

Bachelor thesis:

Social media usage among refugees

A tool for integration?

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1. Abstract

With this research I have investigated whether social media is a tool for Syrian refugees which could benefit them in their integration process in their host country. The meaning of integration is something that is heavily disputed among scholars and in the media. The concept can be defined as a one way process of assimilation or as a two way process where the refugees are allowed to keep their own identity. The different factors that could contribute to the integration process of the Syrian refugees were observed to be influenced by their respective social media usage. The literature shows that social media can affect the integration process of refugees both positively and negatively. My qualitative data reveals that the Syrian refugees do use social media as a tool for most of the factors that can contribute to their integration into their new host society. These factors range from language skills to obtaining the cultural knowledge as well as maintaining social connections.

2. Introduction

As long as we can remember migration has been a thriving factor shaping societies all around the globe. For several reasons people, sometimes forcefully, decide to migrate to another country. The process of migrating can be tough and adapting to a new society requires certain skills. People from different cultural backgrounds come together in a society and the question is what happens? Some politicians grant space to a multi-cultural way of living, while others prefer to talk about integration. Integration into a more or less mono-cultural society. How do people obtain the skills to integrate into a new society? And what are these skills that are needed? With this research I have investigated what role social media plays in the integration process of refugees. The problems that come along with integration are diverse and social media could play a role in tackling these problems. Whether that is about apps that help learning the language or applications where refugees can contact people from the host society, could social media possibly provide a tool for them to acquire the social capital that is needed to advance their integration process? Or, on the other hand, could social media cause refugees to fall in an online trap? Social media does bring risks along like scams and remoteness. Furthermore has loneliness and depression been linked with a lot of online activity (Primack, 2017). We do know that differences among social media usage exist. Younger people are more likely to make use of social media and they have been found to value online friends more. Older people on the other hand were shown to make more use of the traditional ways of obtaining and maintaining their social contacts (Bolton, 2013).

Scientific and societal relevance

Most research that has been conducted on the relevance of social media on integration has been done about migrants, that is to say economic migrants, that came from countries culturally more or less comparable to the Netherlands. Not much research has been done on the social media usage of refugees that came from countries further away and from a different cultural background. The aim of this research is to learn how Syrian refugees use or do not use their social media skills to obtain the social capital that could help them with their integration process. Social capital includes but is not limited to the ability to make new contacts, integrate into a new community and obtain the social skills to bridge gaps between

the newcomer and the native citizen from the host country. Syrian refugees are the largest group of refugees that has arrived in The Netherlands since 2015 (vluchtelingenwerk, 2018). No research has been done yet, to specify how social media can contribute to the integration process of this specific group of Syrian refugees in The Netherlands. Therefore this research is scientifically relevant. By analysing the concepts, the existing literature and holding interviews with Syrian refugees I have researched how social media does or does not contribute to the process of integration among the Syrian refugees.

3. Research background

With this research I want to examine the following research question: ‘How does social media make an impact on the integration process of Syrian refugees in the host country?’

With this research question I have investigated to what extent social media applications have an impact on the ‘integration process’ of Syrian refugees in their host country, in this case The Netherlands.

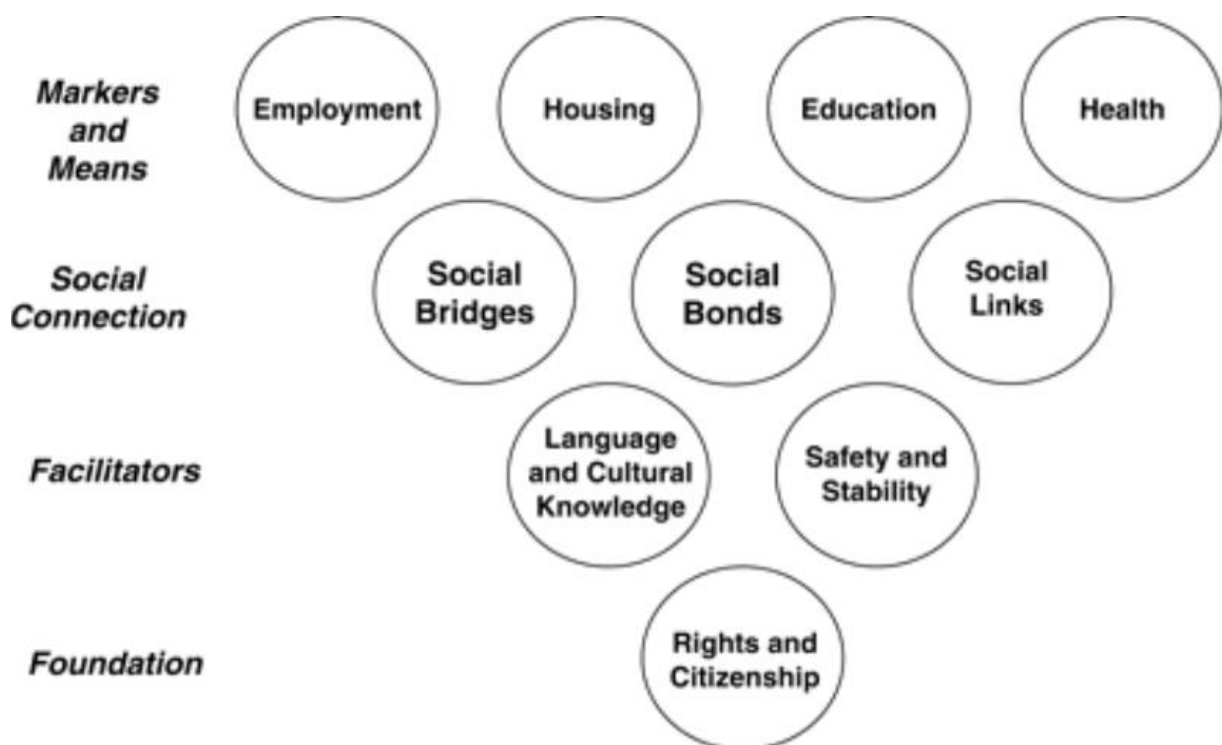
RQ: How does social media make an impact on the integration process of Syrian refugees in the host country?

