


# Digital Resilience Tactics of Syrian Refugees in the Netherlands: Social Media for Social Support, Health, and Identity

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## Abstract

The process of adjusting to a new country may carry important stressors for refugees. In the light of neoliberal policies, refugees are expected to become resilient in a local arrival infrastructure and perform a specific subjectivity based on gratefulness, adaptability, and digital sensitivity to successfully integrate. Drawing on a qualitative, in-depth case study with Syrians living in the Netherlands, this article explores the impact of the retreat of the welfare state and unfolding digital transitions on resilience tactics of marginalized people like refugees. While recognizing the systemic violence and historic trauma many refugees have experienced, we focus on how refugees are expected to and develop ways to become resilient. Three digital resilience tactics are discussed: digital social support, digital health, and digital identities. Social support was mainly sought from family, friends, organizations, and social media platforms, whereas refugees' engagement in meaningful digital practices aimed at fostering health promotion and identity management. Our fieldwork resurfaces paradoxes of digital resilience as described by careful emotional digital labor refugees engage in when communicating with families, the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping refugees' ICT (information and communication technology) adoption and use for health support, and negotiation of different and conflicting identity axes online. Finally, our study provides some insights into the implementation of more effective online and offline practices in the context of social and health support by host countries.

## Keywords

resilience, digital media, Syrian refugees, social support, digital health, digital identity

For me, beginning from scratch is terrifying, but it is also an adventure . . . I left my house in Syria, I left my work and car, I left my family and friends. Of course I miss my family, and feel pain because I left them. But I am an optimistic person so I could continue, I know a lot of people who had depression because of the new situation and they decided not to do anything, but for me I decided to continue and began my life again (Rajaai)

Many refugees like Rajaai—who is a 36-year-old IT specialist from Homs who fled the Syrian civil war in 2014—have experienced extraordinary stressors. Stressful life-events faced by Syrian refugees might include shelling, imprisonment, killing, or disappearance of loved ones, destruction of homes, and/or being forced to flee. While being forcibly displaced, stressors include dangerous journeys, challenging circumstances of refugee-camp life, and bureaucratic and intransparent asylum procedures. Obtaining refugee status and the subsequent period of resettlement are commonly seen as the end to a period of great

uncertainty and marginalization, and the beginning of a new life in a new society. However, acculturation, integration, and cross-cultural identification are serious challenges, possibly leading to “post-migration stress,” particularly for refugees (Groen et al., 2019). Taking a case-study approach, this article discusses experiences of Syrians in the Netherlands who have obtained refugee status. In particular, we take the discourse of resilience as an entry point to understand their experiences trying to build a new life in the Netherlands.

In global and local policy, humanitarian, private sector and social service discourse, resilience, and self-reliance

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have become buzzwords illustrating a new approach to refugee responses. Consider, for example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)/United Nations (UN) initiative “Regional refugee and resilience plan in response to the Syrian crisis” (3RP, 2019), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (2019) investing in “building host countries’ resilience.” Resilience is celebrated as a “panacea for the refugee crisis” (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Refugee responses are simultaneously also increasingly characterized by a parallel digitalization of procedures and processes. Both feature a shared incentive of efficiency, accountability, and increased responsibility of refugees over their own destiny, generally in a context of declining public expenditure.

For example, refugees in the Netherlands face declining service provisions. An overall efficiency-driven decentralization of state services to the level of local municipalities is happening (Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019; Van Liempt & Staring, 2020). As a result, refugees are expected to build their lives in the arrival infrastructures that are shaped by public–private partnerships, and the NGO-ization and individualization of care-work. To avoid being seen as a burden to the state or a societal threat, they have to perform a resilient refugeehood based on deservingness, gratefulness, and adaptability. Given the proliferation of coding academies, hackathons, app-developments, and start-up projects across Europe (Kothari & Tsakarestou, 2019) at present, successful refugees are particularly those who are entrepreneurial and digitally savvy (Georgiou, 2019). Thus, as a male, tech-savvy, and agile person, it is not an incident that Rajaai has successfully become resilient. From the bottom-up, performing the role of “the good migrant,” he has been able to live up to certain expectations which opened for him new opportunities. From a top-down perspective, it should be noted that successful refugee integration in the Netherlands and internationally is increasingly established through digitized monitoring and visualization of criteria such as labor market participation (Boersma & Schinkel, 2015).

