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Capitalising on Crisis & Hope: Emigration & Social Media Ad Targeting in Lebanon

Sacha Robehmed

White and red colours and the maple leaf shape jumped off the screen, demanding attention. “Immigrate to Canada!” exclaimed the ad, with smaller text holding promises to help me secure residency. The image vying for my attention as I scrolled through my Facebook timeline was official and bureaucratic-looking, with serious fonts but no guarantees, and no mention of the cost.

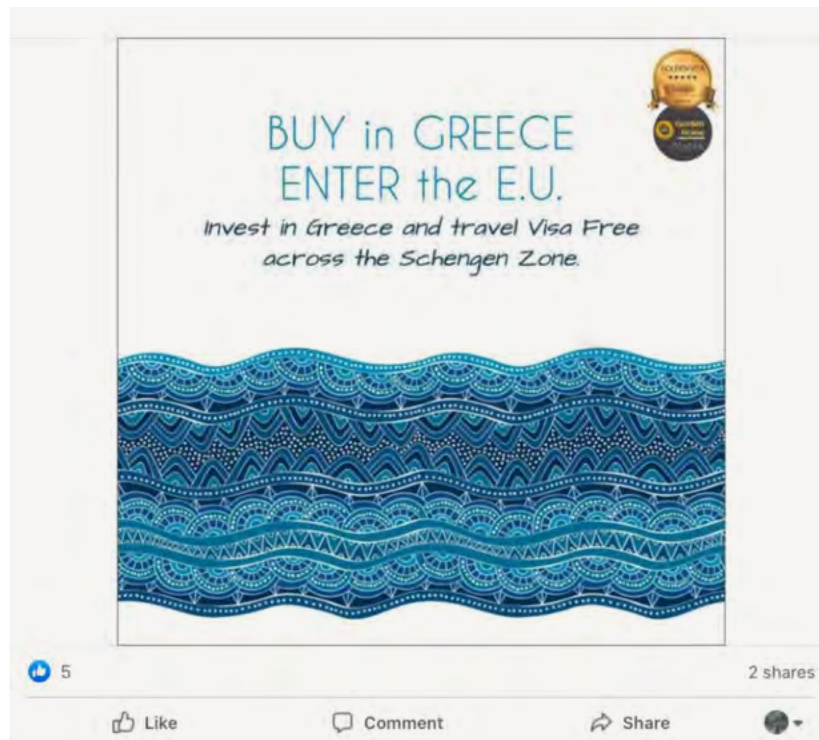
And it was just one of many targeted adverts I’d see every day. I’m not sure exactly when they first appeared. Maybe it was during Lebanon’s nationwide anti-government protests which started in earnest in October 2019. At the time, I was living in Tripoli, the northern Lebanese port city which Tripolitans called “محرومة” (*deprived*) long before the country’s economic collapse, and which became known as “عروس الثورة” (*bride of the revolution*) for its active role in the uprising. When I wasn’t joining Tripoli’s daily 4 p.m. march of university students and activists, I’d obsessively scroll through videos of demonstrations happening across the country. People were euphoric, and the protests at times were more like massive street parties. But sometimes they became violent and scary, with rubber and live bullets fired by the army or private bodyguards of government ministers.

"Tripoli" by Nadim Kobeissi, is licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0. (1).

"Invest in property for a golden visa in Greece!" called out another ad in my timeline. It showed how idyllic life could be, in a whitewashed villa on a green hilltop by the calm Mediterranean blue sea and sky. A five-year residency visa, mine for the taking—for a minimum investment of 250,000 Euros, plus taxes.

Perhaps these targeted adverts started appearing in my Facebook and Instagram timelines in 2020, when the optimism of the protests was replaced by a pervasive sense of increasing desperation as the economic crisis worsened. Or maybe the ads had been there for a while, and I just scrolled past unaware, not seeing them until they jarred against the reality of daily life during an economic collapse in a failing state. Possibly it was my work creating digital products, and past experience putting together Facebook ads targeting displaced people, that brought the ads—and the humans behind them—to life.

