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Political participation of refugee and host community youths: epistemic resistance through artistic and participatory spaces

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ABSTRACT

The political participation of youth is growing in importance with the proliferation of youth parliaments, councils, and online campaigning. Yet, these sites are not accessible to all youth, especially those from minority, or refugee communities. Activism by these types of youth is often denounced or reduced to dehumanising narratives of their experiences. This paper aims to explore alternative spaces for and political participation of refugees through participatory art and exhibition spaces, which are critical for devising policies for pre-emptive peacebuilding and challenging potential intercommunal conflict. In this paper, we draw on a Photovoice project in Istanbul, Johannesburg and a refugee settlement in South-West Uganda (Oruchinga) that brought youth from FDPs and host communities together to reflect on their everyday experiences. All these sites are marked by increasing anti-refugee sentiments and xenophobia, where the voices of refugees are often denied and misinterpreted, making them compelling cases to elaborate on alternative participation methods and spaces for the political participation of refugees. The paper engages with the idea of epistemic (in)justice and resistance as an overarching condition to explore how the youth developed collective political voices.

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Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the question of how Photovoice, as a form of participatory arts, can address epistemic injustices faced by refugees and host community youth by enabling theirpolitical participation. While the concept of youth participation has been

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subject to conceptual ambiguity (Thies 2010; Erkman and Amnå 2012), it is generally understood as 'a process in which children and young people engage in activities and decision-making which concern and affect their lives as individuals and as a group' (Bečević and Dahlstedt 2022, 363). Since the 1940s, youth participation literature has grown with an evolving understanding of political involvement, which now includes both conventional and unconventional forms, with former following established norms such as voting and campaigning while the latter, emerged in the 1970s, operate outside formal institutions, such as protests, rejection and social movements, extending the definition of political participation to all citizen efforts aimed at influencing government (Van Deth 2001). In the 1990s, political participation expanded to include civil activities like volunteering, extending beyond just governmental activities to involve other institutions (Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley 2004; Van Deth 2001). Importantly, political participation is frequently conflated with civic engagement. While the latter represents a more comprehensive concept that encompasses a wide range of citizen behaviours, irrespective of their political nature (Daskalopoulou 2018; Flanagan 2013), the former encompasses activities that focus on the governmental process, politics, and the state (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014).

More recently,new forms of political participation emerged that utilise non-political actions to express political views which triggers a distinction between institutionalised (like voting or party membership) and non-institutionalised participation (like protesting or boycotting). This distinction is crucial in youth participation as youth often lean towards non-institutionalised methods (García-Albacete 2014; Weiss 2020). Our research focuses on youth political participation, a non-institutionalised form, involving community engagement to voice concerns, influence authority, challenge power relations, and change narratives (Finn, Williams, and Momani 2022). We aim to explore how Photovoice can enhance participation and empower youth in political processes, addressing epistemic injustices. This deliberate focus on youth is justified by empirical evidence showcasing that youth is less knowledgeable and interested in politics (Walther et al. 2020), have lower political engagement, like limited party membership and voting, exhibit less trust in political elites (Cross and Young 2008; Quintelier 2007; Quintelier and Hooghe 2011) creating academic debate on 'youth participation deficit' (Loncle et al. 2012) or 'non-participation' (Weiss 2020). However, others note that youth are politically active in non-institutionalised forms (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017). Youth develop a sense of belonging in schools and community organisations, nurture their political skills (Flanagan 2013; Wray-Lake 2019) and their engagement in arts and clubs boost their political involvement (Obradović and Masten 2007). Likewise, models like youth labs, youth boards, learning and co-design spaces, and participatory research foster participation (Cortesi, Hasse, and Gasser 2021) whilst they are being empowered to challenge power dynamics, nurture themselves as agents of change in politically challenging environments through arts and heritage-based civic engagement (Mkwananzi, Cin, and Marovah 2023). We conceptualise youth as an intricate blend of social and historical contexts. Defined not just by age, youth carries normative attributes that encompass societal views on young individuals of varied genders—how they are treated, perceived and de/valued in society. Our prevailing perspective on youth portrays them as potential political catalysts with the power to both disrupt and reshape societal norms (López-Fogués and Cin 2017).