From the policy and governmentality perspective, refugees, in order to be accepted, need to perform a resilience based on dedication, digital market-readiness, and compliance. By no means do we seek to position our argument in support of this rhetoric, as the reduction of assistance, support, and provision exacerbate inequality. As a matter of fact, budget cuts that demand greater resilience of refugees “can make matters worse” (Easton-Calabria, 2019, n.p.), leading to their further marginalization. For this purpose, we seek to ground our understanding of resilience critically, from below. We begin our analysis from the emic perspective of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, taking digital practices as our entry point. Our argument is structured as follows: first, we provide a critical explanatory framework and develop the notion of digital resilience tactics. Second, we offer methodological considerations and introduce our informants. In the third empirical section of the article, we focus on three

practices that emerged from the open coding of the interview narratives: digital social support, digital health, and digital identities.

## Digital Resilience Tactics

Juxtaposing policy discourse and digital governmentality with critical theory, we seek to recover the concept of resilience as an agency-centric critical lens to scrutinize digital practices and lived experiences of power hierarchies. While recognizing the systemic violence and historic trauma many refugees have experienced, it is important to capture how refugees are expected to and develop ways to become resilient. We develop resilience to move toward a power-sensitive agency-centric approach beyond the medicalization and pathologizing of refugees. The concept of resilience emerged from systems theory and ecological theoretical frameworks (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Initially, resilience was used to address individual traits that help individuals to function well despite exposure to considerable adversity (Block & Block, 1980). Resilience covered those developmental processes that evidenced positive adaptation despite significant life adversity (Masten, 2014). Recently, scholars have broadened the study of resilience from singling out the level of the individual psychological development in post-traumatic situations, to recognize the parallel importance of community support (Norris et al., 2008) and processes of meaning-making. Instead of a deficit approach to traumas, life-changing-events can also be considered to mark a period of regeneration and transformation. This requires more attention to transformation as a subjective and social acquisition of alternative frames of reference (Mezirow, 2012) rather than assuming resilience as fundamentally tied to developmental traits.

Resilience can thus be taken to encompass the ontologically various and ambiguous capacity (physical, psychological, social, cultural, and emotional, among others) to maintain competent functioning and health in the face of major life stressors:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is our capacity, individually and in groups, to navigate our way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain our wellbeing, and our capacity individually and in groups to negotiate for these resources to be provided in meaningful ways. (Ungar, 2011, p. 10)

In recent approaches to refugee governance and assistance, resilience in the form of “helping refugees help themselves” is promoted as a durable solution (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018, p. 1459).

Overview studies demonstrate that for refugees, distinct resilience sources stand out: “social support, acculturation strategies, education, religion, avoidance, and hope” (Sleijpen et al., 2016, p. 167); however, these dimensions do not establish clear-cut binary oppositions between those who are either resilient and those who are vulnerable: “a context-driven”

approach acknowledging personal and social factors is crucial (Sleijpen et al., 2016). Global refugee policy frameworks have yet to embrace a context-aware, power-sensitive understanding of resilience. Although policies framing refugees through the prism of resilience “rhetorically shift refugees from the category of ‘vulnerable’ to that of capable actors,” Ulrike Krause and Hannah Schmidt (2019) caution they commonly do not promote the abilities of refugees but “obscure the idea of refugees as self-determined actors and lead to an understanding of them as ‘actors-to-be’” (p. 1).

