betts et al. 2020; Hovil 2007). The self-reliance approach mainly ignores the structural constraints and reinforces the ‘neoliberal subjectivity’ of asylum seekers (Dykstra-DeVette 2018; Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018).

Many global initiatives claim to empower refugees to take part in global decision-making events, like those of the UN or the World Economic Forum. While this can be interpreted as an integrational approach to let migrants speak for themselves and to involve them in the creation of policies, it rarely brings solutions to their precarious lives. As the following sections will show, the intersection of social media, themes of empowerment, and experiences of migration shape imagination as a social practice in Kakuma refugee camp, complicating the analytics of desperation often used to frame refugees and their efforts to navigate precarity.

Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement

Kakuma refugee camp was founded in 1992 with the arrival of the Lost Boys of Sudan, a group of young boys and girls who lost their parents and their homes due to the Second Sudanese Civil War and fled on foot to neighboring countries. With increasing and ongoing conflicts in the region over the following decades the population of the camp increased to more than 300,000 registered refugees with more than 20 nationalities (South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and others) (UNHCR Kenya 2025). To improve the living conditions for refugees and the host population, the Kalobeyei settlement was created in 2016 with the aim to foster refugees' self-reliance. Although the majority of people settled there have brick houses and access to water and electricity, most inhabitants would agree that life is better in the neighboring camp, with its better social and business networks (Betts et al. 2020).

Kakuma refugee camp is located in a remote area of northwestern Kenya near the border with South Sudan, far from any major urban center. Since the highway A1 up to South Sudan was completed, connectivity and mobility have improved. The region is a semi-arid desert with sandstorms, average temperatures of 35–38°C (95–100°F), and flooding in the rainy season accompanied by malaria and cholera outbreaks. The surrounding local population are the Turkana, former cattle nomads who also depend on help from aid agencies or the government. There have been violent conflicts between local groups in the camp as well as the host population and refugees. The relationship between the Turkana and refugees is ambivalent, characterized by the envy of social benefits. Some people say, "It is better to be a refugee than a Turkana in Kakuma" (Aukot 2003: 74).

The camp is under the jurisdiction of the Kenyan government, represented by the Department of Refugee Services (DRS) and administrated by the UNHCR. There is a huge number of international NGOs active in the camp. Residents of Kakuma refugee camp are going through an asylum process and, if successful, are registered and categorized as 'asylum seekers' or 'refugees' by the Kenyan government. Without citizenship, people are restricted in mobility and freedom. They have poor housing of corrugated iron and wood, and limited access to electricity, food, water, medical care, and work. They live with the risk of violent conflict both inside and outside the camp.

As asylum seekers and refugees, their future is extremely uncertain, based solely on the hope of leaving the camp. As Cindy Horst (2006) has shown in her study on Somali migrants in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, this uncertain existence generates what is referred to as *buufis* in Somali, a constant longing to leave the camp. This form of longing and despair, which leads to depression or even suicide, is well known among Kakuma refugee camp inhabitants, although they might not have a certain name for it like the Somali among them.

Refugee camps have been conceptualized as a specific form of institution—the ‘camp’. They are known as places of violence and domination (Greiner and Kramer 2013), and also of power, control, and security (Pieper 2008). As ‘total institutions’ (Goffman 1961) that normatively function according to their own rules (Foucault 1977, 1984), they are characterized by their structurally and institutionally determined conflicts, restrictions, regulations, and exclusion (Böhme and Schmitz 2022). As ‘non-places’ (Augé 2008), they are said to be characterized by a lack of history, relationships, and identity. But as many studies show, most refugee camps, although originally intended to be temporary, have become long-term dwellings, ‘accidental cities’ (Jansen 2018), and city-camps (Agier 2002)—homes where people live for an average of 17 years (Feldman 2015; Herz 2013). This means that they have indeed become places with their own history, relationships, and identity where people engage with their resilience, agency, resistance, and diverse coping mechanisms.

As one can see from the above, the research and theorization on refugee camps is highly polarized around either governmentality, suffering, waiting, and boredom, on the one hand, or agency, resistance, and coping, on the other. In recent years, several studies have looked at both sides of the coin and have taken into account the notion of ‘beyond suffering’ as well as the agency and living strategies of refugees, along with multiple ambiguities and subjectivities (see, e.g., Herz 2013; Horst 2006; Jansen 2018; Oesch 2017; Turner 2005).

