

Social integration in an increasingly digital world:

How do refugees in the Netherlands think about the opportunities derived from Information and Communication Technologies?

Bachelor Thesis

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Abstract

In recent years, the European Union has witnessed a so-called 'refugee crisis'. In order to somehow manage this enormous influx of newcomers, one of the measures of the EU concerns the promotion of the integration of these persons. In the Netherlands, this focus on integration as well as the challenges connected to the process are clearly visible. By means of conducting interviews with refugees in the Netherlands, in this study it is investigated if and how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) help refugees with regards to their integration in a new host-society, taking into account the role of the so-called 'digital divide'. Does having access to such digital technologies enables them to overcome particular difficulties or limitations? Which opportunities does it provide them? Or does it, by contrast, stimulate them to isolate themselves from other host-society members? On the one hand, the findings show that ICTs can undoubtedly be considered as helping tools. On the other, they also show that we should not forget the importance of other, more personal, factors.

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1. Background

As explained by the European Commission, throughout history the migration of persons to – or within – the continent of Europe has been anything but unusual (European Commission, 2017). Mainly via legal ways, migration has taken place for many different reasons. In recent years however, significant changes in this process of migration have been visible. In these years, the European Union has encountered an unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees, of which many have been fleeing from life-threatening situations in their home countries (ibid.). The BBC states that in the year 2015 alone, more than a million migrants and refugees arrived in Europe (BBC, 2016). This so-called migrant or refugee ‘crisis’ cannot be considered a surprise. Mainly due to conflicts, violence and poverty in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and Kosovo, the arrival of such vast amounts of persons could have been predicted (ibid.).

The European Parliament admits that the ‘crisis’ has undoubtedly exposed shortcomings in the asylum system of the European Union (European Parliament, 2017). In order to somehow manage the enormous influx of migrants, several measures had to be taken – and are still being taken at the time of writing. An example of such a measure is the fact that the asylum system of the EU has been adapted and improved (ibid.). The Dublin Regulation in particular has been significantly revised, establishing the criteria to determine which Member State is responsible for processing a specific asylum claim (Open Migration, 2015). Other general measures of the EU include increasing aid to people that need humanitarian assistance, strengthening border security, improving the efficiency of the return policy and promoting the integration of migrants or refugees (European Parliament, 2017). It is mainly the latter that will be focused on in this thesis.

Although we have to take into account that not all refugees wish to stay in Europe and that ‘return migration’ might be a growing movement (The Irish Times, 2017), The UN Refugee Agency argues that integration in Europe is the most appropriate and durable solution for the majority of refugees (The UN Refugee Agency, 2013). Since the mid-1990s, the process of integration has obtained a high place on political agendas. Ever since, investments have been made to improve the effectiveness of programmes that facilitate the integration of immigrants. One of the underlying reasons of this stress on integration has to do with demographic shifts within Europe. Generally speaking, the European population is declining and ageing. By means of integrating (skilled) migrants the EU working population will increase, meaning that via this method welfare systems and pension requirements may be safeguarded (ibid.). In other words, on the one hand integration policy provides for a protection status that is beneficial to individuals, whereas on the other hand it is beneficial to society in general due to the fact that it enables newcomers to become economically productive (European Parliament, 2018).

In the Netherlands, the country of interest in this thesis, this focus on integration is clearly visible. Stimulating foreign nationals to and eventually making them participate in Dutch society, for

instance by working or by receiving an education, is of priority to the Dutch government (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). A basic understanding of the Dutch language is a condition for this (ibid.). A good example of this stress on integration is the new ‘participation statement’ (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). Every person starting with his/her integration process in the Netherlands needs to sign this statement within one year. By doing so, he/she indicates to be willing to actively participate in Dutch society and to respect what is considered to be important in the country (ibid.). Moreover, without passing the so-called ‘integration exam’, one will not be able to fully integrate in the country (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.).

However, besides this focus on the upsides of ‘top-down’ integration, the challenges and difficulties connected to the process are clearly visible as well. According to VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, an organization that looks after the interests of refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands¹, refugees are extremely motivated to integrate, but they are confronted with all kinds of limitations in the actual process (RTL Nieuws, 2018). Examples of such limitations are complicated rules and lacking provisions of information (ibid.). Moreover, often asylum seekers have to wait for a long time before they get to know whether or not they will receive a temporary residence permit (NOS, 2017). Only after receiving such a permit, serious steps in the process of integration can be made. Hence, significant backlogs are created in this period that mainly consists of uncertainty. Measures need to be taken in order to allow refugees to integrate as soon as possible (ibid.).

Another problematic aspect is the fact that only four out of ten migrants pass their ‘integration exam’ in the Netherlands (NOS, 2017). Particularly, migrants without any family relations in the Netherlands have difficulties with the exam. This was a completely different story before the Dutch integration policy changed in 2013. The NOS states that before this change, eight out of ten migrants passed the exam. However, ever since the new policy shifted the main integration responsibilities to the migrants themselves rather than the municipalities in which they are living, we also act as if every problem is in the hands of the migrants themselves. Simply said, the new integration policy is too complicated (ibid.). We are placing too much pressure on the persons that often find themselves in a vulnerable position already (RTL Nieuws, 2017). Hence, only one-third of the asylum seekers in the Netherlands are able to finish their integration process within three years. The others will receive a fine of 1250 euros. All in all, the new policy was introduced in order to integrate asylum seekers as early as possible in Dutch society, but in reality it accomplishes quite the opposite (ibid.). In fact, some even argue that we are forming the basis for a new ‘integration disaster’: a generation of newcomers of which the majority does not have a job and for whom integration will be extremely difficult (De Volkskrant, 2016). A significant amount of municipalities in the country are willing to

¹ VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (n.d.). *Wat wij doen voor vluchtelingen*. Last accessed May 18, 2018. <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/wat-wij-doen>

increase their efforts in order to foster the process of integration, but they often find themselves limited by a number of administrative rules (ibid.).

For the author of this thesis, all of these limitations or difficulties for refugees with regards to the process of integration in the Netherlands have led to the following aim of this study: investigating in which ways this process can be facilitated for the refugees themselves. As explained, often refugees have to wait for a long time before they are able to ‘seriously’ integrate, not to speak of the further difficulties they are likely to face in this process. Thus, is there a particular method or strategy that helps them in the process of integration, particularly when they simply are not able to further integrate yet? One of those methods or strategies could be having access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Generally speaking, ICT “relates to those technologies that are used for accessing, gathering, manipulating and presenting or communicating information. The technologies could include hardware (e.g. computers and other devices); software applications; and connectivity (e.g. access to the Internet, local networking infrastructure, videoconferencing).” (Lloyd, 2005, pp. 3). The general implications that such access can have on the integration of refugees has already been investigated by a number of researchers (AbuJarour & Krasnova, 2017; Alencar, 2017; Almohamed, Vyas & Zhang, 2017; Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Chib & Aricat, 2016; Kaufmann, 2018; Marić, 2017). According to AbuJarour (2017), ICT is reshaping our lives not only under ‘normal’ daily circumstances, but increasingly so in crisis situations. An example of such a crisis situation is the current refugee ‘crisis’ in Europe, which is distinguished by the high usage of ICTs by asylum seekers. Smartphones in particular are an instrumental piece of technology for refugees, due to the fact that access to them can guide asylum seekers along their journey through Europe. Moreover, it can help them to build new lives in their new host countries (AbuJarour, Krasnova, Andrade, Olbrich & Tan, 2017).