Furthermore, the role of media and digital networks in particular has been overlooked as potential resources for resilience: “the relationship between resilience and both traditional offline and new online media remains under addressed” (Craig et al., 2015, p. 254). There is, however, reason to address digital resilience tactics: “media-based resilience-building activities” may be substantial, revolving around “coping through escapism; feeling stronger; fighting back; and finding and fostering community” (Craig et al., 2015, p. 254). To resist a celebration of the digital as a resilience resource, a critical scrutiny of contextual structures is needed: such a critical stance on resilience demands asking questions like “Resilience to what? Resilience for whom?” (Cutter, 2016, p. 110). This means, for example, acknowledging the deeply hierarchical and geopolitical digital migration infrastructures of government categorization, containment, and control (Leurs, 2020). Refugees have no choice but to participate to access assistance, rights, and recognition (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). For refugees, becoming resilient is thus a power-ridden process, mutually constituted by top-down and bottom-up forces. Therefore, institutional and policy expectations of resilience and everyday practices and lived experiences of resilience, we contend, are not always the same. A relational reconsideration of resilience is needed.

The critical relational perspective developed by the French philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984) offers one way to do so. He proposed we can only understand the city through the dialectic of top-down “strategies” of urban planners who order the city in a specific way in relation to city dwellers who develop from the bottom-up “tactics” of “making do” with city infrastructures laid out for them (de Certeau, 1984). Transposed to the experiences of refugees in the context of the Netherlands, with “strategies” we refer here to the apparatus of refugee integration, which might result in marginalization—particularly in the face of expectations of resilience that disguise budget cuts and efficiency-driven digitization. “Tactics” we take to refer to the ways in which people “make do” with those structures—everyday practices which may be experienced as agential acts (Greene, 2019). There is initial evidence “smartphones play a key role in refugees’ attempts to navigate the chronic disruption they experience” (Gough & Gough, 2019, p. 2). Recent studies (Leung, 2018; Mancini et al., 2019) indicate refugees are increasingly digitally “connected migrants” using smartphones to maintain connections

between their homeland and country of arrival (Diminescu, 2020). For example, over 68% of refugees living in urban environments have access to Internet-enabled digital devices (UNHCR, 2016). Therefore, alongside offline tactics of contestation, refugees might go online and employ digital tactics in trying to negotiate or make do with obstacles and challenges themselves.

In foregrounding digital resilience tactics, we will focus in particular on how specific affordances of the wide “poly-media” landscape of social media platforms and digital devices are appropriated (Madianou & Miller, 2012). With affordances we refer here to the “possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 444). Thus, we relationally approach both utilities such as multimediality, synchronicity, simultaneity, scalability (Boyd, 2014), as well as the values invested in them: the interplay of technological, software-, and interface-specific characteristics, and contextualized material and social user practice.

There is growing attention for the affordances of social media and smartphones in the emerging interdisciplinary research focus of digital migration studies. For forced migrants during their journeys, particularly important affordances of social media and smartphones involve according to Marie Gillespie et al. (2018) “communicative affordances” of transnational communication, “locatability affordances” including, for example, navigation, and “multimedia affordances” which allow refugees to document and share experiences, gather, co-produce, and circulate information (Gillespie et al., 2018, p. 8). Besides digital user practices, affordances also shed light on how emotions and affect can be mediated. Mirjam Twigt (2018) mobilizes the concept of “affective affordances” in her work with Iraqi refugees in Jordan to analyze “the ability of media to transpire affects such as hope, but also of dread and despair” (p. 2). Social media and technology use in its broadest sense may invoke ideas about potentialities, in her work on “the envisioned potential of technologies” for refugees in Germany, Saskia Witteborn (2018) unpacks the “imagined affordances of technologies and the digital as an example of the force in forced migration” (p. 24). In the next section, we offer methodological reflections on how we gathered data on Syrian’s digital resilience tactics through qualitative fieldwork.

## Methodological Considerations

This case study presents findings from an in-depth qualitative fieldwork study using in-depth interviews to gather narrative accounts of personal experiences of becoming self-resilient.

Given the lack of existing research on the digital domain as a possible resource for resilience, we opted for an explorative approach, which “can be useful to discover unnamed sources of resilience” (Sleijpen et al., 2016, p. 159). Conversations touched on journeys, camp-life, and settlement in the Netherlands, accessing social support, dealing

with the expectations to learn the language and pass integration exams, as well as negotiating shifting cultural norms across contexts, including gender relations. Rather than seeking to validate a particular understanding of resilience, we welcomed subjective reflections on their own felt transformations and meaning-making of everyday experiences and negotiating challenges, obstacles, and expectations.