Regardless of when they first appeared, I increasingly found myself noticing and being angry at these ads that offered hope for a different kind of life away from Lebanon, but for a price that was becoming ever out of reach for most people.



By 2020, the value of the local currency, the lira, had plummeted, precipitated by decades of government and central bank fiscal mismanagement and corruption. Prices for basic foods were higher every time I went grocery shopping; the power cuts, common even before the economic crisis, lengthened. I stopped bothering to wait at the bank for the monthly 300 dollar allowance I was permitted to withdraw from my account under the capital controls; the steel-padded branches which had been reinforced after protests targeting banks were shut due to COVID, then they'd run out of dollars anyway. Memes and online jokes dryly commented that Lebanon was determined to be number one in the world ... at inflation. Radio programs which had not long ago blasted revolutionary songs and encouraged people to take to the streets were instead filled with WhatsApp voice notes and calls, mostly from women telling heartbreaking stories of sick loved ones and their bleak financial situations, sharing their phone numbers for listeners to support them with food and medicine.

In Tripoli, boats left from the port, as people on board tried to make it to Cyprus. If they survived the trip they were sent back. It felt like every day a new brain drain statistic was discussed: the 20%, 30%, 40% of young people now leaving for opportunities abroad.

Then, the horror of the August 4th port explosion, which shattered Beirut. Scrolling through my timeline I couldn't help but watch videos: the initial fire seen from a window in one neighbourhood, a balcony in another. The moment it hits and the camera shakes and blurry humans in the images scramble, grab their kids, move away from windows. The shattered glass. The giant orange mushroom cloud as seen from a fishing boat in the sea, and a thousand angles from the city, all over social media.

"You can't put a price on your family's safety." In the months after the port explosion, when we learned that those in power had known about the dangerous storage of ammonium nitrate in the Beirut port and done nothing, when we saw no accountability for corruption, I was scrolling through Instagram and paused at these words of a sponsored post. It was another golden visa ad, another idyllic Mediterranean scene, calm and peaceful, but with new text laid over the image. The message was clear. The visa, the new passport, the job, the safety, the kind of life you want, that you'd started to imagine in the demonstrations of 2019, the hope for a future—all of that was still possible, but outside. (And for a fee, of course.)

These ads commodified hope and capitalised on crisis. But this wasn't invented in the social media age. That hope has echoed across time and other crises and waves of migration: the hope parents had of raising their children away from Lebanon's civil war of 1975 to 1990, like my father did; of pursuing economic opportunities in the Gulf, Brazil, Venezuela, Nigeria, or the Ivory Coast, as my grandmother's relatives did; of surviving the mobilisation of Ottoman forces known as "Safar Barlik" and the horrific famine from 1915 to 1918, as my grandfather did as a teenager, migrating before Lebanon was even a state. I'm a literal product of migration, wouldn't exist without it. So I can understand that desire to move toward hope, and life, and a future elsewhere, and to leave a country besieged by misfortune for opportunity in a new place. It's a story as old as time.

These histories of movement and migration, promises of hope fueled by crises, are not unique to Lebanon. Across the global south echo similar dreams of leaving for more lucrative work, more opportunities, a better life. They're advertised on roadside billboards in Kathmandu, as bold all caps text on A4 posters pasted to telegraph poles in Nairobi—and also online in local languages, targeted to users. Social media ads spin the same narrative of hope, offer the same dream we've seen across time and places, but in a format updated for the 21st century: digitised and mediated by an algorithm.

It was this algorithmic aspect I was curious about. The more I noticed the ads, the more I wondered: Why was I seeing these adverts? What did the Facebook algorithm know about me that made me a target? What data—something about my profile, or an action I took online or offline—led to me seeing this ad?