This article builds on these insights to further consider the role of the digital in the lives of migrants and refugees. Kakuma refugee camp, like other urban settlements, is a home, a place for working, learning, and leisure projects. It is a colorful, lively, transnational and transcultural place. Due to numerous organizations and public/media attention, Kakuma has become famous and widely known online. It is presented and promoted by UNHCR with a singular success story of camp residents, accompanied by high-gloss pictures of smiling refugees, as a place of chances and opportunities for education, work, and success. These stories are further proven by statistics: 2,500 small businesses, 52 schools, 80 percent primary school enrollment, 8 medical facilities, and 69 percent access the Internet via smartphones (UNHCR Kenya 2019). Yet how do these developments translate to the lives of specific people? In my contribution I explore the cases of two people who seek out their own lives beyond analytics of suffering. Although they live under the conditions of a refugee camp marked by governmentality, they are young entrepreneurs working toward their dreams, hopes, and visions of the future. They present themselves as creative and successful with a clear future goal in and beyond the camp.

Navigating Different Futures in Kakuma Refugee Camp

As a registered asylum seeker or a person who has been granted refugee status in Kakuma refugee camp, one's future options are restricted. Despite this, people actively inform themselves about future possibilities and evaluate them according to their chances and the risks they want to take, as well as what a 'good' or 'simple' life means to them (see Voirol and Simoni, this issue). Camp inhabitants work or study in the camp, create a home for themselves, and start a family. Some even became successful or famous. A small number of refugees also decide to stay in the camp despite having other opportunities. These cases are very rare and are usually due to old age and/or unwillingness to change familiar surroundings. Some refugees have become successful entrepreneurs or businesspeople in the camp, and leaving would result in a reduction in status. One famous example is Mesfin Getahun, a refugee from Ethiopia who was able to build up a wholesale business in the camp. He has rejected resettlement to the US as it would mean a loss of status for him (Halais 2017).

The most commonly desired and imagined future for people in Kakuma, according to their discussions, was to get a chance to leave the camp and live abroad, or *majuu* ('a place above' in Sheng). This meant waiting and hoping for resettlement, working and studying for scholarships, as well as networking and informing oneself about opportunities to go abroad. The difficult living conditions in the camp and the psychological stress of constant waiting led some inhabitants to decide to illegally migrate to other countries. Most often, the aim was to reach Europe, known as the 'bad route' (*safari mbaya*). This decision was often fostered by images of supposed successful migrants who had done so and circulated their success stories or other information on social media, articulated as a kind of adventure (see Bachelet, this issue). The bad route was seen as a last resort when other options failed and people felt that they were wasting too much of their life in the camp. Self-organized migration could be accomplished only through smugglers, and it entailed the real risk of losing one's life or being trapped somewhere else.

Another choice was to return to the home country or country of origin, depending on the security situation and the envisaged future possibilities in the respective country (see Voirol and Simoni, this issue). The UNHCR organizes repatriation programs for certain countries if the situation allows, but many people have come back to the camp due to the bad living conditions in their home regions (for repatriation to southern Sudan, see Jansen 2018: 165–190). Other people who would opt for going home are not allowed to do so and are not supported by the UNHCR as their country is still rated as unsafe.

Due to several threats to close Kakuma refugee camp, the last one in 2021, inhabitants were worried and took steps to seek back-up options. This reflected the shifting migration policies in Kenya. After the threat of closure, the Refugee

Act of 2021 (effective from February 2022) promised asylum seekers in Kenya new identity cards as foreign nationals, the right and better access to work, and the possibility for people born in the East African Community (EAC) to become naturalized EAC citizens. The Shirika plan (from *shirika*, ‘to cooperate’ in Swahili), created in 2023 by the government of Kenya and the UNHCR, proclaimed to turn the refugee camps into integrated settlements and enhance socio-economic inclusion. Launched in November 2024 for a period of 12 years, the plan foresees three phases: transition, stabilization, and resilience. Kakuma and Dadaab camps are to be administratively transformed into municipalities. The aim is to enable budgetary allocations for infrastructure and services. In these new places, refugees should live alongside the respective host communities and work and engage in economic activities. There is still no clear plan on how Shirika will be realized, however, meaning that, as Segadlo et al. (2024) have shown, the “Shirika plan primarily resembles a black box that fosters uncertainties in [refugees’] already precarious living conditions.” The envisaged plans also run counter to new political developments on the global level. As the Trump government has shut down USAID, humanitarian aid was severely cut back, leading to hunger and strikes. Moreover, in a turn to even more restrictive migration policies, countries like Germany canceled ongoing resettlement from Kenya in 2025. These cases show how camp residents actively evaluate their situation and orient and reorient their future plans accordingly (see Verstappen, this issue).