This study includes a selection of 22 informants, of which 12 are women and 10 are men, between the age of 18 and 39. Interviewees got involved through snowball sampling, resulting in the participation of refugee informants living in major cities in the western urban part of the Netherlands, sharing similar backgrounds in education levels and involvement in NGOs. The sample is not representative, considering the overall heterogeneity of the Syrian-Dutch community. Interviewees' narratives give further nuance, depth, and context to large-scale survey and cohort migration research on the community (e.g., Dagevos et al., 2018; Van Liempt & Staring, 2020). Interviews were conducted in Arabic, English, and Dutch, one-on-one and in pairs. Interviews were conducted mostly between January and April 2019 and lasted from 45 min to 2 hr. They took place at public spaces, cafés, university canteens, offices, and inside people's homes.

Our research is shaped by hierarchical power relations. We researchers operate from a position of privilege and we are cognizant of the risk of exploiting refugee voices. The hierarchy is particularly evident when considering the top-down governmental strategies that demand resilience from refugees, which include time-consuming integration requirements, dazzling and lengthy bureaucratic procedures, and loans and scarce financial resources. This is further exacerbated with the necessity for refugees to negotiate diverging socio-cultural norms and expectations, racism, discrimination, islamophobia and anti-refugee-micro aggressions, and homophobia both during their journeys and during settlement. Aiming to offer a corrective on lived resilience, our focus is a social-justice-oriented and bottom-up perspective focused on everyday practice. We have sought to validate and disseminate preliminary findings with relevant societal stakeholders including the community under study, fellow academics, policy makers, and NGO representatives.

The research team shares insider and outsider status with the informants. The first author, Ghadeer Udwan studied qualitative sociology in Damascus, Syria, and she was a psycho-social support and gender-based violence counselor for refugees in the region before arriving in the Netherlands as a refugee 2 years ago. The present research was initiated by Udwan, who felt there was a great need to document everyday refugee experiences of fellow Syrians living in the Netherlands, with regard to psycho-social well-being, changing gender relations, and the impact of digital connectivity. Udwan, who currently works for a refugee rights organization in the Netherlands connected with Koen Leurs and Amanda P. Alencar to collaborate in fieldwork, analysis, and writing. Leurs and Alencar shared their institutional access

with Udwan, securing research funding to hire her on a short-term research contract and opened up their academic and professional networks. Koen Leurs is a White Netherlands-born tenured assistant professor in gender studies. In the last decade, he has sought to develop creative, participatory, and digital methods to engage in knowledge production with transnational mobile subjects. Amanda P. Alencar is an assistant professor in media and communication, who originates from Brazil and has conducted research on digital integration of forced migrants in Europe as well as Latin America. Geopolitical power relations also shaped our own knowledge of the production process, as for example, the Trump travel ban made it impossible for Udwan to enter the United States and share this article during an international communication studies conference in 2019, while Leurs and Alencar could attend.

All participants gave informed consent, and to protect their anonymity, all names included in this article are pseudonyms, most suggested by informants themselves. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission of the interviewees. Interview recordings were transcribed ad verbatim. Arabic interviews were translated into English. Transcriptions were entered in NVivo, a qualitative data coding software. All material was subjected to open coding analysis oriented to the grounded theory, which aims at searching for emergent patterns across the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Several resilience tactics were identified and grouped together in categories, which form the basis for a newly refined conceptualization. Categories of tactics include *social support* from peers, family, and social services; *diversion* through work, study, and cooking; *entertainment* including arts, music, and video games; *contemplation* through religious, memory, and creative practices; *emotion management* including keeping up appearances, releasing emotions, and suppressing emotions. Subsequently, the resilience tactics within each category were scrutinized to find variations and nuances in meaning making. The analysis revealed that these tactics are also often digitally mediated and complemented with additional digitally born resilience practices. In the three empirical sections below, we will focus on three digital resilience tactics that were most apparent and cut across the categories listed above: social support networks, digital health, and digital identity formation.

