

# **“Mediatized refugees”: Exploring the role of digital media technologies in the acculturation of refugees**

Student name: Nora van Ouwerkerk

Student number: 362243

Supervisor: Dr. Amanda Paz Alencar

Master Media Studies: Media, Culture and Society

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam

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## ABSTRACT

*From 2015 onwards, Europe has witnessed a large influx of refugees. One European country, the Netherlands, predominantly received refugees originating from Syria and Eritrea. Once refugees arrive in the Netherlands and request asylum, the acculturation process begins; they are demanded by the host government to assimilate into the host culture by acquiring the language and the cultural practices of the host society. Language and cultural knowledge are considered to be important facilitators of successful acculturation, without obtaining knowledge of the culture and the language of their new surroundings refugees are unable to participate in the host country. Previous exploratory media-centric studies have found that digital media technologies are to an increasing extent able to facilitate the process of acculturation. Digital media technologies are employed to learn the language and the culture of the host society. However, due to the media-centric nature of these studies they risk missing the bigger picture of refugees' practices that constitute acculturation and that shape and are shaped by the use of digital media technologies. A non-media centric theoretical approach is required to assess to what extent and in which ways digital media technologies are integrated in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands and how digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands.*

*This study employs a combination of semi-structured informal qualitative interviews and the visual ethnographic method of the life-story map to explore the use of digital media technologies by refugees as well as their potential facilitating role in the acculturation process in the Netherlands. The results indicate that digital media technologies are integrated in the everyday lives of the Syrian and Eritrean refugee participants. The participants use digital media technologies, particularly smartphones, in order to access information and to communicate. Additionally this study determined that digital media technologies are partly (i.e. in combination with additional methods) able to facilitate the acculturation process of the participants in the study. The participants employ social media to learn from experiences of other migrants and they use YouTube to access information about the history and culture of the host society. Syrian and Eritrean refugees also learn the language of the host society by consuming online content, by using online translating services and by practicing their language skills through online communication applications. These results provide policy makers with important information about the usability of digital media technologies for the purpose of acculturation. By drawing on these insights, policy makers could alter their policies accordingly.*

**KEYWORDS:** acculturation, digital media technologies, language, non-media centric approach, refugees

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## 1. Introduction

*“No one leaves home unless / home is the mouth of a shark”* – Warsan Shire (Genius, n.d., para.1)

These two sentences out of the poem “Home” by the British Somali poet Warsan Shire have become a call to support refugees and they have been adopted by a number of their advocates (Kuo, 2017). The poem is exemplary of the large amount of migrants that have been coming to Europe from 2015 onwards (European Parliament, 2017). Since 2015, a large number of people arrived in the European territory, either through the Balkan route in the South East of Europe or across the Mediterranean Sea towards Italy and Greece (Mandić, 2017; UNHCR, 2015). The majority of these individuals are refugees who are seeking safety. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the term ‘refugee’ is defined as “a person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution” (UNHCR, 2001, para.4).

### 1.1. Contextualizing the refugee crisis

In 2015 a total of 1.256.210 individuals made a first time formal request to member states of the European Union to receive asylum (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2016). The following year, the number of asylum applicants has also reached 1.205.090 (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2017). In both years, individuals from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq made the majority of asylum requests in the European Union (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2016; VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2017). This can be explained by the conflicts that are present within these countries. In these three countries either civil war or the presence of extremist terrorist organizations forced individuals to leave their homes and country.

The Netherlands received a relatively small share of the total amount of first time requests for asylum in the European Union. Countries such as Germany, Hungary and Sweden received a considerably larger share of asylum requests (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2016). In 2015, 43.035 refugees (3.4% of the total) applied for asylum for the first time in the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2016). In the year of 2016 this amount diminished to 19.290 refugees (1.6% of the total) (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2017). What is interesting about the asylum requests in the Netherlands is that they do not correspond to the asylum requests of the greater European Union. In the Netherlands, Syrian, and contrary to other European nations, Eritrean refugees comprised the largest share of the first time asylum requests (VluchtelingenWerk

Nederland, 2017). Since 2015 20.825 Syrians and 8.856 Eritreans have requested asylum for the first time in the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2017).

Syrians have been fleeing their country due to international, regional and civil conflicts that are present within the nation (Jansen, 2015). These conflicts started in March 2011 as a political uprising demanding a democratic government and reformations (Jansen, 2015). Many Syrians are either fleeing for the effects of war or to avoid being coerced to fight for the Syrian army or for a variety of anti-government militias, such as the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate (Jansen, 2015). The Syrian refugees that make it to Europe are said to be well educated (Tharoor, 2016). This is because the majority of the Syrian refugees who have been able to get to Europe are in a better position compared to fellow countrymen who reside either in Syria or in countries neighbouring Syria such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey (Tharoor, 2016). On average, Syrian refugees in Europe have certain qualifications and degrees, as well as financial means (Tharoor, 2016).

Eritreans have been fleeing their country due to a repressive regime, which is led by one dictator for more than 20 years (Jansen, 2015). Within Eritrea there is one political party, there are no free elections and there is no independent rule of law (Jansen, 2015). Eritreans are in particular fleeing Eritrea due to the country's national service (Jansen, 2015). The national service forces individuals to join the military or to work as civil servants (Blair, 2016; Jansen, 2015; Kingsley, 2015). Through the national service system the government of Eritrea is able to control the daily lives of its citizens; they are able to decide where people live, how their day-to-day live looks like, what types of labour people need to perform and how often people are allowed to see their family and friends (Kingsley, 2015). If Eritreans do not adhere to the rules of the national service they risk being arrested, being held in concentration camps and being tortured (Jansen, 2015). Eritreans, living in Europe as refugees, are considered to be low educated (UNICEF, n.d.). In 2010 adult literacy rates in Eritrea comprised just 68.9 per cent of the Eritreans (UNICEF, n.d.). Furthermore, the combined gross enrolment ratio in education of Eritrea solely comprises 28.5 per cent; suggesting that enrolment in education is not widespread within the country (UNICEF, n.d.). Due to the overall poor education in Eritrea, the refugees who arrive in Europe tend to be low educated as well.

## **1.2. Acculturation of refugees**

Once refugees arrive in the Netherlands and request asylum, they are required by the host society to assimilate into the host culture. The government of the Netherlands demands assimilation by forcing refugees to learn the Dutch language and to take a civic integration exam (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Assimilation holds that refugees need to adjust to the culture and practices of the host society, thereby greatly neglecting their own cultural identity (Berry, 1997). If refugees fail to assimilate, by not being able to illustrate sufficient knowledge of the Dutch language or culture, they risk losing their right to retain their refugee status (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Within this study the process of adjusting to a new host society is understood as acculturation, rather than assimilation. According to Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p.149): “acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups”. This definition refers to acculturation as a two-way process and illustrates that changes may take place in refugees as well as in natives of a host society (Berry, 1997; Da Lomba, 2010). However, in practice, acculturation is frequently regarded as a responsibility of the refugees themselves, whereas the host society does not have the obligation to adapt to the newcomers (Berry, 1997). According to Ager and Strang (2008), key facilitators of successful acculturation into a host society are knowledge of the language of the host society and knowledge of the culture of the host society. In the Netherlands, policies emphasise the importance of these facilitators. In order to receive asylum, refugees are bound to learn the Dutch language and to understand the culture of the Dutch society (Rijksoverheid, n.d., Alencar & Deuze, 2017).

## **1.3. A non-media centric approach to acculturation through digital media technologies**

Digital media technologies have the potential to bring individuals into contact with different cultures (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Digital media technologies allow individuals to access information and connect to one another (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Due to these uses migrants, including refugees, are able to seek out information about their host society and its culture (Leurs, 2017; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). According to Tudsri and Hebbani (2015), media are also able to play an important role when refugees try to learn the language of their host society. These results indicate that digital media technologies could potentially be of great use when they are employed for the acculturation of refugees.

The use of digital media technologies by refugees is situated within the notion of ‘mediatized worlds’ (Hepp, 2010). Mediatization describes the process in which communication media are increasingly diffused and integrated in a variety of social and cultural contexts (Hepp, 2010). As such, the use of media technologies are interwoven in the daily lives of refugees. A study by Smets (2018),

for instance, established that refugees consume large amounts of popular culture, such as music, television series and football, in order to retain a sense of belonging in their uncertain lives. Because the lives of refugees are greatly mediatized and because media are part of their everyday life it is essential to study the use of digital media technologies by refugees from a perspective that is more grounded, less media centric and that places greater emphasis on their lives and perspectives. A non-media centric approach acknowledges that media are part of the spatial and sociocultural aspects of refugees' daily practices (Andersson, 2012; Hepp, 2010). Within the everyday lives of refugees digital media technologies are for instance of great importance when getting to know their new neighbourhoods, when acquiring language skills, when accessing information and when connecting with family and friends (Kaufmann, 2018). This study adopts a non-media centric approach to media studies to study the connection between the mediatization of the lives of refugees and acculturation. This approach allows media uses to be studied as a part of the practices, activities and habits of refugees rather than a separate phenomenon (Andersson, 2012; Hepp, 2010; Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014). At the same time, a non-media centric approach to media and migration studies can be particularly relevant to comprehend the perspectives of refugees. Consequently, a non-media centric approach to studying the role and importance of media in the lives of refugees allows the researcher to connect the use of digital media technologies within the everyday lives of refugees to their process of acculturation. By doing so the non-media centric approach further deepens the understanding of whether and how refugees make use of digital media technologies for the purpose of their acculturation process.

#### **1.4. Scientific relevance**

An exploratory study by Alencar (2017) suggests that refugees in the Netherlands use digital media applications in order to learn the Dutch language and to familiarize themselves with the culture of the country. The majority of the participants in this study stated that they are part of specific Facebook groups and communities that facilitate interactions between refugees and natives (Alencar, 2017). While these findings are promising and revealed on the importance of digital media in the lives of displaced people, there are still limitations regarding the use of media-centric approaches. These approaches risk missing the bigger picture of refugees' practices and activities that constitute integration trajectories and that shape and are shaped by the uses of technologies. Further in-depth research is required to assess how the use of digital media applications in the daily lives of refugees may facilitate or hinder acculturation.

In addition, it is relevant to determine how refugees from different economic and sociocultural backgrounds make use of digital media technologies and whether potential differences in their usage patterns may lead to different outcomes in terms of acculturation into the host

society. A comparison between the two largest groups of refugees in the Netherlands is particularly valuable; namely refugees from Syria and Eritrea. Establishing potential differences and commonalities between these groups of refugees would advance the understanding of the potential roles digital media technologies have in the acculturation of refugees.

This study approaches the use of digital media applications at the intersections of a non-media centric approach, mediatisation theory and refugee integration studies. Through this novel combination, this research might enable new findings to be uncovered between the use of digital media technologies by refugees and its outcomes in the acculturation process. By looking at acculturation from the perspectives of refugees it is possible to determine whether the perspectives of refugees on this matter align with the perspectives of the host government. Additionally, by approaching the use of digital media technologies from a non-media centric perspective, this study has the potential to offer a thorough and all-encompassing picture of the use of digital media in the everyday lives of refugees. Because refugees are part of a mediatized world, a focus on the daily practices and habits of refugees is highly relevant. Currently, a non-media centric approach has not been sufficiently applied to studying the relationship between digital media technologies and the acculturation process of refugees, thereby this study could be a valuable contribution to the academic literature of media and refugee studies.

### **1.5. Social relevance**

Considering the large numbers of refugees that are currently facing the challenges of acculturation into new host societies, it is extremely important to develop strategies in order to ease the process of acculturation. Successful acculturation could be considered to be both beneficial for the refugee as well as the host society (Berry, 1997). Acculturated refugees are able to contribute to the economy and culture of host societies and in turn host societies may greatly benefit from this contribution. Due to the focus on language and cultural integration in the Dutch integration policy, it is relevant to determine how digital media technologies are able to aid refugees in learning the Dutch language and cultural values. If digital media technologies are able to facilitate the process of acculturation then policies could for instance be altered to accommodate a more successful process of acculturation in practice. As stated above, once refugees possess and demonstrate an understanding of the language and fundamental values, they are able to retain their asylum status; this implies that they are able to move forward with their lives in the new host society. Finally, it is also important to determine whether the use of digital media technologies may have any negative effects on the lives of refugees and thereby may impede the process of acculturation.

## **1.6. Research questions**

The research questions of this study are two-fold; firstly they aim to assess how Syrian and Eritrean refugees use digital media technologies. Secondly they aim to determine how these are able to facilitate the process of acculturation. Consequently comparisons can be made between the use of digital media technologies by Syrian and Eritrean refugees and the influences of digital media technologies on the acculturation process of Syrians and Eritreans. The following research questions have been formulated: *To what extent and in which ways are digital media technologies present in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands?* And if they are, *how do digital media technologies influence their acculturation process in the Netherlands?*

## **1.7. Thesis outline**

The aim of this study is to determine to what extent and in which ways digital media technologies are integrated in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Additionally, this study aims to find out whether digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of the individuals. In answering these research questions, the second chapter of this study will present previous theories and research on the topics of the non-media centric approach, acculturation, digital media technologies and the context of Syrian and Eritrean refugees. The theory that will be outlined in the second chapter forms the base for the data analysis of this study. In chapter three the research design and the rationale of the study will be discussed; this section will justify the methodology and elaborate on the data sample and the procedure of the research. Furthermore, ethical considerations concerning the study will be taken into account. The findings of this study are discussed in chapter four. Subsequently, in chapter four, the findings will be analysed and related to the theories and previous studies that are presented in chapter two. Finally, answering the research questions and summarizing the findings will conclude the study in the fifth chapter. Additionally, this chapter will discuss implications of the study in relation to practice as well as some strengths and limitations. Lastly, recommendations will be provided for future research into digital media technologies and acculturation.

## 2. Theories and Previous Research

### 2.1. Introduction

This study investigates digital media technologies in relation to the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands and their processes of acculturation. The following section of the study presents theories and previous about that are relevant for this research aim. This chapter is divided in four different parts. Firstly, the concept of acculturation will be clarified. In relation to acculturation, language and cultural knowledge will be presented as facilitators of acculturation. Additionally, the acculturation situation of refugees in the Netherlands will be contextualized. Secondly, digital media technologies, as well as the relationship between digital media technologies and acculturation will be conceptualized. In the third section of this chapter, the non-media centric approach will be discussed as a central theoretical approach in this research project. Finally, the fourth sections aims to provide necessary background information about the context of Syrian and Eritrean refugees.

### 2.2. Acculturation

#### 2.2.1. Conceptualization and types of acculturation

According to Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p.149): “acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups”. This definition underscores that processes of acculturation may impact the lives of refugees as well as the lives of citizens of the host societies. Acculturation can take place at the group level or at the individual level. (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). At the individual level acculturation marks a change in the behaviour of an individual (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005). This change consists of a behavioural shift through which attitudes, values, abilities and motives of the individual change (Berry, 1992). At this point acculturation results into change in the personal identity of an individual (Berry, 1992). At the group level acculturation marks a change in the culture of the entirety of the group (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2005). Changes at the group level include physical changes such as changes in location and housing (Berry, 1992). Furthermore, changes may be political or economic in nature; refugees might have to adapt to the politics of the host society and they might need to seek other forms of employment in the new host society than they were pursuing in their country of origin (Berry, 1992). Other changes for the group occur in the cultural domain; the language, religion and education within the new host society may be different from the language,

religion and education system that the refugee knows from his or her country of origin (Berry, 1992). Finally, social relationships may change in the new surroundings (Berry, 1992).

Berry (1997) has identified four different strategies of acculturation. These four strategies comprise (1) integration, (2) assimilation, (3) separation and (4) marginalization (Berry, 1997). In order to define these acculturation strategies it needs to be considered whether an individual seeks to maintain its own cultural identity and whether he or she deems it valuable to establish contact with other cultural groups (Berry, 1997).

The strategy of assimilation occurs when refugees do not want to maintain their own cultural identity; on the contrary, they interact with other cultures on a daily basis (Berry, 1997). Assimilation may either be voluntarily or forced upon the refugee by the new host society (Berry, 1997). Separation takes place when refugees want to maintain their own cultural identity, but do not want to interact with other cultures (Berry, 1997). Furthermore, marginalization presents itself when refugees are unable to maintain their culture and establish relations with individuals of the host society due to exclusion and discrimination (Berry, 1997). These three strategies of acculturation perceive acculturation as a one-way process. In the one-way process the responsibility for a successful process of acculturation is put entirely on the refugees (Da Lomba, 2010). The refugees are expected to adapt to the host society, whereas the host society does not bear any responsibility towards the refugees (Da Lomba, 2010). Although these three strategies are prominent in public policies of the West, they do not result in successful acculturation. Making solely refugees responsible for adaptation, and neglecting the social and cultural diversity of refugees, hinders a successful process of acculturation into a host society altogether (Ager & Strang, 2004; Da Lomba, 2010).