While youth participation is considered as a critical aspect of democracy, it is also contested due to the marginalisation of people on the basis of gender, ethnicity, race, and age. There are some spaces for youth participation such as youth parliaments and councils (Kuah 2022; Shephard and Patrikios 2013), public forums (Zihnioglu 2019) or online campaigning (Henn and Foard 2014). However, there is a growing criticism that these political spaces are rather limited due to the domination of adult and androcentric conceptions (Wood 2012). They also limit less trained voices (Kwon 2019; Young 2002), such as youth from immigrant, ethnic minorities, low-income backgrounds, as well as refugees and youth from forcefully displaced populations (Mikola and Mansouri 2015; Olivius 2017; Van Liempt and Kox 2023). Several factors can lead to such exclusion. Firstly, refugee youth lack legal recognition and are excluded from formal political processes. Negative naratives can also undermine refugees' political activism, portraying them as ungrateful (Moulin 2012). Secondly, intermediaries like civil society and humanitarian actors may overshadow refugees' voices with their own organisational narratives (Sigona 2014). Efforts to politically empower refugees can inadvertently bolster stereotypes rather than enhance their genuine voices. Third, the scarcity of safe spaces for refugee youth to engage politically, exacerbated by rising nationalism and xenophobia, limits public expression, making political involvement risky (Nicholls 2013). Involving refugee youth, a population that encounters greater constraints when it comes to political participation, allows us to investigate the potential of Photovoice as a tool for facilitating epistemic resistance.

Building their capacity as political and social actors have the incommensurable good of contributing to ongoing peace initiatives, particularly in contexts marked by intercommunal tensions and conflict (Chaskin, McGregor, and Brady 2018; Cin et al. 2021). Inspired by the possibility of addressing communal conflict, this paper explores the political participation of refugee and host community youth drawing on the concepts of epistemic justice -participation in the meaning making- and epistemic resistance -struggle for recognition of the everyday experiences of refugees. We conceptualise epistemic resistance as a form of political participation exhibited by young individuals, characterised by deliberate actions undertaken with the objective of influencing the decisions and conduct of government officials (Verba and Nie 1972) in pursuit of attaining epistemic justice. The empirical data is drawn from a Photovoice project across three of the world's largest refugee hosting sites, Istanbul, Johannesburg and a refugee settlement in South-West Uganda. While all these cases are marked with growing anti-refugee sentiment and xenophobia in recent years, they differ in terms of legal and political opportunities offered to FDPs, making them compelling cases to elaborate on alternative spaces for the political participation of refugees, such as epistemic resistance through Photovoice, to correct epistemic injustices whilst providing policymakers with concrete insights to focus on challenging potential intercommunal conflict.

We show that, despite differences across three sites, Photovoice, a participatory art tool, provides a safe space for marginalised communities like refugee youth to engage in epistemic resistance, fostering their unique expressions and political subjectivities. It creates political subjects with a sense of solidarity at a grassroots level to develop a collective voice, making them more participatory and representative (Mkwananzi, Cin, and Marovah 2021). However, empowering vulnerable groups is not without challenges, and the paper critically reflects on some of the contradictions, conflicts and tensions that

arose during the Photovoice project in response to refugee youth trying to articulate their needs and engage in epistemic resistance. Building on youth civic (Barber 2007; Mirra and Garcia 2017; Taylor and McKeown 2017) and political participation literature (Ataci 2022; Bee 2021), we investigate the role of Photovoicein facilitating refugee and host community youth participation, analysing through the lens of epistemic justice and resistance. Our research highlights three findings: i) the pivotal role and potential pitfalls of exhibition spaces in amplifying youth voices; ii) the need for politically-sensitive design of participatory methodologies; and iii) the importance of building alliances between marginalised and powerful community actors. Our arguments unfold in three sections: first, we present a conceptual framework of epistemic justice and resistance in protracted crises. Second, we discuss methodology, including research sites, participants, and ethical concerns. Lastly, we explore the potential of artistic forms in public deliberation and political participation, and how well exhibition spaces can accommodate these voices.

Epistemic justice and resistance in protracted crisis

In this research, we draw on two intersecting concepts of epistemic (in)justice and epistemic resistance to think through political participation in a wider protracted crisis context in which refugees are situated, and these concepts offer a critical lens to analyse the process and outcomes of the Photovoice project. We showcase the ways in which the youth developed epistemic resistance by drawing on the work of Miranda Fricker (2007) and Jose Medina (2013) on epistemic (in)justice, exploring the power and ethics of knowing along with the discussions of the legitimacy of knowledge and knower.

Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as a form of wrong-doing that denies individuals their rightful place as knowers and owners of their experiences. This injustice takes two forms: testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when someone's credibility and knowledge are undermined due to prejudice and bias based on factors such as race, class, or gender. The person may be devalued, considered incompetent, and their contributions to society or a community may be dismissed or disregarded. Their legitimate knowledge and expertise are not recognised. On the other hand, hermeneutic injustice relates to the intelligibility of marginalised groups' experiences. It happens when the experiences of oppressed groups are misunderstood, ignored, or not acknowledged. For example, women's experiences of sexual harassment may be invalidated or disregarded. These forms of injustice reinforce existing inequalities and impact individuals' epistemic relationships with themselves, affecting their confidence and self-reliance (Medina 2013). Refugees and marginalised communities often experience these injustices, further perpetuating the inequalities they face. Host communities may view refugees as lacking credibility, leading to humiliation, exclusion, and a sense of being unwanted. This undermines their confidence, trust, and their ability to contribute to society or knowledge. The systematic mistreatment and distortion of their experiences in everyday interactions manifest as epistemic injustices.