The Digitalization of Kakuma Refugee Camp

When the first refugees arrived from Sudan in the early 1990s, Kakuma town was just a small Turkana settlement, connected only by a rough road to Lodwar and South Sudan through the semi-desert. For the first inhabitants it was a horrible place. They had to live in simple tents without provisions, the shade of trees, or protection from the wind, along with the threat of scorpions, snakes, and seasonal floods. Fleeing at that time meant disconnecting from family and friends at home and not knowing about each other’s well-being because calling home via landline was nearly impossible and very expensive (Böhme 2023).

As Lemy, who came to Kakuma from South Sudan, explained, in 2000 the usual mode of communication was letters or military radios that were used in the camp for business communication with South Sudan. At that time most people’s contact with the outside world was restricted to other Kenyan cities like Eldoret and Nairobi. Three years later, the first mobile phones came to be used in Kenya. They also reached the refugee camp and made communication much easier. Since 2008, social media platforms like Facebook and Viber and later, from 2014/15, WhatsApp and their respective messenger and video calls

made it possible for residents of Kakuma to engage in online activities and connect to the world (Böhme 2023). Mobile Internet data became more convenient and affordable too. The UNHCR held a small number of events to promote these developments. They initiated a boot camp for Kakuma inhabitants in 2017 to teach refugees technical skills of ICT, aimed at enhancing their abilities to find education or work (Otieno 2017).

Within the vicinity of the camp, Internet cafes and mobile phone shops have blossomed, and service providers like Safaricom or Airtel and mobile money services like M-Pesa or the digital food aid system Bamba Chakula³ have been offering their services in the camp. However, no (or time-limited) electricity, power cuts, and financial resources still restrict media usage. To access the Internet, camp inhabitants need to have properly functioning and charged smartphones and buy data bundles from the respective provider, something that not everybody can afford. Unreliable and time-limited networks are other problems they encounter (Böhme 2023).

At the time of writing in 2025, Kakuma's inhabitants use their mobile phones to go online and use social media platforms very actively, especially WhatsApp, Facebook, FB Messenger, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram. Although they sometimes have difficulties with connection or money to buy data bundles, social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp are most important, as they allow the refugees to connect with people outside the camp; to build large networks of contacts in Kakuma, Kenya, and abroad; and to present themselves with a personal identity beyond their refugee status (Böhme 2019, 2022, 2023). The Internet and social media make up a big part of economic activities as well as the visual landscape in the camp with painted phone shops, creative charging facilities, and advertisement boards all over the place. Camp inhabitants have been using social media ever since it became available to them, for private and business activities and for taking part in online communities from both offline groups in the camp and global networks.

One can find information about Kakuma refugee camp on diverse websites and all major social media platforms where the camp is presented through pictures, texts, and videos.⁴ On the Internet, information and images of possible new futures elsewhere are shared and received, influencing favored places of destination as well as practices that aim at reaching them. Social media also has a huge impact on the camp inhabitants' social and professional activities, which then might lead to important contacts abroad or enable careers in the camp. Through social media, refugees can publish camp-related projects and events and connect to larger supporting networks to receive donations or even become famous. In this way, social media also functions as a motor for change and adds to the strategies for making a better future (Böhme 2023).

Social media can display multiple and alternative identities and show or hide them more freely (Witteborn 2015). In this way, one can say that the

camp-specific negotiation of (ethnic) identities—what Michel Agier (2002: 334) calls “ethnic chessboard”—has been extended by a virtual dimension. As off- and online identities and activities influence each other, the negotiation of identities has become multi-dimensional and more dynamic (Böhme 2023). In line with the ‘digital heterotopias’ (Witteborn 2015), the dystopian character of smartphones and social media must also be emphasized. For one, it is quite expensive to have a smartphone, a computer, and access to the Internet. Like other Kenyans, inhabitants of Kakuma refugee camp have to buy air time and data bundles from providers. Another issue is lack of electricity. Refugees must either buy a connection or use solar and batteries, which is costly. Many people also mentioned the addictive effect of social media with the related side effect of spending too much time and resources online. Refugees are especially vulnerable to fake news and fraud about scholarships, business projects, funds, and migration possibilities due to their desire to escape their situation.

In the following, I exemplify the above points with the cases of two entrepreneurs who are very active on social media. For this I will first go back to Samir, the fashion designer whom I mentioned at the beginning of this article, and then later introduce Rita, another young entrepreneur from Kakuma refugee camp who is a yoga teacher. To make their cases clearer, I will explain how I met them and recount their biographies and daily lives in the camp. This will be related to and contrasted with their activities and practices online. A special focus will be placed on how they use social media to follow their entrepreneurial careers, how they present themselves with a certain image, and which strategies they make use of to expand their networks.