In this thesis, the implications of having access to ICTs for refugees will be analysed. However, this will be performed in a different way than has been the case in previous scientific research. First of all, previous research on the topic is mainly focused on rather general implications of having access to ICTs (Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Second, such research usually covers the use of ICTs by refugees during their journey to the new host-country, as well as their stay in the host-country (AbuJarour et al., 2017). Third, in some cases this research only covers one particular aspect of ICTs, such as the use of social media (Alencar 2017). What is missing in this current strand of research are findings that are exclusively focused on how access to ICTs might help refugees who can basically only wait until they are allowed to ‘seriously’ integrate. This literature gap will be addressed in this thesis by investigating how refugees living in a so-called ‘Asylum Seekers Centre’ (AZC) in the Netherlands think about this issue themselves. The fact that these refugees live in an AZC means that they already received a temporary residence permit valid for five years and are basically waiting for the opportunity to live on their own in the Netherlands (Immigration and Naturalisation Service, n.d.). Thus, at the moment of living in an AZC, these refugees are not able to fully integrate in the country. By focusing on the

complete range of ICTs that are used by the refugees, meaning that this research is not limited to a particular aspect of it, the implications of having access to such ICTs on social integration opportunities are investigated. This investigation will be performed by means of the following research question:

RQ: 'In which ways does having access to Information and Communication Technologies for refugees in the Netherlands influence their social integration opportunities in the host-society?'

Besides addressing a literature gap which shows the theoretical or scientific relevance of this study, the practical or social relevance is clear too: this study examines how refugees themselves are able to reduce the perceived limitations regarding the politically important process of integration. Hence, first of all this study has a significant social relevance for refugees themselves. As aforementioned, refugees are usually extremely motivated to integrate. By means of this study it is investigated if, or how, having access to ICTs enables them to integrate more easily. Second of all, a relevance for society in general can be found. As previously explained, this has to do with the fact that by integrating migrants or refugees in their host-society, we enable them to become economically productive. In turn, this would be beneficial for society in general.

In the remainder of this thesis, first relevant theoretical arguments and empirical findings from previously performed studies are presented. Second, an explanation of the used data collection method of semi-structured interviews is given, as well as information about the participants and the broader environment of the conducted interviews. Subsequently, the method used in order to analyse the data is explained. Afterwards, the collected data is analysed and compared to the theoretical arguments and empirical findings presented in the next section. In the concluding section of this thesis, an elaborate answer to the research question is given.

2. Theory

In the following theoretical section, several theoretical arguments and empirical findings from previously performed studies with a significant relevance to this thesis are discussed. The section is divided into three parts. In the first, the concept of social integration and the term of refugees are further explained. The second part consists of a discussion of previous studies showing that the use of ICTs positively impacts the social integration of refugees. In the last part, previous studies presenting potential limitations with regards to this impact are discussed. Based on the arguments and findings that are introduced in the last two parts of this theoretical section, two opposing working hypotheses are formulated.

2.1 Clarification of ‘social integration’ and ‘refugees’

Generally speaking, one cannot easily find one single accepted definition of the concept of ‘social integration’. Usually the concept refers to the process of adaptation of immigrants in Europe (Scholten & Van Nispen, 2015). In some practical contexts, the concept is synonymous with the concept of assimilation (Strang & Ager, 2010). Nowadays, in Sociology, the most widely accepted and commonly used definition of the concept of assimilation is by Park and Burgess (1969), who define it as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.” (Park & Burgess, 1969, pp. 735). The process is natural, unassisted and unconscious: someone will be incorporated into the common life of a particular group before even being aware of this. The ideal of assimilation is argued “(...) to be that of feeling, thinking, and acting alike.” (Park & Burgess, 1969, pp. 735). In general, it is argued that interaction between various members of the group is initiated by social contact. In turn, assimilation is the final product of this (Park & Burgess, 1969).

According to Alencar (2017), there are two main ways in which social integration can be conceptualised. The first common view of social integration is “(...) that it is a *one-way process*, in which refugees and migrants have to adapt to the host society, whereas the host society does not have the responsibility to adapt to them” (Alencar, 2017, pp. 2). This perspective is in line with concept of assimilation, due to the fact that it argues that “(...) migrants should abandon their own cultures and values and adopt those of the new society.” (Alencar, 2017, pp. 2). The second view on social integration states that it rather is “(...) a *two-way process* characterized by the involvement of refugees and migrants as well as host societies in the adaptation of newcomers. This perspective of integration claims that both refugees and host society members play a crucial role in making sure that refugees have access to jobs, education, housing, health, culture and language and that they feel part of the new environment, instead of problematizing refugees.” (Alencar, 2017, pp. 2).

Based on the fact that the main integration responsibilities in the Netherlands have shifted to the migrants themselves ever since the new integration policy, a fit with the *one-way* process definition of the concept of social integration can be found. However, as addressed in the background section of this thesis, there is a significant amount of critique on the new integration policy of the country. In this thesis it is argued that refugees cannot fully integrate in Dutch society without particular responsibilities for other members of society. An example is the responsibility to be hospitable towards refugees and to help them when needed. Moreover, in this thesis it is argued that abandoning own cultures and values in order to adopt new ones instead does not have to be a requirement for integration. Based on these grounds, the choice for a combination of the *one-way process* and *two-way process* definitions of the concept has been made. This is in line with how Huber (2003) sees social integration: “(...) as the aim to create a society for all, in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play. Social integration is not the attempt to make people adjust to society, but the attempt to make society accepting of all its people.” (Huber, 2003, pp. 433).

With regards to the term of ‘refugees’ which is used in this thesis, a clear explanation about the difference with the term of ‘asylum seekers’ is required. Persons fleeing their own country and seeking for sanctuary in another country apply for asylum, which comes down to the right to be recognized as a refugee (UNHCR, 2018). This right includes receiving material assistance and legal protection. In order to receive the status of a refugee, “an asylum seeker must demonstrate that his or her fear of persecution in his or her home country is well-founded.” (UNHCR, 2018, last accessed May 22, 2018). Thus, an asylum seeker is someone seeking for international protection, whereas a refugee is “(...) a person who has fled their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” (Amnesty International, November 6, 2017, last accessed May 22, 2018). This means that “not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognised as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker.” (Amnesty International, November 6, 2017, last accessed May 22, 2018). The remainder of this theoretical section is not limited to theories exactly focusing on either social integration or refugees. Due to their relevance, theories focusing on relatively similar concepts or terms have also been included.