Epistemic resistance, on the other hand, is an intertwined concept of epistemic (in)justice. It requires the use of 'epistemic resources and abilities to undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive–affective functioning that sustains those structures' (Medina 2013, 3), but also sits at the centre of a

democratic temperament and a perfectionist struggle toward political inclusiveness. Where there is an epistemic injustice, there is also epistemic resistance (Pohlhaus 2017). This resistance is an imperfect, morally binding obligation of the oppressed and the (host) communities because the dominant public discourse or ideologies can exclude those living under oppression from speaking for themselves. However, hegemonic discursive standpoints that lead to marginalisation cannot be resisted only by the subordinated bodies but also from within, those who constitute a privileged position in society (Medina 2013). This allyship may have heterogeneous forms and practices of resistance, which could posit different outcomes. Some of them could lead to sustainable change by unsettling the structure of oppression through critical interventions, whereas others may not ameliorate the hermeneutical climate. Therefore, Medina (2013) argues that this collective responsibility to resist should be contextualised because the ways in which epistemic injustices affect or shape our lives are always relational. There is always a historical-relational mediation of how socio-political inequalities and power dynamics impinge on different oppressed groups and the epistemic trajectories of exclusion and inclusion.

In this paper, epistemic justice and resistance conceptually form a unique framework through which we explore the potential of Photovoice as a form of participatory art and epistemic resource in opening up spaces of expression and political participation, constructing heterogeneous publics that can recognise the voices of the refugees. Despite voice being integral to both the method and addressing epistemic injustice, it is crucial to recognise where participants' voice is promoted, heard, and becomes a political act. We are interested in the formation and articulation of voice as a process in enabling the refugees to enter public deliberation on issues that concern them. Latz (2017, 142) encapsulates this when she states that 'the presentation phase creates a space where the political agenda is placed at the forefront'. Thus, voice involves multiple interactions, interpretations, and representations across various exhibition spaces; it can reshape public spaces, transform communicative attitudes, or ignite tensions. However, a political voice may not be cohesive, uncontested, or representative, and it may not navigate effectively across different political spaces and audiences. This dissonant aspect of voice is central to both epistemic justice and resistance as it can disrupt the status quo, inspire the marginalised to break their silence, but also potentially further perpetuate hermeneutical injustices.

Photovoice: a participatory art for political engagement

Photovoice employs photography as a medium through which participants can convey their lived experiences – concerns, needs, feelings and wishes to find solutions to the problems of their community and influence policymakers and the government. Using a series of prompts to guide participants based on research themes, the artefacts (photographs) produced are intended to give rich visual representation and insight into the subjective realities of the community lives not easily conveyed. It has three main goals: documenting community concerns and strengths, stimulating critical dialogue on key issues, and engaging policymakers (Wang and Burris 1997). Viewing these goals through a political lens, Photovoice aims to enable people to understand pressing issues they face and then to critically engage and construct this knowledge into

collective group narratives to be intentionally presented to those actors with the power to facilitate and assist transformation. While these indicate that Photovoice facilitates political participation of communities, Liebenberg (2018) cautions that the process, social networks, partnerships, and participant engagement can critically impact the ability to catalyse socio-political change.

Method and research sites

The use of this method in our research serves the purpose of establishing an alternative space for political participation among refugees and host communities with the aim of addressing and rectifying prevalent epistemic injustices while fostering the development of epistemic resistance. To undertake a comprehensive analysis, we employ a comparative case study approach across three countries: South Africa, Turkey, and Uganda. Our selection of these cases is based on the 'method of agreement', also conceptualised as the 'most different systems design' (Przeworski and Teune 1970) and 'the most different with the same outcome' (see Bennett 2004, 30). Photovoice was used in multi-stage settings to illustrate its potential for creating alternative emancipatory voices.

This choice is driven by the recognition that Turkey, South Africa, and Uganda are major refugee hosting countries with varied policy approaches and sociopolitical contexts, but also share a common experience of increasing discrimination and xenophobia. For instance, Turkey has implemented an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, providing them with access to essential services such as healthcare and education at no cost. On the other hand, conditions in South Africa are less favourable. The research was conducted during a period characterised by violent xenophobic attacks, which primarily targeted refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants in cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town. Immigrants without proper documentation often find themselves without access to health services and employment opportunities. In Uganda, our research specifically focused on the Oruchinga settlement situated in the Isingiro District of Southwestern Uganda, near the Uganda-Tanzania border. Uganda hosts refugees primarily from South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Often viewed as an ideal host country for refugees due to its open policies, Uganda provides a small plot of land for resettlement to newcomers. However, this approach has led to the clustering of refugees in specific areas, sparking conflicts between displaced persons and host communities. With minimal government intervention, these communities are entwined in mutual poverty. Through our deliberate selection of these three distinct cases, we explore how Photovoice can foster youth political participation and epistemic resistance in different geographical and socio-economic contexts, specifically contrasting the vibrant urban settings of Istanbul and Johannesburg with the rural landscapes of Uganda. Our analysis relies on 66 interviews with refugees and host community youth, NGOs and exhibition visitors conducted by an interdisciplinary team of 8 researchers/academics/practitioners in South Africa, Turkey, the UK, and Uganda (breakdown of participants provided in Table 1).