To uncover the part of their lives and practices that is related to ‘beyond suffering’—namely, enactments of the good, joyful, and positive—it is relevant to explore how migrants use social media as a strategy and imaginative practice to envision, plan, and achieve a better life and future beyond the refugee camp (see Bachelet, this issue). This does not mean that Kakuma inhabitants do not suffer online. Certain people and interest groups in the camp do leverage social media to show how they are suffering. They use it to call for help or to report the challenges, problems, and grief they experience. Moreover, social media users suffer if they see the beautiful images of people who have left the camp and have ‘made it’. But in most cases my contacts have used social media to show positive images of themselves; therefore, for this article I will investigate how they display beautiful and happy sides of their present lives. How do they use social media for self-fashioning and giving value and meaning to their lives, and which barriers and challenges do they encounter? How do they deal with the differences and discrepancies between their offline and online selves, between moving on in a difficult present and creatively working on a more prosperous future.

From Tailor to Fashion Designer

I got to know Samir in July 2021 when I went around Kakuma refugee camp with my field assistant Pascal on the back of his motorbike. Pascal enabled me to meet different people in his social network whom he regarded as relevant for my research. We drove on the main road entering the camp in Kakuma and took a right turn after Mogadishu Primary School where Samir's tailoring shop is located. Samir was able to build the shop from his earnings. I was amazed as we walked into a quite large shop made of corrugated iron sheets and wooden poles. His shop did not bear any major signage: just the words 'Samir Fashion Design' were written above the shop entrance, but everybody knew where it was. When entering the shop, one came to a small reception room where the tailor had some of his works and African textiles on display, bright and colorful patterned fabrics from different origins, especially *vitenge* (sing., *kitenge*) from East Africa. There was a small wooden bench for visitors, and two of his workers were seated on the left side of the entrance room. One could see the tailored clothes he has produced on display, including long women's dresses, blouses, bomber jackets, shirts, and suits. Samir, a smartly dressed young man with short dreadlocks, received us with a bright smile. Beyond the entrance, one entered the bigger room where the clothes were produced. There were three or four foot-operated sewing machines, a working table, and a huge cupboard in which thousands of fabrics and materials were stored. He had built the shop tall enough so that wind could pass through the upper roof, which brought some relief to the very hot weather in Kakuma. At the time of my research Samir had three co-workers in his shop: Imani, a young Congolese, Touissaint from Burundi, and Mariam, a female apprentice.

At our first meeting, Samir was happy to receive a visitor from Europe, and after a short introduction we preceded with the first interview. Samir was born in 1997 in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and was 24 years old when we met. His biography shares many features similar to those of other migrants I have met in the camp. He lost his family in the ongoing conflict. In 2013, at the age of 16, when he had just started an apprenticeship as a tailor, he decided to flee from Congo due to war and unrest and came to Kenya seeking refuge. The decision to flee, following a hard and unsafe journey to Kenya, is a major break in people's biographies. When they have made it to Kakuma, they have to register and do interviews with the UNHCR. They are obliged to stay at the camp's reception center, an enclosed prison-like area, before they can find a place to stay and integrate into the camp community. Then people can start a new life, marked by survival practices for the structural conditions of a refugee camp in an environment like northern Kenya. Samir, like others, lived in a shared home-made shelter of iron sheets and wood with very simple means to cook and wash when charcoal and water are

available. Inhabitants have to rely on food rations (some oil, rice, and yellow peas) and collect water from nearby wells. Then there is the heat, sometimes dangerous flooding in the rainy season, malaria and other diseases, scorpions, snakes, and theft or violent conflict in and around the camp. People have now entered a life under highly undesirable conditions where they wait and hope to get out some day. Apart from this struggling present state, people want and are expected to invest in education and work for a possible future that they cannot predict. Samir came to Kakuma refugee camp as a minor and re-entered primary school in the camp. Reconnecting to his talent and calling to tailoring, after school he worked and assisted different tailors to learn the craft. At first, he only sewed school uniforms for children, partly because people thought a young boy would not be able to make good clothes (see also Muensterman 2020: 24). As he told me, he kept on studying and learning until he finished fourth grade of secondary school.