2.2 Studies on the impacts of ICTs

As aforementioned in this thesis, research on the general implications of having access to ICTs (for refugees) is not new (AbuJarour & Krasnova, 2017; Alencar, 2017; Almohamed, Vyas & Zhang, 2017; Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Chib & Aricat, 2016; Kaufmann, 2018; Marić, 2017). According to Almohamed, Vyas and Zhang (2017), the use of ICTs can positively influence the social inclusion of an individual as well as the collective social capital in a particular community. The reason for this is that via the use of such technologies, potential social networks can easily be expanded, which builds

up to a particular sense of belonging (Almohamed, Vyas & Zhang, 2017). In turn, in their research Andrade and Doolin (2016) state that ICTs “(...) are increasingly viewed as a useful resource in programs that provide settlement services or promote participation in society.” (Andrade & Doolin, 2016, pp. 405). Based on an analysis of the use of ICTs by a large number of refugees, they find that access to ICTs indeed stimulates the expansion of social networks, due to the fact that it enables refugees to communicate effectively and thus, to be socially connected. However, they also find other capabilities derived from having access to the resource of ICTs, such as being able to participate in an information society and hence, being able to better understand their new host-society. In other words, having access to ICTs enables refugees to regain control over their disrupted lives and to function in a more effective way in a new society (Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

According to Chib and Aricat (2016), these advantages can be traced back to the fact that ICTs provide for so-called ‘open participatory platforms’, which stimulate the learning for and growth of migrants. This has to do with the fact that having access to ICTs enables migrants to participate in a particular digital and inclusive environment that is characterised by a sense of openness and acceptance. Hence, the limitations or difficulties that migrants might experience in a new host-society may be heavily restricted in such an environment. Chib and Aricat (2016) argue that mobile phones in particular undermine the closed boundaries of places that otherwise would be restrictive to certain persons in society, such as migrants. Mobile phones are a useful tool in cutting across cultural geographies, enabling communication with a variety of others, and providing access to useful information. In other words, for migrants the use of mobile phones opens up opportunities in not only personal, but also professional realms (Chib & Aricat, 2016).

This complies with the findings of Kaufmann (2018), who found out that smartphones are a key tool in the lives of refugees due to the fact that they help them to cope with all kinds of daily challenges. Smartphone practices by refugees were found in several contexts, such as staying in contact with people, geographical orientation, language learning, and information access. When asking refugees about the most important apps on their smartphone, “most often named were Facebook, WhatsApp, qando Wien (Viennese public transport app), Google Maps, and Google Translate.” (Kaufmann, 2018, pp. 889). All in all, refugees are not only emotionally attached to, but also technically dependent on their smartphones. The devices have a significant potential for the integration processes of refugees (Kaufmann, 2018).

Further elaborating on this premise, Alencar (2017) argues that it is mainly the use of social media on smartphones by refugees in the Netherlands that is crucial in tackling the challenges of integration. Social media technologies are extremely relevant for refugees within the particular areas of social connections and facilitators, showing a clear fit with the previously addressed concepts of social networks and social inclusion. This relevance has to do with the fact that these technologies improve intercultural contact between refugees and other Dutch citizens, which stimulates the acquisition of language and cultural norms, values and traditions. Besides, the use of social media

creates social and emotional support due to the fact that it enables refugees to contact family and friends in the home country in a more convenient way (Alencar, 2017).

2.3 Studies on the limitations of the impacts of ICTs

Based on the arguments and findings presented by the scholars above, one would argue that having access to ICTs has a clear and far-reaching positive influence on the social integration of refugees. However, other scholars argue that this influence may in fact be rather limited (Alam & Imran, 2014; Newman, Biedrzycki & Baum, 2010; Komito, 2011). One part of this literature focuses on the so-called ‘digital divide’, which originally was defined as “the overarching concept to capture unequal access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) at global and local levels.” (Wyatt, Henwood, Hart & Smith, 2005, pp. 200). Nowadays, the concept does not only include inequalities in physical access to digital technologies, but it also includes inequalities in the skills or knowledge required to use the technologies: inequalities in so-called ‘digital literacy’ (Alam & Imran, 2014). Even within relatively rich countries, “(...) concern is expressed about the ways in which some groups are particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion.” (Wyatt et al., 2005, pp. 201). These groups include a variety of persons, such as the elderly, immigrants, refugees, ethnic minorities, people with lower levels of education or income, and women (Wyatt et al., 2005). Such concern is expressed due to the fact that “the ability to access digital information and communication networks (in particular via the Internet and mobile phones) is increasingly vital to full citizen participation in the economic, social, educational, political and cultural life of modern society” (Newman, Biedrzycki & Baum, 2010, pp. 1). This is particularly so due to the fact that the influence and use of digital access is increasing rapidly, and the fact that governments and businesses “(...) move to greater ICT-mediated provision of services, support and information.” (Newman, Biedrzycki & Baum, 2010, pp. 1).

When focusing on the specific case of refugees in this digital divide, research by Alam and Imran (2014) is particularly relevant. The findings of their research indeed show that within the group of refugees, differences in digital participation are clearly visible. For the ones with a low, or perhaps non-existent level of such participation, the reasons for not using ICTs were either the costs of digital devices, lacking technical skills, or language related difficulties. Hence, the encountered barriers for refugees are mainly economic, social and technical and not particularly behavioural, meaning that it is not really about the willingness to, or attitude towards, using ICTs. One of the main conclusions of the research by Alam and Imran is that for refugees, being limited in the use of ICTs can create social exclusion. This has to do with the fact that in interviews, refugees indicated that access to the internet in particular “(...) allowed them to maintain their ethnic identity, while accepting the host community’s culture and integrating themselves in the host country, so indicating a strong link between digital inclusion and social inclusion” (Alam & Imran, 2014, pp. 356). In other words, not being able to use the internet limits the opportunities and is increasingly disadvantageous for refugees

in terms of being socially included. All in all, this indicates that for a specific part of refugee groups, participation in society is limited due to barriers in using digital technologies.

Based on the empirical findings and theoretical arguments that the use of ICTs has a positive and significant influence on the social integration of refugees, but also taking into account the implications of a digital divide among refugees, the following hypothesis is formulated. This is the first working hypothesis to be used at the base of the research conducted in this thesis.

H1: 'Inequalities in physical access to and skills necessary to use ICTs among refugees in the Netherlands are an important factor in limiting social integration opportunities for these refugees in the host-country.'

Focusing on another and even more extreme type of limitation in the influence of ICTs, research by Komito (2011) addresses the problems connected to so-called 'digital relationships' or 'virtual migrants'. As previously addressed in this theoretical section, some scholars argue that having access to ICTs allows us to easily establish and maintain social networks, which has a positive impact on social inclusion (Almohamed, Vyas & Zhang, 2017; Andrade & Doolin, 2016). By analysing the role of social media in the lives of refugees, the findings of the research by Komito (2011) show something else. These findings show that the online circulation of voice, video, text, and pictures enables a rather passive monitoring of others. The result of this is that via social media, we can maintain a low-level mutual awareness of others since we do not need to actively engage with one another anymore. In other words, social media enables refugees to only create a background awareness of and superficial relationships with other persons in their new host-society, while at the same time it enables them to maintain in contact with those 'back home'. This might decrease the "(...) motivation for migrants to make social contacts in the society into which they have recently arrived" (Komito, 2011, pp. 1084). Thus, for some refugees having access to social media may decrease their participation and slow down the process of their integration in a new host-society due to the fact that "(...) their physical locality can be irrelevant for their identity" (Komito, 2011, pp. 1084).

Based on these empirical findings, the following hypothesis is formulated. This is the second working hypothesis to be used at the base of the research conducted in this thesis.

