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# Refugee integration and social media: a local and experiential perspective

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## ABSTRACT

The refugee crisis has spurred the rapid development of creative technology and social media applications to tackle the problem of refugee integration in Europe. In this article, a qualitative study with 18 refugees from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan is presented in order to investigate the uses and purposes of social media associated to the different areas of refugee integration in the Netherlands. The results indicate that social media networking sites were particularly relevant for refugee participants to acquire language and cultural competences, as well as to build both bonding and bridging social capital. Another important finding concerns the role of government, host society and the agency of refugee actors in determining the way refugees experience social media. Building on these results, a theoretical model for analyzing refugee integration through social media is demonstrated.

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## KEYWORDS

Refugee integration; social media; sociological approach to technology; refugees' experiences

## Introduction

The current EU refugee crisis has shed new light on the importance of digital technologies in improving the lives of displaced people in various ways. This paper explores the relationships between social media use and refugee integration processes by looking at how refugees are utilizing these technologies for adapting to the new environment. Drawing on Ager and Strang (2008) integration framework for refugees and asylum seekers, this study empirically examines how social media interacts with the key areas shaping the practices and outcomes of integration (e.g., employment, education, linguistic competence, cultural belonging, social capital, rights and citizenship). Moreover, the use of a sociological approach to technology (Williams, 1997) provides theoretical insights into the influences of individual and contextual forces on refugees' perceptions and experiences of integration, with implications for their social media practices during settlement.

This paper will enhance our understanding of whether social networking sites are actually transforming integration processes and to what extent social forces determine the potentiality of social media technologies for the various areas of refugee integration.

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Building on the results of a qualitative study with 18 refugees from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan living in Amsterdam, this study demonstrates a theoretical model that focuses on the role of government, host society and the agency of refugee migrants in impacting the way refugees experience social media for integration in the Netherlands.

## Conceptualizing the refugee integration process

The issue of integration has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of migration. Although the term has been usually used to refer to the adaptation process of immigrants in the European context (Scholten & Van Nispen, 2015), scholars do not appear to have a consensual understanding of the meaning, nature and goals of integration (Da Lomba, 2010). One common view of 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 (Da Lomba, 2010). Hence, this view of integration is in line with the assimilatory perspective and states that migrants should abandon their own cultures and values and adopt those of the new society. Scholarly criticism of the assimilation approach argues that those who do not manage to achieve the same adaptation goals and therefore fail to integrate become a problem for host societies (Strang & Ager, 2010). Another problem with this approach to integration is that it does not recognize the cultural and social diversity of refugee and immigrant populations (Da Lomba, 2010).

Another view of integration defines it as a *two-way process* characterized by the involvement of refugees and migrants as well as host societies in the adaptation of newcomers (Ager & Strang, 2004). 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. In his influential theory of acculturation, Berry (2006) also claims that the process of integration involves both minority and dominant groups in order to allow them to negotiate their cultural differences and avoid conflict.

A broader perspective of integration includes several factors related to the context of reception that can affect the settlement of refugees in a country (Portes & Rumbault, 1996; Strang & Ager, 2010). Among these factors, the policies of the host government and the attitudes toward immigrants in the larger society are directly related to the notions of integration adopted in a particular setting. In Europe, the different understandings of citizenship and 'belongings' help shape policy responses to refugee integration processes (Scholten & Van Nispen, 2015). In some contexts, for instance, where integration means 'assimilation', the rights of a refugee to asylum will depend on his/her ability to share a set of qualities that define the new society, constraining the individual agency of refugees in the processes of integration (Mulvey, 2013).

At the same time, the perceptions and attitudes of the host society toward refugees can also influence their ability to identify with the new culture and create a sense of belonging (Akhtar & Choi, 2004; Lewis, 2005). For instance, the work of Kirkwood, McKinlay, and McVittie (2013) found that assimilatory views of integration among members of the host society served to justify hostility toward refugees in Scotland. Such results may have negative consequences for the experiences of refugees, as they were, in general, perceived as

unwilling to integrate and therefore a threat to social cohesion (Lewis, 2005). Social support from host society is critical to the integration process (Akhtar & Choi, 2004).