In the Netherlands a variety of migrants can be found. For the purpose of this study three categories are identified. People that are still waiting for their status to be determined. People that did not get a status of ‘refugee’ and will have to go back, and people that got their status and are allowed to stay. With my research I concentrated exclusively on the last group since these are the people that are going to stay here and according to Dutch government policy need to be integrated into Dutch society (Coalition Agreement 4.6 Integration, 2017). Since these people obtained their status they are referred to as refugees (UNHCR).

When scholars talk about integration, different, rather comprehensive definitions can be found. Favell argues that integration is a two way process where the newcomer as well as the native citizen of the host society are expected to take steps to come to one another. (Favell, 2010). Other scholars such as Da Lomba argue that integration is a one way process where the goal of integration is to insert the newcomer into an existing entity (Da Lomba,

2010). This entity would be a society bounded by a nation state. The newcomer is expected to adapt to the new society accordingly.

Ager and Strang, like Favell, highlight the importance to characterise integration as a two way process (Ager & Strang, 2004). This means that integration is not expected to only come from the side of the newcomer. Also the native citizen is ought to take initiatives to get in touch with the newcomer in the society. The conceptualisation of integration is thus heavily disputed among scholars. How one wants to analyse integration depends also, firstly, on the conceptualisation of integration and, secondly, on the characteristics one attaches to the concept. The social capital needed to integrate requires connecting skills. Social bonds play an important role here, to connect with a new community via social bridges and intra-community integration are valued of high importance (Ager & Strang, 2008).



(Ager & Strang, 2008)

Integration can be divided into four main categories according to Ager and Strang. Markets and means, social connections, facilitators and foundation. For my research it is particularly interesting to see how social media impacts the facilitators and the social connection

categories that ultimately enables the refugees to integrate into the four domains of integration: employment, housing, education and health.

While scholars such as Ager & Strang and Favell highlight the importance of seeing integration as a two way process, scholars such as Da Lomba argue the contrary and say 'Integration can be seen as a one way process'. According to Da Lomba that includes the following categories: Means and markets, Social connections-networks, Facilitators such as language and cultural knowledge and Foundation and citizenship, such as political engagement and participation in the community'(Da Lomba, 2010.) A facilitator such as language could, according to McGregor and Siegel, play an important role in the integration process. Online programs that provide language training for example could be an important tool for young migrants in their integration process (McGregor and Siegel, 2013). According to Isaksson & Omeiche (2013) the language plays a crucial role in the integration process as it enables them to be in contact with the native citizens as well as to participate in the society. So skills needed for integration, such as language skills but also connection skills, can be acquired in various ways. This research aims at finding out how social media contributes to this phenomenon.

3.1 Literature background on social media and integration

A comprehensive field of scholars have examined questions on whether social media influences the behaviour of refugees and also research has been done on the effects of social media usage on the integration process with scholars noting different kinds of results. Both a positive and a negative correlation was found in the work of the researchers.

It was observed that many refugees do use social media for social purposes and to gain bonding and bridging capital. Facebook groups were shown to be an important factor in this process according to Alencar (Alencar, 2017). She argues that Facebook groups have been helpful for refugees for their integration into the labour market. Almost all refugees made use of one particular Facebook group that was created to help refugees to integrate into the labour market. It would be interesting to discover if this is a local initiative or something that represents the wider share of refugees. Furthermore, in her research, Alencar notes that a possible existing knowledge gap between the refugee and the host society could be bridged with the help of social media. In this regard, Dekker and Engbersen argue that social media

could enable migrants to gain new knowledge concerning rights, citizenship and local migrant support services (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

Dekker and Engbersen add that solitude among migrants can be overcome because on the internet information in their native language can be found about the new cultural phenomenon in their host countries. In their research it is also shown that some migrants use social media to contact other migrants living in the host society. Getting into contact with each other often means important exchange on the new cultural challenges the migrants are facing. Migrants are also shown to use social media to interact with native citizens from the host society (Elias and Lemish 2009) (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Sawyer and Chen also explain how migrants use social media to stay in touch with the home country as well. So not only does social media help migrants in gaining bonding and bridging capital to connect to their new society, also does it enable them to stay in touch with their family and friends at home (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

Does social media and online behaviour then also bring a risk along? Could the strong ties to the home country occur as an obstacle to make new contacts in the new country? Komito talks more about these kind of negative effects of social media on integration. Komito indeed argues that because of social media the incentive to make new friends in the real world is lower (Komito, 2011). Online friends are soon considered to be as important and valuable as possible friends in real life. Therefore the migrant could potentially feel less of a need to make new friends in the real world, this incentive would then be slowed down. That view is shared by Brekke who adds that refugees are not dependent on finding friends anymore when they already have friends on the internet that they regard just as valuable as the people they meet in real life (Brekke, 2008).

4. Research hypothesis

Having highlighted the importance and relevance of the research that has been done by different scholars of the topic, I have identified two working hypothesis. According to the literature and preliminary conversation with the supervisors from the refugee centre I presume that social media most likely plays an important role in the life of refugees. According to the supervisors of the refugee centre most refugees are in possession of a

smartphone, laptop or any other device that has an internet connection. The social bonding and bridging capital that would be acquired through the means of social media is very much present throughout the literature review (McGregor & Siegel, 2013) and a first working hypothesis would be that this will be the case too. With these social connection mechanisms the refugees are also in possession of the tools that could provide them with crucial knowledge for their integration process. Therefore my first hypothesis is that the refugees benefit from social media with regards to integration since it enables them to connect, acquire social capital and gain linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. These characteristics have been found important factors of integration.

H1: Social media enables refugees with tools that could help them in their integration process.

My second working hypothesis marks an emphasis on the negative consequences social media could potentially have. As Komito argues, social media could take away the incentive to make new friends in the 'real world' as people tend to consider online friends just as valuable as real friends (Komito, 2011). As the incentive to make real friends disappears the risk of loneliness increases. Moreover, keeping in contact with the home country via social media could take away more of this incentive (Brekke, 2008). It is argued that this decreases the motivation for refugees to make new friends in the host country as they do feel a strong sense of belonging to their friends and family back home. Therefore a second working hypothesis would be that refugees do not use social media as a tool for their integration process. Much rather would they use it to keep in touch with the home country and friends they already have, taking away the incentive to make new friends.