H2: 'Having access to ICTs stimulates refugees in the Netherlands to isolate themselves from other host-society members, thereby decreasing their willingness to socially integrate in the host-country.'

As can be interpreted, two opposing hypotheses are at the heart of this study. To test these hypotheses, data needs to be collected and analysed. In the next section of this thesis it is explained how and where this data has been collected and by means of which method the data is analysed.

3. Methodology

In order to collect data and to investigate the influence of ICTs on social integration opportunities for refugees in the Netherlands, the qualitative data collection method of interviews has been used. As explained by Kajornboon (2005), “interviewing is a way to collect data as well as to gain knowledge from individuals.” (Kajornboon, 2005, pp. 2). For these individuals, or the participants, interviews are ways to express their views, perceptions, or interpretations about a particular topic (Kajornboon, 2005). According to Whiting (2008), we can generally differentiate between three types of interviews: structure, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews. With regards to this thesis, the choice has been made to use semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher usually has a list of pre-determined key topics, issues, or questions that need to be covered in the interview (Whiting, 2008). However, due to the fact that these interviews are non-standardized, “the order in which the various topics are dealt with and the wording of the questions are left to the interviewer’s discretion” (Kajornboon, 2005, pp. 5) and can be changed depending on the direction of the interview. Thus, Kajornboon (2005) recognises that using this type of data collection method allows a researcher the freedom to probe for views and opinions of the participant, while at the same time it gives a sense of order due to the pre-determined list of key themes. Besides, it also gives the participants themselves more freedom to address particular issues they consider relevant (Kajornboon, 2005). The choice for semi-structured interviews has mainly been based on this freedom for both the researcher and the participants, since this makes the interviews more personal and enables the researcher to investigate the very personal views of refugees on the implications of having access to ICTs. The key topics around which the interviews were built up are the following: (1) the view of the participants on the concept of social integration, (2) their use of ICTs, (3) their opinion towards the connection between ICTs and integration opportunities, (4) the difficulties they experience with regards to the use of ICTs, and (5) whether or not their use of ICTs has changed compared to before they were living in the Netherlands.

As already addressed in the background section of this thesis, interviews have been conducted with refugees that are living in an ‘Asylum Seekers Centre’ (AZC) in the Netherlands. Upon arrival in the Netherlands, the organisation ‘Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers’ (COA)² provides assistance to asylum seekers. One of the tasks of this organisation is to provide for shelter for these asylum seekers (and refugees), which is the purpose of an AZC. With regards to this thesis, face-to-face interviews have been conducted with refugees living in an AZC in the city of Almelo, which is also the location where the interviews have been conducted. The choice to conduct interviews with refugees living in this AZC and not any other one in the Netherlands was based on convenience in the first place: the AZC in Almelo is the closest one to the University of Twente, the place where this

² Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (n.d.). Last accessed May 31, 2018. <https://www.coa.nl/nl>

thesis has been carried out. Another reason for this choice was that the employees of the AZC in Almelo were quick to respond positively to the request of conducting interviews.

The following table shows the main characteristics of the refugees that have been interviewed. The shown names of the participants are not their actual names. The interviews have been recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions are included as a separate appendix to this thesis (Appendix 1).

	Gender	Age	Nationality
<i>Interview 1 – Emre</i>	Male	23	Turkish
<i>Interview 2 – Yusuf</i>	Male	39	Turkish
<i>Interview 3 – Isamu</i>	Male	31	Chinese
<i>Interview 4 – Hamid</i>	Male	42	Pakistani
<i>Interview 5 – Zareen</i>	Female	49	Iranian
<i>Interview 6 – Ester</i>	Female	33	Iranian
<i>Interview 7 – Bechou</i>	Male	19	Gambian

Table 1 – Main characteristics of the participants

As can be seen in the table, interviews have been conducted with seven participants. Due to time limitations and the availability of participants, it was not possible to conduct interviews until data saturation occurred. Hence, the initial aim was to conduct five interviews. After these, the field was revisited twice for extra interviews and information. In order to provide for and investigate a variety of views on the topic of the interviews, the choice was made to conduct interviews with both male and female refugees with the largest possible differences in nationalities and age. With the assistance from employees of the AZC, participants were selected. Due to the fact that the participants had to be able to speak English or Dutch to a reasonable extent to participate, and the fact that some persons were not willing to participate, these seven participants were selected. All seven interviews were conducted in English.

With the exceptions of Hamid and Zareen, all of the participants have been living in the Netherlands for a period between three (3) and thirteen (13) months. Respectively, Hamid has been living in the country for nine (9) years and Zareen for three (3) years. Besides, large educational or career-related differences between the seven participants can be found from before they came to the Netherlands. Hamid does not have a study background, but he has always worked. Zareen and Bechou finished their high school education and have done some small or short jobs. Emre studied at a university, but was not able to finish his studies there. Yusuf, Isamu and Ester have finished their studies at a university. They had been working ever since.

To analyse the (transcripts of the) interviews and to come to answer to the research question of this thesis, the method or theory of ‘critical discourse analysis’ is used. In very general terms, critical

discourse analysis is a tool to understand the (hidden) meanings of spoken and written texts and to understand pressing social issues that are addressed in such texts (Mogashoa, 2014). “Critical discourse analysis challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social and political condition.” (Mogashoa, 2014, pp. 105). According to the critical theory, generally speaking “the words of those in power are taken as “self-evident truths” and the words of those not in power are dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate or without substance” (Mogashoa, 2014, pp. 105). Critical discourse analysis can be used to give a voice to the ones without power (ibid.). In this thesis, the method is used to discover the (hidden) meanings related to particular topics that are addressed in the interviews. In other words, it enables the researcher to really get to know how the participants think about the impacts of having access to ICTs on social integration opportunities. This analysis is performed in the next section of the thesis.

4. Data Analysis

In the previous methodology section of this thesis, the five key topics around which the conducted interviews have been built up were mentioned. In this section, the expressed views and ideas of the seven participants are carefully analysed for each of these topics. Quotations are used to show the most striking views that were indicated by the participants. Afterwards, an interpretation of the most important aspects of the interviews is given. In turn, this interpretation is then compared to the theoretical arguments and empirical findings that were presented in the theoretical section of this thesis. Throughout the entire section, the term ‘digital devices’ is used to refer to ICTs. This has also been the case during the conducted interviews in order to improve the participants’ understanding of the general topic of the interviews.