Our participatory action research involved small groups of participants due to the intense interaction and dialogue necessary for co-production. To avoid imposing power dynamics, we reshaped the research process based on participant feedback during pre-engagement workshops with local NGOs. These workshops spanned nine months and

Table 1. Participant information.

Research Sites	South Africa: Johannesburg	Uganda: Oruchinga settlement located in Isingiro District	Turkey: Istanbul
Total number of participants: 38	10	16	12
Participant profile: ages from 18 to 25	5 refugees (from DRC and Zimbabwe) and 5 from host community youth	8 refugees (from Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda) and 8 host community youth Diversity in languages spoken: Two of the participants acted as interpreters of Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, and English	6 refugees (Syrian) and 6 host community youth
Gender composition	3 females and 2 males from each community	4 males 4 females from each community	2 males 4 females fromeach community
NGO interviews	2	2	2
Visitor interviews	11	Not taken for safety reasons	11
Exhibition Space	Closed exhibition spaceby invitationonlydue to xenophobic attacks at the time of research	Closed exhibition by invitation in refugee camp for security reasons	Public Exhibition in Hünkar Kasrı, located in Eminönü, opening to Grand Bazaar and adjacent to 'New Mosque' (Yeni Camii)

included introduction meetings, photo and ethical training, outdoor photography sessions, and reflection meetings. Participants were paired with a refugee and a youth from the host community for fieldwork, which involved photo shooting. They were asked to select five photos for display in formal art exhibitions organised across three sites. Additionally, they developed brief narratives to elucidate their chosen photos. This was done to amplify the visibility of the art, and it was a means of giving the participants a political voice to raise their concerns and engage in epistemic resistance through political participation. This process has enabled a vibrant and safe environment for participants to engage in meaningful political participation so that they could change their agendas to accommodate their priorities whilst allowing us, as researchers, to tailor the research design to fit the specific needs of the participants and create a non-hierarchical research environment.

We considered three key factors. First, we employed youth aged between 18 and 25 as differences in intergenerational understandings and interpretations of social and political issues are universal. Secondly, to counter the male dominance in research spaces and address women's underrepresentation, we made a concerted effort to involve more young women. Lastly, we acknowledged the social and cultural capital of refugees and host communities in each location, noting factors like education and rural/urban divide. We conducted exit interviews after each exhibition with the youth and our NGO partners in addition to notetaking during the workshops. This was followed by random interviewing of visitors in each exhibition space-with the exception of Uganda, for security reasons. The interview breakdown is detailed in Table 1.

We had to make some minor amendments to our research design. In South Africa, the exhibition had a strong turnout with local and international academics, politicians, ambassadors, artists, press members, friends, family, and participants. Participants stayed throughout the exhibition, providing context to the photos and engaging with the public. In Turkey, participants in the photography and ethics training

developed a close bond and a sense of community. They decided to do fieldwork and take group photos in different parts of Istanbul for two weeks instead of working in pairs. The exhibition attracted visitors from the media, civil society, policymakers, educators, academics, municipalities, the public, and tourists. The participants were present at the exhibition to interact with the audience. In Uganda, where research was conducted in the Oruchinga settlement hosting refugees from Burundi, the DRC, and Rwanda, smartphones were used instead of cameras due to sensitivity issues. The community exhibition took place at the settlement base camp and was attended by the settlement commandant, officials from NGOs and international organisations, and refugee leaders.

In our case studies, we explore how exhibition spaces facilitated political participation. The following two sections examine the design process of photo narratives and engaging with the audience, reflecting on the challenges of navigating tensions and the political climate during the exhibitions. These discussions highlight the complex nature of utilising exhibition spaces for political engagement.

Photovoice exhibitions: spaces for multi-sited political participation

There are two reasons why we focus on exhibition spaces in this paper. First, youth conceived these spaces as platforms of epistemic resistance and seeking epistemic justice to express their voices to subvert negative narratives and dominant hierarchies. Their primary concern was to create an 'invited space' for political participation and a 'space within the research community where passion and rigour boldly intersect out in the open.' (Leavy 2020, 21). Secondly, exhibition spaces offer the youth a unique opportunity to engage with communities and the public. However, previous research often overlooks the complexities and tensions that arise when the youth occupy political voices in these spaces, reducing them to mere displays of final products. By examining youth interactions and experiences in exhibitions, we explore how they navigate asymmetrical power relations and carve out a tangible space for themselves.