H2: Social media takes away the incentive among refugees to make new connections in the 'real world', therefore not advancing the process of integration.

5. Research design and methodology

After having analysed the literature, I conclude that to best answer the research question, this research will focus on five different but interconnected topics. First of all, the topic of integration will be examined. The literature shows that there are different ways of

conceptualising integration, but how do the Syrian refugees view their integration process? Secondly, the importance of the knowledge of the refugees about The Netherlands, the Dutch culture and the Dutch 'norms and values' will be addressed, did social media contribute to these characteristics? Thirdly, the importance of the language is highlighted in the literature and it has been further examined in the interviews whether social media could play an advancing role here. Fourthly, the importance of obtaining the social capital needed to integrate and how social media can contribute here has been investigated and, lastly, the integration into the labour market has been researched as another important factor of integration.

Taking into account the aim of the research, which is collecting data from refugees on how they view integration and how they possibly use social media as a tool for integration, means it is best to hold interviews with the refugees to be able to understand the sentiment from their perspective.

Holding interviews is a qualitative method of study and is better suited for this research. I chose to hold unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews are designed in a way where the researcher does not ask questions like it is a survey, but much rather should the interview look like an informal conversation where the refugee feels at ease to share his/her experiences. At any point it should be clear that any data on their social media usage is relevant for my research, therefore the answers the refugees would give should not be limited to very strict questions asked by the researcher. Rather should the questions be as open as possible. The qualitative data of the six in depth interviews I hold will be conducted in the refugee centre in Almelo in accordance with the COA (Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers). The interviews have been done 'one on one' to avoid any feelings of intimidation or social pressure to give a so called 'socially desirable' answer. Giving socially desirable answers is a phenomenon that can occur when the interviewee feels pressured to give a desirable answer rather than telling the truth. By holding one on one interviews the outside pressures are lower and with this method the response bias is kept low. No interpreter will be present as the COA indicated the Syrian refugees have a sufficient knowledge of English or Dutch to conduct the interviews without an interpreter. Moreover, without an interpreter the interviewer can better understand the emotions of the refugee.

With the approval of the refugees, the interviews were recorded and have been transcribed and added in the appendix.

To get meaningful data from the refugees, a representative group of six refugees has been composed that shall be suitable and representative for the interview. Younger as well as relatively older refugees need to be interviewed to identify any possible age gap. Could it be that younger refugees use social media for other purposes than older refugees? According to Chen differences can be expected here (Chen, 2012). The educational background, the age and the gender all affects the social media use according to him. I also want to find out whether men and women use social media for different purposes. However, it should be noted that the number of male refugees that arrived in The Netherlands since 2015 is considerably larger than the number of female refugees (Central Agency for Statistics, 2015). Therefore a sample of five males and one female was chosen for this research. The ages of the participants vary between twenty one and fifty two. This group of participants is representable for the larger group of Syrian refugees in The Netherlands, as data from the Central Agency for Statistics shows. Refugees in general spend a lot of time on social media because they simply have a lot of free time (Alencar, 2017). Therefore it is interesting to interview this group of people about their social media usage.

Questions I have asked to the refugees focussed around the theme of integration. What do they think of integration? Do they think it is necessary to 'integrate' into their new society? How do they see their own integration process? And do they make use of social media to advance this process? The questions have been as open as possible and the refugees were encouraged to speak freely as this would widen the perspective of the researcher. The interviews lasted about thirty to forty five minutes for the researcher to be able to get a clear understanding of the perspective of the refugee.

The data retrieved from the interviews with the refugees was then analysed by using discourse analysis. Discourse means expressing oneself by using words ((McGregor (2010:2)). By analysing the discourse that was observed in the interviews with the refugees I can get a good understanding of the sentiment the refugees have towards integration and how they could possibly use social media as tool that can advance this process. Discourse analysis is a method which 'aims at equipping us with a higher awareness of the hidden motivations and underlying power structures and, therefore, enable us to solve concrete problems. It will not

provide absolute answers to a specific problem, but it enables us to understand the conditions behind a specific problem and make us realise that the essence of that problem and its resolution lie in its assumptions, the way it is being phrased. It can be applied to any text, that is, to any problem or situation' (Mogashoa, 2014). In other words, discourse analysis enables us to understand the leading thread running through the interview. 'The object of discourse analysis is to uncover the ideological assumptions that are hidden in the worlds of our written text or oral speech in order to resist and that we are exercising power over unbeknownst to use. It aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes' (McGregor 2010:4). To give meaning to the interviews and the perspectives of the refugees towards integration, discourse analysis is thus the most convenient way for analysing the data since it captures the sentiment hidden in the answers of the refugees.

A limitation of this research could be the fact that only refugees were interviewed that mastered either the English or the Dutch language. Most refugees at the refugee centre spoke just Arabic. These refugees were not interviewed since no interpreter was present. The refugees that are able to speak Dutch or English might be a group of refugees that is higher educated and more likely and willing to integrate into the Dutch society. Especially being able to speak Dutch is a sign of willingness to integrate. Having only interviewed this group of refugees could mean the research is slightly limited and by analysing the data one should therefore take this into account. The data of the interviews can be found in the appendix

6. Analysis

To formulate an answer to the research question: 'How does social media make an impact on the integration process of Syrian refugees in The Netherlands?' this section has been dedicated to carefully analyse the interviews held at the refugee centre in Almelo with six Syrian refugees. The six Syrian refugees consist of 5 males and 1 female and the ages of the refugees vary between 21 and 52. The analysis will be done by using discourse analysis, to get an understanding of the different perspectives of the refugees themselves towards integration, social media and their usage. The analysis is divided into five different but

interconnected sections, namely: Integration, Knowledge of the Netherlands, the Dutch language, Social connections and Future aspirations.

6.1 Integration:

Within this section the research aims at uncovering the different perspectives refugees may have about the concept of integration. Are they familiar with what integration means, what does it mean to them and how, in their view, can they become a part of the Dutch society? Is this a one way process where they should adapt to The Netherlands or do the refugees expect some effort from the Dutch too? What expectations do the refugees have on how they can become a part of the Netherlands?