From the four strategies by Berry (1997), the strategy of integration is successful for the purpose of acculturation. Refugees that integrate are able to maintain their own culture, whilst at the same time they are able to establish intercultural relationships with other citizens of the host society (Berry, 1997). Integration is a two-way process of acculturation (Berry, 1997). This holds that integration is only possible if the host society is open and inclusive towards refugees (Berry, 1997). Hereby this view of acculturation understands acculturation to be a responsibility of both the refugees and the host society (Ager & Strang, 2004; Da Lomba, 2010). In this two-way process refugees are not seen as a problem and encouragement of the host society is required to include refugees into their new surroundings. On the part of the refugees they are, for instance, expected to learn the language of the host society and to understand the culture of the host society (Da Lomba, 2010). In the two-way process of acculturation, the host society is expected to provide possibilities for refugees when it comes to employment, education, housing and healthcare (Ager & Strang, 2004; Da Lomba, 2010). The strategy of integration is most relevant to this study due to its successful

outcomes for both refugees and host societies. Within this study acculturation is therefore understood as a two-way process of refugees adapting to a host society as well as the host society adapting to the refugees, as exemplified by the strategy of integration from Berry (1997). This study defines acculturation as refugees being able to maintain their own culture, whilst being able to adapt to the culture, customs and language of the host society (Berry, 1997). Successful acculturation and thereby the strategy of integration is something that refugees and host societies should strive for. When it comes to studying the use of digital media technologies the aim is to establish how the uses and experiences contribute to successful acculturation, due to the successful outcomes of the two-way process, by Berry understood as the strategy of integration, this strategy is considered to be the only strategy to pursue acculturation (Berry, 1997).

### **2.2.2. Language and cultural knowledge as facilitators of acculturation**

A conceptual framework of integration by Ager and Strang (2008) regards language and cultural knowledge to be important facilitators of refugees' acculturation process. Being able to speak the language of the host country and to understand the culture of the host society is essential for refugees in order to build their new lives in the host country (Ager & Strang, 2008). Without acquiring language skills and obtaining cultural knowledge refugees are unable to participate in the host society; they are unable to study, unable to obtain employment, unable to complete their administration and unable to establish meaningful social connections (Ager & Strang, 2008; Nash, Wong & Trlin, 2006).

Obtaining the ability to understand and speak the language of the host society is of great importance for effective acculturation (Ager & Strang, 2008; Nash et al., 2006). Being unable to understand and speak the language of the host society results in difficulties in social interactions, which hinders further acculturation of the refugee (Ager & Strang, 2008). Furthermore, comprehension of the language is required in order to have access to education and in order to find employment. Likewise, knowledge of the language of the host society is needed in order to participate in the community as an active citizen. Whilst learning the language of the host society is a responsibility of the refugees, a two-way process of acculturation identifies that the host societies also bear responsibilities (Nash et al., 2006). In order for refugees to function in their new host societies in the early stages of migration, it might for instance be essential that host societies provide important information for refugees in their native language or else ensure access to translation services (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Apart from the importance of language learning, previous research amongst refugees by Ager and Strang (2008) has found that cultural knowledge functions as a facilitator of acculturation. On the one hand refugees need to obtain cultural knowledge of their new host societies; this

knowledge includes being informed about national values, customs and procedures (Ager & Strang, 2008). By obtaining cultural knowledge refugees are able to understand the host society and accustom themselves with various national values and customs. On the other hand it is of great importance that the citizens of the host society obtain knowledge of the culture and the background of refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008). Through learning about the culture and the experiences of refugees, citizens of the host society and refugees can reach a mutual understanding of one another and each other's cultures (Ager & Strang, 2008).

### **2.2.3. Refugees in the Netherlands: Acculturation context and model**

Refugees who request asylum in the Netherlands need to register at the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.a.). After registration refugees are housed in a central location of the Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (COA) (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.a.). The asylum procedure lasts, on average, for fourteen days (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.b.). During the procedure the Immigration and Naturalisation Service aims to determine the identity of the refugee, his or her itinerary as well as his or her reasons for fleeing to the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.b.). If the Immigration and Naturalisation Service is unable to make a decision based on this information, the asylum procedure is followed by an extended asylum procedure (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.b.). Refugees who are subject to the extended asylum procedure are housed in asylum seekers centres by the COA (Korac, 2003; VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.a.). Once a refugee obtains a residence permit, either through the asylum procedure or through the extended asylum procedure, a living space is assigned to him or her in a municipality in the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.a.).

In the Netherlands the strategy of assimilation, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, is the most prominent manner in which policies aim to incorporate refugees within the Dutch society (Berry, 1997; Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). A refugee who is in the stage of the asylum procedure is not required to assimilate into the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.c.). However, once he or she is granted asylum he or she needs to assimilate (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.c.). This is required if a refugee is between eighteen years old and the retirement age, has obtained a residence permit and if he or she does not possess a passport from a country within the European Union or Turkey (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.c.). Refugees are given three years to complete the process of assimilation into the Netherlands (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). In order to prove that they have done so successfully refugees are required to pass a civic integration examination within these three years (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). The civic integration examination consists of questions about the Dutch language, the values and workings of the Dutch society and the labour market in the Netherlands (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). Throughout

this process refugees themselves are responsible for a successful outcome (Korac, 2003; VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, n.d.c.).

With its focus on the Dutch language and the values and workings of the Dutch society, the civic integration examination stresses the importance of assimilation with regards to language acquisition and cultural knowledge. The government of the Netherlands demands that refugees obtain cultural knowledge of the country and consequently they expect that refugees adapt their own behaviour to the values and workings of the Dutch society. Furthermore the government stresses the importance of understanding and speaking the Dutch language in order to be able to participate in the society of the Netherlands. This illustrates that Dutch policies put the responsibility for successful language and culture acquisition on the refugees themselves; the government does not carry any responsibility within this process. By adhering to this assimilatory one-way process, the policies in the Netherlands might be counterproductive when it comes to reaching successful acculturation outcomes. Adopting a two-way process of acculturation may, on the contrary, stimulate and encourage refugees to learn about the language and the culture of a host society because they are given tools and assistance within their learning process. Furthermore refugees might be more willing to learn if the government of the host society is showing its support and if their own culture and heritage is acknowledged and respected.

## **2.3. Digital media technologies**

### **2.3.1. Conceptualizing the use of digital media technologies among migrants**

Digital media technologies consist of digitized content that is made available through the Internet or through computer networks (Flew, 2007). Digital media technologies comprise software, websites, digital video, digital images, digital audio and social media (Flew, 2007). Digital media technologies are increasingly used for the purpose of communication. In line with this social media are digital media technologies that are used frequently by individuals as a means for communication (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

Social media allows individuals to connect to one another and to engage with content on the Internet (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Due to this potential social media have become increasingly important within the lives of people (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Social media hosts individuals from all walks of life, because of this diversity these digital media technologies are able to stimulate a conversation between different cultures and potentially reach understanding (Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015).

Social media are used for multiple reasons. Firstly, users of social media may use this digital media technology because they want to connect and communicate with other individuals (Sawyer &

Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). Social media enable a form of low threshold communication; by using this means of communication people may build up relationships and feel a sense of belonging (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Secondly, people may use social media in order to expand their knowledge and to learn more about different people, events and cultures (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Finally, the main reason for using social media may be that this type of technology enables a convenient way of communication and socializing (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

According to a study by Elias and Lemish (2009) migrants tend to use digital media technologies for several reasons. Similarly, Elias and Lemish (2009) found that migrants use digital media technologies in order to learn more about their new host societies. The knowledge that they seek is varied in nature; they seek information about politics and procedures, as well as information that may be valuable in daily life (Elias & Lemish, 2009).

Furthermore, several studies found that migrants use digital media technologies in order to connect and communicate with other individuals (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Komito, 2011; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). First, migrants use media to stay in contact with friends and family in their country of origin (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Komito, 2011; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Contacts at home are used to overcome feelings of loneliness and to follow news about politics and events in their country of origin (Elias & Lemish; 2009; Komito, 2011). Second of all, refugees use digital media to establish new connections within the host society (Elias & Lemish, 2009). Digital media technologies allow refugees to connect with both other refugees or local citizens in a safe manner and enable them to become more confident in their communications (Elias & Lemish, 2009).

### **2.3.2. The intersections between acculturation and digital media technologies**

A study by Díaz Andrade and Doolin (2016) about refugees in New Zealand has found that refugees use digital media technologies in several ways that help them in their acculturation process. Firstly, refugees use digital media technologies to participate in an information society (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Digital media enable many practical tasks such as making a doctor's appointment through e-mail, searching and applying for jobs on the Internet and managing one's finances online (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Refugees who have the knowledge and skills to carry out these practical tasks are able to participate within the information society of their new host society; which in turn gives them a feeling of independence and control over their daily lives (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

Secondly, refugees use digital media to communicate effectively (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). To many refugees the language of the new host society is unfamiliar; digital media function as communication channels to prevent misunderstanding between the refugee and the contacts of the

host society (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Furthermore, it offers them a safe space in order to practice and develop their language skills (Alencar, 2017; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). In an exploratory study by Alencar (2017) participants stated that social media such as YouTube are employed to learn the language of the host society.

Refugees also use digital media technologies in order to understand the culture and the practices of a new society (Alencar, 2017; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Leurs, 2017; McGregor & Siegel, 2013; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). Increasing one's knowledge about the culture and way of life of the host society greatly contributes to successful acculturation (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Additionally, communication between refugees and citizens of a host society improves the cultural knowledge of citizens of the host society about the refugees living within their country (Alencar, 2017). Communication through social media is able to reduce negative stereotypes of refugees that citizens of the host society hold; this benefits the acculturation process of the refugees (Alencar, 2017).

Fourthly, through their digital media consumption refugees are able to express their cultural identity (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Refugees often consume popular culture and news in their own language, which aids them in negotiating their identities throughout the acculturation process (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Smets, 2018).

Finally, digital media help refugees to establish social connections with individuals from their own particular ethno cultural group in their new host societies as well as to maintain transnational relationships (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Having to settle within a new country comes with many challenges and difficulties; friends and family from the country of origin as well as friends from their ethno cultural group are able to provide support for acculturating refugees (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

These five uses and experiences of digital media technologies by refugees illustrate that digital media does facilitate acculturation. However, the studies that have uncovered these positive results on digital media technologies and their effects on acculturation have been media-centric in nature (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; McGregor & Siegel, 2013; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). In order to determine whether these benefits are actually impactful integrated within the lives of different profiles of refugees there is a need to explore the role of media as part of the everyday lives of refugees.

Prior, largely media-centric, studies have found that digital media technologies may also hinder the process of acculturation. Previously it was described that refugees frequently use digital media technologies in order to stay in contact with friends and family from their country of origin (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Prior to the existence of digital media technologies refugees relied upon new contacts in their host societies in order to have a social network and to overcome feelings of

isolation and loneliness (Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). It could be argued that due to the existence of digital media technologies, and in particular the widespread use of social media in contacting friends and family from the countries of origin, refugees no longer need to make connections to citizens of the host society to fulfil their social needs (Brekke, 2008; Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Brekke (2008) states that refugees “regard online friends as being just as adequate as the people they meet face-to-face” (p.111). If refugees refrain from establishing relationships with citizens of the host societies this might impede the process of acculturation (Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013).

In line with the previous argument, another impeding factor of digital media technologies in the process of acculturation is that refugees predominantly use digital media to establish personal connections in the host society with individuals from their own particular ethno cultural group, such as refugees from the same country of origin, instead of connections with citizens of the host society (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Digital media technologies could therefore greatly impede the process of acculturation because it reinforces the segregation of refugees and the citizens of the host society (Kim, 2008; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Digital media technologies could potentially be more valuable for the acculturation process if refugees and citizens of the host society were to come into contact with one another online (Kim, 2008). Because digital media facilitate a form of low threshold communication, refugees could use this medium to connect with citizens of the host society (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

Another problem that is encountered by refugees concerns the affordance of digital media technologies (Leurs & Smets, 2018; Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek, 2017). Having access and maintaining access to digital media technologies is costly (Wall et al., 2017). Additionally having access to digital devices does not imply that the user of this device has access to a network of to the Internet to use the device to the best of its abilities (Wall et al., 2017).

Furthermore, refugees acknowledge that not all information that they find through digital media technologies is in fact credible (Leurs, 2017; Wall et al., 2017). Due to prior experiences many refugees have difficulties trusting online information sources such as social media; refugees are struggling to determine what information is credible and what information consists of rumours (Leurs, 2017; Wall et al., 2017). Because refugees tend to distrust the information that they find online, they might be less inclined to seek information about the procedures, practices and the culture of the new host society through digital media technologies.

A final impeding factor in the process of acculturation is that refugees might not use digital media because they fear surveillance through digital media technologies from their countries of origin (Wall et al., 2017). Digital media technologies have become part of their governments in order to trace and follow its citizens (Wall et al., 2017). Refugees are afraid to express themselves through

digital media because their governments may be tracking their devices (Wall et al., 2017). In order to shield themselves from potential negative consequences refugees opt for self-censorship and refrain from using digital media technologies altogether (Wall et al., 2017).

#### **2.4. Non-media centric approach to the analysis of media and refugees acculturation process**

Central to this research is a non-media centric theoretical approach. This approach recognizes that the use of digital media technologies is increasingly situated within the lives of refugees (Andersson, 2013; Smets, 2018; Tosoni & Ridell, 2016). Mediatization describes the process in which media communications are increasingly diffused and socially and culturally embedded (Andersson, 2013; Hepp, 2010). According to Krotz (year), communication is at the heart of human action (Andersson, 2013). He states that the development of digital media technologies has not changed the importance of communication; it has solely changed the means of communication (Andersson, 2013). Due to this change in the way individuals communicate the “articulations of meaning in an everyday life-world are unquestionably interwoven with processes of media communication” (Hepp, 2010, p.41). Because the lives of refugees are greatly mediatized due to the extensive use of digital media, it would be valuable to determine whether and how the use of digital media technologies plays a role in the process of acculturation, and in particular language and cultural learning.

In considering the role of digital media technologies it is important to take into account that digital divides may impact the extent of mediatisation of refugees' lives (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). Not all individuals may have equal material access to digital devices and the Internet (Brake, 2014; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Van Dijk, 2005). Furthermore, individuals may lack the knowledge, skills or motivation to use digital media (Brake, 2014; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Van Dijk, 2005). Unequal access to digital devices also lead to relations of power, where individuals who possess digital devices gain power over individuals who are dependent upon others to use these devices (Smets, 2018). Additionally, political forces in the counties of origin may limit refugees to use digital media in their home countries, as well as in the host societies, due to fear of surveillance (Freedom House, 2016; Whittaker, 2013). Apart from this, access to digital media technologies does not guarantee the use of these technologies (Brake, 2014; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Van Dijk, 2005).

In order to determine to what extent the lives of refugees are mediatized through the incorporation of digital media in their daily lives and how digital media technologies facilitate the process of acculturation of refugees, a non-media centric approach is adopted. The non-media centric approach to media studies allows for connections to be made between the mediatized lives of refugees and their process of acculturation; the extensive use of digital media technologies, within the context of the daily activities of its users, may influence acculturation. The non-media centric

approach argues that media studies should analyse media in relation to other technologies and everyday practices (Krajina et al., 2014; Morley, 2009; Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013). David Morley states that, “we need to ‘de-centre’ the media in our analytical framework, so as to understand better the ways in which media processes and everyday life are interwoven with each other” (2007, p.200). Decentring the media entails that the processes through which media are shaped as important in the everyday life are analysed (Hepp, 2010).

In accord with this, media are part of the practices and habits of individuals and should not be considered to be a separate component (Andersson, 2012; Hepp, 2010; Krajina et al., 2014; Smets, forthcoming 2018). In order to understand media and their implications it is important to first understand the social actors of media (Andersson, 2012). Studying the everyday can be challenging because it requires the observation of practices and habits that are often taken for granted (Krajina et al., 2014). According to Morley “you have to force yourself to see ‘almost stupidly’, to force yourself to take notice of things you’d ordinarily find to be invisible” (Krajina et al., 2014, p.691). However, by studying media in relation to the mediatized everyday and the individual it is possible to determine connections between the use of digital media technologies within the everyday lives of refugees and their processes of acculturation. Consequently it would be possible to obtain a more thorough understanding of the daily lives of refugees, their use of digital media technologies and its associations with acculturation (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013).

Because the non-media centric approach aims to analyse media in relation to the everyday practices of individuals, the focus of the research is not on one particular medium (Hepp, 2010). Instead the focus is trans-medial in nature and aims to capture the entirety of the media environments of the refugees in the Netherlands (Andersson, 2012; Andersson, 2013; Hepp, 2010). By reflecting on the relationships between media ensembles of refugees and their cultural integration it is possible to determine whether the possession and use of media has the potential to influence the acculturation process (Hepp, 2010). Throughout this reflection it is important to take the value of cultural sensitivity into account (Hepp, 2010). Cultural differences and similarities of refugees need to be considered in relation to media possession and use (Hepp, 2010).

## **2.5. Conceptualizing the Syrian and Eritrean refugee experience**

### **2.5.1. Syrian refugees**

Refugees originating from Syria have been fleeing their country due to the on-going conflicts that have torn up Syria since the year of 2011 (Jansen, 2015). A political uprising in March 2011 against President Bashar al-Assad, the president of Syria, marks the beginning of the conflicts in the country (Jansen, 2015). Similar to other Arab countries, such as Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, Syria took part in what can be deemed the Arab Spring, demanding a democratic government as well as political reformations (Jansen, 2015). The Arab Spring turned violent and steered the country into a civil war (Rodgers, Gritten Offer & Asare, 2016). Apart from fighting the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, the conflict became centred on the different schools of the Islam that are present within Syria; the Sunni majority of the country is opposing the president's Shia Alawite sect (Rodgers et al., 2016). Throughout the civil war, anti-government militias, such as the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, gained power and added an additional dimension of terror to the conflict in Syria (Jansen, 2015; Rodgers et al., 2016).