Equally important, the perceptions and attitudes of refugees in relation to their integration can also shape adaptation processes (Strang & Ager, 2010). Research showed that refugees experience integration at a local level rather than integrating with national values of the host society (Mulvey, 2013). More specifically, studies comparing integration across various EU countries found that the refugees themselves have different views and aspirations regarding their integration, irrespective of their status in the country where they seek protection (Castles, Korac, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2002). Because of theoretical and empirical inconsistencies in what constitute the criteria, processes and contexts of integration, Strang and Ager (2010) developed a *multidimensional* approach that divides the concept into several areas and domains that can be used in the analysis of the different notions and variables of integration across settings.

### **A multidimensional approach to the process of refugee integration**

In order to develop a coherent framework for investigating the dynamic and multifaceted integration of refugees, Ager and Strang (2004) based their major study on conceptual research on the different notions of integration as well as on empirical work in settings of refugee integration in the UK. The first sources of data for the conceptual validity of the integration framework included documentary analysis of several EU Integration measurements and indicators and a substantial body of 'integration' literature review in order to identify recurrent themes across the different notions of the term (Ager & Strang, 2008). In addition, applied fieldwork in the form of qualitative interviews with refugee and non-refugee actors was used to elaborate on preliminary conceptual analysis. Subsequently, data from a national cross-sectional survey with refugees allowed for the identification of potential clusters and connections between themes that would support the definition of the proposed domains of integration. The meaningfulness and utility of the framework for policy-makers and practitioners working with refugees and refugee-impacted communities were then assessed in the verification phase. As a result of evidence from the above data sources, the authors proposed a multidimensional approach to integration that includes the following areas of refugee integration: (1) *Means and markets*; (2) *Social connections*-networks (3) *Facilitators* such as language and cultural knowledge and (4) *Foundation and citizenship*, such as political engagement and participation in the community.

The indicators within the first area of *means and markers* include the domains of (1) employment, (2) education, (3) housing and (4) health. These four domains refer to the 'public face' of integration (Da Lomba, 2010). As pointed out by Ager and Strang (2004, p. 3), accomplishments in these domains are considered not only as 'markers' of successful integration outcomes, but also as 'means' to support positive integration in other areas of integration.

The domains within the second area of *social connections* stress the importance of relationships in the process of refugee integration. These domains are considered the more 'private sphere' of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Based on the work of Putnam (2000) on social capital, Ager and Strang (2008, p. 166) have established different forms of relationships that are relevant for integration: (1) social bonds (connections within a

community defined by, for example, ethnic, national or religious identity); (2) social bridges (connections with members of other communities) and (3) social links (connections with institutions, including local and central government services). Research within this framework is widely supported by qualitative studies on refugee and non-refugee communities (Ager & Strang, 2008; Croucher, 2011; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Komito, 2011).

The third area of *facilitators* assesses three key domains of cultural competence that are necessary for individuals to effectively integrate: (1) language; (2) cultural knowledge and (3) safety and security. Language is a crucial indicator of integration and has been used extensively in acculturation research (Reece & Palmgreen, 2000). According to Ager and Strang (2004, p. 4), ‘cultural knowledge refers to refugees obtaining knowledge of the dominant culture as well as non-refugees acquiring knowledge of the circumstances and culture of refugees’. Previous studies have focused widely on migrants’ knowledge acquisition of cultural elements of their host societies (Peeters & D’Haenens, 2005). On the other hand, the domain of safety and security deals with issues of racial harassment and fear of crime. Although this domain can be reflected in the various areas and domains of the integration framework, Ager and Strang (2004) argue about the importance of creating an exclusive category assessing issues of racial discrimination, as it is a factor that can affect the establishment of relationships and therefore intrinsically linked to the wider process of integration.

The fourth area of *foundation (rights and citizenship)* assesses the extent to which refugees are provided with the basis for full and equal engagement within their host society (Ager & Strang, 2008). It focuses on the enablement of rights for those ultimately granted full refugee status or leave to remain (e.g., rates of applications for citizenship by refugees; number of refugees voting in local elections; access to welfare resources, etc.).

Although the integration framework used in this study was initially used to assess the work of organizations and policy-makers in the distinct areas of refugee integration, Ager and Strang (2008) stress the possibility of applying these areas and domains of refugee integration to other variables that also play a pivotal role in this process. This study focuses on social media as an important factor in the lives of migrants experiencing adaptation in a new culture.