Hope

'In Syria we had no aim. But here there are many, many aims. We hope, we look, many things. One of my girls said to me: this time there is hope, before no ' (Participant 2).

Among the refugees there is a great sense of hope. Hope for a better future in The Netherlands, for themselves and for their family. The Syrian refugees I spoke to are eager to become a part of the Dutch society and to become a Dutch citizen one day. They indicate that they plan to stay here as they regard the prospects regarding their future in The Netherlands better than in Syria. To become part of the Netherlands, the Dutch governments wants refugees to adapt or rather 'integrate' into the Dutch society. According to current Dutch government policies, the refugees are expected to actively do their best to integrate in The Netherlands (Coalition agreement 4.6 integration, 2017). No specific steps from the Dutch society are specified therein though. Furthermore, the refugees are expected to take the steps necessary to integrate, and the costs this entails, themselves. Arguably then, the Dutch government may see integration as a one way process.

When taking a look to the perspective of the refugees towards integration an important finding is that many refugees are not well aware of the concept and are not familiar with its implications. *'No.. What is this?' (participant 5.)* Or it didn't cross their mind: *'Integration (.....) I did not think about this yet.'* (participant 6). The refugees do not seem to be informed that the Dutch government wants the refugees to integrate into the Dutch society.

Initiatives from both sides

Once the concept and its implications were explained, the refugees would much rather suggest that for becoming a part of the Dutch society it is not merely up to the refugees to take the initiative. A mutual exchange of cultures, values and lifestyles is something that is desired. *'It is very lovely meeting Dutch people. They listen to me and I listen to them. We can learn from each other from both sides.'* (Participant 4). During the interviews the refugees were particularly happy to share customs from their cultures and traditions. *'I want to tell you (.....) about my society from Syria'* (Participant 4). This indeed points to a desire to see integration as a two way process. The refugees note that they would like for Dutch people to come into contact with parts of the culture of the refugees as well *'My wife (.....) she made this meal for the Dutch people, it is Syrian and Dutch people came here'* (Participant 3).

The importance of the language

To be able to obtain a standard of living in The Netherlands where one can be considered to be 'integrated', refugees note the vital importance of the knowledge of the Dutch language. Not being familiar with the Dutch language is felt as an obstacle for them in achieving the factors that can contribute to their integration. For example, making Dutch friends is seen as difficult since they do not have the Dutch language skills to keep up a friendship in Dutch. *'I'm surprised why I'm (.....) why I don't have any friends until now.'* *'If I learn the language it will be easier, I can communicate with people'* (Participant 5). The surprise of the refugee is important to note, it means the refugee expected that it would be easier for him to make Dutch friends. Apparently, after living in The Netherlands he realizes that the Dutch language is of a more vital importance he originally had thought. The knowledge of the Dutch language therefore is an important thread throughout the process of integration. Integration into the labour market is also seen as an obstacle. *'I want to be philosophy teacher, but I need to learn Dutch first'* (Participant 4). The refugees are however confident that once their language skills improve they will make more Dutch friends and life becomes easier for them.

The other perspective

Taking a look at the perspective of Dutch people towards the refugees it seems that a considerable amount of Dutch people are not happy with the refugee influx and the, in their opinion, threat they pose to the Dutch culture. Confrontations have taken place during

refugee debates in 2015 and 2016 (AD, 2016) and increasingly polarised an hatred language could be found on online forums (De Gelderlander, 2015). The refugees, however, all stated that they have not met any Dutch people that displayed hostile behaviour towards them nor did they encounter Dutch people whom they considered to be racist. *'No, no. I (.....) I visit many places in Netherlands and I didn't meet any bad people'* (Participant 2). Neither did the refugees mention hatred towards them on social media. Therefore the general attitude towards refugees in the Netherlands seems to be that Dutch people keep a distance from the refugees and in terms of integration expect the first steps to be taken by the refugees.

6.2 Knowledge of the Netherlands

As mentioned, debates about integration in The Netherlands stress the importance on the Dutch norms and values and the 'Dutch identity' (TPO, 2017). From a right wing perspective refugees are often described as a threat to the Dutch identity and the Dutch values (Reformatorisch Dagblad, 2018). Are the refugees aware of these Dutch values and what information do the refugees have about The Netherlands? Integration into the Dutch society would mean that the refugees become aware of the norms and values of the Netherlands and how the country functions. This section essentially focusses on what the refugees know about The Netherlands and the Dutch culture and how they acquired their knowledge. Was social media an important source for this or did they gain their knowledge about The Netherlands via face to face talks? Can social media familiarise the refugees with the Dutch customs?

Freedom

When being asked 'why did you want to come to The Netherlands?' the refugees gave the following, similar answers. Freedom is the word that comes back most often.

'I know here is (.....) Freedom for everybody, it is free for everybody, (.....). You should in the first place respect another people and another people respect you. If you don't do that (.....) if you don't do that you will face a problem.' (Participant 5)

'(The) Community in The Netherlands has an open mind, more than other societies in Europe.' (Participant 4)

'Here we are free. In Syria my home is destroyed. (.....) Pharmacy is destroyed, I have nothing in Syria everything is destroyed. Here I have freedom.' (Participant 3)

If one can consider for the refugees to have a choice in choosing their destination, the reason the refugees indicate as to why they wanted to come to The Netherlands in particular is most importantly because of freedom. Freedom played a large role in their choice, if they had one. The Syrian refugees that were interviewed were positive about The Netherlands and felt at home in the country. *"Yeah, yeah I feel (.....) it is home, you do not feel confused like 'oh my god how can I take taxi and how can I ask and very difficult also is how can I find someone who speak English? Do I ask him? Can I go this park or where I can find nice food.' No. You feel it is easy, you know. So that will make me feel comfortable."* (Participant 6) The refugees feel comfortable here and that is important as they see their future in The Netherlands.