Since 2011 a fast amount of Syrians are either fleeing for the effects of the civil war or to avoid being coerced to fight for the Syrian army or for the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra (Jansen, 2015). Approximately thirteen million Syrians are currently displaced (Connor, 2018). A total of six million Syrians are internally displaced within Syria (Connor, 2018). Additionally five million Syrians are living in the Middle East and Northern Africa; these countries include Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Libya (Connor, 2018). Furthermore, an approximate total of one million Syrians are currently living in Europe as refugees (Connor, 2018).

The Syrian refugees that are displaced within Europe are on average well educated compared to the refugees that reside in the neighboring countries of Syria, such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (Tharoor, 2016). Prior to the outbreak of the civil war, the Syrian refugees that are currently in Europe frequently enjoyed a high standard of living within Syria and they managed to obtain quality education and well-paid occupation. The fact that the Syrian refugees in Europe are well educated can be explained by the financial means that are required for a refugee to be able to undertake the journey to Europe (Tharoor, 2016). Fleeing to Europe is extremely costly, therefore only the wealthy and more educated individuals have been able to reach Europe (Tharoor, 2016).

### **2.5.2. Eritrean refugees**

Refugees originating from Eritrea have been fleeing their country due to its repressive regime (Jansen, 2015). The government of President Isaias Afewerki consists of a single political party, which has been ruling the country since 1993 (Jansen, 2015; Zere, 2017). The regime of President Afewerki does not allow free elections; furthermore, the state is not separated from the rule of law (Jansen, 2015). Part of this oppressive dictatorship is the national service of Eritrea (Blair, 2016; Jansen, 2015; Kingsley, 2015). The National Service Proclamation was introduced in 1995 for citizens aged 18 to 40 years old to take part in a national service (Dörrie, 2014). This national service demands that individuals, male and female, join the military or work as civil servants in the country (Blair, 2016; Dörrie, 2014; Jansen, 2015; Kingsley, 2015). At the start of the instalment of the national service, it was mandatory for the inhabitants of Eritrea to attend six months of military training as well as twelve months of military duty or social work (Dörrie, 2014). However, after the war with Ethiopia, the regime of President Afewerki extended the national service in 2002 to an indefinite amount of time (Dörrie, 2014). Due to this national service system the regime of Eritrea possesses the ability to control each and every aspect of the lives of its citizens (Kingsley, 2015). Depending on the national service, the regime decides where you may live, what activities and work you perform on a daily basis and which people you are allowed to associate with (Kingsley, 2015). The conditions of the national service are highly abusive; if Eritreans do not fulfil the demands of the regime they face being arrested or imprisonment and torture (Dörrie, 2014; Jansen, 2015).

Many Eritreans have fled their country to avoid or to escape the abusive national service. The majority of the displaced Eritreans end up refugee camps in neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan (Laub, 2016). Due to the heinous conditions within these refugee camps many of the Eritrean refugees take the leap to flee further towards Europe (Laub, 2016). Another common destination for displaced Eritreans is the Middle East, particularly Israel (Laub, 2016).

The Eritrean refugees that are displaced within Europe are on average low educated (UNICEF, n.d.). Adult literacy rates in Eritrea comprised 68.9 per cent in 2010; indicating a lack of formal education within the country (UNICEF, n.d.). Additionally, the combined gross enrolment ratio in education comprised 28.5 per cent in 2010; indicating a lack of enrolment in education throughout entire Eritrea (UNICEF, n.d.). Because the education system is underdeveloped within Eritrea and people are generally low educated within this country, the displaced Eritreans within Europe tend to be on average low educated.

### **2.5.3. Challenges of Syrian and Eritrean refugees upon arrival and during integration in the host country**

Syrian and Eritrean refugees face a number of challenges upon arrival in the Netherlands, as well as throughout their process of acculturation. A first difficulty that both groups of refugees encounter is the challenge of finding meaningful employment and financial security (Van Heelsum, 2017). At the time of the asylum procedure it is not permitted for refugees to work, throughout this period refugees are unable to generate an income (Van Heelsum, 2017). After being granted asylum in the Netherlands Syrians and Eritreans are allowed to find employment, however, in practice it is challenging for both groups to find a job (Huygen, 2017; Van Heelsum, 2017). Due to their relatively high level of education, Syrians have better prospects of finding a job than Eritreans (Van Heelsum, 2017). However, these jobs are frequently not at the same level as the work they used to perform in Syria (Van Heelsum, 2017). Because Eritreans are on average low educated and do not possess relevant diplomas they have to resort to manual jobs or they risk unemployment (Van Heelsum, 2017).

A second difficulty that Syrian and Eritrean refugees encounter is the challenge of understanding the rules, particularly more practical rules such as rules related to healthcare (Van Heelsum, 2017). Refugees are often unaware of the procedures in the Netherlands and they do not know which treatments are covered by insurance and which ones are not. Due to the lack of clear information many refugees refrain from seeking medical help at all (Van Heelsum, 2017). Eritreans in particular also lack the knowledge about psychological problems (Van Heelsum, 2017). They are unaware of the potential depressions that they might have, caused by trauma, loneliness, debts and disappointment, and they do not realize that in the Netherlands help is offered for those who suffer from psychological problems (Van Heelsum, 2017).

A third difficulty stems from the fact that refugees have fewer rights than citizens within the Netherlands (Van Heelsum, 2017). Once refugees are granted asylum in the Netherlands they do not receive a permanent residence permit; their permit needs to be re-evaluated after five years (Van Heelsum, 2017). Due to this regulation refugees are often feeling insecure and they are not willing to fully start their lives within the new host society (Van Heelsum, 2017). Even after receiving the Dutch nationality refugees are often treated different than citizens of the Netherlands, they are frequently subject to unequal treatment and discrimination (Van Heelsum, 2017). Finally, Syrians and Eritreans are also highly aware of the fact that they are unable to freely express themselves in the Netherlands due to the fear that the secret services of their countries of origin might intercept this information (Van Heelsum, 2017).

A fourth difficulty that both Syrian and Eritrean refugees encounter is related to establishing social relationships within the host society (Van Heelsum, 2017). When first arriving in the

Netherlands refugees are grouped together in shelters, in these shelters they are surrounded by individuals from their own ethnic background; thereby making it more challenging to establish contact with Dutch citizens (Van Heelsum, 2017). Due to the lack of contact with citizens of the host societies, many refugees either maintain their relationships with fellow Syrians or fellow Eritreans (Van Heelsum, 2017). Especially Eritrean refugees struggle to make connections with Dutch individuals (Van Heelsum, 2017). Eritreans are often shy and humble in nature, which causes difficulties when establishing relationships (Van Heelsum, 2017). Syrians however also face challenges when trying to connect with Dutch individuals; due to a widespread prejudice about Muslims in the Netherlands, certain Dutch citizens may be reluctant to engage with Syrian refugees (Van Heelsum, 2017).

Finally, for Syrian refugees it might be difficult to find a balance between holding on to their own traditions, culture and religion and adapting to the traditions and culture of the host society (Van Heelsum, 2017). Children of refugee parents are still prone to development and therefore more likely to adapt to the traditions and the culture of the Netherlands. For Syrian parents it might for instance be a challenge to see their female children accustom to the free norms of the Netherlands instead of to the norms that the parents have been subject to in Syria (Van Heelsum, 2017)

### **3. Research Design and Rationale**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The aim of this study is to determine to what extent and in which ways digital media technologies are integrated in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Additionally, this study aims to find out whether digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of the individuals. In order to achieve this, a combination of life-story maps and qualitative semi-structured informal in-depth interviews was considered to be appropriate due to its potential to access the experiences and opinions of the participants. The data was drawn from twelve in-depth interviews with Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. The research design presents further details of the research methodology, the sampling design, the participants, the procedure, the interview design and the process of data analysis. Because this study concerns the participation of a vulnerable research population, ethical considerations are taken into account in the last section of the research design.

#### **3.2. Research Methodology**

In order to investigate the research question a qualitative research method is employed. Qualitative research is “an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.3.). The goal of the study is to explore and theoretically refine the understanding of how the use of digital media technologies, by different groups of refugees in the Netherlands, facilitates language and cultural learning. In line with this goal an interpretivist epistemological position is appropriate (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2013). Moreover, this method assumes a constructionist ontological position; this position acknowledges that social properties appear due to the social interactions between people (Bryman, 2012).

A comparative research design is adopted in order to make comparisons between Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. A comparative research design facilitates the study of multiple different cases by employing the same methodology (Bryman, 2012). Within this research the design allows for studying the role of digital media technologies in the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees. After analysing each group of refugees separately, this research design will allow for comparisons to be made between the two different groups (Bryman, 2012). Through the comparative research design it is ultimately possible to determine whether there are any differences and similarities between the daily uses and experiences of digital media technologies by Syrian and

Eritrean refugees and how these uses are reflected in their acculturation process. A comparison between Syrian and Eritrean refugees is in particular of interest due to the different cultural backgrounds and the different levels of education that these refugees may have (Tharoor, 2016; UNICEF, n.d.).

The qualitative research methods that are used in this research consist of a combination of qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews and visual ethnographic techniques, such as the use of drawings, photos, videos, etc. (Bryman, 2012; Young & Barrett, 2001). Participants in the research will be subject to semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allows for flexibility on the part of the researcher, which ultimately ensures that the interviewees are able to express their views on the impact of digital media technologies on the acculturation process in a richer and more detailed manner (Bryman, 2012). Prior to conducting the individual interviews, participants are requested to draw a map of stories they have experienced and/or people they have met since they first arrived in their country of reception (Young & Barrett, 2001). This method, also known as life-story map, derives from ethnographic research and can be used to collect experiences and accounts of participants (Bagnoli, 2009; Young & Barrett, 2001). During the interviews, participants are also invited to share pictures and/or videos they might have of their experiences and life in the Netherlands. The data that are gathered through the life-story maps and their personal visual materials are aimed to direct the conversation during the interviews. Drawing life-story maps and sharing personal archives may aid the participants in recalling their actions and experiences. Furthermore, they provide for a creative approach to interviewing in which the meanings of the participants are incorporated (Bagnoli, 2009; Young & Barrett, 2001). The semi-structured in-depth interviews will build on the data from the life-story maps and visual archives in order to gain a better and more thorough understanding of the everyday lives of refugees and their experiences and uses of digital media technologies in the acculturation processes.

### **3.3. Sampling Design**

A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was used to select participants (Bryman, 2012). Once a refugee makes a formal request to obtain asylum in the Netherlands, a refugee is accommodated in an asylum seekers centre (COA, n.d.a.). Rules and regulations apply when it comes to visiting asylum seekers centres (COA, n.d.b.). Besides that, refugees might be reluctant to participate in research due to pending legal situations as well as their traumatic encounters (Haene, Grietens & Verschueren, 2010). Because of these circumstances the population is relatively hard-to-reach. Purposive and snowball sampling allow for an initial contact with a small group of refugees who are relevant for the research (Bryman, 2012). After contacting these individuals they are able to propose other participants to participate in the research (Bryman, 2012).

In line with this, initial contact was established through the network of contacts that the supervisor of the study had due to her work on refugees. Additionally, a cultural insider provided assistance throughout the sampling process.

The sample consists of refugees from Syria and Eritrea because these two nationalities represent the two largest groups of refugees in the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2017). As this study is concerned with assessing the use of digital media technologies for the purpose of acculturation in the Netherlands, the participants that are included in the research should live in the Netherlands. Besides that, the participants should not be living in the Netherlands for more than five years. This guideline has been established in order to ensure that the participants are likely to be active in their process of acculturation. Furthermore, the participants needed to be acknowledged by the government of the Netherlands as refugees and thereby be status holders. Additionally the study aimed for diversity in the sampling of participants; therefore males and females aged between 18 and 40 are included in the sample. More specifically, the following criteria were used in the study as a guideline to sample participants:

- Participants had to be refugees originating from either Syria or Eritrea.
- Participants had to live in the Netherlands for at least six months and no longer than five years.
- Participants had to be acknowledged by the government of the Netherlands as refugees and thereby be status holders.
- Participants had to be between the ages of 18 and 40.
- Participants included in the study comprised of males and females.

### **3.4. List of participants**

In total twelve refugees from Syria and Eritrea had been selected to participate in the study. A total of seven refugees from Syria have been included in the sample. A total of five refugees from Eritrea have been included in the sample. The sample is comprised of eight men and four women and the age of the participants ranged between 26 and 38 years old. The level of education of the participants could be considered to be rather high. All Syrian respondents obtained degrees on the university level. The level of education of the Eritrean respondents is mixed, three out of the five respondents obtained formal degrees. For reasons of privacy the participants prefer to remain anonymous. In order to ensure their anonymity and privacy their names and places of residence are not published within the study. In order to identify the participants, pseudonyms will be used. The following participants' index was established which contains an overview of the participants' age, sex, origin and educational background (see table 1):

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

Participant's ID	Age	Sex	Origin	Education
<b>Participant 1</b>	31	Male	Syria	Bachelor degree in English literature
<b>Participant 2</b>	34	Male	Syria	Bachelor degree in Journalism
<b>Participant 3</b>	35	Male	Syria	Master degree in Management
<b>Participant 4</b>	32	Male	Syria	Bachelor degree in English Literature
<b>Participant 5</b>	31	Female	Syria	Bachelor degree in Economics
<b>Participant 6</b>	30	Female	Syria	Bachelor degree in Journalism
<b>Participant 7</b>	26	Female	Syria	Former Law student
<b>Participant 8</b>	37	Male	Eritrea	Electrician
<b>Participant 9</b>	38	Male	Eritrea	Farmer
<b>Participant 10</b>	33	Male	Eritrea	Master degree in Agricultural Engineering
<b>Participant 11</b>	33	Male	Eritrea	Bachelor degree in Journalism and Mass Communication
<b>Participant 12</b>	33	Female	Eritrea	Bachelor degree in Business

### 3.5. Procedure

Prior to conducting the semi-structured in-depth interviews the interviewees have been informed about their rights as participants in the study. The majority of the interviewees signed a form of informed consent to ensure confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix A). One interviewee preferred to provide his consent orally. All interviews were carried out in person and were recorded on audiotape in order to enable transcription of the interviews. Six interviews were conducted individually. The remaining six participants were interviewed in pairs of two; in these cases the interviewees preferred to be part of the semi-structured interview together. This form of interviewing also allowed for one of the participants, who were either fluent in English or Dutch, to translate for the other participant who did not speak either of these languages sufficiently to conduct an in-depth interview individually. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted between the 6<sup>th</sup> of April and the 30<sup>th</sup> of May.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in participants' homes in various cities in the Netherlands; the remaining interviews were conducted in other familiar public locations such as cafés, restaurants and the Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The interviews were held in these places to ensure that the participants were in a comfortable and familiar environment. Furthermore these locations allowed the interviews to be conducted in an informal manner that stimulated trust and an equal and balanced relationship of power between the interviewer and the interviewees.

### **3.6. Interview Design**

At the onset of the in-depth interviews participants were asked to draw a map of stories that they have experienced throughout their duration of stay in the host society. The interviewees were motivated to share the experiences and achievements that they preferred, and that they felt comfortable with, to share with the interviewer. In total the participants were given between ten and fifteen minutes in order to complete their life-story maps. A3 papers, as well as colouring pens, were provided to the interviewees in order to complete this activity. The use of this visual ethnographic method allowed the participants to share their everyday experiences in a convenient manner (Bagnoli, 2009; Young & Barrett, 2001). Because prior knowledge and skills are not required to draw a life-story map the life-story map was deemed to be a suitable method to ask the participants to illustrate their experiences and stories in the new host society (Bagnoli, 2009; Young & Barrett, 2001). Unfortunately, in practice this was not entirely the case. Two participants did not take part in the drawing of a map of life stories. Participant 9 was unable to draw a life-story map due to his illiteracy. Participant 10 refrained from drawing a life-story map due to time constraints.

After completing the life-story maps, participants were asked to share these visual materials during semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data that were gathered through the life-story maps were complementary to the interviews and used to guide and enrich the in-depth interviews. The information that stemmed from the maps of life stories allowed the research to gain an initial insight into the everyday lives and experiences of refugees. Furthermore, these insights enabled the interviewer to structure each in-depth interview according to the life and experiences of the participant.

The interviews were conducted as informal interviews. Informal interviews are frequently understood as conversational interviews (Given, 2008). Informal interviews allowed the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee to remain open to the interviewee's perspectives (Given, 2008). Due to its informal and un-hierarchical nature, this form of interviewing helped build a relationship of trust with the interviewee, which enticed the participant to speak more freely and openly (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Besides this, informal interviews also allowed new topics of interest to be discovered that may have been overlooked by the interviewer prior to conducting the interview (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Additionally, informal interviewing corresponded with the theoretical non-media centric approach that is employed within this study. Informal interviews are essential in gaining an understanding of an individuals' point of view (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Smets, 2018). This particular form of interviewing enabled the interviewer to get a thorough understanding of the everyday activities and experiences of each individual participant (Smets, 2018).

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. However, this structure was not considered to be final. Depending on the interviewee and the results of the life-story map, the structure of the interview was changed throughout some of the interviews. In total the in-depth interview contained eight different topics (see Appendix B). At the start of the interview the interviewer asked the participants introductory questions to get to know the participants.

The following section of the interview concerned participants' discussions of the life-story maps. Having drawn the life-story maps, the participants were encouraged to explain their drawings. Consequently the researcher asked clarifying questions about the activities and experiences that were incorporated in the life-story maps in order to understand the everyday lives of the participants.