## **Social media and migrant integration processes**

In her seminal work on acculturation, Kim (2008) defines ‘communication’ as a key dimension of immigrants’ adaptation, with media playing a variety of roles in this process. In recent years, however, digital technology has the potential to transform the settlement of migrants in the various areas of sociopolitical, economic and cultural integration (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Thus, new technologies can provide migrants with general information about rights, citizenship, and local migrant support services, help overcome feelings of isolation by making information available to migrants in their own languages as well as cultural practices of both their home and new destination countries (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), promote language learning through training programs online and the inclusion of marginalized immigrant youths (McGregor & Siegel, 2013).

More specifically in relation to social media, the capabilities for transformation afforded by this type of technology can be primarily linked to important innovation in communication and collaboration processes in the context of migration (Komito,

2011). The differential role of social media compared to other Internet-based applications relies on the development of migrants' social networks and the possibility of users to consume, produce and share content and opinions within and across networks (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Not surprisingly, most studies on the relationships between social media and integration processes have focused on the area of social connections (Brekke, 2008; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Sawyer & Chen, 2012), as social networking sites have provided migrants with new forms of interaction with both home and host societies (Komito, 2011). Research by Elias and Lemish (2009) on the use of Internet among teenage immigrants from Russia living in Israel showed that they use online chats to interact with local peers. The study by Sawyer and Chen (2012) also found similar patterns of social media use among Chinese immigrant students in the US.

Similarly, social media platforms have been widely used among migrants in order to maintain contacts with family members and friends in their country of origin (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Komito, 2011; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). The role of social media for bonding social capital is mainly rooted in the migrants' need to receive emotional support, overcome feelings of loneliness and monitor friends and family back home (Komito, 2011). Consequently, some scholars have argued that social media may decelerate the process of integration into the host society, as newcomers become less dependent upon finding friends and develop social connection in their host society (Brekke, 2008; Komito, 2011). In contrast, research has provided strong evidence that maintaining social relationships in the home country and being associated with transnational online communities can help migrants overcome adjustment challenges instead of producing social segregation in the new society (Elias & Lemish, 2009). Hence, Komito (2011) states that it is not yet clear how social media and new technologies are changing previous patterns of migration and advises that more research is needed to further understand whether such technologies actually facilitate or hinder integration processes in various societal spheres.

As an attempt to examine the impact of social media on the sociocultural adaptation of migrants, Croucher (2011) proposed a theoretical model based on the analysis of categories that tap into issues of perception, identification and interaction with the host culture, as well as the use of language, media and adoption of cultural norms. The present study aims to contribute to this growing area of research by extending the analysis of the role of social media in the different areas of integration (Ager & Strang, 2004). Moreover, a focus on participants with refugee backgrounds provides an important opportunity to advance our understanding of integration processes in view of the contemporary European migration crisis.

In light of the above, this research tries to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences and uses of social media among refugees?

RQ2: Are social media applications contributing to the process of refugee integration? And, if they are, how are social media assisting refugees in the various areas of integration?

## **Social media and refugee integration from a sociological perspective**

The view that social media are impacting refugee integration processes can also be linked to McLuhan's reductionist theory of technological determinism, which states that technologies shape how individuals in a society think, act and operate (Adler, 2008). Critics of

technological determinism argue variously that ‘the effects of any given technology depend mainly on how it is implemented which is in turn socially determined’ (Adler, 2008, p. 4). Sociological approaches to technology do not reject the impact of media on social processes, but claim that media technologies are subject to social forces that help shape their uses and functions (Mosemghvdlishvili & Jansz, 2013; Williams, 1997). When applied to studies of migration, this approach can be particularly relevant because it takes into account the various forces (sociopolitical, economic, cultural and individual) shaping migrants’ perceptions and practices of integration. Hence, many scholars have focused on the individual and contextual characteristics of migrants to explain the factors affecting the use they make of different types of media during settlement (Alencar & Deuze, 2017; Chen, 2012). It has been largely demonstrated, for instance, that cultural and socio-economic factors of individual migrants, such as language, communication styles, cultural background, level of education and age (Chen, 2012; Sawyer & Chen, 2012), as well as attitudes toward integration can cause significant differences with respect to media use in the course of their adaptation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Peeters & D’Haenens, 2005; Reece & Palmgreen, 2000). Similarly, scholars have found that the sociopolitical conditions of the context of reception (e.g., integration policies, attitudes of the host society towards newcomers, labor market conditions, etc.) can enable or constrain migrants’ media practices and developments (Alencar & Deuze, 2017; Portes & Rumbault, 1996).