According to what Samir and other people told me, how people got their first mobile phones or smartphones is a major moment in many refugees' lives that they vividly remember. With his first earnings from the tailor shop, Samir was able to buy a smartphone from a local dealer. Unfortunately, this initially got him into trouble as the phone was stolen. He was arrested by the police and held in custody for two days until he could prove that he was not the one who stole the phone. The phone then opened up a whole new world for him, not only for communication and connection, but also in his profession as a tailor. He began using social media, especially Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp status to post pictures of his designs and promote his brand and services for marketing and sales. His Facebook account was 'Samirfashiondesigner', but he soon needed a brand. In 2018 he was able to build his own shop in Kakuma and created his fashion brand Kolakisa, which means to show and teach in Lingala. When business went well, in 2022 Samir could earn 30,000 Kenyan Shillings (around 200 Euros) per month.

On his Instagram account, under his profile, which carries the symbol of his brand Kolakisa, one could see pictures of people wearing his colorful and bright fashions in different settings, be it the simple background of people's homes in the refugee camp to self-made studio backgrounds with white sheets. Images ranged from friends and customers who posted selfies while wearing his fashion to staged doubles with similar designs or a whole group of models. Samir himself was dressed in a blue suit wearing sneakers and sunglasses beside a model wearing his fashions during an event. In all these pictures, the beautiful, colorful designs stood in contrast to the simple or natural background. Interested clients could place their orders online or call him. More importantly, clients who had already bought his fashion posted his designs on their social media channels while mentioning his name. From glamorous self-presentation and network building came

more contacts beyond the camp and abroad, which opened up opportunities to take part in fashion events.

Through his online activities, Samir obtained contact with journalists from abroad, like the editor of the youth magazine *Fluter* of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb) in Germany in 2019, who e-mailed him and asked to write about him in their magazine. In January 2021, one of the editors of 'Für Vielfalt' ('For Diversity') from the Society for Threatened People in Germany contacted Samir via WhatsApp requesting an interview and feature for their magazine (Fischotter 2021). She contacted him after Samir came to her attention through pictures on the Internet. Through social media, he also came into contact with international customers, fashion designers, and researchers. He then received invitations to fashion events in Kenya and abroad. He attended 'Kakuma Beauty for the Border', a competition organized for fashion designers in Kakuma refugee camp and won the award for best designer. Following that, he was invited to Nairobi Fashion Week in 2018 and 2019 and took part in 'Kakuma got Talent 76' where he was awarded Best Designer in Kakuma in 2019 and 2020.

All this gave him hope to leave the camp and not merely dream but invest in the future. His future dreams were to become a famous fashion designer known around the world and more importantly to find a new home and place to live. His biggest dream was to present his own collection on the catwalk of the New York fashion week (Münstermann 2020: 23). His big role model was the late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen, as he told me while showing me McQueen's designs on Instagram. But first, his plan was to open an online shop through which he could market his fashion globally.

Viewing his brand and designs online, he has already become a well-known fashion designer, supported by fashion events he attended in and beyond the camp. However, the possibility and virtual worlds of social media seem to have widened the gap to his reality as an asylum seeker and simple tailor living in a refugee camp. It was a constant rollercoaster, and Samir had to deal with and manage the sometimes suddenly occurring ups and downs. Offline in the camp, he was limited according to restricted resources, equipment, educated co-workers, and lack of regular electricity. Moreover, his customers in the camp did not always have the means to buy his clothes. When he wanted to buy material or take part in fashion events, he had to ask for an allowance from the UNHCR and find the funds for traveling. As a refugee he was not allowed to register his business officially, although the UNHCR praises and supports refugees' entrepreneurial activities and self-reliance.

Despite all these odds, as a young and creative fashion designer Samir is actively countering the conception of the helpless, passive, and poor refugee who has neither the means nor the ability to take part in leisure or beauty. Asked about the meaning of fashion design in a refugee camp, he said, "People

here have fled because of many problems. I think when you wear something which makes you happy, it can take away some of your sorrows ... refugees as well shall feel comfortable and please themselves" (Münstermann 2020: 23).

The example shows the potential of a smartphone as a medium and tool to enter the virtual world of possibilities. The phone enables self-presentation as an imaginative and real practice that can lead to connections and even fame. However, Samir cannot shake off the label of 'refugee fashion designer', which is exploitatively used by humanitarian actors, fashion designers, or people abroad. Every contact with clients outside of the camp, including invitations to fashion events or news features, leads to expectations to improve his situation that are only temporarily met. "What do I gain from an interview?" he once asked me, as he had been called and interviewed so often, but did not see any appreciable change in his life. When his best friend and housemate died suddenly in 2024, he sent me a picture of the two friends from a few years ago with the caption "RIP I lost a brother" and the text "No life here, we are dying young with our dreams." In moments like these, Samir is thrown back to the harsh realities and suffering side of being a refugee in Kenya.