The potential of photovoice for epistemic justice relies heavily on the selection of exhibition spaces that enable meaningful political engagement between refugee and host community youth. However, our research revealed that the specific socio-political contexts of each setting played an equally significant role. The spaces that refugees occupy are very distinct, and the place, audience and nature of exhibition spaces were governed by the 'living politics of the city' (or the site) (Rossi 2013). These dynamics shaped everyday acts of resistance related to political agendas. Given the social and political backdrop of our research, choosing the appropriate exhibition space and audience involved critical decision-making. Factors such as ensuring refugee safety and avoiding potential conflicts were carefully considered when determining the optimal space and target audience for youth outreach and engagement. Participants viewed the exhibition space as a means to reflect and convey a narrative of peace-making between the two communities, representing a collective political voice. This means that the selection of the exhibition spaces was part of epistemic resistance, as participants used this choice as an opportunity to deconstruct and modify oppressive normative structures (see Medina 2013, 3). By presenting their artifacts to the public, they aimed to occupy

public space and convey their messages. This involved presenting a narrative that incorporated both individual and collective values to an unfamiliar space, which could potentially cause disruptions. However, it's important to note that exhibition spaces are not devoid of tensions, resistance, and conflict. Below, we discuss these challenges and epistemic resistance in exhibition spaces across three sites.

Challenges and epistemic resistance in exhibition spaces in three sites

Discussions in Uganda focused on determining an exhibition space that would accommodate all key stakeholders involved in addressing social and economic issues within the settlement. Youth, NGOs, and researchers considered this a central concern. As we were situated in a camp settlement, the aim was to provide the youth with a platform to express the challenges they face daily. The primary target audience they sought to engage with consisted of decision-makers, humanitarian workers, and camp leaders, rather than the general public. While the exhibition offers a space of epistemic resistance, enabling political engagement, what this event demonstrated is how the politically charged nature of these spaces can simultaneously create pushback and resistance. The passionate narratives youth conveyed around the photographs illustrated a lack of access to education, employment, and safe access to drinking water. These narratives were not new per se to the humanitarian workers in the room, but Photovoice is intended to express participant needs through a lens of their own worldview to policymakers with the hope of instigating change. It also addresses hermeneutical injustice by preventing refugee experiences in falling the conceptual blank gaps using the power of images.

Medina (2013) highlights the simultaneous use of epistemic resistance by both oppressed groups and host community youth, viewing it as a moral obligation. However, power imbalances significantly influenced the extent of epistemic resistance. This was because humanitarian and NGO worker responses to the images did not affirm the youth's plight or encourage a commitment to action. The questions raised after the exhibition focused more on the project and the researchers rather than the messages articulated by the youth. The audience was challenging on a technical front, arguing that the quality and aesthetics of the images were not 'good enough'. This diverted attention away from the intended messages of the photovoice artifacts, perpetuating testimonial injustices. Furthermore, there was a strong interest in the outcomes of the project, particularly regarding where and to whom the images would be displayed outside of the settlement. The line of questioning demonstrated a significant disregard for the youth and the collective agenda they had formulated and brought into the exhibition space, which was unexpected. Two youth representatives later shared their perspective on this issue.

> They [humanitarian workers] said they have never known these bad things before. That is a lie, they work here, the place is small, they know exactly where the problems are' (DRC refugee, male, 23)

> They are worried because they think you (researchers) will use the photos to show they are not doing their work (Burundi Refugee, male, 22).

These testimonials reveal that, instead of fostering support, the exhibition of the photographs unintentionally provoked counter resistance and stereotyping. The images were

perceived as intrusive and threatening, which was an unexpected tension for us as researchers. To address the situation, we engaged with camp leaders and argued that the platform aimed to stimulate a debate on improving refugee livelihoods, rather than assigning blame to anyone or any institution. This example highlights the importance of carefully considering and navigating the politics of exhibition. Empowered voices can only engage and be heard to a certain extent if the audience is unwilling or unable to listen, perceiving the discourse as a challenge to their dominance and vested interests. It shows that testimonial injustice is not easy to dismantle as the credibility deficit facing refugees remained unaltered. Rather than addressing testimonial injustice as a whole, the exhibition space and the political engagement it fostered allowed us as researchers to recognise how other people understand the experiences of marginalised communities and relate to them.