The third section of the interview focussed on the participants' social connections. Questions were for instance asked about establishing friendships and connections in the host society, maintaining friendships in the host society and the country of origin, the level of satisfaction with the current amount of social connections and the activities that are usually undertaken with friends and social connections.

The fourth section of the interview dealt with the participants' cultural perceptions and practices in the host society. In this section the interviewer tried to determine opinions about the culture of the host society. Furthermore, questions were aimed at understanding whether Syrian and Eritrean refugees adapt themselves to the culture of the host society. Additionally, the questions determined whether and how the culture of the country of origin of refugees plays a part in their everyday lives in the host society.

The fifth section of the interview concerned the language practices of the refugees in the host society. Throughout this section of the interview, questions were directed at determining whether and how the participants learn the language of the host society. Besides this, the participants were asked about their motivations to learn the language of the host society.

The sixth section of the interview dealt with the participants' views on acculturating into the host society. The participants were asked about their personal views on acculturation. Furthermore, questions were directed at their practical experiences of acculturating into the Netherlands. Additionally, participants were encouraged to share the challenges that they encountered throughout the process of acculturation as well as the aspects that they experienced to be beneficial during the process of acculturation.

The seventh section of the interview aimed to determine how the participants use digital media technologies within their everyday lives. Participants were asked questions about their media access as well as their media literacy. Consequently additional questions determined the uses and experiences of media of the interviewees. Furthermore, questions were posed about the amount of

trust the interviewees have in online information as well as the freedom they experience to use digital media technologies.

In the final section the interviews were closed by asking questions about the future plans of the participants in the study.

### **3.7. Data analysis**

After conducting the in-depth interviews the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed through thematic analysis. The data that were collected through the life-story maps were considered to be complementary of the interviews and was solely used to enrich and ground the interviews. Therefore, this data has not been analysed individually. Thematic analysis was used because it allowed for the refinement of theory (Boeije, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2012). Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis employs coding of data in order to determine categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After establishing categories, themes are generated out of these categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes allow for patterns of meaning to emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis lent itself in particular to this study due to its flexible nature; thematic analysis does not require to be connected to a specific theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Due to this flexibility, the method allowed for a detailed analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During the first stage of the data analysis the interviewer read the interviews multiple times in order to obtain an overview of the material. Subsequently the data was subjected to open coding in order to determine the main concepts and categories discussed by the participants (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The open codes were assignment to the paragraph level of the interview; at times one single paragraph contained multiple open codes. The open codes classified the data and described the data in a few words in order to understand the transcript and to capture the essence of the phenomenon that was discussed in the interview by the participants (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

After having subjected open coding to seven out of the twelve interviews, the open codes were arranged into axial codes (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). At this stage the analysis aimed to connect the different open codes to one another in order to identify overarching patterns and themes among the data (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Connections have been made by constantly comparing the open codes to one another (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The different axial codes that were established throughout this stage are: social connections, cultural perceptions and practices, language practices, acculturation and media access and uses. Appendix C presents an overview of the axial codes and open codes that have been used in the data analysis.

In the following stage of the data analysis, during the selective coding, it was identified how the overarching themes correspond to the research questions posed in this study. In this phase the axial codes were matched to the theoretical perspectives and previous research that are guiding within this study (Boeije, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Subsequently, analytical conclusions were drawn and comparisons were made between participants from Syria and Eritrea in order to answer the research questions and to present the data in a structured manner.

### **3.8. Ethical considerations**

Studies involving refugees as participants require strict ethical considerations to be taken into account throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. Because refugees have frequently encountered traumatic experiences and often find themselves in pending legal situations, refugees make up a vulnerable research population (Haene et al., 2010). In order to ensure that the participants experienced the study as a positive experience ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the process of interviewing and during the analysis of the interviews.

Prior to conducting the interviews the interviewees had been informed about their rights, the risks and the benefits of the study. It was explained that the participants participate voluntarily in the study. Furthermore, it was made clear that they are allowed to from further participation in the interview at any time. Besides this, the interviewer ensured that the interviewees knew that they have the right to refuse to answer questions. Apart from the explanation of their rights, participants were ensured that strict confidentiality is maintained in the data of the study. It was clarified that the identity of the participants remains anonymous and that the data gathered through the interview and the life-story map is only used for academic research purposes. Additionally participants had been asked permission to audiotape the interviews. Once the participants had been informed about their rights and the risks they were asked to either sign the form of informed consent or to provide their consent orally.

Throughout the design of the interview great care was taken to ensure that the interview and the life-story map did not include questions that may cause emotional distress among the participants. The interviews and the life-story maps had been conducted in an informal manner that ensured a natural and confidential relationship between the participant and the research. This style of interviewing prevented an imbalance of power between the interviewer and the participants. Additionally, the interviews took place in locations that are familiar for the participants in order to ensure a balance of power between the researcher and the interviewee and to create a comfortable atmosphere for the participant.

## **4. Results and Analysis**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The overarching goal of this study is to determine to what extent and in which ways digital media technologies are present in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Subsequently this research also aims to examine how digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. This section of the paper will present the main themes and findings that were found during the thematic analysis. Additionally these themes are connected to previous findings that have been discussed in the section of theories and previous research. The findings are presented through paraphrasing and quoting fragments of the interviews.

### **4.2. Migration trajectories**

The first section of the results and analysis presents descriptions of the migration trajectories of the participants in the study. These descriptions are based on the drawings of the participants' life-story maps. During the interviews, the participants have drawn a life-story map in which they illustrated their migration trajectories as well as their everyday activities in the host country.

Participant 1 has been living in the Netherlands for two years and four months. Upon arrival he has lived in multiple asylum seekers centres across the country. Within these centres he obtained a position as a volunteer in the computer-learning centre. After being allocated a house he applied for family reunification, which was granted to him and his wife and two children joined him in the Netherlands. Currently he is volunteering in an asylum seekers centre in his neighbourhood. Besides this he is an active member of the soundboard of the municipality of his city of residence. In the future he wishes to study a premaster at a university and to obtain employment.

Participant 2 arrived in the Netherlands three years and three months ago. Whilst staying in the asylum seekers centre he volunteered as a translator. After receiving his status and his house he applied for family reunification; several months later his wife and son came to the Netherlands. Throughout his period in the Netherlands he aimed to establish many connections and to work on his future perspective. In order to expand his opportunities he is currently enrolled in a bachelor degree in the field of media at a university in the Netherlands.

Participant 3 has lived in the host country for four years. After receiving a house he also got family reunification, upon which his wife and two children came to the Netherlands. Currently he is working whilst studying a part-time master in the field of media. His future plans include finishing his master degree and starting an own business.

Participant 4 has been living in the Netherlands for two years. He also applied for family reunification and since then his wife is able to live with him in the Netherlands. Currently he is working as a volunteer in an organization for refugees where he aids refugees by translating. In the future he hopes to find employment in the host country.

Participant 5 came to the host country six months ago. She joined her husband with her two children as part of family reunification. She is exited to start her new life in the Netherlands and she hopes to be able to speak Dutch fluently soon.

Participant 6 arrived in the Netherlands two years and eight months ago. Like participant 5, she was able to come with her son due to family reunification. Currently she is the process of starting a premaster in the field of media and communications.

Participant 7 has lived in the host society for six months. She also joined her husband because of family reunification. At the time of the interview she was expecting, therefore her near future will be based around childcare. In the long term she desires to continue her study and to find employment in the Netherlands.

Participant 8 has lived in the Netherlands for three years. After obtaining a house he has worked in the host country. Currently he is working on a voluntary basis as a translator for fellow refugees. Additionally he is part of the soundboard of the municipality of his place of residence. He hopes to be able to obtain his drivers license, by doing so he would expand his possibilities for employment.

Participant 9 arrived in the Netherlands three years ago. In his country of origin he has never learned how to read and write and is therefore illiterate. Because of his illiteracy the participant was not asked to draw a life-story map. Certain aspects of life in the host country are challenging for him; he is often confronted with the language barrier. He strives to be able to speak Dutch in the future so that he can become independent whilst doing his daily activities.

Participant 10 has been living in the host country for five years. Due to time constraints he was unable to draw a life-story map. He could start his new life in the Netherlands because he was accepted in a master degree in agricultural engineering. At the moment he is working in a coding school, however, in the future he would like to obtain a job in his field of study.

Upon arrival in the Netherlands participant 11 has been most concerned with alleviating his traumas and homesickness. During his stay in the asylum seekers centre he tried to keep up to date with new developments. After obtaining a house he started to design his future in the host country. He aimed to expand his network and currently he is in the process of applying for a master degree at a Dutch university.

Participant 12 has been in the host country for one year. She was granted family reunification and joined her husband with her two children. In the meantime she has given birth to a third child;

caring for her new born baby takes up most of her time. Her future plans include passing the civic integration exam.

#### **4.3. General patterns of use of digital media technologies**

The section section of the results and analysis concerns a discussion of the first research question:

*RQ1: "To what extent and in which ways are digital media technologies present in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands?"*

In order to answer the first research question it is necessary to address the general patterns of use of digital media technologies of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. By analysing the general uses and practices of digital media technologies of the interviewed participants, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the role that digital media technologies play within the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. The non-media centric approach that is adopted within this study allows for a more grounded and subjective understanding of the general patterns of use of digital media technologies by Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands (Andersson, 2013; Hepp, 2010).

The vast majority of the participants that took part in this study were digitally literate and able to use digital media technologies throughout their everyday lives. In his life-story map, participant 3 for instance illustrated that his smartphone is of great importance within his everyday life. He did this by drawing a picture of himself with a smartphone. Only one participant, participant 9, indicated that he is not digitally literate. The digital illiteracy of this Eritrean participant can be explained by his overall illiteracy. Adult illiteracy, caused by a lack of formal education, is currently still a widespread problem within Eritrea (UNICEF, n.d.).

The majority of the study participants indicated that they predominantly use three different digital media devices; these include a smartphone, a computer or laptop and a television. The digital device that is most used on a day-to-day basis by the interviewees is the smartphone. The reason given for the predominant use of the smartphone is related to the accessibility of this technology. One interviewee for instance states that his smartphone has become a part of himself:

*"Maybe it's, I don't know, maybe it's a kind of habit. You need to have your mobile phone the whole day. (...) Exactly. Just to keep it close to me. It's part of you. You cannot leave it for one minute" (Participant 1).*

One of the other participants shows that her smartphone is convenient to use. When being asked why she prefers using her smartphone to other digital media technologies she replied by stating:

*“My phone? Because it’s always in my hand” (Participant 12).*

In a study about smartphone use by Syrian refugees in Vienna (Kauffmann, 2018), it was found that refugees use and appropriate their smartphones in order to navigate their daily lives. The current results align with Kauffmann’s findings and suggest that smartphones are greatly internalized in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands (Kauffmann, 2018).

Along with the predominant use of the smartphone, interviewees revealed that the amount of time they spent using digital media technologies fluctuates between just a few minutes per day to an approximate eight hours per day. This variation of frequency of digital media use can be explained by the different daily activities that the participants involve themselves in. Some participants, predominantly the female interviewees, reported a lack of time to use digital media technologies due to their responsibilities in relation to childcare and running a household. Other participants used digital media technologies to a great extent because their work or education demanded them to do so:

*“I remember in the first block of 2017, (name of professor) asked us to download a programme here and to see how much hours you spend on your mobile phone. It was really unbelievable. A lot. I think the result after one week was that I used my social media daily for more than eight hours. As I told you, it’s part of my study” (Participant 2).*

Even though the majority of the interviewees spend a considerable amount of time using digital media technologies during their everyday lives, few participants also stated that they diminished their use of digital media technologies. Social media, in particular the social media platform Facebook, enticed the participants to reduce their media consumption. One of the interviewees stated that he considered his social media consumption to be time consuming. In order to change this he decided to delete his social media profile on Facebook:

*“Everyone spends too much time on mobile phone. I had Facebook in the last year and I terminated the account. (...) For spending time. There are so many things that you need to do rather than using Facebook or social media. And if I need to contact someone I can contact him via Whatsapp. That’s it” (Participant 1).*

Apart from the desire to avoid spending too much time on the social media platform, the same interviewee indicated that the social connections that he maintained on Facebook are a cause of

conflict. The participant wished to avoid contact with individuals who still reside in his country of origin because he is not interested in pursuing discussions about the situation in his country of origin and questions about his life in the host society:

*“Yes, I don’t want to be asked about what is going here, or what I’m doing here, or how is life here. I don’t want to be asked these kinds of questions. And I don’t want to be in a debate about the situation in Syria. The one who posted something about the government or supporting the government or something like this, because I will not like this post and I will maybe un-friend this person. It’s better to terminate the Facebook to avoid so many conflicts. It’s better” (Participant 1).*

This fragment illustrates that the participant fears that individuals from his country of origin use his social media presence for purposes of surveillance. Because he is concerned about his privacy he rather terminates his social media accounts. Other migrants also have experienced this fear of surveillance (Komito, 2011). A study by Komito (2011) already determined that migrants, as well as the social connections of migrants, use social media to obtain information about others and to invigilate on the daily lives of others. Next to avoiding certain social connections from the country of origin, another participant wished to prevent confrontational news about the country of origin. In order for her not to be confronted with this kind of content she deemed it necessary to delete her social media account. She states that the images and news on social media, such as Facebook, had a negative effect on the state of her mental wellbeing:

*“I don’t have Facebook and Twitter. I don’t like social media. (...) I used Facebook maybe three years. Then I stopped since five years. I don’t like it. Also I don’t like the photo from war, photo from children. I become depressed” (Participant 6).*

#### **4.3.1. Using digital media technologies to access information**

By analysing the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands it became clear that digital media technologies are interwoven into their daily lives for several purposes. The main purposes of using digital media technologies for refugees include access to information and facilitating communication. Other, less frequently mentioned, purposes of digital media technology uses are work, online shopping, entertainment and the use of the Internet as a creative outlet.

For Syrian and Eritrean refugees accessing information is one of the main reasons for their use of digital media technologies. The most dominant type of information that is accessed through digital media technologies is the news. In line with previous research (Alencar & Deuze, 2017; Elias &

Lemish, 2009), informing themselves about the situation in their countries of origin as well as informing themselves about the developments in their host society is important to the majority of the interviewees. This study also revealed that the application that is being primarily used to access news from their host society and news from the country of origin is the social media platform Facebook:

*“I use it (Facebook) for different purposes. The first thing is communication. The second thing is for news. To get information about the news, what’s happening around me in the Netherlands and in Syria. And also to follow up the activities that are happening in the Netherlands” (Participant 3).*

In some cases the news in the host society is directly about the refugees themselves. In line with this, participant 2 and 3 reported following the news in order to know which positions different politicians of the host society take with regards to refugees:

*“Facebook is useful for that. Facebook, Twitter. Also on Twitter I am following the most of the Dutch departments. The Dutch regering (government), the interior ministry, foreign ministry, justice minister, prime minister. A lot of Dutch officials. Geert Wilders, I am following him and I retweet his tweets also. I should do that. I am a journalist and I know exactly what he is speaking about against refugees. So it’s important for me. I am following him. And so I have very good idea about all these things through social media. So it helps me” (Participant 2).*

Another type of information that refugees access through digital media technologies is information about events and activities in the host society. Digital media technologies make it possible to learn more about social activities that take place in the neighbourhood (Elias & Lemish, 2009). One of the Eritrean interviewees for instances uses Facebook to find out about social activities in his place of residence:

*“I use it (Facebook) if I want to buy something. Ah let me go to the Rotterdam garage sale or something. So I have all these groups. If I want to play football or something, then I go to football groups” (Participant 10).*

Accessing information about daily activities and events corresponds to prior research that determined that migrants employ digital media technologies to access information about social events and activities (Alencar, 2017; Elias & Lemish, 2009; Leurs, 2017). These results reveal that

Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands most frequently use Facebook to gather information about events and activities in the host society.

Furthermore Syrian and Eritrean refugees also access information through digital media technologies that help them for their education. Particularly refugees use these technologies to aid them in learning the language of the host society (Alencar, 2017). One participants states how she uses her smartphone to learn the language:

*“I use the phone all the day with Google Translate. With my study. Because small things. I hate big things with social media. I use it only for Google Translate. Also with NPO radio to hear Dutch” (Participant 6).*

Finally, Syrian interviewees stated that they use applications such as Marktplaats (Dutch version of eBay), 9292 (public transportation application), university applications, online banking and parking applications to access general information online:

*“For my phone I have a number of applications. For example I have YouTube. I have Marktplaats. I have 9292, which is essential here in the Netherlands. I have Skype. And I have application for the university. I have application for the bank and for the parking to park my car. So I have different applications that I use in my life in general” (Participant 3).*

This fragment shows that this Syrian interviewee uses a large variety of applications, which is representative of the other Syrian participants. Contrary to the Syrian participants, the Eritrean participants indicate a poor or non-use of applications for accessing general information. This difference indicates that there might be a digital gap between Syrian and Eritrean refugees. Syrian refugees in the Netherlands possess more digital literacy skills compared to Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands (UNICEF, n.d.). This difference may be caused by several factors. Firstly, unlike Syrians, Eritreans are likely to be low educated (UNICEF, n.d; Tharoor, 2016). Secondly, Eritreans are likely to lack the required knowledge of the language in order to use such applications. Finally, the cultural background of the participants also influences this difference. Due to a lack of Internet in Eritrea, Eritrean refugees were, prior to migrating, already not accustomed to using a wide variety of applications in their country of origin (Katlic, 2014).