### Social Support Networks

Social support is very important, we are social beings, we can't live alone. (Rima)

Like Rima, the majority of the interviewees emphasized the importance of social support during settlement. In facing various stressors and challenges during settlement, social support is sought from different sources, including from family, friends, organizations, and social media platforms. Social support is one of the key factors scholars have identified to increase the psycho-social well-being for refugees: it contributes to feelings

of safety, belongingness to a community, social inclusion, participation, feeling valued, recognition of one's social status, and freedom from discrimination (Gifford et al., 2009). Social networks of refugees can, through the practical and emotional resources that result from these connections, contribute to their well-being and the weathering of a place in society. Social contacts with fellow Dutch people can help them find a job, gain knowledge about how Dutch society works (e.g., in education, care, and work), and improve their Dutch language skills which might all contribute to them feeling more accepted by majority members of society (Dagevos et al., 2018; Van Liempt & Staring, 2020).

Family was the most pivotal source of social support mentioned, and support from friends was often mentioned second. Contact with families and friends help them to overcome difficulties. Be it through physical contact or social media connections, it makes them feel in control of their lives. Informants, for example, find through their connections solutions for their problems, as 29-year-old Areej, a teacher from Aleppo, illustrates:

My family supports and helps me a lot, the effect of my family is very large. Even though they are not with me now, but when I talk with my mother she always said to me, be strong, you have the power to overcome these difficulties, that helps me a lot.

Social media connections function as a digital resilience resource, as it makes them feel closer and together, as Haifaa—a 34-year-old woman who “worked in Syria in sewing”—explains: “because now my family has Wi-Fi, we became able to talk with them and see them, so I feel as they live with us.” Zohor—a 30-year-old Karate teacher who opened her own training facility in the Netherlands—emphasizes the affordances of visuality in addressing how she accesses familial social support through social media: “it facilitates our contact with others, I can talk with my family and I can also see them through camera, so things became easier.” Informants also maintain contact with friends to make do with their new situation, as Rajaai explains:

Friends support help me a lot. I have one close friend from Syria, every day, when I finished my work I call him and we talk, so that helps me to release negative energy, about half hour every day and then I feel comfortable.

Informants feel a compulsion to keep in touch with their families who live in war to rest assured of their safety, and to know the last developments there (Leurs, 2019). As Shado said, “This connection with them make me feel better because I can reassure about them, I can know if they are fine and that makes me feel better.” The importance family members and friends play in providing social support has been documented in other studies. For those recovering from traumatic events, researchers have found supportive parent and friend relations are an important source of resilience, proving, for example, that these connections play an important factor in allowing

those affected to find a way to deal with stress (McCleary & Figley, 2017). It has also been shown that social media has the ability to create networks of “shared resources and support,” including enabling social integration and network support, emotional support, esteem support, informational support, shared identities, and the facilitation of interpersonal relationships (Baym, 2015). This dynamic resonates with the established scholarship on the beneficial aspects of the affordances of mediating intimacy through audio, visual, haptic, and textual forms (Cabalcinto, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Specifically, these insights reflect scholarship on transnational communication migrant families may engage in: social media enables migrants to have a “connected presence” even though they are physically living apart from one another (Diminescu, 2020). However, this scholarship on transnational communication has mostly focused on labor migrants, while experiences of forced migrants are distinctive.

During our fieldwork we realized there are many informants who cannot tell their families about their problems, even though their families play an important supporting role in their life. They feel they cannot because of the worries people have about their families who still live in Syria, as we can learn from Jak—a 34-year-old former social councilor—who says,

The contact with my family helps, but most of the time I don't talk to them about my problems, because I know that they face a lot of problems in Syria, so maybe sometimes I talk to them about simple problems, but I can't speak about everything which hurts me, because I don't want to increase their stress.