In the context of Turkey, the exhibition space served as a multifaceted arena, evoking attention, hope, interest, entanglement, and narrative imagination. It became a public project, resonating with diverse emotions embraced by the audience. The youth particularly asked for a central exhibition space that could be easily accessible to the public. Unlike the refugees in Uganda, their primary objective was to engage with the local Turkish community, as they share public spaces but often experience limited interaction due to xenophobia. Their aim was to disrupt the socially, spatially, and politically segregated public space. The exhibition took place in an old Ottoman Pavilion located in Eminönü, a highly central area of Istanbul visited by millions of residents and tourists. Unlike Uganda, the Istanbul exhibition faced less contention, with participants reaching a consensus that the chosen space was ideal for effectively communicating the persistent epistemic injustices faced by the youth, especially refugee youth, to the broader public.

In Turkey, the communication of epistemic injustices was more pronounced compared to Uganda. The youth actively engaged with the public, leading to emotional exchanges and discussions during the exhibitions. These interactions primarily revolved around questioning and challenging the visual stereotypes perpetuated by the media regarding refugees. Through their photographs and narratives, the youth focused on portraying spaces and moments of joy and peace, deliberately countering the prevailing depiction of despair and agony often found in tabloids and visual media. One refugee in particular exemplified epistemic resistance by actively engaging with locals, aiming to change the prevailing image of Syrian refugees in the minds of the public:

> People often envision Syrian refugees as the boat people who are trying to cross the Western Europe or helpless victims. They think we do not have any qualifications and education so some of them were amazed that I took these photographs. Some could not believe that I was a refugee because I can speak Turkish fluently, like a native speaker. This exhibition, the photographs we have taken with Turkish youth and the interaction space here indeed challenged it today and showed how we have different ways of expressing ourselves, being part of the community and we are resilient conscientious residents of Istanbul who aspire peace within and beyond our communities (Syrian refugee, female, 20)

This interview clearly illustrates that the participant perceives her political participation as successful. It highlights an important aspect of hermeneutical injustice, which stems from the belief that dominant groups will not comprehend the experiences of marginalised communities, making communication seem unnecessary. Yet, photographs addressed this gap better than words and extended discussions and opened a space for addressing

testimonial injustice as the refugee youth captured an opportunity to participate in meaning making by actively communicating with visitors.

The refugee and host community youth also gave interviews to national press media during the exhibition's opening day in Istanbul. Their motivation was rooted in a collective epistemic resistance, aiming to diversify the experiences of refugee youth and disrupt dominant narratives that foster unwelcoming attitudes towards refugees in the public sphere. The interviews reflected their unity and commitment to promoting peace, transcending the significance of identities that segregate them as 'Syrians' or 'Turks'. We also conducted interviews with exhibition visitors, who acknowledged the engagement between the refugee and host communities in the composition of photos and the process of storytelling, demonstrating a responsive and empathetic connection with the participants. These reflections highlight a unique form of epistemic resistance that involves not only oppressed groups but also the host communities, emphasising the commitment of participants to their moral obligations. One visitor noted that:

> Their rightful claim to lead a life with dignity involves a lot of resilience because we are exposed to different stories in the media. This exhibition, the interactions I had with refugees and Turkish youth is particularly useful in changing the stories that dominate among the public opinion if circulated and advocated widely (Exhibition Visitor, Istanbul).

In South Africa, the exhibition coincided with a critical period marked by xenophobic attacks against refugees and undocumented migrants, especially in Johannesburg. Consequently, refugees encountered distorted narratives, misrecognition of their experiences, and significant hermeneutical injustices. During our discussions with youth and NGOs, the safety of refugees emerged as a paramount concern, leading to the unintentional silencing of other important issues they wished to highlight. While an open exhibition facilitated greater political participation and addressed testimonial injustices, the refugees expressed a preference for a closed exhibition space, limited to a select audience of pro-migration individuals, particularly influential decision-makers. There was a consensus among everyone that holding this exhibition at a public museum or space would pose safety concerns for them but also restrict their freedom to articulate their stories.

The exhibition in South Africa was held in a secure space, specifically an exhibition room within a hotel. The youth were safely transported to the venue by the university and NGO workers. The exhibition attracted high-profile visitors, including ambassadors, high commissioners, policymakers, researchers, academics working on migration in Johannesburg universities, representatives from various migration and refugee groups, and NGOs. This exclusive and controlled space, comprising key decision-makers, practitioners, and refugees, fostered a more interactive and secure environment that encouraged refugees to openly share their experiences. Unlike Istanbul, where the exhibition was open to the public, and diverse voices regarding the perception of refugees were present, the South African space provided a pro-migration atmosphere and political alignment. Consequently, the participants did not need to actively display epistemic resistance as the youth in Istanbul and Oruchinga did. However, this did not mean that this space was artificial for crafting political participation. To compensate for the limited public participation, the press invited to the exhibition conducted interviews with both participants and the project team, disseminating the key messages from the exhibition despite the prevailing hostile anti-refugee sentiment at the time. On the other hand, many visitors

who attended South Africa exhibitions highlighted that the conventional forms of participation and spaces of interaction could obscure the complexity of experiences and distort the realities. Particularly, one of the ambassadors in the exhibition noted that forums or councils that invite refugees to speak about their experiences indeed reproduce injustices through the imposition of power hierarchies which do not sensitise the audience about the hermeneutical and testimonial injustice in everyday practice or create a space of resistance to contest the dominating stories and open new fronts. On the other hand, one of the Zimbabwean refugees reflected:

> At first, I felt intimated by the existence of policy makers, I never thought they would make it here. This is the dilemma we face as refugees. We want to speak the officials but then feel uncomfortable speaking to them due to power hierarchies. In the end, I think as youth our message was clear (Zimbabwean refugee, male, 19).

What we observe here is the difficulty in challenging power imbalances, even within artistic forms of public discourse. The contestatory politics, while fostering epistemic resistance, does not guarantee the expression of every voice. In the next section, we will argue how unequal power relations resulted in the censorship of certain voices.

Unheard voices of exhibition spaces

The photos displayed a unique form of agency created photographically, visually presenting the complexities of being a part of a wider community, embodied subjectivity and disrupted the notion of refugees as disembodied actors. However, the growing body of work on the relational becoming of co-production in participatory arts focuses on the critical and reflexive analysis of power dynamics (e.g. Groot et al. 2019), negotiation of the meaning across different co-researchers (Philips et al. 2021), and giving the responsibility to the communities to allow them to present their experiences through locatedness, gender, race, and class, and helping them form a political alliance to deconstruct structural challenges (Mkwanazi and Cin 2021).

Throughout our research, the issue of power relations and imbalances emerged prominently. Despite the intention of creating a public space that welcomes every voice, certain voices and identities were filtered out and unable to represent their concerns. This exclusion was influenced by both the fragility of public space and the power dynamics that suppressed refugee voices. One notable example involved a youth who captured a photo of a veiled Syrian woman with a rainbow flag from behind during Istanbul LGBT Pride 2019. The group engaged in discussions about whether to display this photo, with a conservative Syrian participant expressing opposition, citing it as contrary to Islamic values. However, the final decision not to exhibit the photo was made by the authorities responsible for the exhibition spaces, underscoring the impact of power dynamics. The authorities justified their decision by stating that the exhibition space was adjacent to a historic mosque, and they feared a potential public reaction. This means that the decision taken by the majority of the participants - the dominant group - lacked intersectional perspective. Despite the exhibition space being chosen for its openness to the public, it inadvertently silenced the epistemic resistance of more marginalied participants, reinforcing exclusion. In essence, for the participant who took the photo, all three goals of photovoice—documenting and reflecting concerns, promoting critical dialogue, and engaging with policymakers ((Wang and Burris 1997, 171) —were absent.

The discussion surrounding the removal of this particular photograph evoked disappointment among some of the youth, especially the individual who took the photo to showcase the reconciliation of different ideas and peaceful coexistence. However, we faced a choice between hosting a closed exhibition similar to Uganda and South Africa, where the photo could be displayed, or censoring the photo to proceed with a public exhibition. Ultimately, the majority of the youth reluctantly decided to exclude the photo in order to reach a larger audience through a public exhibition. They acknowledged that the photo could be displayed in the exhibitions held in South Africa and Uganda. This kind of power imbalance impacting the display of the photos was beyond the control of researchers and NGOs. The political climate in Turkey, with the emergence of an anti-gender movement, posed limitations on exhibiting such a photo in open public spaces. This was a constraint we had to consider in our decision-making process.

The inability to present this particular photo highlighted the intricate nature of social and political processes and spaces in Istanbul, that, simultaneously, both welcomed and suppressed different identities. The youth often navigated between the temporality of this space and time as they documented their shifting identities through different means of political participation (e.g. conventional space of taking the streets for pride and using arts to reach different audiences). Some of the youth expressed their desire for a more inclusive public space that could embrace and accommodate diverse identities. Such a space would have allowed for addressing testimonial injustices and creating an environment where the credibility of every voice is acknowledged and heard.

The political sensitivities of censoring photographs for the exhibition also manifested itself slightly differently in the Ugandan context. The project is intended to exhibit in three separate spaces. The ambition in each case was the same, to provide space for the youth voices to be heard and, hopefully, provoke change. Given that many refugees struggle to find employment or have enough to sustain themselves and their families, as well as increasing pressure on the limited resources of the government as well as the international community (Ahimbisibwe 2018), the youths' images and accompanying narratives played into these tension as they, simultaneously, capture the visceral nature of the hardships of everyday life, juxtaposed against photographs conveying unity and cooperation. There was potential in the youths' voices to reify the dominant discourse, which could unsettle and confront the intended audience. However, the political dynamics and contextual factors specific to the exhibition sites presented the research team with difficult decisions and ethical dilemmas. There was a genuine risk that unfiltered access to the photographs could provoke resistance and backlash against the youth, necessitating the responsibility to safeguard them. This led to the question of how to edit the photographs and youth messages while preserving the integrity of their voices. Therefore, like Istanbul, we, as the researchers and NGO representatives and the youth faced a power inequality that we could not confront and control.