#### **4.3.2. Using digital media technologies to facilitate communication**

Apart from accessing information, Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands use digital media technologies in order to facilitate communication with friends and family. The applications that are predominantly used by refugees in the Netherlands are Whatsapp, and Facebook:

*"I get a lot of calls on Whatsapp and Facebook from my family and friends. So I need this application for communication mainly" (Participant 3).*

*"Whatsapp chat with my friends in Syria and my friends here. With my family, with my father and mother, everyday. That is important to me" (Participant 6).*

When using Whatsapp and Facebook the participants make use of the variety of communication tools that these applications have on offer. Both applications offer a chat function as well as the possibility to call and to video call a friend or a family member. Both Syrian and Eritrean refugees use these different functions that Whatsapp and Facebook provide them with in order to communicate. Only one participant, participant 9, prefers traditional calling over the use of applications in order to make a call. This can be explained by his illiteracy; due to his illiteracy it is challenging to operate digital applications. By using Whatsapp and Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family, Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands highlight the importance of digital media technologies for the purpose of communication (Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). These social media platforms enable a form of low threshold communication that is convenient when attempting to maintain social connections with a large amount of individuals (Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015).

Multiple scholars have suggested that refugees use digital media technologies in order to stay in contact with friends and family from their country of origin (Brekke, 2008; Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Participant 3 describes the importance of communication after his family is living dispersed around the world:

*"I have a brother in Germany and one in Turkey and one in Egypt. And my mother and another brother are still in Syria. So it's like the family is spread over the world. So we got to find a way of communication. Mainly it was through Whatsapp and Facebook. So we make like video calls or voice calls every now and then to see each other and to talk to each other. (...) I have contact with my mother almost everyday. Because I need to check up on her safety everyday since she is still in Syria. So I call her almost every day. And for my brothers, I call them every two or three days so to check up on them and to talk to them" (Participant 3).*

Because digital media technologies facilitate communication with relatives in the country of origin it is frequently argued that refugees no longer need to make connections with citizens of the host society in order to fulfill their need for social connections (Brekke, 2008; Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Family members that are living in the country of origin of the refugees could function as an online social network and could help overcome feelings of loneliness and separation (Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Ultimately maintaining these social connections could impede the process of acculturation of refugees (Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Even though the results indicate that refugees from Syria as well as refugees from Eritrea greatly value their social connections in their country of origin, digital media technologies do not prevent them from establishing social connections in the host society. On the contrary, digital media technologies provide Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands with opportunities to connect to citizens of the host society. Participant 1 describes how he connected with locals from Amsterdam and Rotterdam through Whatsapp:

*"I had some contact with Dutch people. A man here living in Rotterdam, I tried to contact him and I am also contacting him via Whatsapp from time to time. And when I got house I knew a lady from Amsterdam that I also contacted her and also have been contacting her in Dutch. Trying from time to time to send her Whatsapp messages and talk to her, meet her. Just to talk in Dutch to practice" (Participant 1).*

Like participant 1, participant 6 also connected to citizens of the host society through Whatsapp. She states that digital media technologies help to break boundaries when establishing social connections in the host society:

*"With chat with Dutch people it breaks boundaries. For example mother of friend of (son). I began with her. I invited her by Whatsapp. She gives me her number and began with the chat. Then we meet. It helps me" (Participant 6).*

These two fragments illustrate that social media, such as Whatsapp, offers refugees a low threshold form of communication to establish social connections with citizens of the host society (Elias & Lemish, 2009; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Syrian and Eritrean refugees establish social connections with citizens of the host society as well as with individuals from their own particular ethno cultural group. Participant 8 established social connections with individuals from his own ethno cultural group, Eritrea, through his work as a translator:

*"I started unpaid work. I was translating, helping statusholders (status holders) with translation. (...) Now I am also doing unpaid work with an organization called 'Warm Welkom Amsterdam Noord' here in North. This is for Eritreans and Syrians. We help the people to know the neighbourhood and organizations here who can help them" (Participant 8).*

Previous studies have found that refugees predominantly use digital media to establish social connections with individuals from their own particular ethno cultural group instead of establishing connections with citizens of the host society (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). By doing so refugees and citizens of the host society become more and more segregated (Kim, 2008; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). The results of this study do not correspond with these previous studies; Syrian and Eritrean refugees do establish social connections with individuals from their own ethno cultural group, particularly through their voluntary efforts as translators. However, next to establishing these social connections both groups of refugees also connect with citizens of the host society. Participant 2 and 6 illustrate how their network of Dutch friends grew through one particular friendship:

*"Actually we have a lot of Dutch friends. (Name) is an illustrator. She writes and draws a lot of books for children. (...) So throughout her I met a lot of people. She is very famous in the Netherlands. Her friends, most of them very famous, most of them writers, poets, musicians. But throughout (name illustrator) for sure we got a lot of contact with a lot of people here in the Netherlands. So she is definitely useful and very good here for us" (Participant 2 & 6).*

Finally, apart from connecting to friends, family and citizens of the host society through social media, the interviewees also use their email accounts in order to communicate in a professional manner with organizations and institutions:

*"My laptop just I work with it with the school and other things. Emailing, or if I have something to do online, like communicating with the gemeente (municipality)" (Participant 8).*

*"Also the email address I forgot. The email I use everyday. Because here we have a lot of email from Nederlandse (Dutch) company. School of (son)" (Participant 6).*

By using their email accounts in order to communicate with official organizations and institutions in the host society, Syrian and Eritrean refugees are able to participate in the information society of the

host society (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Emailing makes it for instance possible for refugees to communicate with the municipality, with the language school and with the teachers of their children. The refugees within the sample experience this kind of official communication in the host country to be radically different from the administration and communication that took place in their countries of origin. Emailing functions as a tool for the participants of the study to overcome this difference. In doing so and by being able to carry out practical communication via email, this type of communication gives Syrian and Eritrean refugees a feeling of independence and control over their everyday lives (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

#### **4.3.3. Digital media surveillance and credibility**

In both Syria and Eritrea the governments practice a regime of surveillance and censorship (Freedom House, 2016; Whittaker, 2013). In Syria President Bashar al-Assad allows his citizens to be tracked online in order to identify opponents of his regime (Whittaker, 2013). In Eritrea President Isaias Afewerki also monitors the digital activities of his citizens to track down opponents (Freedom House, 2016). In both countries citizens therefore do not possess freedom of expression and they fear surveillance of the government (Freedom House, 2016; Wall et al., 2017; Whittaker, 2013). A previous study by Wall et al. (2017) found that refugees, living in a host society, are afraid to use digital media technologies because they fear surveillance from the governments of their countries of origin. Contrary to that study, the results suggest that Syrian and Eritrean refugees are aware of the lack of freedom of expression in their countries of origin. Furthermore, the interviewees feel free to use digital media technologies within the host society to their likings and do not fear surveillance from the governments of their countries of origin. When being asked about the freedom of using digital media technologies in the Netherlands participant 2 and 6 discuss the differences between freedom of speech in Syria and the Netherlands:

*“Comparing with Syria, yes. Very free. Maybe we have a lot of freedom. (...) In Syria you write with the pen and the pen have the handcuffs. You write between limited space” (Participant 6).*

*“There is a limit. You shouldn’t write about everything. For example, you can’t write about the government” (Participant 2).*

*“But in Syria we can say: ‘I hate the president of the Netherlands’. But we can’t say: ‘I hate the president of Syria’. Here we can say both” (Participant 6).*

The fact that all participants feel free in their use of digital media technologies does not imply that they trust all the information that they access through their devices. All interviewees agree that it greatly depends on the source to determine whether information is in fact true or false. One way of dealing with this uncertainty is to search for additional information:

*"I know that we are in the time of fake news nowadays also. Fake news is everywhere. So to be sure from sure, if I have doubt anything I search more. Definitely if I search more I can have the truth. This is very important" (Participant 2).*

Another way to determine the truth, according to participant 4 is to rely on information that is published on official websites:

*"Facebook no. But the rest, yes. Google for instance, there you can find a lot of official information. (...) Facebook isn't official I think, it's not the website. The Ministry of Education for example has a website. But on Facebook no. That is a page, that is not official. (...) Because on Facebook everyone can post something. (...) But on the website no. That is reliable. It's logical" (Participant 4).*

According to another interviewee, a different way of determining the truth is to rely upon your own knowledge when you are confronted with fake news:

*"For instance now in the media about the Muslim, there is a lot of wrong things that the news say. But because I know the religion of Islam I cannot trust that one" (Participant 12).*

For other participants the issue of trusting media is related to the specific content of the information. When serious aspects are at stake, such as healthcare and academics, the credibility of the source is highly important:

*"It depends on the information. For example for medicine or treatments, no. It is better to go to a doctor" (Participant 4).*

*"It depends from which website I am getting it most of the time. If I want to use it for school I always need to have a definite source. I need to know where it's from, if it's based on studies, who wrote it, when was it posted, when was it put in the website. These kinds of things" (Participant 10).*

All of these fragments illustrate that the participants acknowledge that not all information that they access online is credible and trustworthy. These findings confirm prior studies that determined that refugees have difficulties trusting online information sources and social media (Alencar, 2017; Leurs, 2017; Wall et al., 2017). Even though they do not trust all the information that is accessible, both Syrian and Eritrean refugees have found ways to deal with their distrust in information by searching for additional information, by depending on official sources and by trusting their own knowledge.

#### **4.4. Acculturation and cultural perceptions and practices**

The third section of the results and analysis concerns a discussion of the second research question:

*RQ2: "How do digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands?"*

In order to answer the first part of the second research question it is necessary to address the cultural perceptions and practices of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Additionally it is of great importance to determine how Syrian and Eritrean refugees learn about the culture and the practices of the host society. By analysing the different ways in which the participants get to know about cultural perceptions and practices of the host society, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the roles that digital media technologies may have in the acculturation process of refugees. The non-media centric approach that is adopted within this research allows for a grounded view on the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands (Andersson, 2013; Hepp, 2010).

##### **4.4.1. Cultural differences in the host country**

Upon arrival in a new host society refugees are confronted with multiple cultural differences. The Syrian and Eritrean participants of this study reported that they have been confronted with several cultural differences in the Netherlands. The most significant cultural difference is related to the social interaction between individuals in the host society. Both Syrian and Eritrean interviewees of the study recognize that individuals in the Netherlands make appointments in the host society for social engagements. The participants reported that this is different from the culture in their countries of origin, where they would stop by the homes of their friends and family whenever they wished to do so:

*"If you want to go to someone else's place you always need to call: 'Hey on Thursday I'm coming and I'm staying for dinner'. You really have to specify why you are going there, till*

*when are you staying and what time are you coming. This is completely different from my country. I would just bump into your place like: 'Hey! I just want to stay over, I don't feel like staying at my place today'. And then you just open the door" (Participant 10).*

A second difference between the social norms of the host society and the countries of origin of the refugees incorporated in the study concerns the directness of the individuals living in the host society. Both Syrians and Eritreans stem from rather conservative cultures in contrast to people who have grown up in a liberal country such as the Netherlands (Van Heelsum, 2017). Therefore the Syrian and Eritrean participants are at first not accustomed to individuals, who are very direct and honest with regards to their opinions:

*"But the difference between Syria and Netherlands, here the people are direct with you. In Syria we have the other way" (Participant 6).*

Even though this directness of individuals is at first a difference, some of the participants see the benefits of this social norm and incorporate it within their own life:

*"And also a bit become more open, because I also see the advantage of that. Because in my country you are a bit shy to, for example, say your opinion. Or maybe the person may be offended: 'I'm not going to say that, someone else can say it'. And these things also. You can say stuff and then you can explain why you said it. Because I know it's going to help you also, so don't take it personally" (Participant 10).*

Apart from being direct and having to establish appointments, the social relationships in the Netherlands are, in particular according to the Syrian participants in the study, based on rather closed relationships. This is different from the ways in which the interviewees engaged in relationships in Syria where a more open form of communication appeared to be the norm. The majority of the Syrians in the study experience the closed nature of the relationships in the host society as a barrier to acculturate because it impedes the establishment of friendships and connections:

*"The communication with people is really difficult. It is very difficult to find people who can stay in touch. (...) Everything short. And the level of communication is different than in Syria. (...) The people that have always stayed in the Netherlands, with them it's very difficult to get in contact. They are more closed than other people" (Participant 5).*

*“Everybody is very busy with his life so they don’t give a lot of attention to social interaction. It’s true they say: ‘Hi, hello’, and this stuff. But there is always like limits, they keep space between you and them. (...) It was difficult because, for example, it was difficult to establish a common ground between you and these people. (...) The nature of the Dutch people is quiet, which don’t encourage you to go and be initiative to ask: ‘Would you like to come visit our home for dinner or something?’. Then they would think: ‘Why he want to invite me to his home?’. They would think you want something from them. This was actually way complicated because I don’t want anything from them. We are only newcomers and are building a new life and we need to integrate in this community” (Participant 3).*

This reluctance of individuals from the host society to associate with refugees is nothing new. A prior study by Van Heelsum (2017) discovered that refugees in the Netherlands struggle to establish connections with Dutch individuals. In turn, this lack of social connections influences the acculturation process of the refugees in the study. Because they have difficulties in establishing meaningful connections they are unable to shape their lives in the host society. It is for instance difficult to undertake activities and to feel at home. Besides that, a lack of social connections with people from the host society also limits the process of language learning because the participants are not able to practice with native speakers.

A fourth cultural difference that is experienced by the participants concerns the overwhelming amount of administration and the rules and regulations associated with it, that is common practice in the host society. When being asked about the cultural differences between Syria and the Netherlands, participant 5 answered the following:

*“The financial affairs and the post, the letters, we don’t have them in Syria. The financial affairs are completely different. We do not have a tax system; we do not have social assistance benefit, the letters. We do not receive letters at our homes” (Participant 5).*

In line with the study by Van Heelsum (2017), the Syrian and Eritrean refugee participants in the study also have difficulties understanding the rules and regulations of the host society. For them it is in particularly challenging to make sense of more practical rules and procedures because they are simply not aware of their existence (Van Heelsum, 2017). Apart from not understanding the administrative rules and regulations, participant 11 explained that a large difficulty that comes with the different form of administration in the host society is the language barrier:

*“Because all the post you receive are in Dutch language. At first it’s difficult to understand the Dutch language. So it’s difficult for me also to respond” (Participant 11).*

This difficulty highlights the importance of understanding the language of the host society in order to take part in the official practices and cultural practices of the country. Without understanding the Dutch language, the participants of the study are not capable of understanding official writings, let alone respond adequately to these letters. Being unable to understand and respond to official correspondence is likely to impede the acculturation process of the interviewees because they are not able to participate in the practices of the host society.

#### **4.4.2. Adapting to the culture of the host country**

By analysing the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands it became apparent that the majority of the participants of the study pursue the strategy of assimilation in order to acculturate into the host society (Berry, 1997). In doing so, the interviewees aim to act like the residents of host society, maintaining their own cultural identity is subordinate to adapting to the cultural perceptions and practices of the host society (Berry, 1997). Participant 2 speaks about his desire to acculturate and to be exactly like the individuals in the host society:

*“I tried to be much more active with the society and just to understand everything, how this country works. Because after a few months I could be part of it and I have to be exactly like the Dutch, find work or start programme to study, just to have a job” (Participant 2).*

In the case of the participants, assimilation is a voluntary decision; the host society does not force the interviewees to assimilate into their new surroundings (Berry, 1997). As participant 2 indicates, the interviewees regard assimilation to be the proper strategy in order to be able to participate in the new society, to obtain a degree and to find employment. Participating in the host society is also considered to be a pillar of acculturation for the refugees in the study. According to participant 1, participation is required for acculturation:

*“I measure the integration in terms of, in the volume of participation, in the volume of contribution. What is your contribution to this society? What is the volume of your participation? How can I measure your participation without job, without an action and real contribution to this society?” (Participant 1).*

Besides the importance of participation, the interviewees state that obtaining cultural knowledge about the host society is crucial for their acculturation process. Participant 5 puts it in a brief, but clear manner:

*“Important, I know what is Nederland (the Netherlands)” (Participant 5).*

This result aligns with previous research by Ager and Strang (2008) that found that cultural knowledge functions as a facilitator of acculturation. In this research refugees reported that knowledge about national values, customs and procedures are important to understand the host society (Ager & Strang, 2008). The current results indicate that both Syrian and Eritrean refugees in this study also deem it necessary to be informed about customs and procedures to comprehend their new surroundings (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Although the participants in the study adapt themselves to the host society through assimilation, the vast majority of the interviewees stress the importance of a two-way process of acculturation. Within this process acculturation is seen as a responsibility of both the refugees and the host society (Ager & Strang, 2004; Da Lomba, 2010). One of the interviewees describes his perspective on acculturation:

*“From my point of view integrating is not from my side, from the other side also. As I respect your culture, you should respect my culture” (Participant 2).*

This fragment illustrates that the participants deem it necessary for successful acculturation that the host society provides the right conditions for refugees to adjust to their new surroundings (Ager & Strang, 2004; Da Lomba, 2010). However, on the other hand the interviewees also state that acculturation cannot take place without personal effort and hard work from the refugee. When being asked about who is responsible for acculturation participant 7 answered the following:

*“Because a refugee is here and not in Syria. And nobody will come to him and teach him everything. He is responsible. He needs to do it himself” (Participant 7).*