While this study substantiates the role of both individual and contextual forces on migrants’ view of integration and consequently, on their ability to make decisions concerning media choice, few researchers have investigated the link between these forces, not only in relation to social media uses, but also during refugee integration processes. Accordingly, this study argues that the impact of social media on the experiences of refugees depends on how they perceive integration in their host society, which may be interpreted in light of both the sociopolitical (contextual) constraints and their own agency in the process. Following from this rationale, this research addresses the following questions:

RQ3: What are the refugees’ perceptions of integration in their context of reception?

RQ4: How do refugees’ perceptions of integration influence their uses of social media?

## **Refugee migration in the Netherlands**

In 2015, the number of asylum applications in Europe has surpassed those in any of the last 30 years (Ministry of Security and Justice [IND], 2016) and this surge in refugee migration has put into question the ability of EU countries to integrate the newcomers into their host societies (Benton & Glennie, 2016). Much of the instability in managing this refugee crisis stems from the failure of the European Union to predict and provide quick and effective support to the recent flow of refugees arising from conflicts in the Middle East. In addition, the crisis has emphasized the lack of cohesion between different policies and programs in this area, as well as the rising nationalist sentiment in many European countries, affecting the development of a unified solution to growing refugee challenge (Scholten & Van Nispen, 2015).

In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Security and Justice (2016) report shows that the number of asylum applications lodged was the highest since 1999, with a total of 58,880 applications coming mostly from nationals of Syria, Eritrea, Iraq and Afghanistan

(IND, 2016). Despite increasing refugee migration, the Netherlands does not stand significantly in terms of statistics (unlike Germany and Sweden), but it is deemed more steady than some other countries with greater oscillations.

Integration policies in the Netherlands stress the (cultural) assimilation of refugees and migrants, which means that they need to learn the Dutch language and demonstrate an understanding of the fundamental values of Dutch society in order to be granted admission to the country (International Catholic Migration Commission [ICMC], 2013). At the same time, the Netherlands has a long tradition in welcoming different groups of migrants and refugees and is known for innovative approaches to integration at the city level with the support of local governments (IND, 2016). The city of Amsterdam, for example, has a huge number of ‘pilot actions’ running on the themes of refugee integration. Altogether, these factors make the Netherlands a very interesting case for the analysis of the complex and challenging process of refugee integration in European societies.

### Method and sampling design

The qualitative method of conducting in-depth interviews was considered the most appropriate to address the research questions, as it provided the study with detailed information about participants’ thoughts and experiences on the impact social media has on their integration. The interviews were carried out at the Asylum Seekers Center (COA) in the city of Amsterdam during the period August–September 2016. Challenges in recruitment of refugees led the researcher to include the participation of a cultural insider (a Syrian linguistics expert with a refugee background), who was living in the center at the time of the study and assisted the researcher with recruiting and enrolling research subjects through his social network and its extended associations (snowball sampling method). In total, 18 refugee migrants from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan were interviewed. Most participants had been living in the Netherlands for less than a year and were either in the process for obtaining asylum status or had been granted refugee status. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants’ gender, origin, age, time in the Netherlands and educational background.

**Table 1.** Key demographics of refugee participants in the Netherlands.

Participant’s ID	Origin	Age	Duration of stay in the Netherlands	Educational background
Man 1	Syria	31	11 months	Bachelor degree in Economics
Man 2	Syria	21	10 months	Bachelor degree in Economics
Man 3	Syria	33	8.5 months	Bachelor degree in English literature
Man 4	Afghanistan	28	9 months	Bachelor degree in Literature
Man 5	Eritrea	39	9 months	Bachelor degree in Health
Man 6	Syria	45	12 months	Bachelor degree in Economics
Man 7	Syria	24	11 months	Former middle school student
Man 8	Syria	38	8.5 months	Bachelor degree in Architecture
Man 9	Syria	23	12 months	Bachelor degree in Accounting
Man 10	Syria	31	12 months	Bachelor degree in Computer engineering
Man 11	Eritrea	30	12 months	Former Engineering student
Man 12	Syria/Iraq	18	8 months	Former middle school student
Woman 1	Syria	40	10 months	Bachelor degree in Economics
Woman 2	Syria	37	10 months	Former middle school student
Woman 3	Syria	60	9 months	Former high school student
Woman 4	Syria	45	12 months	Bachelor degree in Economics
Woman 5	Syria	45	5 months	Bachelor degree in Sport
Woman 6	Syria	43	12 months	Former high school student



Having a Syrian contact as the main connection to at least initial study subjects might have inhibited access to non-Syrian participants, but at the same time it is important to note that the large number of Syrian refugees residing in the center also made it difficult for the researcher to reach out to other refugee populations. The fact that Syria has different cultures living together in one country provided the researcher with the opportunity to include a sample that reflects the diversity of the Syrian population.