A few years before, I worked on a Facebook ad campaign. We used social media ads for outreach and engagement, letting people in Iraq know about a service which helped displaced people reconnect with missing loved ones. The ads had a call to action to register for the service. I dove into the world of social media advertising, learning about cost-per-click. The most effective way to run social media ads was to define the target audience as much as possible. We experimented with different visuals and text for the ads, trying to find the right content for each audience "segment." We created different target audiences, refining by governorate, age, and gender, and tailoring the content of the ads to be more appealing to, say, women in their 60s. There was a list of interests and behaviours we could narrow down by (though at that time these were less well developed for global south audiences than they would have been for Facebook users in the US). Suggested interests included general categories like family, relationships, food, hobbies, but it was also possible to target any specific interest, like "migration," simply by typing it in the search bar. We tried out targeting the ads according to behaviours such as the types and brands of mobile devices people were using, or travel patterns including "people currently traveling" or "people who returned from a trip two weeks ago."

Then there was the creation of "Lookalike Audiences," an algorithmically generated target group based on the profiles of an existing user group. By using a tracking pixel on our organisation's website, Facebook would be able to target ads to a larger group of people which had similar traits to that initial group who had interacted with the website—and the pixel. A professional marketer has estimated that "if you go to a website ... 99 percent of the time it has a Facebook pixel."[2] In fact, Electronic Frontier Foundation research from 2019 found that "Facebook has pixels or other cookie-sharing code on about 30% of the top 10,000 sites on the web."[3] (It's worth noting that both these stats are likely focused on the US. While many top websites in the US are also likely to be top sites in the global south, such as Google Search or YouTube, there are also going to be more local-specific sites that are popular, such as local news sites or local companies, which would not have been covered by the research cited.)

With this background, I could not help but wonder at the human behind the tech, the social media marketer creating ads for the businesses offering immigration

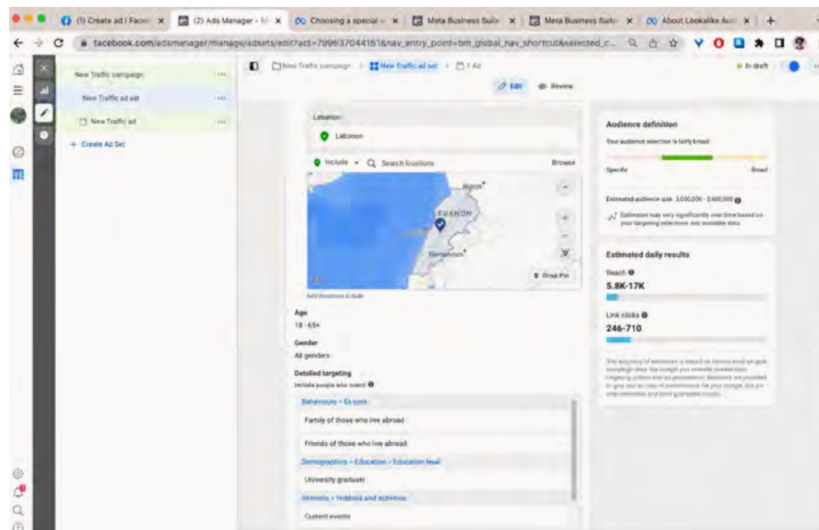
services. What were they thinking and doing to target their ads and optimise their cost-per-click that found me?

I imagined them opening up Facebook Ad Manager, clicking “Create Ad,” and then “Audience.”

Maybe they entered a location: “people living in Lebanon.”