4.1 The use of ICTs

In the conducted interviews, all of the participants indicated to have access to particular digital devices and the internet. All seven participants indicated to use a smartphone and all but one were using a computer or laptop. Additionally, three participants were using a tablet. For most participants, the first device that came to mind was their smartphone. Yusuf also indicated that he used his Android smartphone the most: “Digital devices are now everywhere, even in children’s hand. (...) everyone is using these devices. Me too I use mostly, you know this Android”. “(...) smartphones are part of our life. That’s why we never leave this devices from our hand”. (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). Yusuf argued that this mainly has to do with the aspect of convenience: “Yes because smartphone is so easy to use. It’s everywhere and you cannot carry the laptops or tablets everywhere”. (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). In all seven interviews, a difference between the purposes of using a smartphone and a computer or laptop was indicated by the participants. Generally speaking, a smartphone was considered to be a bit more personal, whereas a computer was used for rather educational purposes. This educational aspect mainly has to do with the fact that the majority of the participants indicated to use a computer or laptop to learn the Dutch language. These participants followed Dutch classes on the AZC and used a computer to do their homework for this. Bechou even indicated that “The laptop was given to me by the teacher here, for me to do my lessons.” (Bechou, May 14, 2018). Ester did not have access to a computer or laptop, but she indicated that she used a tablet instead to learn the language. This tablet was also given to her by the teacher. One of the main indicated purposes of a smartphone was to communicate with others via social media. Zareen indicated that she mainly used WhatsApp and Telegram for this. For Ester this also included Instagram and Facebook. Emre argued that “The main thing I use it’s WhatsApp, because you may send photo’s, videos and emotional phrases. And you may speaking and sending message. Because of that I’m using WhatsApp more than normal calling or

sending message. And the second one is Instagram, I'm watching all my friends, all my social relations". "This is a really good communication" (Emre, May 7, 2018).

For Emre, this communication mainly took place with friends and family back in Turkey or in other European countries. However, when compared to the other participants, Emre was an exception in this. With regards to this digital communication, Zareen argued: "Not very much with the back in the home. Very personal like my son or sister, only I had that. But mostly the friends other side, here, Dutch people (...)" (Zareen, May 11, 2018). Whereas Hamid argued to not be in contact with people 'back home' at all, for Ester, Bechou and Isamu this was somehow the same as for Zareen. With regards to digital communication with Dutch people, Isamu indicated the following: "(...) I keep in contact with them, of course with Nederlands. I try to conduct with them. And if I can't, there is so many translate apps. Google Translate I can use that." (Isamu, May 8, 2018).

However, the aforementioned distinction in purposes of the use of smartphones and computers or laptops is not completely strict. This has to do with the fact that all participants indicated to use all of the digital devices for the rather general purpose of searching for information about all kinds of things in the Netherlands. For the majority of the participants, most important for this was the use of Google. Hamid indicated that "(...) you can go on Google (...). Everything, all the data come out and you can use to know about more this country." (Hamid, May 8, 2018). Zareen argued that via her computer, she could find "Information maybe about a country, or from a culture, or maybe from euh... find out what this medicine for using for, or euh... what kind of for example herbs or foods can help me in this (...)" (Zareen, May 11, 2018). Besides, a number of participants indicated to use digital devices for transport purposes. They were using a maps application on their smartphone to find an address and how to go there, or to check when the trains or busses are going. Yusuf even argued that "Without using Google Maps or Apple Maps you can't go anywhere now." (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). Other purposes that were mentioned by the participants are reading the news, and organizing their days and money via agenda or banking applications. Moreover, the majority considered Google Translate to be significantly important too.

4.2 Views on the concept of integration

With regards to the views on, or experiences connected with, the process of integration in the Netherlands, significant differences between the participants can be found. All of the participants considered the process to be important and each of them were motivated to integrate, but the views of Yusuf and Hamid in particular were striking. Whereas most of the participants had a somewhat 'general' or 'mild' view on the process, Yusuf and Hamid argued that the process must be very strict. Yusuf indicated the following: "(...) yeah for the integration it's really compulsory according to me. Because if somebody lives somewhere, they must integrate to where they are living. Otherwise, they cannot understand about their culture, they cannot understand about their language, they cannot

communicate and understand each other. That's why integration is very important. It must be very strict. So everybody must focus on this integration program and follow up. Even though stay here or not. Integration means that you are part of this country. You will work for this place and benefit to society. You have to add something (...)" (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). Hamid's view is similar to this, which can be seen in the following quotes: "I believe, that is my own believe, when you live somewhere, you have to accept the rule and regulations and people." "(...) I believe, when I live here it's my country. I have to do like my country. Because I'm living here, I drink the water from here." "I eat from the money from here, so I have to give back. I cannot give like the money or anything else, but I can give respect for that, yeah." (Hamid, May 8, 2018).

Focusing on particular aspects in Dutch society that helped or stimulated the participants to participate or integrate in Dutch society, some of the participants stressed the importance of the hospitality of Dutch people. According to Emre, the "(...) hospitality of Dutch peoples are helping me to communicate and to integrate and to learn new things about the new culture. For example in the transportation I don't know very well how OV-chipkaart works, when I buy and when I will check in and check out. All these problems, the peoples are helping to me." (Emre, May 7, 2018). When he came to the Netherlands, Emre felt like a 'problem' for the country because he did not fit in. However, the hospitality of Dutch persons made him feel at home and confident. Bechou and Hamid also argued that the fact that Dutch people are really welcoming stimulated them to integrate. "(...) the people they accept you. They accept you as a refugee, as a human being. That is, I like it very much." (Hamid, May 8, 2018). As indicated by Hamid, due to the fact that everyone in the Netherlands is considered to be 'the same', no one is limited in opportunities to learn things. Yusuf and Ester also stressed that because of their freedom, they saw many opportunities to learn things. Examples of such opportunities were learning the language, going to university again, or finding a job in the Netherlands.

Another indicated aspect that 'eased' the life of all seven participants in the Netherlands had to do with the fact that most of the Dutch people are able to speak English. Emre, Isamu and Hamid indicated that they did not experience any communication difficulties, since they can speak in English whenever they cannot use their Dutch. The other participants thought about this aspect in a somewhat different way, such as Ester: "Here, in Nederland, I think 99% of people can speak English. And this is so good and this is so bad *laughs*. This is good because we know English and we can have contact with other people so easy, but it's bad because we must learn Dutch here. For go to work and go to university. And the English language, euh... to be lazy." (Ester, May 11, 2018). Ester indicated that the English language was sufficient for in the AZC, but that speaking in Dutch will be much better for refugees when they can live in their own house. Bechou, Yusuf and Zareen also stressed the convenience of being able to speak in English, but they argued that being able to speak the Dutch language indeed enables refugees to really get close to others. Yusuf was the most clear with regards to this statement, arguing that integration starts from language. In turn, language will open other gates.

Thus, when you are not able to speak Dutch, “(...) you do not understand the culture, or social life, or other rules.” (Yusuf, May 7, 2018).

4.3 Connection between ICTs and integration opportunities

A striking difference in views was found when asking the participants about the importance of digital devices for their social integration opportunities in the Netherlands. On the one hand, Emre, Isamu and Hamid clearly stressed the importance of having access to such devices, as well as the importance of having access to the internet. This indicated importance was mainly based on the fact that having access to digital devices enabled these participants to search for information about all kinds of things in the Netherlands. Emre also indicated that for him, this was already useful before he came to the Netherlands: “Before you are coming here, you may see that the Dutch has a really good law country. And because of that, you are coming here. And you are learning this information about the courts in the Netherlands, human rights in the Netherlands. You are learning from a smartphone and the internet and laptops. And from Twitter maybe. Because of that, before coming to there, digital material is a really big influence about your coming. There are too many sights in smartphones about tradition of Netherlands, about language of Netherlands, too much things. And maps, you may find your roots to go somewhere. These are easy for us.” (Emre, May 7, 2018). Besides, the importance of digital devices was also mainly based on the fact that they helped the participants with practical issues related to transportation and translation.