The interviews lasted on an average for one hour and were conducted with assistance from the Syrian cultural insider in the case of participants who lacked sufficient command of English. The interviews focused on the main patterns of Internet use, while distinguishing between social media applications and Internet in general; the motives for social media and Internet usage; and perceptions and expectations of the role of social media for promoting refugee integration in their host societies. In addition, a series of open-ended questions were asked about their vision of integration in the Netherlands, such as the importance the participants assign to various aspects of life in the Netherlands (language, communication, cultural adoption, work, education, etc.); and their thoughts on what is necessary for a refugee migrant to do to feel integrated into Dutch society.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to enable thematic analysis (Boeije, 2010). Following from the deconstruction of these interviews, emerging themes and categories such as the uses and purposes of social media among refugees, as well as their perceptions of integration were coded (open coding). Subsequently, these categories were scrutinized in order to find variances and nuances in meaning (axial coding). Finally, the main categories were selected and compared across data in order to facilitate theory building (selective coding). In the interest of diminishing the risk of biased results and enhancing the validity of the qualitative study, participants were instructed to review meaningful quotes and interpretations by the researcher immediately after the sessions.

Ethical and research governance approval were obtained by the Review Board Committee of the [*Anonymous university*] before interviews were conducted.

## Results

### *Social media use among refugees*

Overall, the findings revealed that all of the participants in the study have a greater preference for social media platforms over other Internet applications. Age and gender differences did not play a role in determining the participants' frequency and type of social media use in their early stage of integration. They used Facebook, Youtube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber and Google. In addition, the social media app Line was widely used among Syrian refugees, and it basically offers the same features of Skype. The average amount of time spent on social media was seven hours per day. All of the participants can access Internet on their mobile phones, providing more opportunities for them to log in on their social networking accounts multiple times a day.

Moreover, high levels of social media and Internet usage, in general, can be related to the great deal of spare time refugees have to spend on these sites. According to participants, life in the camps and centers can be very difficult and monotonous for each and every refugee. There are very few or no specific leisure or training activities for them, and this factor helps explain their greater need for these tools as a means to cope with

anxiety at the center. Prior to their arrival in the Netherlands, participants from Syria reported using less social media due to their busy working schedules in their homeland. For instance, one interviewee commented: ‘before the war, and when I was in Syria, I used to work there, so I was busy. Therefore, I used social media networks about one hour per day. But here in the Netherlands I use it all day’ (woman 1, Syria). In the case of a refugee from Afghanistan, he rarely used social media owing to limited Internet access in his home country (man 4).

In their discussions of social media use, they also highlighted the disadvantages of excessive social networking. Some participants found problematic that most people spend a great amount of time on social media, even though they recognize the importance of these platforms for their lives in the new country. Another point of criticism regards the credibility of information and content found in social media (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). As one interviewee put it: ‘we do not know exactly if this information is right or wrong. So I am not sure if this information is true or not, who published or who is the responsible for this information’ (man 7, Syria).

## ***Social media and the various areas of refugee integration***

### ***Means and markers***

As part of the Dutch asylum system, refugees are provided with basic orientation and resources (e.g., housing, health access, pocket money for food and clothing) at COA when they arrive in the Netherlands. During their stay at the center, refugees can also choose to work or study, but they must find their own jobs and/or educational financial support (ICMC, 2013). Interestingly, fewer than half of refugee participants mentioned that they use social media for acquiring information about employment, housing, personal health problems, training programs and the educational system in the Netherlands. Two discrete reasons emerged from the low functionality of social media applications in this area. First, although participants expressed awareness of the presence and relevance of social media when searching for housing, jobs or courses in the early stages of their resettlement, they very often highlight the major role of the individual and social connections in order to obtain the appropriate information about these domains of integration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

As I said if I want to look for information, I will ask a friend who will help me to find the right information ... because the content is in Dutch. So, I always go to ask a help of friends. I am looking for Hotel Management study, I got accepted, but I knew that it costs about euros 5000 and that is not working at all. Later on, a friend told me that you can do that via some organizations and institutions that help us to study online and get the certificate by buying for it. I could find tourism management and I wish that I can do whatever I want. (woman 6, Syria)

Second, the rise of informal refugee networks online is mainly linked to the part played by local organizations and communities in reshaping the integration experiences of refugees in these areas (Benton & Glennie, 2016). For example, almost all of the participants mentioned the successful case of the online Facebook page ‘Refugee Start Force’ devoted to the labor integration of refugees as a result of local community initiatives.