The refugees are well aware what kind of country The Netherlands is, what values the Dutch people have and what the Dutch culture may look like. *"Here the woman can talk and can say: 'No, I don't want.' And she goes to the police. Yeah, I think you (.....) you see a lot of problems, a lot of problems about that. (.....) Syrian woman go to police and (.....) her husband, 'he kicked me or he (.....) told me make this and make this and I don't like that'. They will be (.....) 'everybody in another house.' It is bad. The man should respect the woman and the woman should respect the man."* (Participant 5) The Syrian refugees are also well informed about the equality between man and women in The Netherlands. This is often regarded as a main problem by right wing politicians and political commentators, where it is argued the refugees need to be educated on the matter (Trouw, 2016). The people that I spoke to seemed to be well aware about gender equalities and inequalities in both home and host country, in contrast to what often is argued in the media by right wing political commentators. The refugees thus did research about The Netherlands before coming there and displayed an eagerness to learn more about the country and its culture.

Acquiring more knowledge

The knowledge the refugees had about The Netherlands before coming here, seems to concentrate on general knowledge about the Netherlands and the Dutch society. *'Yes, I know from (.....) the books we learn about the Dutch, about the habit of the Dutch, for*

example (.....) there are many bikes, we learned about the basics, the government system, basic things' (Participant 2). The refugees are eager to gain more knowledge about The Netherlands and underline the importance of being aware about the Dutch culture. *'When a new person comes to a new country, he must learn (.....) how this country works, about the culture, how to live, how to (.....) yeah this is very important.'* (Participant 3) How do the refugees gain their knowledge about The Netherlands? Before coming to the Netherlands the refugees thus note that they already have some idea about the country. They may have acquired this knowledge via face to face talks with people: *'So they told me something about The Netherlands, about respect here, yeah. I very much like it'* (Participant 5) or via books, but the internet seems to be the source from which refugees obtain by far most of their knowledge of The Netherlands. *'Yes, I may be looking for information on Google.'* (Participant 1) Several websites and applications are used for gathering information about The Netherlands and its customs.

'Yeah I use Google, Wikipedia, Facebook, (.....) you know there is (.....) there are (.....) many Facebook pages about The Netherlands and YouTube videos about the history of the Netherlands, its people, and education here.' (Participant 4) Refugees are interested in The Netherlands and spend time informing themselves by using the internet. This does not merely consist of basic things like the history and culture but also very practical things such as becoming literally streetwise in The Netherlands: *'I use Google Maps to see which street I have to go, which bus I have to take'* (Participant 6). Another example of such a practical implication of living in The Netherlands is for the refugees to be able to drive a car in The Netherlands. *'For example: I want to learn the driving theory. Yes from the mobile, yes to know the theory, how to do this lesson, lessons how to drive the car in Netherlands.'* (Participant 2) so the Syrian refugees are indeed observed to be interested in the functional means of living in The Netherlands. *'I can search on YouTube about everything I want know about (.....) about The Netherlands. I can search on (.....) YouTube. So, like (.....) If you want to know something about Breda. City Breda. You will write (.....) trip in Breda of Holland (.....) of Netherlands. Oh we can see this'* (Participant 5). It can thus be argued that the knowledge gap that possibly exists between the refugees and the host society can be bridged by the use of the internet and social media. The refugees indeed use social media to gather more knowledge about the Netherlands and in this regard this fits the theory of Dekker &

Engbersen (2014) who also argue that social media can help to lower this knowledge gap. The refugees are eager to learn about The Netherlands and their smartphones and laptops give them access to the internet which contains lots of information about the country. It can help them to become familiar with Dutch customs and the Dutch culture. Via social media, the refugees are also aware of the daily news that keeps the Netherlands busy. In the sometimes absence of traditional media, social media becomes more important for the refugees and seems to start replacing the traditional media. *'Just 1 time I saw the news on TV'* (Participant 1)

The Dutch news is followed by the refugees

The news and goings on in The Netherlands are being followed by most Syrian refugees that were interviewed. Social media applications like Facebook and YouTube enable the refugees to keep up to date with stories that keep The Netherlands busy. This illustrates a keenness to become intertwined with the Dutch society.

'Facebook (...) YouTube, yes, we use it for many things, to look for anything new. Yes, to look for example the news, about the world, the news about the weather, many things.' *'There is at 6 o'clock (.....) there is news about many things. We look for the weather, many things. To listen to the Dutch language, listen. To hear, to use the Dutch in my ear.'* (Participant 2)

'(The news) It is Arabic and in Dutch. And if Facebook is in Arabic, they give the news in (.....)Dutch, because they take it from Dutch channel, you know?' (Participant 4) Also Facebook is being used as a source to retrieve news from. *'Yes. Because I have a page in Facebook, my Facebook yes. It's Netherlands in Arabic. Yeah I see everything, every problem, every accident, everything.'* (Participant 5)

The eagerness of the refugees to keep up to date with the goings on in The Netherlands points to the will of the refugees to become a part of their new society, to become a part of The Netherlands. The refugees are becoming increasingly aware of the 'Dutch values' and are keen on learning more about the country and its customs as their searching behaviour on the internet and their use of social media demonstrates.

6.3 The Dutch language

Linguistic skills are considered as an important tool for integration (Isaksson & Omeiche, 2013). Therefore this part has aimed at understanding the position of Syrian refugees towards learning the Dutch language. It has been examined whether the refugees are making an effort to learn the language and if they do, how social media applications and the internet can play an advancing or discouraging role in this process.

Determination to learn the language

'if you want to live with some people in another country the first thing that you should make is: learn the language. If you learn the language you will be good with them. You will feel yourself is like them.' (participant 5)

The research has shown that for the refugees it is very important to learn the Dutch language. First of all because they see it as the most essential skill needed to make contacts with Dutch people. Secondly, they indicate that being capable of speaking the language is necessary for any future job prospects. Although the refugees note that many Dutch people are able to speak English to them, they do feel uneasy when having to speak the English language in, for example, a shop: *'If I communicate with people, like If I go to shop, I will ask the seller. I want this. These things. Yeah okay. You will answer me in English, and he will not be happy. Yeah I see that.'* (Participant 2) The refugee would feel more at ease would he be able to speak Dutch to the shopkeeper.