On the other hand, the rest of the participants had a somewhat mixed feeling about the implications of the use of digital devices. For Yusuf, digital devices were particularly useful due to the fact that they helped him solving personal issues. He argued that digital devices made his life easier. However, when focusing on the process of integration in particular, Yusuf indicated that “(...) integration is not only with the smartphones or the digital devices. It is in you. If you really will to do it, to integrate, you can do it. You can contact with so many people. You can meet and discuss with them. You can integrate easily. You can ask people if you don’t know anything, you know. You can integrate in the social life.” (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). Yusuf argued that when you want to integrate in a new country, you have to meet people in order to understand the system and the language in the first place. Digital devices are useful, “(...) but you cannot do everything with it.” “In the social life you understand if it is difficult or not. If you put your effort, if you adapt, if you focus on something, you can easily pass and learn it. You can do it.” (Yusuf, May 7, 2018).

For Zareen, the implications of the use of digital devices were even more limited. She argued that apps like Facebook might be handy for refugees that just arrived in the Netherlands, since this will give a refugee at least some feeling of being connected with others. However, she also argued that in general, digital connections are not very real or ‘healthy’. She did not trust this type of connections with others. Instead, for Zareen integration was all about face-to-face communication and personal

relations with other members of society: “(...) really connecting with people, face-to-face, and talk with them. For me it’s more real and more deep (...)” (Zareen, May 11, 2018). She indicated that refugees need to start a completely new life again in the Netherlands, so communication with others is highly important. Even when this communication can only take place in English. By talking with and listening to people, “(...) little by little you get used to this, all the new things.” (Zareen, May 11, 2018). Zareen stressed that via her voluntary work at a restaurant, she could really get in touch with people and face new things in order to get more experience. According to her, such work has two sides: connecting with society and doing the things they do, as well as to learn little by little.

Ester also recognised the importance of personal relations when focusing on social integration. However, she argued that for refugees living in an AZC, such relations might not be most important yet. This had to do with the fact that for refugees spending most of their time in an AZC, getting into contact with other members of Dutch society and establishing strong relations with these persons might be difficult. With regards to her life in the AZC, Ester stressed the importance of having access to the internet. Most useful for her when focusing on integration were Google and WhatsApp. In the near future, Ester could live in her own house in the Netherlands. For this, she indicated the personal relations to become most important, since they would help and stimulate her in learning the Dutch language. Lastly, Bechou also indicated the importance of his social life and personal relations for his integration in the Netherlands. He argued that knowing more people would help him to integrate further. However, since digital devices helped him with many things as well, Bechou did not really argue that one of the two was most important for him.

4.4 Difficulties in the use of ICTs

When asking the participants about the difficulties or limitations they experienced in the use of digital devices, such as difficulties related to physical access to, or skills required to use, particular devices, only relatively small difficulties were indicated. For Ester, sometimes it was difficult that particular websites were only available in Dutch. However, she did not consider this a big problem, since her friends were always there to help. Yusuf thought about this in a similar way: “I don’t have any difficulties. If I have I can ask people how to use it, how to join or enter to the program they will explain me. I have so many friends here, I can learn from them.” (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). Emre argued that digital devices are flexible materials and hence, he did not experience any difficulty either. He did however stress a potential financial problem for refugees in general: “(...) this is difficult because you are a refugee and maybe you don’t have too much money because of all things in your own country. These are hard parts of digital world, maybe.” (Emre, May 7, 2018). Potential examples given by Emre were licenses for Microsoft programs, or costs of vocabulary apps.

Hamid, Zareen and Bechou pointed out that it might be a problem when the internet is not working, since you need the internet for almost everything nowadays. However, Zareen questioned

whether we should even consider this as a problem: “If you disconnected from it, you feel you are disconnected from the whole world. Maybe you don’t need to know what is going on in the whole world.” (Zareen, May 11, 2018). Instead, what Zareen did consider to be a problem was that there are always new updates, or other better things. Thus, to some extent you will always have the feeling that you are limited. Moreover, Zareen indicated that the use of digital devices is not always safe, because all of your information may be hacked or leaked one day.

Besides the aspect of the internet, Hamid experienced a rather personal difficulty in his use of digital devices as well. Due to a lacking educational background, he indicated that his typing skills were not that good. However, this difficulty did not completely hinder him in using a computer, since he was still using this particular type of digital device to learn the Dutch language. During the interview, Isamu also pointed out a particular personal limitation. For him, learning via digital devices was somewhat difficult due to the fact that he got distracted quite easily: “For example I want to learning now, for Dutch. I want to using this app, but I’m using ten minutes. Maybe after this: *ding*. I have new message from WhatsApp, I am speaking to other guys, time has passed. Maybe I’m watching the video from YouTube, it’s very good video, but I cannot using my time for the learning of work.” (Isamu, May 8, 2018).

4.5 Changes in the use of ICTs

With regards to whether or not the use of ICTs by the participants changed compared to before they came to the Netherlands, Bechou was the only participant with a significant difference in use. He indicated that in Gambia, where he was born and lived before he came to the Netherlands, he only used a computer about once a month. He did not have access to a computer himself, but had to go to an internet café to use the device. Moreover, he did not have access to a smartphone either. On the contrary, in the Netherlands Bechou had personal access to both a laptop and a smartphone and he indicated to use them every day. The inability to have personal access to both types of devices in Gambia was based on a financial problem.

For Emre, there was no difference in physical access to particular devices. The only difference he experienced had to do with his use of the internet: “(...) especially after coming to here you are wanting to catch news about your own country and besides of that, you are wanting to learn new things about Dutch peoples, Dutch republic, Dutch news. And this is an increasing communication, increasing using internet.” (Emre, May 7, 2018). Thus, only the time spent using digital devices increased for Emre. Isamu and Hamid indicated something similar. Both of them pointed out that they were using different and more advanced types of digital devices nowadays, but that mostly had to do with the simple fact of technological developments over time. Besides, Hamid also indicated that in Dutch society almost everything is digital, which was another difference for him. An example was the machine to buy tickets at the train station.

Zareen and Ester, both coming from Iran, argued that their use of digital devices was similar. The only difference they perceived was that in Iran the government limited some things, whereas in the Netherlands everyone is free to use whatever he or she wants. According to Ester, “(...) in Iran some social program is filter. And the speed of internet is down. In that time we couldn’t use some program like Facebook, or YouTube, or for example searching for euh... – we had a problem with searching for research, because we didn’t have any available website or social program like Google to search. Because it’s blocked.” (Ester, May 11, 2018). However, Zareen pointed out that this was not such a big problem for her, since there were other ways to be digitally connected. Yusuf was the only participant indicating no difference in use at all.

4.6 Interpretation: the importance of other factors

Generally speaking, it has been shown that ICTs or digital devices were useful for the participants of this study. When asking about the importance of digital devices, Yusuf even argued that “It’s my every details” (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). With this, Yusuf meant that he used the digital devices for a high variety of purposes on an everyday basis. The devices made his life easier since they helped him with all kinds of small things, the details. In general, the participants used digital devices for the following purposes: (1) to communicate with others, (2) to learn the language, (3) to search for general information, and (4) to arrange practical issues. For the first purpose of communication, the participants considered their smartphone and social media networks to be particularly useful. The applications that were used the most for such communication were WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Telegram. Learning the language is something for which the participants mainly used their computer or laptop. In order to search for information about inter alia the Netherlands in general, Google was considered to be most important. Lastly, most of the practical issues were related to transportation and translation. For these, Google Translate and Google Maps were considered to be highly important. All in all, with regards to the process of social integration, having access to digital devices provided the participants with a number of opportunities. Hence, the devices can undoubtedly be considered a helping tool.