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the functionality of social media for orientation about practical issues of the host society (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). In all cases,

participants commented that they use social media for obtaining and sharing basic information about locations, transportation, shopping and market developments in the country.

### **Social connections**

In line with previous studies, social media applications are important tools for the refugee participants to build both bridging and bonding social capital (Peeters & D'Haenens, 2005).

I use it to communicate with my friends here in the Netherlands, friends of my country of origin, Afghanistan, communicate to give opinions, somebody in Brazil for example, we share content with him and opinion. I do not know if it helps us for adaptation, but we can learn the language of the new country, so it really helps in overcoming the problem of communication by learning the native language of the nation you live in. (man 4, Afghanistan)

As illustrated in the quote, social bridges can be related to the learning of the host country language as one of the main challenges of the refugee integration process. In all cases, participants demonstrated strong motivation to establish links with the native population because this form of contact can be highly beneficial for their adaptation, both in terms language and cultural learning (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Since opportunities to interact with host society through work relationships and/or studies remain limited for most participants, social media was used to coordinate intercultural meetings with the Dutch people. For example, one interview said:

Yes, there is a Facebook page for refugees and Dutch people, where they can organize activities. Two weeks ago, there was an activity in Amsterdam that was organized by this page; it is like a singer and some Dutch and Syrian guys, where we could touch basic Dutch people. So this page helped to promote this intercultural contact. (man 9, Syria)

In their accounts of the events surrounding intercultural contact with locals, the participants also emphasized the positive attitude and behavior of the host society toward refugees, and argued about the importance of receiving support from the natives to create this sense that they (can) belong to Dutch society (Akhtar & Choi, 2004).

For me ... what I notice is that Dutch people like refugees. There is no racism in the Netherlands. In Germany and Sweden the case is different, refugees are suffering there. (man 1, Syria)

As for bonding social capital, most of the participants' responses revealed that using social media to contact and stay updated with friends' and families' life helps them feel satisfied and receive the emotional support they need in order to address the challenges of living in a new country (Komito, 2011).

On Facebook communities, a group of people gives us advices that we need to be patient and gives an emotional support that everything would be ok. It is almost positive, and it has a positive influence. I have a friend from Syria, who lost everything in Syria, he was really crazy. He said his brother is alive. He was too happy to find him alive. It is very good always to have friends, we need to contact people. It is almost positive, and it has a positive influence. (man 4, Afghanistan)

At the same time, social media apps were also useful to establish social links with Dutch immigration offices, lawyers and refugee centers. 'Refugees are using social media pages of these institutions to integrate or to start integration' (man 11, Eritrea).

### **Facilitators**

Ager and Strang (2004) state that refugees start their integration process from the moment they arrive in the host society, even though they are not assigned legal status, as in the case of other migrants. In the Netherlands, refugees sometimes have to wait almost a year to receive the residence permit and only after being granted legal status can they apply for civic integration courses in order to demonstrate that they have sufficient knowledge of Dutch language and culture and are therefore apt to integrate into Dutch society (ICMC, 2013). In this sense, the same integration requirements given to other migrants are given to refugees (Strang & Ager, 2010), which means that they are responsible for independently finding their own integration courses and language tests. In this respect, social media applications have proven to be of great utility. Participants reported finding their way through these technologies for language and cultural learning even before they received their residence permit. For example, an interviewee said: 'social media is helping a lot to learn the Dutch, because you can search for You-Tube, and follow so many videos, and you can start your first step of learning the Dutch language' (man 1, Syria).

As for the interactions between social media and the domain of safety and security issues, two divergent and conflicting discourses have emerged. Whilst a minority mentioned that social media might help Dutch people change their images and conceptions about the refugees, all agreed that social media has not reduced discrimination and racism and believe that social media may even reinforce stereotypical images of refugees fleeing from war in Syria and other African countries, as well as negative impressions of Islam. In this particular domain, the agency of individuals plays a greater role in this process. Almost in all cases, participants considered that the individual's views, attitudes and behaviors are more likely to mitigate racism and discrimination in the context of their own intercultural experiences with Dutch natives.