The refugees seem eager to learn the language and this could be noted during the interviews where even some refugees asked the interviewer about it: *'Do you have a program to learn the Dutch language, so that I can talk to people?'* (Participant 3) and *'if you know something about an application (for learning the Dutch language), you can let me know'* (Participant 6). At the refugee centre there are Dutch classes available for them. These courses are from English to Dutch. As there are many people in the centre that do not master the English language, this is regarded as a problem. *'It is a problem for some people in the class, because (.....) they understand the movie, but they don't understand the teacher, they don't understand the teacher what he says. Just.. 'yeah okay.. okay.'* (Participant 5). Not all the refugees can follow the lessons from English to Dutch and learning from Arabic to Dutch may be easier for native only speakers.

Social media can help

Alternative ways for learning the language can be found on social media. The refugees indicate that on YouTube instruction videos are available from Arabic to Dutch. This means that this is a way that also only Arabic speaking refugees can learn the Dutch language. *‘(.....) There are videos, refugees from Syria, (.....) they were in Netherlands since maybe 7 years and they speak Dutch very well and they make the videos about learning Dutch for Syrians. It is easy for us.’* (Participant 4). Although the English language may be more similar to Dutch, learning from the native language (Arabic) to Dutch is considered to be easier for some refugees. *‘Because (.....). Not all people speak English, you know. And when I speak, (.....) when I want to explain an idea or any words or any sentences in Dutch (.....) I use Arabic for it.. It would be easier.’* (Participant 2) The level of English during the interviews was sufficient but could not be considered fluent, therefore learning from Arabic, their native language, to Dutch would be easier for the refugees. Social media platforms such as YouTube and different language applications do provide this opportunity to the refugees whereas the school at the centre does not. McGregor & Siegel (2013) already noted in their work that online language training programs could be an important tool for refugee integration and this research can confirm this since all the refugees interviewed actively use social media applications to improve their knowledge of the Dutch language.

For any small talk, quickly needed translations that happen on a day to day basis, Google translate is popular among the refugees: *‘yeah it (google translate) is very good. And I use this, you know. You know this?’* (Participant 4) This seems to be application that is used merely for quickly translating a word, rather than learning the language.

Facebook is also used by the refugees to improve their Dutch language skills, although to a lesser extent *‘Facebook (.....) everything is on Facebook, yes! There is a Facebook group here (.....) a test for the Dutch language on B1 level, to speak B1. Everything, all the people are Arabic here. Facebook, yeah, days in Arabic and days in Dutch, municipality in Dutch, how can I live in The Netherlands. So many programs are here. Yeah, how to live in The Netherlands, everything. How to work here. Job status, how to drive a car in The Netherlands, how to cook Dutch food.’* There is a Facebook page that provides all kinds of information on The Netherlands in Arabic which promotes the Dutch language and posts

instruction videos on how to learn the language but also gives general information about The Netherlands on all kinds of things.

Dutch music too is popular among the Syrian refugees at the centre. Especially Dutch rap and Dutch hip-hop has a large audience among younger refugees. *'I listen to music in Dutch. Rap music'* (Participant 4). *'I also learn Dutch by listening to music'* *'I listen to Marco Borsato'* (participant 1). Refugees suggest that this too helps them by developing their language skills as well as watching Dutch tv shows on YouTube or on TV. Overall it seems that YouTube is the most important source that the refugees use for learning the Dutch language. *'The most important one for me is YouTube.'* (Participant 6) YouTube consists of a wide variety of Dutch language instruction videos from English to Dutch as well as from Arabic to Dutch, Dutch music can be streamed on there and Dutch (children's) TV shows can be watched there as well.

Learning the language via a social media application like YouTube also has disadvantages as one refugee notes: *'I don't like this way because I told you I want (.....) to continue with people. If you just see A, B, C, D. Okay it's finished. You will not remember that. But when you meet people, speak with them, you.. you.. the idea will stay here, don't (.....) go.'* *'Yeah I think it is a bad way. But when you will speak with people, Dutch people, it is good for you.'*

(Participant 5) Learning the Dutch language while interacting with Dutch people is arguably a way of learning that is preferred. The Dutch classes at the refugee centre are a good example of this and have been valued highly: *'it is good. They have a good teacher. Yeah his name is Nard and he is very good.'* (Participant 5) For refugees that do want to put extra effort in learning the language and for refugees that do not master the English language and likewise have difficulties following the Dutch courses at the refugee centre, social media applications are a valuable tool for learning the language.

6.4 Social connections:

To become a part of a new society also means making contact with new people from that society. This paragraph aims at understanding the perspectives of the Syrian refugees on how they can build up a new network in The Netherlands. Do they want to make Dutch contacts and do they already have Dutch friends? Or do they rather prefer to be in contact with other Syrians that share a similar cultural background? Does social media play a role in

process of connecting with new people? Or has it been mainly used to stay in contact with family or friends back in Syria and could this hinder integration?

I'm surprised why I'm (.....) why I don't have any friends until now.' (Participant 5)

The refugees are often having a hard time developing meaningful relationships with Dutch people. Also here the Dutch language is of vital importance. The refugee that managed to obtain the most friendships with Dutch people, was the only refugee interviewed that spoke the Dutch language almost fluently. To find out whether social media could help the refugees develop friendships it has been investigated which social media applications the refugees use to stay in contact with their friends. *'I have WhatsApp, Messenger and IMO.'* (Participant 3)

These applications were most frequently WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook (Messenger) and IMO. The refugees indicate that they spend a lot of time using social media applications as there is not much to do in the refugee centre. *'I use social media All the time. Maybe when I eat something, I open it' 'You know, I am just waiting here. I have many, many hours'* (Participant 4) As the refugees spend a lot of time on social media applications the question rises whether the use of social media can capacitate the refugees in making Dutch friends?