This was also confirmed through Zohor's remark about her family: “I don't talk with my family when I am stressed, I talk with them when I am happy, because they also have their problems and pressures in Syria, so I don't want to increase their worries.” Sam—a 27-year-old from Aleppo, who identifies as homosexual and who is currently following English teacher education—shares both his family in Syria and he himself actively manage the impressions they want to make: they curate what and how they communicate about their own feelings and struggles:

I know that they always lie. I always don't tell them what happens to me. I always tell my mum I'm very happy, I'm fine. There was periods when I was like very sad. But I don't tell her, like what's she gonna do to me, you know?

Mahmud, an 18-year-old, struggles maintaining this balance: “My contact with my friends in Egypt had separated me into two parts.” As a result of these dynamics, 39-year-old Rema—who worked in Syria as a lawyer—changed her social media use: “Before, I used to share my feelings, sadness, and depression on social media, but later I had awareness that with doing that I hurt people around me,” and subsequently she preferred physical meetings with friends to

share her feelings. Recognizing this first paradox of digital resilience is important as it allows us to offer a corrective to the celebration of transnational connectivity as a friction-free way to maintain intimate transnational family relations. In this case, we can take cues from Cabalquinto (2018) who analyzed the uneven transnational family relations among Filipino migrants living overseas and their families back home as a form of “asymmetrical mobile intimacy” (p. 37). Whereas Cabalquinto emphasizes the class differences between those who managed to move and those who stayed put impact mobile intimacy, the Syrian refugee context highlights the challenges of sharing emotions to become resilient. Desires for mobile intimacy through digital exchanges have to be filtered as a result of having to simultaneously take into consideration that their conversation partners are still living in a war zone and are facing immense hardship.

Notwithstanding the asymmetries, transnational communication is taken up as a digital resilience tactic offering a sense of stability. Nour, a 16-year-old who was studying Law in Syria, uses social media as a way to restore routines of her normal life as much as it was when she lived in pre-war Syria: “I have agreed with my friends to call them at the first day of feast, and see each other to celebrate as we used to do when we were together in Syria.” Maintaining such routines is one way of making do with the stressors of forced migration, which contributes to a sense of reliability and trust in companionship, which might be described as a form of maintaining “ontological security” (Georgiou, 2013).

This reveals a second paradox of digital resilience, the strong appeal of ritualistic social media use also raises challenges including the need to set limits. As 29-year-old Ayham—who studied political science and owned a computer repair shop in Syria—explains,

Often I try to get rid of it, because for me, it is a sort of addiction, for me it is worse than drugs. But it is a main thing in our life, it is a source through which we can release our energy in. Because we have no one who can talk with or express our problems to [outside social media].

However, it is difficult to curb social media contact for support, without better alternatives. The challenges of finding new friends to engage in exchanges that move beyond greetings and curiosities about their experiences are repeatedly mentioned. As Ayham continues,

Sometimes it is difficult to find a person who can understand you are tired and that you want serious help. So maybe we can say that there is no social support here in the Netherlands. Because [we have the feeling we have] no one who can talk with or express our problems to, when I want to talk to anyone I need to take into consideration the reaction of other people.

As Jak states, because “everyone is busy with his own [ . . . ] I don’t feel that I am more resilient here. In Syria at least we had the support of family, but here because we

are alone, so the responsibility is bigger.” When establishing new offline connections is perceived as difficult, social media is also used to make do; for Zohor, friendships made on social media can help her to release stress: “I received social support here through my ‘fake friends’ . . . , even though I have never seen them . . . we are very close friends and we support each other a lot.”

### Digital Health

The people (Syrian refugees) they think (that) the doctor doesn’t care about them so they stop going. And because you’re not healthy you cannot go and see people, do things with them. So yeah health is very important for better integration. (Masoud, a 20-year-old “engineering student from Syria”)

The majority of participants highlight that they commonly found themselves in situations where medical consultations were saturated with dissatisfaction. Masoud indicated such reluctance to seeking aid for health was a result of both negative past experiences and cultural misunderstandings. As stated above, refugee integration contexts are being increasingly shaped by neoliberal policies that aim to reduce the “burden” for states and foster a kind of resilience that places greater demand on refugees themselves. In this section, we explore the repercussions for the domain of health.