These findings are fully in line with how some of the scholars addressed in the theoretical section argued the capabilities that refugees derive from having access to ICTs to be (Almohamed, Vyas & Zhang, 2017; Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Having access to digital devices indeed enables refugees to communicate more effectively and thus to expand potential social networks on the one hand, and to participate more easily in an information society on the other. In other words, the use of a smartphone and/or computer indeed opens up personal opportunities for refugees, which Chib and Aricat (2016) argued to be the case. It may still be the case that the use of these devices also opens up opportunities in professional realms for refugees, but the findings of this study do not point into the direction of this particular argument by Chib and Aricat (2016).

Focusing on the role of the so-called ‘digital divide’ which has been addressed in the theoretical section, Alam and Imran (2014) found out that refugees encountered economic, social and technical barriers in their use of ICTs. By contrast, the findings of this study show something else. First of all, all of the participants had access to relatively the same digital devices. Moreover, none of them indicated to have significant difficulties in the use of the devices. Emre was the only participant to mention a potential financial problem: “(...) this is difficult because you are a refugee and maybe you don’t have too much money because of all things in your own country. These are hard parts of digital world, maybe.” (Emre, May 7, 2018). However, Emre did not experience this problem himself. For Hamid, the fact that he did not have an educational background limited him in the use of a computer since he could not type that good. Still, Hamid did not consider this a big problem due to the fact that people were helping him with this. Most of the participants even indicated that their use of digital devices was similar compared to before they came to the Netherlands. Bechou was the only exception in this. All in all, no significant inequalities in physical access to and skills necessary to use ICTs were found among the participants. Hence, it is not possible to conclude anything about the first working hypothesis of this thesis. This hypothesis reads as follows:

H1: ‘Inequalities in physical access to and skills necessary to use ICTs among refugees in the Netherlands are an important factor in limiting social integration opportunities for these refugees in the host-country.’

As addressed in the theoretical section, Kaufmann (2018) found out that smartphones have a significant potential for the integration processes of refugees. In turn, Alencar (2017) argued that it is mainly the use of social media by refugees that is crucial in tackling social integration challenges. The findings of this study show that social media applications are indeed helpful for refugees since the use of such applications enables them to communicate more effectively, but social media applications cannot tackle the challenges connected to integration on its own. The participants of this study indicated to use these applications for the purpose of communicating with others only, whereas the other three purposes of using digital devices were considered at least as important, if not more important, for social integration opportunities.

Further elaborating on the purpose of communicating with others, the majority of the participants indicated that this communication mostly took place with Dutch friends and not that much with people ‘back home’. Emre was the only participant for whom this was different. For him, this communication mainly took place with friends and family in Turkey or in other European countries. However, he indicated that this might change in the future. Most striking with regards to digital communication were the views of Yusuf, who stressed the downsides of such communication by arguing that “Devices are good, but devices mostly stop the relation. You know there was good relation before with the people who are contacting each other, or more than before the devices came.”

(Yusuf, May 7, 2018). With this, Yusuf meant that digital relationships are not as ‘real’ as personal relationships and that only having digital contact might even vanish personal relationships that used to be there. This was also recognised by Zareen, who argued that digital connections are indeed not very ‘real’ or ‘healthy’. She did not trust this type of relationships. According to Yusuf, this disadvantage of digital communication had to do with the fact that “We don’t understand each other while using these devices, you cannot express yourself with this kind of devices. I can explain you everything, you can see my face, you can understand how I feel, if I’m angry or not. But in this devices they misunderstand, you know.” (Yusuf, May 7, 2018). For Zareen, this was also the reason that digital relationships on inter alia social media need to start from personal relationships first. “But euh... some applications, like WhatsApp or this for like talking, chatting, like that, it’s starting from see the people. First beginning to see people, then if you like to get more connected or being in touch with the person, yeah of course you use the...” (Zareen, May 11, 2018).

Altogether, these findings on the digital communication of the participants do not fit with the findings of Komito (2011) about ‘virtual migrants’. Digital communication did not decrease the motivation of the participants to make social contacts and thus, it did not decrease their participation in host-society, nor did it slow down the process of their integration in the Netherlands. Moreover, none of the other purposes of using digital devices stimulated the participants to isolate themselves from other host-society members either. Thus, the findings do not show a fit with the second working hypothesis of this thesis. This hypothesis reads as follows:

H2: ‘Having access to ICTs stimulates refugees in the Netherlands to isolate themselves from other host-society members, thereby decreasing their willingness to socially integrate in the host-country.’

Coming back to the findings of Kaufmann (2018) about the significant potential of smartphones for the integration of refugees, the findings of this study indicate that such potential for digital devices in general may be somewhat limited. As aforementioned, digital devices are certainly a helping tool for refugees, but some participants had a mixed feeling about the implications of such devices. According to them, we should not forget about the importance of social life, face-to-face communication and personal relations when focusing on the process of social integration. These aspects may be even more important than having access to digital devices. It is at this point where the findings of this study cannot be shown to have any kind of embeddedness in the arguments or findings of previously performed studies. In other words, these striking findings related to the importance of social life can be considered as new findings.

Focusing on this importance, Yusuf pointed out that “(...) integration is not only with the smartphones or the digital devices. It is in you. If you really will to do it, to integrate, you can do it. You can contact with so many people. You can meet and discuss with them. You can integrate easily. You can ask people if you don’t know anything, you know. You can integrate in the social life.”

(Yusuf, May 7, 2018). Emre indicated that integration is indeed about the ‘small’ or ‘simple’ things in daily life: “I am going with the trains and I am taking, buying, shopping. These are part of integration in Netherlands for me.” “It’s a different thing for new people, but part by part, day by day, you may do it.” (Emre, May 7, 2018).

For Zareen, the best way to socially integrate was via her voluntary work. She indicated that during such work, “(...) you see the new culture. For example, mostly what they wear, how they greeting, how they eating, what they eat, what they like, what the timing of the euh... weekdays, working and rest and what they do mostly, what kind of euhm... entertain they like.” (Zareen, May 11, 2018). In other words, via her voluntary work Zareen was able to learn many things about the Dutch culture or society in general. She considered the face-to-face communication with others to be more important than whatever she could learn on digital devices. For her, this mostly had to do with the fact that during face-to-face communication, “(...) you feel the energy, you feel the real purpose of this conversation.” (Zareen, May 11, 2018). By contrast, she did not consider digital communications to be particularly ‘real’ or useful with regards to social integration.