Not many online friends

First of all, the characteristics of their current friends are quite homogeneous. It can be observed that most of their friends are Syrian that either still live in Syria or are Syrian friends/family that are now in Europe. The refugees are seen to be having a hard time obtaining meaningful friendships with Dutch people. Besides the Dutch language, also a difference between generation can be seen here. The oldest refugees that were interviewed did not manage to make Dutch friends but they indicated that their children however were able to uphold friendships with Dutch people. *'For my daughter, there is Facebook from Ellie, she is a friend with my daughter but (.....) I (.....) I didn't know Dutch, yeah, to read the Dutch in this Facebook, I didn't make a friend in face until now'* (Participant 2). There are, however, Dutch visitors coming to the refugee centre but they are, in the beginning, encouraged to not give their phone number to the refugees. These Dutch visitors, often volunteers, are the first Dutch people the refugees consider as a friend. Since the refugees of this research are still in the refugee centre and are waiting for a house and permission to work their life looks

different from the lives of the Dutch natives. The refugees did not make online friends and were not seen to have valuable relationships with online people that could replace friends in real life. *'No, actually no. I don't have them in my Facebook. I am sorry about that.'* (Participant 4)

Komito (2011) and Bekke (2008) argued with their research that young migrants could consider their online friends as valuable as their friends in real life. Moreover the incentive to make friends in real life would be lower since they already had these online friends. Proof for these claims could not be found among the refugees that were interviewed. On the contrary, the incentive to make Dutch friends was really high.

Contact with the home front

An important function of social media for the refugees is that it enables them to stay in contact with their friends and family that are back home in Syria. This was observed to be a sensitive topic for the refugees and the pain and suffering that the civil war has caused could be best seen here. Families that were separated from each other puts the refugees in a difficult position. Whereas some refugees did not want to talk about this issue *'When you ask me about this (.....) I do not want to speak about it, it will make me feel not good'* (Participant 6) other refugees were willing to share their thoughts though. They are happy such things as the internet exists so that they still can be in contact with their loved ones via social media. As argued before by Komito (2011), being in contact a lot with family and friends back home could cause a setback for integration in the home country and create a sense of homesickness. In this research this claim could not be proven. When being asked this question a refugee answered: *'No. Because they are happy. You know (.....) if I stay in Syria, my situation will be very, very hard you know. And (.....) now I am in Netherlands, I have my diploma, and I (...) I have devotion about what I want to do. So I want to make a good future me and for my family and give this society something good.'* (Participant 4)

Whereas the refugees do miss home and their family it does not seem to hold them back in their integration process. Furthermore, the refugees indicate that it is sometimes not easy to stay in contact with their family in Syria because of the bad conditions or because the internet gets cut off regularly: *'there is not internet all the time in Syria'* (Participant 2)

Not many Dutch friends yet

'I didn't know Dutch, therefore I didn't know how to make (.....) Dutch friends and we didn't know the language until now.' (Participant 4) The primary reason refugees state as to why they do not have many Dutch friends yet is because they are not able to uphold a conversation with Dutch people in Dutch. As mentioned; the participant that spoke Dutch best was the only one that was in contact with Dutch people whom she considered to be her friends. This also points to a strong desire among Dutch people to be friends with people that can speak Dutch, rather than accepting a non-Dutch speaker in their circle of friends. This should be viewed as another example of integration seen as a one way process by the Dutch. The newcomer is expected to make the first step, learning Dutch, whereas the Dutch native will stay in his comfort zone.

All in all, it can be concluded that the refugees are eager to make Dutch friends and they expressed their willingness to do so. Social media did not play a vital role in helping the refugees to create friendships with Dutch people. The refugees did not make Dutch friends via their social media applications, it however enabled the refugees that already had Dutch friends to stay in contact with them. Hence, the function of social media in this regard seems to be more focussed on maintaining existing friendships than providing an opportunity for the refugees to attain new friendships with Dutch people.

6.5 Future aspirations

Once the refugees have settled in The Netherlands another important part of integration is the integration into the labour market, finding a job that suits them. What kind of prospects does the background of the Syrians enable them and what are their plans in The Netherlands? Can social media help them with finding their way to a job?

'I hope to find a job that is suitable and that matches with me and a new future for my children.' (Participant 3)

The refugees stress that it is important for them to find a job that suits them, to find a job that is in line with their background from Syria. *'In Syria I was a barber' 'Yes, I want to (.....) open (a) barber shop in The Netherlands.'* (Participant 6) Other refugees want to continue with their studies that they could not finish back in Syria at a Dutch university *'I have studied 2 years in Syria, but I did not finish. Yeah, but now I have come here in Netherlands and I*

want to learn Dutch first and then I want to complete economics.' (Participant 1) The language again here seems to be of importance. The aspirations and expectations the refugees have for the future are very much unclear so far. They however see their future in The Netherlands and not back home in Syria. *'I feel like you, like a citizen. In The future I will do my work, everything in this country. Because here is my land. Here is my land, not there. I feel for the first time (.....) I feel for the first time that I am a citizen. Yeah. The first time (.....) this is the first time I feel that.'* (Participant 2) Especially the older refugees interviewed where the determined to pave the way for a bright future for their children in The Netherlands. The refugees however did not have a clear idea yet how to achieve their future aspirations. *'I do not know how can I work?'* But they all indicate that they finally have found their hope back, the hope for a bright future.

Not everything is bright though

On the other side the refugees are also struggling with various issues. A study from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research shows that forty one percent of the Syrian refugees in The Netherlands experience mental problems (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018). As these are sensitive topics one cannot be sure whether the participants of the research were keen on putting forward stories about their mental problems. One refugee did though and stated *'Yeah I have a lot of problem in my life.'* *'I feel bad inside'* (Participant 5) These mental problems should not be underestimated and the pain and suffering of the refugees that may have caused this should be handled with the outmost care and dedication to prevent depression among the refugees. It is important for these problems to be looked after for the refugees to be able to make a bright new start into their new future in The Netherlands.

When taking a look at that future and what role social media may play in achieving their future aspirations it was observed that social media applications do not have a significant role in the process of integrating into the labour market. Just one participant mentioned a Facebook group where he could find jobs that could help him with his integration into the labour market. Alencar (2017) describes that almost all refugees in her research made use of Facebook groups that could help them with their integration in the labour market, in this research that proof could not be verified. Among the other refugees there was no mention on this topic.