In 2024, Samir moved out of the camp to Nairobi, since the capital offers many more opportunities and access to contacts and events for a fashion designer. As an urban refugee, he must pay for his daily expenses out of his own pocket. As he proudly told me in March 2025, he was invited to the Los Angeles Fashion Week, another big step toward fulfilling his dreams. This means that his future-making online and offline has been successful.

From Refugee to Online Yoga Instructor

Unlike Samir, I got to know Rita first only online as one of the Facebook friends of my first contacts in Kakuma. I was amazed by her social media profile of an always smiling yoga instructor in colorful, shining pictures of different yoga poses. When I first met her in Kakuma, her appearance stood in big contrast to her online images. She received me a bit sick in her home and small shop made of wooden poles and iron sheet. She was dressed in simple clothes with a Rasta knit hat while her twin sister was lying on a mattress on the floor with malaria. She was 29 years old at that time and a single mother of one child.

Rita was born in 1992 in Uganda and raised in Rwanda. With the help of a befriended woman, she fled from Rwanda with her sister at the age of 8. They had to pass through South Sudan and arrived in Kakuma in 2000. Arriving in Kakuma refugee camp, they were taken to the reception center, and the community was informed that they were twin sisters who do not know anybody in the camp. One month later, a man came and claimed that he knew their parents and picked up the girls from the reception center. The supposed uncle

fostered the two girls and educated them from primary up to secondary school. After her secondary school Rita took a diploma in social work and finished an associate in arts.

At the time I met her, Rita was working for the UK-based charity organization Windle Trust as a community mobilizer in the camp, assisting in educational programs for the community while waiting to enroll for her MBA. She recounted to me in vivid detail how she became an offline and online yoga instructor in Kakuma refugee camp, a story that revolved around a rather bad incident involving her mobile phone. As a sporty person, she used to go jogging in the nearby laga, a riverbed near Kakuma town. A couple of boys attacked her and stole her phone. This left her feeling unsafe, so she stopped jogging and restricted herself to rope skipping and dancing at home. Later on, a friend introduced her to a gym at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) compound. While they had to pay 500 Kenyan Shillings (approx. \$5) as a training fee (the same amount for nationals and staff), they were stopped from training later in the day as they would not be allowed to enter the compound after 5:00 PM.

Rita was introduced to her first yoga session by her friend and a former South Sudanese Kakuma resident who had attended yoga training in Nairobi. Although it was hard work and very painful in the beginning, she continued going to the sessions. In 2018, the same friend drew her attention to an African yoga project to which one could apply. In 2019, she was shortlisted for a six-month trial, which included four weeks' yoga training in Nairobi and her first teaching classes, which she gave at the Angelina Jolie Youth Center in the camp. After the probation period, she received a three-year yoga instructor scholarship with a mentor from the US. For the training she undertook in Kakuma, she received 10,000 to 15,000 Kenyan Shillings (\$100 to \$150) in return for proof, through pictures and videos, that she had done the sessions. When Covid-19 broke out, things became difficult. While they advised trainees to teach online, she could not do that due to network problems in the camp:

I used to record my short clip of videos and I go to where the network is a bit strong and post my videos on social media. And through posting videos on social media, that is when I learned that what I was doing, what I am doing right away, was being recognized. So that was when I started receiving calls from people who are like from UNHCR and these NGOs from over here and people from overseas. Like South Africa and US, they started contacting me to have classes with them.

Since then, Rita has given online yoga lessons with participants in South Africa and the US and has been able to earn extra income. For a group class she received \$75, and for a one-on-one class, \$30 per lesson. In 2021, a refugee from Burundi together with a Kenyan lady working in Kakuma founded the initiative Fitgang within which they organize sporting activities that bring

refugees, humanitarian staff, and other people together on a regular basis. They offered dance, fitness, or yoga sessions three days a week at a hall near the local bar as well as hikes and charity walks to surrounding places. Rita was involved as a yoga trainer from the beginning.

Rita used Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp groups to advertise her yoga classes through which she also got in contact with yoga teachers and students abroad. She had her own YouTube channel but preferred Facebook for the quality of the videos. On her social media channels, she predominantly posted about her yoga practices and lessons, events that relate to yoga, as well as sports or refugee-related events. Other posts were about her and her twin sister or posts with religious sayings. One can see Rita or the people she taught dressed in colorful sportswear on mats in typical yoga poses, sometimes as silhouettes staged before a beautiful natural background like a sunset. Other posts show people smiling broadly while acting out the different yoga poses or the groups of people she teaches on their mats. Rita assembled these images and added texts that speak to hope, positive attitude, empowerment, self-esteem, and the future. For example, above several pictures in which one could see a young lady practicing yoga surrounded by a curious crowd in an open space near the refugee camp, she wrote: "Spreading positivity and captivating mental well-being within the displaced community through Yoga practices ... May the light in me shine the light in you."