It depends on the person himself, because when I am open minded, when I accept and tolerate, when I have the ability and the wish to know more people, to be a Dutchman, it will help me to be the person who eliminates the stereotypical image. The way I introduce myself to Dutch people, the first impression that lasts forever for everybody, is something good to eliminate the stereotypes from both parties. (man 3, Syria)

Despite the negative perceptions of social media, participants believe that these networks could help fix stereotypes toward refugees across Europe. For example, one participant highlighted the importance of creating more initiatives like Facebook pages and groups that include information about the habits, the languages and the tradition of every culture, and that promote more activities and meetings for intercultural dialog (man 7, Syria).

### **Foundation**

In the domain of rights and citizenship for refugees, Facebook communities were used by few participants as sources of information about immigration procedures, laws and other legal issues of taxes. The role of social media in this foundational area of integration

consisted mainly of assisting refugees with information about legal services and applications, as finding information in the website of government institutions can sometimes be a very arduous task (male 4, Afghanistan).

### **Perceptions of integration**

Across the sample of participants, both the one- and two-way approaches to integration were used to define their perception of the process. In line with the assimilatory view, participants' discourses revolved around the notions of cultural adoption, language acquisition and respect for Dutch rules and social norms. This view was echoed by the majority of respondents, as illustrated in the quotes below.

In the Netherlands, I think that language is the most important thing. Integration is a normal process in the Netherlands. (man 10, Syria)

I have not met any of the Dutch people in person yet, but I wish to meet them and be close to them because I can learn through them many things and I can be aware of their habits, traditions and culture. (woman 14, Syria)

On the other hand, a small number of participants (less than a half) shared the view that integration is a two-way process and argued about the need to protect their own cultural identity while assimilating into the Dutch culture. Also, a common view expressed by participants supporting the two-way approach was that the involvement between individual and host society plays a fundamental role for successful adaptation (Akhtar & Choi, 2004).

Society is also important to make you integrate easily. When host society is helpful and open, refugees can integrate easily. Integration also depends on the person himself. (man 10, Syria)

Furthermore, when asked about the importance of the different domains of integration at the level of the individual refugee, the participants' views surfaced mainly in relation to Dutch policy rhetoric of assimilation (Scholten & Van Nispen, 2015). In this sense, language and cultural learning were frequently and consistently present in our data. The majority of participants put great emphasis on the importance of first learning Dutch to communicate with locals and understand how Dutch society works in order to have access to the labor market, educational system and acquire citizenship rights (man 3, Syria).

In a similar vein, integration is a process shaped considerably by the refugees' eagerness to stay and assimilate into their host country (Ager & Strang, 2004). For instance, participants' greater use of social media technologies in the areas of facilitators and social connections resonated with their strong motivation to belong to Dutch society. Finally, there was a sense of agreement amongst participants that their positive perception of Dutch community was also reflected in their intention to integrate and use social media to connect with members of the host culture.

### **Discussion**

This study has shown that social media technologies were particularly relevant for refugees within the areas of social connections and facilitators (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011). The majority of participants reported being connected to Facebook groups aimed at

improving intercultural contact between Dutch natives and refugees, as well as other social media sites for the acquisition of language and cultural competences. Similarly, this study also points at the relevance of social media among refugees for contacting family and friends in the home country in order to obtain social and emotional support. The findings of this investigation complement those of previous studies (Komito, 2011) and highlight that in the case of refugees, the use of social media for coping with these needs can be even more pronounced and crucial to tackling the challenges of integration.

With regard to the area of means and markers, the role of civil society actors and local organizations was considered to be more valuable than the affordances of social media technologies. For instance, participants highlighted the importance of (offline) social connections for obtaining more reliable and accurate information about issues related to the Dutch labor market and educational system (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Yet, the use of social media for orientation in these domains was guided by strategic choices of the platforms available, as not all information found in social media can be trustworthy.