Taking a look at the hypothesis that were developed before the interviews, two different results were among the possibilities. Social media could either provide an opportunity for the refugees to develop the skillset necessary for integration or it could prove to be a setback and does not advance the integration process. Having analysed the qualitative data of the interviews neither of the two hypothesis are fully reflective of the truth but both do represent some of the findings of the research. Social media can indeed provide refugees with the tools that can help them in their integration process as it helps the refugees in attaining linguistic and cultural knowledge of The Netherlands. Though, social media does not have a significantly high effect on the integration into the labour market and the ability to obtain new Dutch contacts among the Syrian refugees that were interviewed.

7. Conclusion

This research has aimed at discovering a possible relationship between the integration process of Syrian refugees and the use of social media and finding an answer to the research question: “How does social media make an impact on the integration process of Syrian refugees in the host country?”.

Literature has shown that integration is a concept that can be explained in different ways. It may be seen as a one way process where the sole initiative is expected to come from the refugee, who has to adapt to the norms and values of the existing ‘Leitkultur’. On the other hand there are scholars, such as Ager & Strang (2004) , who argue that integration should be seen as a two way process. In a two way process the newcomers are permitted to accommodate to the society, not in an assimilatory manner, but allowing for equal treatment. In this light also the native citizens are expected to take an initiative to come into contact with the newcomer. The current Dutch government rather focusses on seeing integration as a one way process. In the coalition agreement the refugee is ought to develop himself into a Dutch citizen by learning the language and adapting himself whereas no steps from Dutch natives are indicated. As this research has shown, the refugees would prefer it when integration is not merely seen a process where the refugees have to transform and adapt themselves into Dutch citizens but the refugee would like for the Dutch natives to take an initiative too. A mutual exchange of cultures is something the refugees desire. They are

eager to get into contact with the Dutch however and note the importance of the Dutch language for their integration process. Most refugees already started to learn Dutch and are eager to enlarge their knowledge of the language. They may do so by going to lessons that are provided at the school at the refugee centre, but also the role of social media is important when it comes to learning the language. The refugees indicate that YouTube is the social media app most frequently used to learn the Dutch language. They may view instruction videos on learning Dutch, videos about the Dutch grammar or Dutch children's programs on the application. Often the language videos they watch are from Arabic to Dutch, rather than from English to Dutch like in the school. A considerable group of refugees does not master the English language and therefore YouTube is of much use to this group of refugees since here a tool for learning the Dutch language for Arabic speaking people is available.

YouTube does not just provide the refugees with tools to learn the language. They also use YouTube as a source for information about The Netherlands. Videos about Dutch cities, clips about the Dutch culture and information about basic things are being watched on YouTube. The internet was observed to be frequently used to gather information about the Netherlands and its culture. Google is often consulted and the refugees indicated that in Facebook groups information about The Netherlands is shared. Social media thus can familiarise the refugees with their new environment and the society. Even the news of The Netherlands is followed on Facebook. This shows the refugees are willing to become a part of their new society. Social media was thus observed to be a useful tool for the refugees when it comes to learning the language and increasing their knowledge of The Netherlands and the Dutch culture.

Social media does not contribute significantly to all factors of the integration process though. The refugees did not obtain Dutch friendships with the use of social media, they did not make online friends either. The claim made in the literature by Brekke (2008) therefore could not be proven in this research. Social media was not observed to be holding the refugees back from making friends since online friends did not replace real friends and no incentive in searching for real life friendships was taken away.

Most of the refugees, however, do not have many Dutch friends yet at this moment. The only refugee that spoke Dutch well, was also the one with the most meaningful relationships

with Dutch people. As the refugees themselves also suggest, it is easier to make Dutch friends once they know the language. The knowledge of the Dutch language keeps coming back and appears to be the main thread throughout the research. Once obtaining the necessary language skills the refugees are confident their amount of Dutch friends will increase. Not many refugees at this stage of their integration process have Dutch friends added in their social media applications. The social connections they have via their social media apps then also mainly focus on the home front. It enables them to stay in contact with their friends and family back. It has been suggested in the literature by Brekke (2008) and Komito (2011) that this may have a negative effect on the integration process of the refugees as it may cause homesickness. The refugees however did not indicate such thing and were just thankful they were able to keep in contact with their loved ones back home. The incentive to make Dutch friends was very much present during the conversations with all refugees.

In the literature Alencar (2017) points to the advancing role of social media with regards to the integration of refugees into the labour market, almost all refugees were using a Facebook group that assisted them with this process. The refugees I spoke to were, except one, not in such a Facebook group. Therefore I consider the effect of social media on integration into the labour market relatively low.

All in all, it can be concluded that social media has a rather small, but advancing effect on the integration process of the Syrian refugees. The biggest advancing effect of social can be found in learning the Dutch language and gather knowledge about The Netherlands and the Dutch culture. The effect of social media on the social connections with Dutch people and the integration into the labour market was found to be low. The possible negative effects of social media on the integration process as described in the literature were found not be applicable for the Syrian refugees.

Discussion

To work more efficiently and to solve capacity problems, the Dutch government could make use of online training programs for refugees to learn, for example, the Dutch language. Making this tool available would in Arabic would increase the integration process as the refugees have been shown to be enthusiastic about learning the language this way and they

would have a more easily accessible way to means of learning the language. Furthermore, should the Dutch government coordinate their policies in accordance with stakeholders.

Future researchers could improve the possible limitations of this research by allowing native only speaker to join. To do so, the interviews should be held by people that speak Arabic. A quantitative study could be conducted where the size of the interviewees can be increased due the fact that the interviewer speaks Arabic. A higher sample size can create a higher representability of the research, whereas all Syrian refugees will have the chance to be heard opposed to just the English speaking ones. By holding interviews in Arabic one should also avoid using an interpreter as the interpreter is one more participant in the interview exchange and answers directly coming from the refugees are more meaningful in understanding the discourse. A future researcher should try to explain the phenomena of integration in a more comprehensive way by always trying to take into account the biases of the researcher himself towards the concept. Further research could also focus on refugees that are for a longer period of time in their host country to check up how their integration process is going. This research has concentrated on Syrian refugees who have been in The Netherlands for a relatively short period of time, it would therefore be interesting to investigate how the integration process is going for refugees that have been in their respective host country for a longer period of time.

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9. Appendix

The transcribed interviews can be found in the separate file 'transcribed interviews' enclosed to this document.