The cultural practices that the participants adopted throughout their acculturation process are various in natures. Firstly, the vast majority of the interviewees report that they incorporate cycling into their everyday lives as a form of transportation. Secondly, they adapt themselves to the Dutch habit of making appointments for social engagements:

*“I noticed that I adapted to many things here. (...) If you invite somebody you need to make an appointment to give more time. For example weeks before the planned date. This is maybe because their agenda is full and they have other plans. So you get to give them more freedom to choose the time that is suitable for them” (Participant 3).*

Thirdly, the interviewees state that, like the Dutch, they become more direct in their ways of communication:

*“This is what I have learned. I have to be very direct. Of course I was also direct, but I am more direct now. I am just greeting the Dutch people. I need to have face contact, directness. And also when I am talking, I have to talk to the point” (Participant 11).*

Finally, the participants also adjust themselves to particular human rights and freedoms that weren't present within their countries of origin. Participant 8 explains how he found out about same-sex relationships and how he now accepts gays and lesbians:

*“Like in our country, we don't have homo's (gays) and the lesbian. But it is here normal. In the boat where we are coming, men are kissing each other. Maybe at first, you know, it was a little bit difficult. But later on we adapted. Even sometimes it was a little bit difficult when my children are with me in the boat and they see ladies kissing each other and something. (...) They ask: 'Why they did this?' and 'What is this?'. But we have to deal with it, we have to tell them. Later when you grow you are going to know it. But it is like this, no problem” (Participant 8).*

The assimilatory strategy does not value the own culture and identity of the refugees (Berry, 1997). The findings of this study confirm this perspective towards acculturation. For many participants, in particular for the Eritrean interviewees, the culture of the country of origin is no longer important in the host society. One of the participants explains why he leaves his culture in his country of origin:

*“The traditions or other things that we are talking about, I can leave it in Syria. I don't use it here. So I can leave it there and that's not something that I care about. (...) Because it's part of that culture and here is another culture and you need to adapt to this culture. And when you adapt I cannot impose my identity and push it in the face of people here and say that this is my identity and I refuse. This kind of blocking is not acceptable” (Participant 1).*

Even though the participants pursue assimilation with regards to acculturation, some Syrian interviewees do value certain aspects of their own culture and identity. These aspects are in particular the food and the Arabic language. Most of the participants continue to cook Syrian recipes in the host society. Furthermore they value the Arabic language and aim to pass it along to their children:

*"I would like also to preserve the mother language for my children in order to be able to communicate with their relatives in Syria. (...) If my mother for example wants to communicate with my children and she could not find a language, or she notices that they don't speak their mother language, she would be very sad. They would also be very sad and they would blame me later that I did not focus on their mother language" (Participant 3).*

These two fragments are contradictory to one another and illustrate that the Syrian refugees in the sample have difficulties to find a balance between their own culture and identity and adapting to the culture of the host society. On the one hand they stress the importance of adjusting themselves to a new culture. On the other hand they need to hold on to certain aspects of their own cultural identity. Van Heelsum (2017) already established in previous research that Syrian refugees experience a struggle in combining multiple identities. Like the current results, the results of this prior research found that it is challenging to combine the traditions and the culture of the country of origin with the traditions and the culture of the host society (Van Heelsum, 2017).

#### **4.4.3. Facilitating knowledge about the culture of the host country**

The participants in the study reported that there are four different ways to acquire cultural knowledge of the host society. These ways include organizations, surroundings, social connections and digital media technologies. Some of the interviewees acknowledged that a variety of civic organizations facilitated them to learn about the culture in the Netherlands. These organizations are for instance non-profits aiding refugees in their acculturation process or municipalities establishing initiatives to foster successful acculturation. Participant 4 remembers how an integration course, organized by the municipality, helped him to learn about the cultural practices of the Netherlands:

*"We got a lot of general information about the Dutch society. Also to arrange your insurance in a good way. Yes. The work in the Netherlands, the education. (...) Yes, we got a lot of good information about the Dutch society, the traditions, celebrations, for example. About the law, the constitution. According to me it was really good" (Participant 4).*

Another way to in which the participants reported to get to know the culture of the host society is through their surroundings and the environment in which they are living. The participants explain that through observing what is happening around them they learn about the culture and practices of the host society. One of the interviewees for instance plans to visit the Rijksmuseum (national museum) in Amsterdam to learn more about the history and the culture of the Netherlands. For her, learning about the culture through her surroundings is more valuable than any other approach. She explains:

*“Outside it’s better. Outside I look at the windmill, I look at the shop. What kind of food, Dutch food? Yes, I love looking at my farmer’s mill. It is beautiful, it’s big, it’s old. (...) Yes it’s beautiful, it’s the culture of the Netherlands” (Participant 5).*

Learning by observing the environment around you is particularly important for the illiterate participant. For him this proved to be the only accessible option that facilitates cultural learning because many of the other options require literacy skills.

Apart from learning through organizations and from the surroundings, social connections are also able to facilitate cultural knowledge for the participants in the study. Many of the interviewees learned from Dutch friends and connections; they taught them about the traditions and the daily live in the host society. Furthermore, the participants were able to ask questions about the Dutch culture to their social connections if they wished to get to know more information:

*“I do ask a lot of questions. A lot of my Dutch friends I used to ask questions. So most of the things I learned about the Netherlands are from them. So they tell me like, what is a taboo to do in the Netherlands, what is not a taboo to do in the Netherlands” (Participant 10).*

Social connections are able to facilitate acculturation, in terms of gathering cultural knowledge, because it gives the refugees in the sample the opportunity to contact locals and to interact with them about the cultural differences that they encounter in the host society. The female participants of the study seem to make use of social connections in particular when it comes to learning about the cultural perceptions and practices of the host society. However, in contrast to the male participants of the study, the majority of the females do not directly contact citizens of the host society to increase their cultural knowledge. The females frequently learn about their new surroundings through their husbands. In her life-story map, participant 5 for instance allocated a central space to the process of family reunification and the role of her family in her life. This exemplifies the importance of her husband in her daily activities. Because the husbands of the

female participants, from either Syria or Eritrea, arrived in the Netherlands well before they joined them, the husbands are already more familiar with the culture and the practices of the country. Due to this additional experience, the husbands are able to guide the females through a large part of their acculturation process. This process is stimulated by the integration policies in the host society (Bouma, 2018). The integration policies are usually focused on the most promising individual in the family, due to the experience of the husband, he is considered the most likely to be able to participate in the host society in the nearby future (Bouma, 2018). As soon as the husband obtains employment, the family for instance no longer relies upon a social assistance benefit, upon which the municipality loses track of the other individuals in the family (Bouma, 2018). Because of this reduced guidance by the municipality the females are increasingly dependent upon their husbands (Bouma, 2018).

Finally, digital media technologies also facilitate cultural learning for the participants in this research. Both Syrian and Eritrean interviewees use digital media technologies in order to learn more about the Netherlands (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). They employ digital media technologies in different ways. Firstly, the interviewees use digital media technologies in order to learn from the experiences of other refugees in the host society. By accessing the shared experiences of other refugees, the participants were able to get to know more about the daily life in the Netherlands. Social media platforms, in particular Facebook, lend itself to share experiences with others. Participant 10 explains how he got to know more about cultural differences through Facebook:

*"You see for example news about the Netherlands and culture about the Netherlands and stuff like that. And Facebook videos and people post stuff; people just share their shocking experience in terms of culture or something. Then you see like: 'Oh ok, I see!'. These things, it teaches you a lot" (Participant 10).*

Apart from learning about cultural differences on social media, these platforms are also used to share more practical information about the daily life in the host society (Alencar, 2017; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Leurs, 2017; McGregor & Siegel, 2013; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015). One of the participants for instance recalls how Facebook enabled him to learn about the rules and regulations that apply to public transportation in the Netherlands:

*"Facebook is a platform. Everything you can find there, good experience and bad experience. So you can learn from both of them. You can learn from the mistakes that the others fall. For example, a few days ago I saw on Facebook that somebody have problems with his NS card*

*(public transportation card). I don't know any information about that. And I don't know that my son has to have a NS card so that he can go with the train at this age. Before that, nobody told me that. So I have to order him an NS free card so he can go with the train freely. Otherwise the conductor will come and give me a fine. And I will not be fine after that actually. Nobody can give me this information" (Participant 2).*

This fragment highlights once again that it is challenging for the participants to understand the rules and regulations of the host society (Van Heelsum, 2017). In the case of informing others about more practical rules and procedure, digital media technologies do help the refugees in the sample because they make the interviewees aware of the existence of such procedures. This result corresponds with previous research, which found that refugees use digital media technologies, and social media in particular, to understand the practices of a new society (Alencar, 2017; Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016; Leurs, 2017; McGregor & Siegel, 2013; Sawyer & Chen, 2012; Tudsri & Hebbani, 2015).

Secondly, the participants, predominantly the Syrians in the sample, make use of YouTube to get informed about the culture of the Netherlands. One of the participants speaks about the content that he views on YouTube:

*"I listen everyday for four hours to YouTube videos. (...) I have so many YouTube videos about, documentaries about the Netherlands. There is a series, which is called 'De Ijzeren Eeuw', 'The Iron Age', about the 18<sup>th</sup> century. From 1800 till 1900. That talks about so many scientists and Amsterdam city and Enschede, about the textile there, factories and about so many different subjects. About banking in the Netherlands, the first bank. And other serie also about William I, II and III. (...) Because you need to integrate. How can I integrate without information. I need to know more about the people, about the history of the Netherlands, about the achievements of the Netherlands" (Participant 1).*

This interviewee uses YouTube to access information about the history and the culture of his host society. He states that by doing so this aids him in his acculturation process because it is essential for him to know more about the country that he resides in. This aligns with the findings of Díaz Andrade and Doolin (2016) who established that knowledge is key when it comes to successful acculturation of refugees. Sawyer and Chen (2012) also determined that individuals frequently use social media platforms to expand their cultural knowledge. Furthermore, a prior study by Alencar (2017) already established that YouTube is frequently employed by refugees in order to learn the language of the host society. The current results illustrate that, additional to this, YouTube also functions as a valuable platform for cultural learning.

Finally, digital media technologies make it easier to access information about different cultures for the interviewees. Because of this accessibility there is certain proximity of cultures even though the cultures are radically different from one another. Participant 8 speaks about how, due to media, he already knew partly about the Dutch culture whilst he was still residing in Africa:

*"The world is today like similar. When I was in Sudan and when I was in Eritrea, if you always use the media you can have an idea what the Europeans are, what Africans are. You have an idea. (...) The media is in all the world like similar. What I mean is, when I was in my country I know about homo's (gays). When I come here it is not something which is new" (Participant 8).*

This section shows that digital media technologies even have the potential to help the participants with acculturation prior to migrating to a host society. By informing themselves beforehand they can know about the cultural changes that will occur after they migrate to Europe.

Even though the interviewees are able to benefit from digital media technologies during their acculturation process, it is important to highlight that digital media technologies are not solely responsible for successful cultural acculturation. As the results indicate, the participants make use of a variety of strategies that facilitate their acculturation; civic organizations, the surroundings and the social connections of an individual also greatly contribute to this goal. In an ideal situation the participant makes use of a combination of all these methods, including the use of digital media technologies, to achieve successful cultural acculturation.

#### **4.5. Acculturation and language acquisition**

The fourth section of the results and analysis concerns a discussion of the second research question:

*RQ2: "How do digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands?"*

In order to answer the second part of the second research question it is necessary to address the importance of language acquisition in the host country. Subsequently it is important to analyse the process of language learning of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. By determining the different methods interviewees use to learn the language of the host society, it is possible to understand whether digital media technologies play a facilitating role in this process.

#### **4.5.1. The importance of language acquisition in the host country**

The vast majority of the participants in the study consider language to be an important, if not the most important, prerequisite for successful acculturation. Learning the language of the host society is therefore something that the participants deemed necessary. The participants explain:

*“According to me, integration is the language. The most important is the language” (Participant 4).*

*“Integration means to me, when I am living in the Netherlands, I have to integrate. I have to know the language because I am living here. I don’t have any solution. So I have to do it, to integrate, and I am trying to do it” (Participant 9).*

Language learning is considered to be essential because the participants need to know the language of the host society in order to be able to participate in the country. Without knowledge of the language these refugees are for instance unable to study, unable to work and unable to pursue meaningful connections with Dutch individuals (Ager & Strang, 2008; Nash et al., 2006). Many of the Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the sample also experience a lack of knowledge of the Dutch language as a barrier to participate in the Netherlands. Participant 5 illustrates how she required her husband’s guidance when taking the children to school:

*“I don’t have language. It is difficult. But my husband helps me always. That is very good. It is easy for me. I don’t have language. Always my husband with my family. We go together to the school. Every day. Very good. But now I can go to school by myself” (Participant 5).*

This fragment highlights the importance of the Dutch language; without knowledge of the language the participants are unable to live their lives independently and they always require help from somebody who is able to speak the language of the host society. Another participant talked about the difficulties in establishing social connections without speaking the Dutch language:

*“The only problem with me is the language. Because of the language I don’t have a lot of connections with Nederlands (Dutch) people. (...) Because of the language I cannot communicate with a lot of people. Even from my neighbours, maybe they need to help me and I need to help them. The thing is, we have problem with the language. They cannot communicate with me and I cannot communicate with them” (Participant 9).*

Both of these fragments show that language is an important facilitator of refugees' acculturation process. A previous study by Ager and Strang (2008) determined that language acquisition is essential when it comes to further acculturation. Without knowledge of the language refugees are unable to establish social connections with Dutch individuals. In this study the experience of participant 9 corresponds to this perspective and states that language is indispensable to make connections (Ager & Strang, 2008). Nash, Wong and Trlin (2006) furthermore determined that the ability to speak the language increases the chances of refugees to study and to find employment. The participants in this study confirm this finding by expressing the importance of language in order to participate in the community of the host society (Nash et al., 2006).

This desire to participate in the host society is cited by the majority of the participants as the main motivation for learning the Dutch language. The participants recognize that their lives in the Netherlands require for them to speak the language. Furthermore, they want to learn the language in order to be able to study and work in the Netherlands. One of the participants speaks about his desire to have a career and to study and the importance of knowing the language:

*"The motivation was actually, I got a good career in Syria and the motivation for me was to continue the same thing here in the Netherlands. I knew I had to start from zero. (...) I also was motivated to study the language because I wanted to continue my study, to study a master, which requires a high level of Dutch language" (Participant 3).*

Apart from being able to participate in the host society by working and studying, the interviewees wish to learn the language in order to establish new relationships with individuals from the host society. When being asked about their motivation to learn the language participant 4 and 7 discuss the importance of language in establishing social connections:

*"According to her it is to contact people, and also for the children in the future" (Participant 7).*

*"It is the same. For work and also for contact. Without language there is nothing" (Participant 4).*

Some of the interviewees, predominantly the Eritrean interviewees, learned the language because they are required to do so by law. For refugees in the Netherlands it is mandatory to learn the Dutch language (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). As part of the acculturation process, refugees are required to pass a civic integration examination that, amongst others, examines the knowledge

about the Dutch language (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs, n.d.). When being asked about his motivation one of the Eritrean participants of the study admits that this requirement motivated him to learn Dutch:

*“Honestly speaking the obligation. It’s an obligation for the one who receives status. Of course you have to study language and do the exam and get your certificate and diploma”* (Participant 11).

None of the Syrian interviewees in the study mentioned that they were motivated to learn the language because it is mandatory to do so for refugees in the Netherlands. A few Eritrean participants, however, did mention that this motivated them. This difference could possibly be explained by the different backgrounds of the Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the study. Most of the Syrian participants already obtained good forms of employment in Syria, whereas the Eritrean participants were forced to work for the national service of their government. The Syrian interviewees, in contrast to the Eritrean interviewees, might therefore be used to a high quality of life in their country of origin and are more motivated to work hard in order to regain such a quality of life, as exemplified by a prestigious degree and secure employment, in the host society.

#### **4.5.2. Facilitating language acquisition in the host country**

The participants in the study reported that there are four ways to learn the language of the host society. These ways are through school, self-study, social connections and digital media technologies. All of the interviewees are either enrolled in a language school or have been enrolled in the past. These schools include courses that are provided by universities such as the University of Amsterdam and VU Amsterdam. Other language institutes that are attended by the participants are Taal-Academie and NedLes. Additionally, some of the participants already started to learn the Dutch language during their stay in the asylum centres through courses organized by volunteers. However, this was not the case for all of the interviewees. Not all asylum centres provide the option to learn the language. Furthermore, in the Netherlands it is prohibited to attend a language school whilst the decision surrounding a refugee’s status is still pending. The participants state that this rule prohibits them to learn the language of the host society.