When I asked her about the role that social media has played for her and her activities she stated:

Yeah, social media helped me to reach out or to make me that famous to the extent that I didn't know that what I was doing as my own personal interest something that my passion drove me to do, has really impacted others through what they see and learned from me.

Although Rita has found a vocation, an income, and a door to further opportunities and future possibilities in the camp community as well as online, she has to fight against prejudice and envious people who dislike her because she is an East African woman and single mother doing yoga:

The one misconception that I heard or the negative perception people always comment on some of my pictures. You know yoga poses are sometimes so exposing. Sometimes they will be like "You will kill your husband one day" like I don't have a husband. Some people will say "Oh, what are you showing your child?" But all those kinds of negative perceptions of what I am receiving from people about my child, my child knows what I'm doing. And sometimes if I go for training to teach people I take him along with me to go and see what I'm doing there. So, I don't want one day when he grows up and starts receiving negative words from people that is like

“Your mommy is like this and that” but I want him to grow up knowing that that is what I have been doing.

The example shows how Rita, despite living in the confined environment of the refugee camp, has used her talent, dreams, and visions of the future to become an entrepreneur and how the Internet and social media have helped her to become a yoga professional. While online, she was able to join a global community of yoga practitioners. Offline, in the community of the camp, she was confronted with prejudice as well as cultural and gender stigma: “If I get negative words on social media I just delete, I delete. No one would leave them. I am always active on social media, maybe you have seen, and when I see negative words, I just delete. To build my portfolio.”

The stories she told me show how she deals with criticism and negativity and actively decided which viewer comments fit into her self-image of a successful yoga instructor, thereby resisting her community’s expectations. In building up her own portfolio, she was deconstructing suffering and replacing it with pleasure and happiness. The example also shows how negative comments did subject her to suffering online, but that these could be edited to fit into her positive self-presentation. Rita still lives in Kakuma, hoping and waiting to get a chance to leave the refugee camp while balancing the phases of offline suffering and online self-idealization.

Conclusion: Social Media and Future-Making

To understand the complexity of migrants’ life-worlds, it is crucial to bring to light how they see themselves and evaluate their situation. As explored in this article, practices of imagination, self-fashioning, optimism, and humor show us how people strive to live a life ‘beyond suffering’.

Smartphones, access to the Internet, and social media play a crucial role here. Migrants who live in remote and restricted places and are limited in rights, freedom, and mobility, like the inhabitants of Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, actively use these media to navigate their hardships, deal with their suffering, and move beyond. Today, through the use of social media, Kakuma inhabitants can build up large transnational networks that can lead to further future possibilities and opportunities.

We can see from these two examples how dreams and imagination as a social practice (Appadurai 1996: 31) become visible and materialize on social media, and how these visualizations affect the dreamer and the ones who fulfill that dream. The dreamer is further motivated to reach the envisaged life but can become despondent if the dream is not realized. Samir and Rita actively engage in ‘future-making’ in their ‘agency in waiting’ and present us their lives

beyond the analytics of suffering. Through social media, they design, create, and produce future visions online that can affect their reality offline. The pictures, videos, and narratives they post change our view of the suffering, faceless masses of migrants and refugees in refugee camps as victims, which we usually see in the media. Even more than most, migrants in Kakuma want to present themselves in a positive and beautiful way with identities beyond their refugee existence.

As Kakuma refugee camp, with its 34 years of existence, has become a town of its own, there are many small-scale businesses and entrepreneurial activities in the camp. Like Samir and Rita, many refugees have built their own businesses based on their talents, education, and what they love to do, achieving a good living in the camp. Online, they can practice and present themselves according to their imagined vision and dreams of a better, freer, and more successful life and actively work toward it.

Through social media, they are able to promote themselves and their work to a global audience and engage with, as well as become integrated into, communities of interest. They use ‘technologically mediated sociality’ (Willson 2012) to manage what is visible (their accomplishments as a yoga trainer or fashion designer, motivation, and strength) and what is invisible (their personal struggles, hardships, daily lives in the camp). Their examples show us that their moralities are influenced by all kinds of lifestyles, discourses, and practices that are characteristic of the refugee camp as a laboratory or playground of humanitarian actors and organizations. Through their work they inadvertently feed into the neoliberal promotion of refugees as self-empowered and self-reliant and become part of a new global form of exploitation in which professionals, public figures, or celebrities, be it from Kenya or the Global North, superficially portray themselves as supporting or working with refugees but without actually changing the refugees’ precarious situation.