On the other hand, the exhibition space in South Africa did not face such complexities in terms of who could be heard. It served as a home for displaying photos that could not be exhibited in Istanbul and Oruchinga. However, the limited and closed nature of the exhibition hindered the reach of some voices to a wider public. This was an epistemic

injustice, reflecting the broader social and political climate at the time, with rising anti-refugee sentiment and violence on the streets for over a month. It exemplified the creation of power hierarchies between influential actors in public spaces and those with less power to challenge these imbalances. As researchers and NGO workers, our role was to create safe spaces and ensure that the narratives and stories conveyed through photographs and exhibition spaces as platforms for 'guarded civic engagement' in order to overcome epistemic obstacles and distortions resulting from oppression and marginalisation.

These tensions, compromises, and compensations shed light on the complex dynamics of politicising refugee voices, which can simultaneously depoliticise them and perpetuate hermeneutical and testimonial injustices. It implicates the imperfect role of creating artistic forms of deliberation (Mkwananzi, Cin, and Marovah 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that the broader political and social contexts in which these deliberations occur ultimately hold the power to determine which voices are included and shared. Consequently, despite capturing the immense heterogeneity within refugee communities, we were unable to effectively convey this diversity to a wider public audience.

Conclusion

This research explores how Photovoice establishes an artistic space for addressing the epistemic injustice of self-representation and offers an alternative to institutionalised forms of youth political participation. The multifaceted nature of the research also encompassed diverse geographical landscapes and examined the urban/rural divide, revealing intriguing findings. There is a notable correlation across different contexts, highlighting the 'glocal' nature of the epistemic injustices experienced by refugee youth. These injustices evoke similar concerns regardless of the specific location, demonstrating a global and local sentiment. The use of creative modes to stimulate political participation, while exhibiting nuanced differences, largely yields comparable results. These methods effectively bridge the gap between youth and the public sphere, giving rise to nuanced forms of resistance. These outcomes support the overarching hypothesis that the intersection of youth, creativity, and political participation transcends regional boundaries, fostering a shared experience of resistance against epistemic injustice among refugee youth.

Our study concludes with two key arguments, framed within the context of epistemic injustice and resistance, which highlight the inherent connection between instances of injustice and subsequent acts of opposition. Firstly, the exhibition spaces served as crucial platforms for the youth to develop their individual and collective epistemic agency. This shows that unconventional forms of political participation can take the form of art-basedand peaceful resistance (Van Deth 2001), thus debunking the notion that marginalised individuals lack agency due to lack of recognition (Bierria 2014). These spaces became arenas for expressing unheard political agendas, but also safe spaces for refugee youth (Nicholls 2013). However, as our findings demonstrate, the choices surrounding the location, timing, and audience of the exhibitions significantly influenced the experience of political participation. It became apparent that the exhibition spaces were not always accessible to refugees, and the voices of the youth were

suppressed by powerful institutional narratives and actors. This additional layer of insight shed light on the epistemic inequalities and struggles faced by young people in gaining recognition for their voices. Thus, these exhibition spaces became crucial sites for challenging and countering epistemic injustice, acting as strongholds of resistance against such inequities.

Particularly, the literature suggests that the use of creative forms of political participation can make youth feel more confident (Weiss 2020). By expressing themselves through non-institutionalised methods, they often feel better heard. This is particularly so for marginalised youth, such as refugees and our research shows that the ways they have engaged with the wider public indeed do challenge the narrative of 'youth participation deficit' (Loncle et al. 2012) or 'non-participation' (Weiss 2020). However, employing such methods requires careful consideration of political landscape, as unexamined assumptions and limited perspectives affect marginalised youth's ability to articulate their voices or risk confronting powerful actors and dominant narratives who will disengage, resist or close political space.

Secondly, the collective epistemic resistance formed through non-institutionalised forms of participation (Earl, Maher, and Elliott 2017) demonstrated by marginalised participants involves forming alliances with non-oppressed individuals to amplify their voices and expand their agency within social and political networks (Finn, Williams, and Momani 2022). These alliances and the creation of alternative spaces for counter-narratives built their capacity as political and social actors (Chaskin, McGregor, and Brady 2018), and teased out the potential of creative platforms in fostering a shared sense of resistance across diverse geographical landscapes among youth who have been long denied any form of political participation.

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Data Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and it's potential re-use, data underpinning this publication cannot be made openly available.

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