Three factors that helped or stimulated the participants with their integration in the social life were mentioned in the interviews. First of all, some of the participants indicated that Dutch people were always willing to help them with all kinds of problems they experienced in their daily lives, which made the process of integration easier for them. Besides, the fact that everyone in the Netherlands is ‘equal’ and that nobody is limited with regards to learning opportunities was also considered to be an important factor. Hamid pointed out the following: “(...) now I learn from here. You can always do. Here in Holland everyone is the same. You have not limited if you want to learn something. You have opportunity to learn. So that is good thing.” (Hamid, May 8, 2018). The voluntary work of Zareen, which she requested at the AZC herself, can be seen as an example of such a learning opportunity. Lastly, the fact that most of the people in Dutch society are able to speak English certainly helped all of the participants in their daily lives, although the majority of them considered that for a refugee in the Netherlands, being able to speak Dutch is more convenient and important in order to fully integrate in society.

5. Conclusion

This study shows that refugees living in an AZC in the Netherlands have access to ICTs and do not experience significant difficulties in the use of such digital devices. Hence, no clear connection with the so-called ‘digital divide’ is found. In general, four purposes for which the refugees use digital devices are recognised: (1) to communicate with others, (2) to learn the Dutch language, (3) to search for general information, and (4) to arrange practical issues related to transportation and translation. For the first purpose, refugees mainly use a smartphone and social media. By contrast, for the second they mainly use a computer or laptop. A smartphone was considered to be more convenient for the third and fourth purposes due to the fact that the device is easily transportable, but a computer is also used for these purposes. Altogether, having access to digital devices and the internet opens up personal opportunities for refugees and thus, the findings show that these devices can certainly be considered helping tools for refugees in the Netherlands with regards to their social integration in the host-country. A specific example of the relevance of such helping tools is the fact that refugees can use digital devices to search for essential information for their integration exam. By means of none of the recognised purposes of using digital devices does having access to the devices stimulate refugees to isolate themselves from other host-society members and to decrease their participation in the host-society in any way.

Most striking in this study are the emerging findings related to the limitations of the potential of digital devices, which can be considered as new findings and contribute to the current knowledge existing in this field of research. The devices are indeed considered as helping tools, but refugees cannot solve every challenge related to social integration with the help of digital technologies. Instead, we should not forget about the perhaps even more significant importance of personal relations, face-to-face communication and the social life of a refugee when focusing on opportunities for social integration. Thus, for policies or programmes focusing on the integration of newcomers in the Netherlands, the recommendation is given to not expect too much of the learning potential of the use of ICTs only by such newcomers. Instead, the focus should be on ways to enable or stimulate these persons to connect with other host-society members in real life. Providing them with enough opportunities to work somewhere on a voluntary basis is an example of this.

In the background section of this thesis, the question originated if and how ICTs could help refugees in the Netherlands when they are not able to ‘seriously’ integrate any further. Could it help them to overcome particular difficulties or limitations? All in all, the findings of this study show that to some extent, ICTs help refugees with issues related to the aforementioned purposes of using digital devices. However, partly depending on the attitude of a refugee towards the concept of social integration, the implications of having access to ICTs on social integration opportunities for refugees in the Netherlands can be rather limited. This shows that the answer to the research question of this thesis is somewhat two-sided. This research question reads as follows:

RQ: 'In which ways does having access to Information and Communication Technologies for refugees in the Netherlands influence their social integration opportunities in the host-society?'

Based on the rather strict attitudes and ideas of some of the participants towards the process of social integration, one could argue that the fact that the new integration policy in the Netherlands shifted the main integration responsibilities to migrants themselves does not have to be a negative matter necessarily. This also has to do with the fact that some participants indicated that they experienced a high number of learning opportunities in the host-country and that some of them even directly indicated to be in favour of the Dutch integration policy. In the background section of this thesis it has been argued that the current integration policy in the Netherlands is too complicated and that things need to change in order to prevent a new 'integration disaster' (NOS, 2017; De Volkskrant, 2016). Altogether, despite the fact that the findings of this study cannot be directly linked to it, the argument is made that the integration policy in the Netherlands does not necessarily need to change into a more pro-active policy for society in general, which is argued by RTL Nieuws (2017). However, based on the findings on the importance of the social life of a refugee and the fact that the participants stressed that the hospitality of Dutch persons truly helped them, the author of this thesis wants to stress the role that other host-society members can play by taking an hospitable position towards refugees and by helping them whenever they are in need of such help.

In addition, by now it has become clear that having access to ICTs enables refugees to address one part of the challenges related to social integration only and thus, refugees in the Netherlands might still experience particular difficulties or limitations in the actual process that they cannot easily overcome themselves. An example of a specific case in which such limitations are clearly visible has already been mentioned in the background section, namely when asylum seekers need to wait a long time before getting to know whether or not they will receive a temporary residence permit in the Netherlands (NOS, 2017). Due to the fact that digital technologies can only partly help them in this period, the author of this thesis stresses that the utmost attention needs to be given to enabling newcomers to integrate as early as possible in the country.

On the one hand, particular strengths related to the research design of this thesis are easily distinguished. First of all, the findings are not limited to one particular type of digital device. Instead, they cover all aspects of ICTs that are used by refugees. Second, the study did not only focus on the positive implications of having access to ICTs, but also on the limitations related to these implications. In other words, it focused on a much broader context. Third, the study has a clear practical relevance due to the insights that it delivered in the exact purposes for which refugees in the Netherlands use digital devices and the opportunities for social integration that are connected to this. Moreover, the scientific relevance is clear as well, due to the fact that this study presented new findings on the limitations of the potential of having access to digital devices and the perhaps even more significant importance of personal relations, face-to-face communication and the social life of a refugee.

On the other hand, the weaknesses or limitations of the research design and connected to this, the recommendations for further research, are clear as well. First, future research should investigate whether or not the findings of this study are undermined when examining the implications of having access to ICTs for a higher number of participants, living in more than one AZC in the Netherlands, with a higher number of different nationalities, a more equal number of females included, and perhaps a broader difference in ages. Such further research is particularly relevant due to the fact that the only participant in this study who indicated that his use of ICTs was significantly different compared to before he came to the Netherlands was also the only participant coming from the African continent. Hence, it needs to be investigated whether or not African refugees in general experience more difficulties with regards to the adoption of digital technologies in a new host-society.

Second, a potential weakness of this study might be related to the fact that all of the participants were able to speak English to a reasonable extent, which might mean that these participants were more ‘developed’ or used to Western societies in general than refugees who do not speak English. If this is the case, it might mean that for less developed refugees the implications of a ‘digital divide’ are more extreme, or that the issue of isolation which has been addressed in the second working hypothesis of this thesis is different for them due to the fact that their views on the concept of integration might be different. Hence, further investigation of this matter is required.

The fact that the author of this thesis was not an experienced or trained interviewer can potentially be a third weakness of this study. Due to this lack of experience, the interviews and the data used in this study might to some extent be biased. An example of this is that by means of the exact wording used by the interviewer, his own views and ideas about the importance of ICTs or the concept of social integration might have become clear to the participants. Subsequently, this might have shaped the answers given by the participants, including the rather strict attitudes and ideas of some of the participants towards the concept of social integration. This type of bias can be considered ‘social desirability bias’, which involves respondents answering questions in an inaccurate way in order to present themselves in a more socially acceptable light (Lavrakas, 2008). At the time of writing, the presence of this bias and the aforementioned weaknesses remains uncertain however.

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