In their virtual work, Samir and Rita strongly play to this audience rather than to camp residents. Meanwhile, their offline lives stand in stark contrast to how they present themselves online. Both examples show the difficult relationship between life in the restrictive and immobilizing environment of the refugee camp, in contrast to the freeing power of the imagination (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), in this case the online world. They do in fact mobilize themselves in an immobilized environment. The ‘transnational affective capital’ that Samir and Rita have both created is indeed short-lived if they are only temporarily invited to take part in the life to which they aspire before falling back to being an asylum seeker in Kenya. As ‘virtual migrants’ they live in this ‘connective presence’ (Licoppe 2004), not only between geographical spaces but also temporally, between past and future, and between their two life worlds and the respective identities and emotions that these entail (see Mahar, this issue).

The glossy images of themselves and their work as happy, successful, and confident entrepreneurs does not tell us about the harsh realities they have to live in or about their uncertain future and their life spent waiting for resettlement, job opportunities, or scholarships, which might give them a way out of the camp. They may also suffer on social media through negative comments they receive, when they feel bad about the posts of others, or if problems are so severe that they have to be articulated online too. But in both cases we can see a clear discrepancy between offline suffering and online happiness that is interrelated. While this is true for everybody using social media, the difference here might be larger and is characteristic for a post-migration condition.

Clearly, there are a multitude of contradictions that migrants have to deal with, of being vulnerable and empowered, restricted and free at the same time, resulting from the different practices that migrants participate in offline and online on a local and global level. Through resisting being just a refugee in a refugee camp and actively moving beyond, they engage in a form of ‘mobile commons’ as described by Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013). Social media can be a window and portal to a world to which one is not physically connected. It can bring chances and opportunities as well as dangers like fraud and hate speech for its users. But these two cases also show the dystopian character of social media. Samir and Rita are both connected to customers, fans, and supporters but still live marginalized in the refugee camp. Compared to other residents, they are empowered but are still excluded from freedom, mobility, and the life and work they aspire to have. Social media shows us the ‘beyond suffering’ of migrants’ lives, and we can see how people living in the constrained environment of a refugee camp see themselves and want to be seen.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank all the people I have worked with in Kakuma refugee camp and beyond who were willing to share their experiences with me. Special thanks go to Rita and Samir, whose cases are presented here at length. Thanks also to Pascal Zigashane and Abubakar Rugamba, who assisted me in fieldwork. Research was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), project no. 422709975.

Claudia Böhme is a cultural anthropologist with expertise in new media practices and migration and a regional focus on East Africa and Germany. Currently an independent scholar, she has done research and published widely on the video film industry in Tanzania and on the role of social media for refugees in Kenya in relation to trust and future. In Germany she has done participant observation in asylum homes and advised on the introduction of a complaint management system for asylum seekers. She has lately been working at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media in Braunschweig, where she participated and observed digital making and coding activities in educational ecosystems for children and young people in Germany. ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-1717-0028. E-mail: claudiaboehme77@gmail.com

Notes

1. Since my two principal contacts, Samir and Rita, are entrepreneurs who depend on publicity and public outreach and who wish to widen their social and professional networks, I have opted against anonymization. They have agreed to use their real first names and social media account names.
2. According to the International Organization for Migration, a migrant is defined as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is” (IOM 2019). This definition encompasses intra- and interregional border crossing and intercontinental as well as international migration. I will use the term ‘(transnational) migrant’ if referring more generally to people on the move. The term ‘refugee’ will be used if I refer to people who are registered as refugees or regard themselves as refugees, or if they use the term for political reasons.
3. Bamba Chakula (“Get your food” in Sheng, a Swahili slang) was established by the UN World Food Programme in Kenya in 2015 to gradually replace the in-kind assistance of food to cash assistance and introduce an electronic cash transfer and e-voucher system for selected food suppliers and refugees to collect part of their food rations.
4. The UNHCR website, Kakuma Girls, a “Welcome to Kakuma Refugee Camp” YouTube video by FilmAid, the Kakuma News Reflector kanere.org, the online education project “Kakuma Project” and several sites and chatrooms on Facebook, including Kakuma, Project Kakuma, Kakuma Kenya, Kakuma, Kakuma R-camp K-town, two sites called Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kakuma Refugee Secondary School, and Refugee Flag Kenya.

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