In addition, very little is still known about the functions of social media in guiding refugees through government procedures and other valuable services. Previous reports concerned about whether existing apps were duplicating non user-friendly government websites or failing to reach the intended audiences (Benton & Glennie, 2016). In this study, participants' perceptions and limited use of social media applications for foundational purposes provide evidence for this matter.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from the interview data concerns the influence of three main forces on the views expressed by refugees regarding what it means to be integrated in the Netherlands: the host government, host society and individual agency of refugees. At one end of the spectrum are the refugees whose perspectives were rooted in assimilatory ideals; these views are closely related to the way integration policies are shaped in the host country and reflect their responsibility to acquire cultural and civic knowledge. Toward the other end of the spectrum are those who view integration as an individual achievement that depends on the refugees' personal characteristics and decision to adapt. In this study, the agency of the refugee in this process resonates with the two-way approach or intercultural notion of integration, in which the individual can find a balance between both cultures. The host society falls in the middle of the spectrum and refers to the level of perceived social support from civil society and local community actors (Akhtar & Choi, 2004). This study revealed that positive interactions with members of Dutch society have great impact on the refugees' perceptions and practices of integration at a local level (Mulvey, 2013).

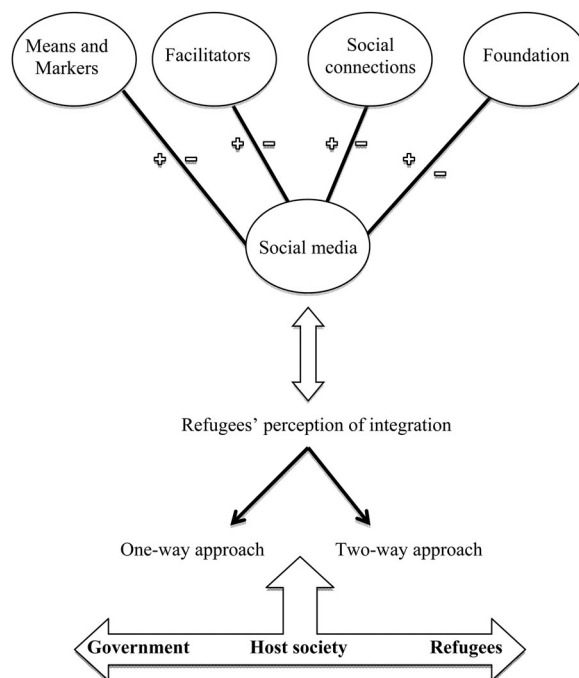
When analyzing how (and if) the three forces shaping refugees' perceptions of integration are reflected in their social media practices, it was possible to observe that a relationship exists between the influence of the context of reception on the refugees' acquisition of new social and cultural capital and their use of social media for those integration needs (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). More specifically, this study has demonstrated that Dutch integration policies and positive attitudes of the host society toward refugees explain much of the respondents' social media usage for learning the language and bridging with members of the new group.

In this regard, Strang and Ager (2010) called attention for further work to investigate the effects of government policies on the way refugees perceive and experience integration, as well as on how host societies' perceptions and attitudes toward refugees can affect their

settlement in terms of actions (e.g., social support, discriminatory acts, etc.). These findings, while preliminary, contribute to this neglected area of migration research. Unlike prior studies (Mulvey, 2013), the present research provides some empirical evidence to support the relationship between sociopolitical structural forces and the refugees' understandings of belonging and the process of integration itself. Yet, refugees also created their own accounts of integration, which do not accurately reflect the Dutch assimilatory model. For example, participants emphasized the importance of bonding with family, friends and home culture and social media as the main channel for these practices. Hence, the refugees' use of these technologies for social and cultural bonding in this research can be linked to differences regarding their perceptions of integration (either one-way or two-way view) (Castles et al., 2002).

Building on these results, this study proposes a model that can be used to demonstrate the (potential) relationships between the three forces shaping refugees' perceptions of integration, which may influence refugees' experiences and consequently, the ways in which they use social media for the different areas of the integration framework (see Figure 1).

Since this study was limited to one context of integration, it was not possible to evaluate how and whether the interactions between individual and structural forces can also shape the functions of social media for integration in other relevant countries receiving large influxes of refugees. Second, given the small sample of participants and its restricted range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, considerably more work will need to be done to determine the validity and applicability of the model with large-scale and more diverse refugee populations and across time. Finally, considering the active use of social media among refugees and the influence of sociopolitical forces on their media



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model of refugee integration through social media (RISM).

practices, this study suggests that greater efforts are needed to ensure more effective coordination between government policies and the actions of local actors for the implementation of digital media services to tackle the challenges of structural and socio-cultural integration of refugees in EU societies.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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