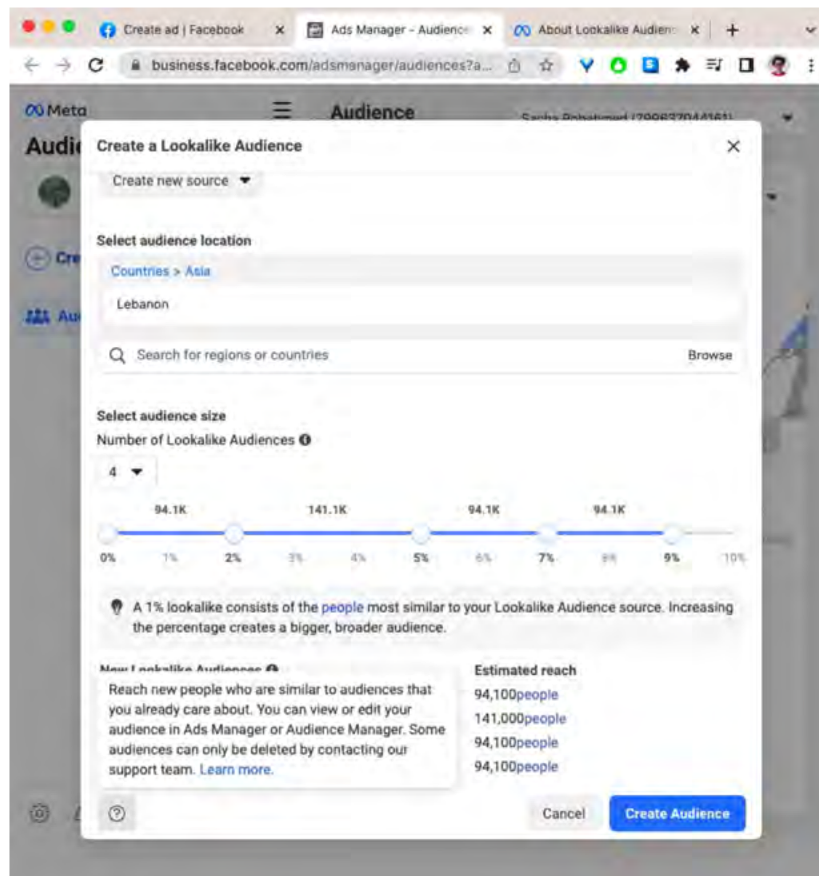
Or more likely a combination of demographics:

“people living in Lebanon; aged 18 to 40; education level: university.”



Or maybe they targeted the ads by interests and behaviours, keywords like “Canada,” “Greece,” “migration.” Maybe it was because I had liked a friend’s picture in Canada, and Instagram pictures of a friend’s lockdown stay in Kefalonia, Greece. Or perhaps it was being part of a migration research network group, or because I followed a Facebook page for work in 2016, where Syrians crossing the Mediterranean would share information.

Or did they create their own “Lookalike Audience”? I thought of everything I’d done online that might have left a cookie crumb trail picked up by Facebook pixels on web pages across the internet. Perhaps I was targeted for those searches for visa information for my partner, or browsing sites about civil marriage in Cyprus. I thought of the conversations we had had about finding somewhere to settle down and one day raise a family, the related websites we had looked at. All the times I’d turned to internet searches to find the information I needed to map out my future. Was this what Facebook had captured, and which was now reflected back by the ad algorithm and the audience segmentation of a social media marketer somewhere?



And just how personal was the targeting? Seeing these golden visa ads in Lebanon, where each day the news seemed to get worse, underscored the injustice and humiliation people were living through. I even bleakly wondered if it was this context

triggering the ads I saw daily. Perhaps the ads were targeted at those who had shown support online for the protests, by liking pages or sharing posts expressing frustrations. On the other hand, maybe they weren't so personalised at all, and instead targeted everyone in the country living through the economic collapse.

So maybe it was something in my data and online actions, information I'd willingly or unintentionally shared, or perhaps simply where I was located, that had led to my categorisation as a target for immigration and golden visa adverts. But what the algorithm didn't know is that I didn't actually *need* the opportunity that was being sold. I was fortunate to already have it. Thanks to my dad migrating in the 1970s during the civil war and meeting my (British) mum, I have the opportunity to travel easily by virtue of having a second "better" passport. With a master's degree and relatively well-paying work, I could afford to do so. I had the means and the ability to leave and build a new home outside of Lebanon. Without clicking on those immigration ads, I left Lebanon in February 2021.