After receiving their residence permits and enrolling in language classes, the interviewees experienced several challenges within the language school. Firstly, some language courses did not connect to one another. If a participant was able to move to a higher level he or she frequently had to wait until the next course would start. This could greatly slow down the language learning process. Participant 6 explains how she was forced to take a break between two language courses:

*"I have two courses in UVA (University of Amsterdam). Then I have other courses with Dutch in VU (VU Amsterdam). But with Dutch I have holiday between the courses. The courses not direct next to. Maybe I have one course, then the long holiday. I want to stay. But university haven't course for two months. I have self-studied thuis (at home)" (Participant 6).*

Secondly, they found that many schools teach in an inefficient manner and that they allow the students to speak in their own language in the classes. This slows down the learning process for all the students in the course. The participants' state:

*"It was actually normal lessons with mostly Syrian people. So this was a challenge because you know, if you've got a lot of Syrian people in class then they will speak Arabic" (Participant 3).*

*"In the school, sometimes it is important and helpful. But not all the schools are also the same. What I mean is, it depends on the class and the teacher. Some teachers they didn't take care if people are asking a lot of questions, speaking their language the other ones translating to each other and something, it is kind of killing of time. What I can say is for myself, meestal (most of the time) what I did I did it by myself" (Participant 8).*

Participant 6 and participant 8 both illustrate that due to these challenges they resorted to self-study at home. Most of the Syrian participants of the study make use of self-study in order to learn the Dutch language. Only one Eritrean participant makes use of this option. This could, once again, be related to the motivation of the Syrian interviewees to learn the language, in order to be able to continue a high standard of living in the host society. Self-study is predominantly done by repeating the lessons of the language school and by practicing the material. Furthermore, the participants search for additional information online to supplement the lessons. Many of the participants of the study are also involved in doing translation work; the participants translate material from Dutch to Arabic or from Dutch to Tigrinya to help fellow refugees. The participants who are translating state that this work helped them to learn the Dutch language:

*"It started when I first arrived in the Netherlands and people came to me and brought some letters with them to translate it for them from Dutch. These people thought, because I speak English then I would be able to translate these letters for them. I said ok, so I started using Google Translate and translate for these people and also to teach them how to do that themselves by using Google Translate. So this worked fine and I started to get more*

*knowledge translating. So every time when I am translating something I learn a new word”* (Participant 3).

The majority of the interviewees recognize that self-study is required in order to acquire the Dutch language. The language is perceived as radically different from Arabic and Tigrinya and therefore a lot of time and effort needs to be invested to learn. Self-study is therefore seen as an important component of language learning. Participant 1 explains why he put so much effort into self-study:

*“I exerted great efforts to learn the Dutch language because it needs this effort. It’s not easy to acquire the language without efforts, because it’s too difficult. It’s too difficult. Especially the words that are originally Dutch, that are not borrowed from other languages”* (Participant 1).

Apart from learning through school and from self-study, social connections are also able to facilitate language acquisition for the participants in the study. Many of the participants in the study practice the language with a language coach, neighbours and Dutch friends:

*“I have neighbour. She is a teacher in school in Haarlem. But it is a good woman. She has made the language easy for me. She visits me one time a week. That is very good. I listen, I start to talk”* (Participant 5).

*“Contact with people, that is every essential. Because when you speak with somebody, with a Dutch person, he can directly correct you. He describe what does this word mean, how we can use it. That is important”* (Participant 2).

These fragments illustrate that Dutch social connections make it easier to learn the language because these individuals are able to correct the mistakes of the participants immediately. Practicing the language with Dutch people also provides the participants with an opportunity to learn more about the culture and the practices in the host society:

*“I was working also from my side on the language by meeting people and talking to them. Even though I did not speak good Dutch at the beginning, but I was learning from people. Because actually I find it quite better for me to learn from people than in class. When I learn from people I also learn about the culture, which is something you cannot get from the class”* (Participant 3).

This highlights once again how interconnected different aspects within the acculturation process of refugees are. Social connections are greatly connected to language acquisition; without meaningful social connections it becomes challenging for the interviewees in the study to practice the language of the host society. Additionally, social connections are crucial when it comes to developing one's knowledge about the culture of the host country; social connections enable the participants to experience and discuss cultural differences in practice. These findings correspond to research by Ager and Strang (2008) and Nash et al. (2006) who determined that language knowledge is essential for further acculturation of refugees. Both studies found that knowing the language enables refugees to establish connections and to learn more about the culture of the host country (Ager & Strang, 2008; Nash et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the female participants of the study frequently practice the language of the host society with their husbands. This result aligns with a result that was found previously within this study which holds that the female participants frequently learn about the cultural perceptions and practices through their husbands. Because the husbands of the female participants arrived in the host country before the female interviewees, the husbands are most of the time already able to speak the Dutch language and are therefore in the position to help their wives to acquire the language.

Finally, digital media technologies also facilitate language acquisition for the participants in the research. Both Syrian and Eritrean interviewees use digital media technologies in order to learn the language of the host country. They employ digital media technologies in different ways. Firstly, digital media technologies are frequently used in the language courses of the participants. All of the interviewees mentioned that their classes make use of online exercises and digital devices:

*“I have a book for Code Plus. Code Plus is the best book for Dutch. But next to the books I have online all exercises” (Participant 6).*

*“I have book and teacher, listening to a computer video. I have a special programme with my book. Online. I listen with my teacher. I have exercises at home. Yes I have homework” (Participant 5).*

The fact that digital media technologies are used within all of the language courses of the participants of this study highlights that this type of education has become mediatized. Hepp (2010) already established that digital media technologies are increasingly integrated within social and cultural contexts. This result indicates that mediatisation is also taking place in the realms of education (Hepp, 2010).

Secondly, both Syrian and Eritrean participants in this study use digital media technologies to practice their Dutch communication skills. Whatsapp proved to be a good application to practice the Dutch language with friends. The majority of the communication on Whatsapp takes place in writing; therefore this application is very suitable to practice a new language because it provides the users with time to think about what they wish to communicate:

*“But Whatsapp echt belangrijk (really important). I chat with Dutch language. For example, I can show you here, I have friends, I have long chats. It’s belangrijk (important) for writing. I am so good in writing. In Dutch it’s very good with writing. I find it easy because I can think about it” (Participant 6).*

By writing in Dutch on Whatsapp with friends and other social connections, the participants practice and develop the language of the host country in a safe environment. A study by Díaz Andrade and Doolin (2016) confirmed that refugees use digital media technologies to practice their language skills in a convenient manner. Additionally this kind of communication through Whatsapp might reduce misunderstanding between the refugee and his or her social connections in the host country because the user is able to take his or her time to think about the messages that he or she is writing (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

Besides this, many of the interviewees use their digital devices for translation services. A website that is frequently used by the participants for this purpose is Google Translate. They use Google Translate to translate words that are unclear, for instance if they receive official letters and need to understand the content. Additionally they use Google Translate whilst they are studying the Dutch language:

*“I use the phone all the day with Google Translate. With my study. (...) I use it only for Google Translate” (Participant 6).*

Another way in which digital media technologies facilitate translation services is through calling other individuals. One of the participants, participant 9, mentioned that he calls Eritrean friends, who speak the language of the host country, in order to receive help with translating:

*“Sometimes when I am lost with something I need to ask somebody. I call him and you can ask: ‘Eh (name) what is the name of the aula in our language?’ Then I can say this is the tafel (table). If he is in a shop or something like that, sometimes you can ask (Participant 9).*

For this participant in particular the option to call other people is more appealing than the use of a website like Google Translate. Due to his illiteracy he is unable to use a website. The option to call somebody with his smartphone is therefore more convenient. By doing so he relies upon members of his own refugee community. A study by O'Mara (2012) determined that refugees from a variety of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds engage in different ways with digital media technologies. The actions of participant 9 align with this idea and suggest that due to the participant's cultural and linguistic, or illiterate, background he prefers call members of his own refugee community to ask for help (O'Mara, 2012).

Furthermore, the interviewees in this study also aim to improve their language skills by consuming a variety of content on digital media technologies. The vast majority of the Syrians and Eritreans use YouTube to learn more about the language. On YouTube they consume videos that are directed at learning the Dutch language. Participant 1 explains how a YouTube channel by Bart de Pau helped him to learn Dutch:

*"I started to learn also via YouTube some Dutch words. From 'Learn Dutch with', I don't remember his name, but there are so many resources. Myriam one of them and Bart de Pau. (...) I learn from many resources in order to learn the Dutch. But I depend many on Bart de Pau because he was the best. You learn from every video twenty-five words, forty videos, one-thousand words" (Participant 1).*

These videos teach newcomers the basics of the Dutch language and help them to expand their vocabulary. Apart from watching purely informative videos about the language, the participants in the study also used YouTube to view Dutch-spoken videos about a variety of topics. The interviewees for instance state that they frequently use YouTube to access news; additionally they watch Dutch documentaries and shows. One participant shares that he practices the Dutch language through the YouTube channel Universiteit van Nederland; a channel on which the best scientists of the Netherlands give lectures:

*"There is also a website that is called Universiteit van Nederland. This is also good to practice. There are lot of information and different subjects, scientific, literary, everything. And if I find it difficult I can listen to the same video three, four times" (Participant 1).*

Both of these quotes illustrate that YouTube facilitates language acquisition for the refugees in the sample. A previous study by Alencar (2017) already determined that refugees frequently use YouTube to learn the language of the host society. The current results correspond with the research

by Alencar (2017) and emphasize the facilitating role that social media have in the process of acculturation.

As well as watching content on YouTube, some participants consume entertainment content on the streaming service Netflix. They state that this allows them to be exposed to the Dutch language, either by hearing the spoken language or by reading subtitles. Two of the Syrian participants talk about their Netflix use:

*“We depend sometimes on Netflix. Netflix is a very good helper” (Participant 2).*

*“We have Netflix. I watch films in English, but subtitles with Dutch” (Participant 6).*

Furthermore, many individuals in the sample consume news online to practice the Dutch language, either on YouTube as explained previously, or through other websites such as the website or application of the newspaper and broadcaster or through social media platforms like Facebook. One participant provides more details about how he consumes news to improve his language skills:

*“For the news, I only use YouTube also, live channels of news. Sometimes reading articles about integration, LinkedIn. Something about migrants, refugees, these kinds of articles. Because I try everyday to read an article in English and in Dutch, two articles, in order to keep my Dutch fresh” (Participant 1).*

A final medium that is used to learn the language by both the Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the sample is the television. They report that the television helps them to get familiar with the language of the host country by hearing it. Furthermore, subtitles aid them in developing their listening and reading skills. The programs that the participants watch on the television vary from cartoons to political debates. The interviewees tried to practice the language by watching cartoons on the television:

*“I was asking people about the best way to learn the language and I got recommendations that it was to watch TV. Especially children’s TV, cartoon TV, because they speak slow and clear. I was trying to do that and to listen to the Dutch news. Just to expose myself to the Dutch language as much as possible” (Participant 3).*

Another interviewee states how certain television programmes motivate him to learn the language of the host country:

*“Zondag met Lubach, I watch it every time. I learned from him. His language and how he speaks makes you like to learn this language. And also I like the debates. Which is in the campaigns, election campaigns when there is debates. I like the way the Dutch people debating. I like that because in our land definitely we don’t have this. Since I born till now there is one president. When he dead he give the rule to his son. So I like this kind of thing, so I keep watching that” (Participant 2).*

This participant recognizes through his digital media consumption that there is a large difference between the political system in the Netherlands and Syria. He is able to learn more about the politics in the host country through the television, thereby language acquisition and cultural learning are once again closely interrelated to one another (Ager & Strang, 2008; Nash et al., 2006). Learning a new language through the medium of a television is nothing new. A study by Vanderplank (2010) found that television has been used frequently in the past to teach and to learn new languages.

This section illustrates that digital media technologies are able to facilitate language acquisition for the participants in the study. However, it is important to stress that a combination between the use of digital media technologies and other methods, such as language schools, self-study and social connections, are essential when it concerns successful acculturation in terms of language learning. In an ideal scenario the participant makes use of all of these options to achieve successful acculturation:

*“I actually recommend to watch TV as much as possible, especially Dutch TV. And also to get involved with projects or initiatives that other people are doing. For example to meet Dutch people and to interact with Dutch people as much as possible. So it can be for different levels, not only TV, it can be through TV and social media and personal interaction with other people and meeting people and attending workshops. These things are all helpful in my opinion. (...) In this way I think it will be a joyful process. It will not be a boring thing to learn a strange language” (Participant 3).*

By doing so the participant gets to experience different aspects of the acculturation process. He or she is able to learn the language, whilst he or she gets to know the culture and establishes social connections in the host society.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed at determining to what extent and in which ways digital media technologies are integrated in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Furthermore, this research examined how digital media technologies influence the process of acculturation of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. Firstly, an answer to the first research question of the study was sought in order to proceed with the research: *To what extent and in which ways are digital media technologies present in the everyday lives of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands?*

The study established that digital media technologies are to a great extent integrated in the everyday lives of the Syrian and Eritrean participants of the study. The interviewees predominantly use three digital media devices namely, a smartphone, a computer or laptop and a television. However, the smartphone is used more frequently due to its accessibility. The amount of time that the participants spend on a daily basis using digital devices is extremely varied, from a few minutes per day to eight hours per day. This depends on the daily tasks of the interviewees; females report to spend less time on digital media technologies because they are occupied taking care of their children.

The Syrian and Eritrean refugees within the sample use digital media technologies to access information and to communicate with others. They particularly access news about the host society and the countries of origin. Furthermore they access information about events and activities in the host society as well as information that aid them in their education. It was found that the Syrian participants make use of a larger variety of applications to access information than the Eritrean participants. This difference highlights the existence of a digital gap between Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the study. Furthermore, the study determined that the participants do not trust all the information that they access through digital media technologies; it greatly depends on the source. This clearly indicates a situation of 'information precarity' (Wall et al., 2017) regarding refugees' access to reliable online information. In order to determine the truth they search for additional information, rely on official websites as well as their own knowledge. However, both the Syrian and Eritrean interviewees do feel free to use digital media technologies within the host society to their likings, even though they migrated from countries where media surveillance by the government is the norm.

The study found that the participants also use digital media technologies, predominantly Whatsapp and Facebook, to communicate with friends and family. It was found that the interviewees maintain communication with individuals from their country of origin as well as with individuals from the host society. As found in prior research (Brekke, 2008; Komito, 2011; McGregor & Siegel, 2013), it is therefore not the case that digital media technologies lead the refugees in the sample to solely maintain connections with their country of origin. On the contrary, digital media technologies provide them with a low threshold form of communication to connect with citizens of the host

country. Additionally the Syrian and Eritrean participants use their email addresses to communicate effectively with organizations and institutions in the host society. By doing so they are participating in the information society of the host country (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016). In turn, this gives the participants a feeling of independence and control over their lives (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2016).

Digital media technologies, and especially social media, are not always regarded as positive aspects in the daily lives of the refugees in the study. The research determined that the participants found that social media is too time consuming. Furthermore, social media stimulates surveillance by family and friends and it displays content that is considered to be too confrontational for some of the interviewees (Komito, 2011). Due to these aspects of social media, some of the participants in the study terminated their social media presence.

Finally, the second research question of the study was answered, namely: *How do digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands?* This question is twofold; on the one hand it aimed to determine how digital media technologies facilitate acculturation in terms of obtaining cultural knowledge. On the other hand it aimed to determine how digital media technologies facilitate acculturation in terms of language acquisition.

In order to clearly identify how digital media technologies facilitate acculturation it was firstly necessary to determine the participants' perspectives on acculturation and the cultural practices in the host country. It was found that the Syrian and Eritrean refugees in the study pursue an assimilatory strategy towards acculturation; they aim to live like the citizens of the host country (Berry, 1997). Within this process they do not consider their own culture to be of importance. However, the Syrian interviewees do value the Arabic language and Syrian food. Contradictory to the strategy of assimilation, the study determined that the participants perceive acculturation as a two-way process and regard both the host society and refugees to be responsible for successful acculturation (Ager & Strang, 2004; Da Lomba, 2010). Additionally the interviewees perceived cultural knowledge as an important facilitator of acculturation. The research found that the participants adapted themselves to several cultural practices in the host country namely, cycling, making appointments, and pursuing direct forms of communication and tolerance towards human rights.

Consequently the study determined that four different aspects facilitate acculturation when it concerns cultural knowledge. The Syrian and Eritrean interviewees learned about the culture of the host society through civic organizations, their surroundings and their social connections (Strang & Ager, 2010). Likewise, digital media technologies also facilitated cultural knowledge for these individuals. Social media is often used to learn from shared cultural experiences of other migrants and refugees. Furthermore, YouTube is employed to access information about the history and

culture of the host society. Finally, digital media technologies make a different culture more accessible because they allow you to search for information online; because of this some aspects of the culture of the host country were already known to the refugees of the study prior to migrating. It can be concluded that digital media technologies are able to facilitate acculturation for the refugees in the research. However, it is necessary to underscore that other factors, such as civic organizations, the environment of an individual and his or her social connections also contribute to the acculturation process. Ideally, the participant combines all of these methods to achieve successful acculturation.

After determining that digital media technologies facilitate cultural knowledge, the study also found that digital media technologies facilitate language acquisition. The participants consider language knowledge as an important prerequisite for acculturation. Without knowledge of the language of the host country the entire acculturation process comes to a halt; language is essential in order to study, in order to obtain employment and in order to establish meaningful connections in the host society (Ager & Strang, 2008; Nash et al., 2006).

The research established that the participants make use of four different methods to learn the language of the host country, namely, through language schools, self-study, social connections and digital media technologies. Online exercises and digital devices are frequently used within language schools. Furthermore, the Syrian and Eritrean participants practice the language by communicating with citizens of the host society in a safe and convenient environment like Whatsapp. Another way in which digital media technologies facilitate language acquisition is through the potential it offers in translating; Google Translate for instance helps the interviewees whilst studying the language. Finally, the interviewees learn the language through digital media technologies by consuming Dutch content. YouTube allows the participants to watch online lessons as well as Dutch-spoken videos about a diversity of subjects. Netflix enables the refugees in the sample to listen to the Dutch language and to read Dutch subtitles. Furthermore, the consumption of news on digital media devices allows the interviewees to practice the language. Television also proved to be of great value; by watching Dutch cartoons and shows the participants become more familiar with the language of the host society. Even though it can be concluded that digital media technologies are able to facilitate language acquisition for the participants in the study, it is important to state that a combination of language schools, self-study and social connections are valuable and necessary in order to achieve successful acculturation.