But if the algorithm was seeing an inaccurate image of me, who else was being read and misread by the algorithmic gaze? Lebanon is a country of 5 million people and in 2019 about 78% used Facebook, 45% Instagram.[4] I thought about who else was seeing these adverts, and what they made of them—especially if they were more discriminated against due to their travel documents and immigration status, or didn't have the hundreds of thousands of euros needed to buy the golden visa, the one that would "keep their family safe."

I thought of the hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. Previously paid about 300 to 400 US dollars a month, most migrant domestic workers were now getting ever diminishing monthly salaries in devaluing Lebanese pounds—if their employers were even paying them at all, blaming the economic collapse and COVID-19. In the summer of 2020, employers were leaving women from Ethiopia at the embassy, without a return ticket home while they were not able to afford one, owed months in back salary. Were migrant workers also receiving the same emigration ads as me?

I wondered about my Syrian neighbours—the caretaker of the building I lived in, his wife, and their three little girls mesmerised watching children's songs on YouTube on their parents' phones—did they see these ads? About a million Syrian refugees live in Lebanon, and the routes to asylum or refugee resettlement abroad seem more unlikely than ever with the war in its eleventh year. And there are 450,000 Palestinian refugees in the country, most born in Lebanon since 1948, but granted a travel document and not a passport, and discriminated against in many ways. Facing

more travel restrictions, and greater likelihood of visa rejections, were Syrians and Palestinians seeing the same emigration ads that I was? As Facebook and Instagram users, did we fall into the same audience that the ads targeted? In trying to label and categorise users by location, age, gender, behaviour and interests, the algorithm might have misread political realities: namely that the imagined hopeful futures of the emigration ads are not equally available to everyone.

But perhaps Syrians and Palestinians were seeing other ads, with a different angle. In the summer of 2019, already present government xenophobia escalated further, with the Ministry of Labor enforcing a policy requiring all noncitizens to pay for work permits. This was widely seen as a way to force Syrians to return to Syria, but it also affected Palestinians, who called for general strikes in many of Lebanon's Palestinian neighbourhoods and camps.[5] I remember driving along the highway at that time, appalled at seeing a billboard pasted with the Ministry of Labor logo and some slogan about *jobs for Lebanese*—blatant racism disguised as nationalism. If the Ministry of Labor rolled out a physical media campaign, somehow, it doesn't feel like too much of a stretch to imagine the ministry buying online ads for its xenophobic labour policy.

When we see ads on billboards or in other physical formats, we know other people around us are experiencing them too. But online, and mediated by the algorithm, we do not know exactly what others are seeing, if they are being shown the same adverts as we are, or not. Who else comprised the "target audience" for the ads I kept seeing in my social media newsfeeds? Were others seeing the same ads capitalising on crisis and hope?

And if they were seeing the same ads, what did they do and how did they feel? Maybe they ignored them, scrolling past, the ads commodifying hope simply disappearing in a blur of timeline content competing for attention? Or had they paused to read them, maybe even click through?

I wondered about those unknown thousands—likely millions—of other people. Did the ads make them as angry as they made me?

Each ad was a cruel digital reminder of the deepening crisis, offering the tantalising hope of a better future elsewhere. Yet few people seeing them would likely have the means to take these safe emigration escape routes.

Sacha Robehmed is a design researcher focused on technologies in humanitarian contexts. Through her research, she develops rights-based and inclusive digital services, policies, and strategies, working with refugee communities and civil society organizations. She was based in north Lebanon until 2021.

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Endnotes

(1) Nadim Kobeissi. "Tripoli." November 2, 2019. Photo. https://www.flickr.com/photos/nadimkobeissi/49005962122/.

(2) Mae Rice. “What is a Lookalike Audience and How Can You Leverage It.” *builtin* (blog), July 13, 2021. https://builtin.com/marketing/lookalike-audiences.

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