### **5.1. Implications for practice**

The results that are presented within this research correspond to the outcomes of previous studies about the ways in which digital media technologies influence the acculturation process of refugees. The study determined that digital media technologies are able to facilitate refugees with cultural knowledge and language acquisition in the host country. These findings could ultimately be of great value and benefit for refugees who need to acculturate within a host society.

Because of the focus on language and cultural integration in the Dutch integration policy, there is a pressing need for governments and organizations to deploy digital media technologies – with the support of ethnographic evidence – as part of the process of refugee acculturation (Alencar, 2017), and without falling prey to technological determinism and digital humanitarianism. This result provides policy makers with important information about the usability and effectiveness of digital media technologies for the purpose of acculturation. By drawing on these insights, policy makers could alter their policies towards integration accordingly, and stimulate the use of digital media technologies for these purposes, to accommodate a more successful process of acculturation. Ultimately this could be of great benefit for refugees, who are trying to acculturate, because they could potentially acquire knowledge about the language and the culture of the host society in a shorter amount of time. By doing so they are able to build their lives in the host country.

### **5.2. Strengths and limitations**

The first strength of this study lies in the non-media centric theoretical approach that is adopted throughout the research. Due to its grounded and more subjective approach towards the interviewees, the non-media centric approach allowed the researcher to comprehend the daily lives of the participants and avoid techno-centric perspectives on individuals' interactions with digital media (Andersson, 2013; Hepp, 2010). Furthermore, this approach gave the interviewees the opportunity to express their experiences and perceptions in their own terms. Additionally, the non-media centric approach led to a more informal form of interviewing, which created a confidential atmosphere for the participants to share their experiences.

A second strength concerns the mixed methodological approach that constitutes this study. The combination between qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews and the visual ethnographic technique of the life-story maps proved to complement one another. Due to the drawing of the life-story maps the researcher was able to understand and to contextualize the entirety of the everyday lives of the Syrian and Eritrean participants in the study. Furthermore, the life-story maps allowed new and surprising topics to emerge during the interviews that ultimately enriched the data.

Naturally, this research comes with several limitations. First of all it should be stressed that this study presents one particular moment within the acculturation process of the participants being studied. Acculturation is a long and multifaceted process and it requires a long period of time for refugees to acculturate within a host country. By solely looking at the acculturation process of refugees at one moment in time, the study fails to present an accurate representation of the entire process of acculturation.

Finally, this study is also limited due to its focus on the facilitating role of digital media technologies on language acquisition and on obtaining cultural knowledge. In order to be able to participate and feel at home in a new society, refugees need to acculturate in other domains as well. The research could be made more extensive by taking into account other aspects of acculturation such as educational integration, labour market integration, social integration and health integration.

### **5.3. Future research**

This study contributes to the existing academic literature in the fields of refugee studies and media. However, in line with the limitations of this study, there are several suggestions for additional research in the future. Firstly, it would be valuable to include a larger-scale and more diverse sample of participants in the study. This study aimed for an equal distribution in terms of gender; in future research more females should be included to reach this goal.

Secondly, as explained in the previous section, this study is based upon interviews at one moment in time of the entire acculturation process of the refugees in the sample. Because acculturation is a long and multifaceted process it would be valuable to conduct a longitudinal study in the future. By conducting a longitudinal study it would be possible to gain insights into the acculturation process of the participants at different moments in time. Hereby it could be determined whether there are any differences in the views upon acculturation and the practices of the participants at different stages in the acculturation process.

Future studies about digital media technologies and acculturation could also benefit from the implementation of additional research methods. In this research semi-structured qualitative interviews and life-story maps were used in order to gain insights into the perspectives of the interviewees. In the future, studies could combine these methods with more practical methods that are specifically targeted at comprehending the digital media use of the participants. An example of this could be to employ social media, such as Whatsapp or Facebook, to communicate with the interviewees and to ask questions about their everyday lives. By doing so, the researcher will be able to obtain a clearer image of the digital media use during the daily lives of the participants in the study.

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## 7. Appendices

### Appendix A

#### **CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

##### **FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:**

Dr. Amanda Paz Alencar  
Assistant Professor at the Department of Media & Communication  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
International Bachelor Communication & Media (IBCoM)  
[www.eshcc.eur.nl/english/ibcom](http://www.eshcc.eur.nl/english/ibcom) | [www.eshcc.eur.nl](http://www.eshcc.eur.nl)  
Visiting address: Woudestein, Van der Goot building, M8-50  
P.O. Box 1738, NL 3000 DR Rotterdam  
tel: +31 10 408 8629 | +31 631938282 | email: [pazalencar@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:pazalencar@eshcc.eur.nl)  
Site: [www.eshcc.eur.nl/english/personal/alencar/](http://www.eshcc.eur.nl/english/personal/alencar/)

#### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research on the role of ICTs and digital media technologies in the lives of refugee migrants and in their digital practices related to the process of integration in the Netherlands. The study aims to understand the part played by new media technologies in their integration process and daily experiences in the host country.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to *be interviewed and share experiences (through drawing of a life-story map) of your daily lives*. In general terms,

- the questions of the interview and the sharing of experiences during the life-story map activity will relate to the process of refugee integration and your thoughts and experiences with using social and digital media in it.
- The observations of the interviewer/researcher will focus on establishing the impact of social media and digital technologies on refugees' integration experiences.

**Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape recorder for the interview.**

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

#### **ANTICIPATED RISKS AND BENEFITS**

- A.** As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information not in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by [measures that will be taken: pseudonym, general identification only mentioning age and gender, etc.].
- B.** I am aware that the possibility of identifying the people who participate in this study may involve risks for personal reputation, help, social relations, etc. For that reason –unless you prefer to be identified fully (first name, last name, etc.)- I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will only use pseudonyms to identify participants.

I will use the material from the interviews and life-story map exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications. The information recorded is confidential, only a number will identify you, and no one else except the main researcher and the cultural and language moderator (with access to the information) will have access to your interview. **In order to keep your personal information's security tight, the materials from the interview and story-life map will be recorded in a tape recording device of the Erasmus University Rotterdam and stored on a safe computer environment of the same university. All of these steps are done according to the standards of privacy and protection of information policy. The researcher is very keen and committed ethically and professionally to protecting the privacy of participants and collecting the relevant information relating to the research.**

#### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

This is an 18-month project, which means that I will ask for your commitment to take part in the different parts of the study for this time period. A more detailed description of the time the interview and fieldwork will involve is provided at the following:

- **Interview research:** Each interview session **together with the life-story drawing activity** will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

You may interrupt your participation in this project at any time.

#### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of the study, you may contact the main researcher – Dr. Amanda Paz Alencar, email: [pazalencar@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:pazalencar@eshcc.eur.nl)

#### **SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM**

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient. **Your oral consent will be recorded on tape.**

**I give consent to be audiotaped and share my everyday experiences during this study:**

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

## Appendix B

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. Explaining the aim of the research to the participants.
2. Informing participants about the timeframe of the interviews: 45 – 60 minutes.
3. Informing participants about their rights, anticipated risks and benefits.
4. Requesting to record the interview.
5. Participants sign the informed consent form or give oral consent.
6. Explaining the life-story map to the participants.

#### **1. Introductory questions**

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Where are you from?
4. Where do you live in the Netherlands?
5. How long have you been living in the Netherlands?
6. What did you do before you came to the Netherlands?
7. What is your educational background?

#### **2. General questions life-story map: allocate 10 – 15 minutes for drawing the map**

1. What do you mean with this?
2. Why did you do this?
3. How did this make you feel?
4. What did you learn?
5. Did you encounter any challenges? How did you deal with this?
6. What would you do differently? How would you change this?
7. Did anything happen that made you feel happy and hopeful about living in the Netherlands?
8. In what way do these activities contribute to your integration in the Netherlands?
  - Which activities do you find particularly helpful?
9. Did media take up a part in your life in the Netherlands?

### **3. Social connections**

1. Do you have friends in the Netherlands?
  - Where are your friends from?
2. How did you meet your friends?
3. How often do you meet up with your friends?
4. What kind of things do you do with your friends?
  - Could you give an example of something that you did with your friends that you really enjoyed?
5. How do you maintain your friendships and contacts?
  - Do you talk to them on media?
  - Do you use media in order to meet up for activities?
6. What do you find important in a friendship?
7. Are you happy with your current group of friends?

### **4. Cultural perceptions and practices in the host society**

1. How do you feel about the lifestyle of the people in the Netherlands?
  - What do you like about their lifestyle?
  - Are there things that you find strange/difficult? Why?
2. Do you keep your eating habits from Syria/Eritrea, or have you changed it? Why?
3. What kind of transportation do you use to get around?
  - Do you ride a bike? Why or why not? Do you want to learn it?
4. Are you familiar with the political system in the Netherlands?
  - How did you get to know about this?
5. How do you feel about the way the Dutch engage in relationships with one another?
  - How do you experience relationships with neighbours?
6. Do you consider your own culture important?
  - What aspects are most important to you?
  - How do you try to balance your own culture with adapting to a new culture?

### **5. Language practices in the host society**

1. Are you learning the Dutch language or have you learned it in the past?
2. When did you start learning Dutch?
3. How do you feel about your knowledge of the language thus far?
4. What is your main motivation to learn the language?

5. How do you learn the language?

- Which methods do you use to learn the language?
- Do you take a language course at school?
- Do you have fellow students, friends or family to practice with? How do you practice with them?
- Do you use digital media to learn the language?

6. What did you find the most helpful whilst learning the language and what did you find the most challenging about learning the language?

7. Could you think of something that could make it easier to learn a new language?

## **6. Acculturating into the host society**

1. What does integration mean to you?

2. When would you consider yourself integrated into the Netherlands?

3. What do you consider important for a refugee to do to integrate or to feel at home in the Netherlands?

4. What do you think about the integration process in the Netherlands?

- Do you find the process difficult? What has been the most difficult for you?
- How could the process be made easier?

5. Is there something that has been particularly helpful throughout your process of integration?

6. Do you feel at home in the Netherlands?

7. Do you think that the integration process is the responsibility of both refugees and the host society, or just of refugees?

## **7. Media uses and experiences**

1. Do you personally own digital media devices or do you have access to digital media devices?

2. What digital media devices do you own/have access to?

3. Which of these devices do you use the most?

- Why do you use this device the most?
- What are your favourite applications on this device?

4. Which other digital devices do you use often?

- Why do you use them?

5. Which digital devices do you use the least?

- Why do you use this device less frequently?

6. How often do you use digital media?
7. Why do you use digital media?
8. Do you think that digital media have helped you to adapt to the Netherlands? If so, how has it helped you?
9. Do you think that digital media have helped you to learn about the Dutch culture? If so, how has it helped you?
10. Do you think that digital media have helped you to learn the Dutch language? If so, how has it helped you?
11. Do you trust the information that you find through digital media?
12. Do you feel free enough to search for any information you wish to access through digital media?

## **8. Aspirations**

1. Do you have any plans for the nearby future?
2. What are your aspirations for the next years?

## Appendix C

### CODING SCHEME

Axial Code	Open Code	Quotation
Social connections	Establishing social connections	"In the camp I tried to contact people from COA. I contacted also people from Syria, from Eritrea, they were just like neighbours in the flat that I was in."
	Maintaining social connections	"If I need to contact someone I can contact him via Whatsapp."
	Social activities	"Every week we go outside with the family. We have a lot of parties, friends. I know friends which is illustrator. She has a lot of parties. We are involved with her. Sometimes we go to her library, when she releases books, something like that."
	Satisfaction with social connections	"For this thing we are really satisfied because we have a lot of relationships. And most of the Dutch people we are lucky with them because we have very strong relationship with them."
Cultural perceptions and practices	Differences between country of origin and host society	"For example when we talk about gay relationships or lesbian relationships all this kind. This is a part of a society. You cannot separate it from the society. But it's not accepted there. It's a kind of moral culture. So what is moral here is not there and vice versa. This is also a rule that we need to understand as refugees or as migrants; here the moral standards are different."
	Cultural learning through social connections	"When I learn from people I also learn about the culture, which is something you cannot get from the class."
	Cultural learning	"Outside it's better. Outside I look at the windmill, I look at the shop. What kind of food, Dutch food? Yes, I

	through surroundings	love looking at my farmer's mill. It is beautiful, it's big, it's old. (...) Yes it's beautiful, it's the culture of the Netherlands."
	Cultural learning through organizations	"We got a lot of general information about the Dutch society. Also to arrange your insurance in a good way. Yes. The work in the Netherlands, the education. (...) Yes, we got a lot of good information about the Dutch society, the traditions, celebrations, for example. About the law, the constitution. According to me it was really good."
	Cultural learning through digital media	"I have so many YouTube videos about, documentaries about the Netherlands. There is a series which is called 'De IJzeren Eeuw', the 'Iron Age', about the 18 <sup>th</sup> century, from 1800 till 1900. That talks about so many scientists and Amsterdam city and Enschede about the textile there, factories and about so many different subjects. About banking in the Netherlands, the first bank. And other serie also about William I, II and III."
	Adjusting to culture of host society	"Yes I noticed that I adapted to many things here. I can give you an example. If you invite somebody you need to make an appointment to give more time. For example weeks before the planned date. This is maybe because their agenda is full and they have other plans so you get to give them more freedom to choose the time that is suitable for them."
	Importance of culture of country of origin	"But the traditions or other things that we are talking about I can leave it in Syria. I don't use it here. So I can leave it there and that's not something that I care about."
Language practices	Motivation for language learning	"The motivation was actually, I got a good career in Syria and the motivation for me was to continue the same thing here in the Netherlands. I knew I had to start from zero. (...) I also was motivated to study the language because I wanted to continue my study, to study a master, which requires a high level of Dutch language."

	Language learning through social connections	“Contact with people, that is every essential. Because when you speak with somebody, with a Dutch person, he can directly correct you. He describe what does this word mean, how we can use it. That is important.”
	Language learning through school	“I have two courses in UVA (University of Amsterdam). Then I have other courses with Dutch in VU (VU Amsterdam).”
	Language learning through self-study	“It started when I first arrived in the Netherlands and people came to me and brought some letters with them to translate it for them from Dutch. These people thought, because I speak English then I would be able to translate these letters for them. I said ok, so I started using Google Translate and translate for these people and also to teach them how to do that themselves by using Google Translate. So this worked fine and I started to get more knowledge translating. So every time when I am translating something I learn a new word.”
	Language learning through digital media	“But Whatsapp echt belangrijk (really important). I chat with Dutch language. For example, I can show you here, I have friends, I have long chats. It's belangrijk (important) for writing. I am so good in writing. In Dutch it's very good with writing. I find it easy because I can think about it.”
	Difficulties in language learning	“It was actually normal lessons with mostly Syrian people. So this was a challenge because you know, if you've got a lot of Syrian people in class then they will speak Arabic.”
Acculturation	Participation in host society	“And after that I started contacting universities and I got acceptance to study a master at Erasmus University. I was very happy. And I started this master and after one year I got a job and now I am working and studying at the same time.”
	Pillars of integration	“Integration means to me, when I am living in the Netherlands, I have to integrate. I have to know the language because I am living here. I don't have any solution. So I have to do it, to integrate, and I am trying to do it.”

	Positive aspects of host society	"I like here because the Nederlands (the Netherlands) people is very nice and friendly".
	Difficulties in host society	"The only problem with me is the language. Because of the language I don't have a lot of connections with Nederlands (Dutch) people. (...) Because of the language I cannot communicate with a lot of people. Even from my neighbours, maybe they need to help me and I need to help them. The thing is, we have problem with the language. They cannot communicate with me and I cannot communicate with them."
	Feelings of belonging	"For myself I feel happy, feel that I am in a community that accepts me. And a place where I can find opportunity to work. Where I can find opportunity to have a very high diploma, which is acknowledged all over the world. But to say that home, no. Not home."
	Perspective of integration	"From my point of view integrating is not from my side, from the other side also. As I respect your culture, you should respect my culture."
Media access and uses	Use of digital devices	"Maybe it's, I don't know, maybe it's a kind of habit. You need to have your mobile phone the whole day. (...) Exactly. Just to keep it close to me. It's part of you. You cannot leave it for one minute."
	Frequency of media use	"I remember in the first block of 2017, (name of professor) asked us to download a programme here and to see how much hours you spend on your mobile phone. It was really unbelievable. A lot. I think the result after one week was that I used my social media daily for more than eight hours. As I told you, it's part of my study."
	Reasons for media use	"I use it (Facebook) for different purposes. The first thing is communication. The second thing is for news. To get information about the news, what's happening around me in the Netherlands and in Syria. And also to follow up the activities that are happening in the Netherlands."
	Trust in information	"I know that we are in the time of fake news nowadays also. Fake news is everywhere. So to be sure from sure, if I have doubt anything I search more. Definitely if I search more I can have the truth. This is very

		important.”
	Freedom of information	“Comparing with Syria, yes. Very free. Maybe we have a lot of freedom. (...) In Syria you write with the pen and the pen have the handcuffs. You write between limited space.”