From the literature we learn health support is crucial for reinforcing refugees’ resilience during their integration (O’Mara, 2014). Relevant studies indicated that the promotion of mental and physical health among refugees is strongly aligned with their ability to access and secure a job or place in an educational institution, establish social connections, and develop cultural and language skills in the new environment (Ager & Strang, 2008). Despite the importance of access to health care for social inclusion, refugees often experience several barriers to accessing adequate information and assistance in the host health system. For instance, existing programs for health promotion do not effectively engage culturally and linguistically diverse populations, nor do they distinguish the experiences of refugees from other mobile subjects or local communities (O’Mara, 2014).

Abdul—a 35-year-old who holds a bachelor’s degree in English literature from Syria—emphasized obstacles to obtaining adequate health support might result in a feeling of alienation and confusion and therefore prevent refugees from truly feeling integrated:

Every newcomer has many difficulties in the Dutch medical system. You see that there are so many newcomers who give up going to the GPs because they do not understand the mechanism of treatment in this system. It is yet new for them. And doctors do not give them medications, when they tend to ask them to drink a couple of glasses of water. Whenever you have an appointment, and you miss this appointment, you have to pay a fine. This is something very strange. The main problem here is

communication. Here I mean the problem of information and the language.

To reduce feelings of discontent and ensure that they will receive the proper health support, most Syrians stated that they purposely searched and gathered practical health information online that can help them socialize with the Dutch health care system (O'Mara, 2012). For instance, many reported that they frequently look up doctors' contact details and nearby hospitals/clinics via Internet-based platforms as the first step in seeking health information. Both male and female informants frequently mentioned that geolocation options which feature in most social media platforms and mobile applications were particularly convenient as the location-based and multimedia affordances of these technologies enabled them to immediately identify and evaluate the closest medical clinic when needed. Fatima describes herself as a 26-year-old "who came from Syria in August 2017." She had her baby in the Netherlands. In her experiences accessing health care, she confirms the efficiency of digital access: "We can contact the GP via email, or we can make an appointment online without any difficulty and would save time and make life easy." In the words of Masoud, "It has helped in different ways when I started to have my family doctor, I searched on the internet which one is closer to me, I looked at some of the ratings of the doctors." However, the language skills and digital literacies necessary to locate such information should not be taken for granted, he shares: "It's like sometimes, you know what you want to search for but you don't know what or where, it's a little bit problematic." In making do with navigating health information online, and across social media platforms as a digital resilience tactic, we see how some experience marginalization as they face "information precarity" (Wall et al., 2017) while others who have developed critical literacies to locate and assess content are able to make the most of the migrant "mobile commons" (Trimikliniotis et al., 2015) of peer-to-peer knowledge. As Abdul explains,

I don't expect to see something from a doctor, maybe I can see someone who is in the same position as me so I can read the symptoms and see if I'm close to it and how did they get to solve on his own or what did the doctor say.

In further analyzing the challenges refugees encounter to navigate health infrastructures and practices in their host country, we observed digital technologies offer valuable tools to establish in-group collaboration and assist refugees in accessing health information and resources (O'Mara, 2012). Used this way, social media platforms become critical spaces where refugees can share their experiences and feedback regarding health procedures and assistance in the host country while at the same time fostering "community resilience" practices (Norris et al., 2008) in the digital environment. A case in point is the Facebook community

group "هولندا في الطبية" *medical in Nederland* with 16,000 followers and tailor-made to the specific interests of the Syrian community in the Netherlands. Sandra, a 26-year-old who worked in Syria for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, shares, "I ask questions on the Facebook page 'medical in Nederland' about health issues, when I get sick, I can ask about medicines, different diseases, comparing health insurance, death insurance, healthy food, useful information about pregnancy, for children, etc." Areej also uses social media for accessing information about medical issues: "Accessing information about new things in Nederland, such as insurance, it is very important because it is a new system which we weren't use to in our country."

Overall, it was difficult for informants to find ways of getting detailed and adequate health information through official institutions and websites despite having specific demands and needs. Amira, a 31-year-old "who used to work as a hairdresser in Damascus," who holds a bachelor's degree in Economics, is very critical of the kind of support provided by local municipalities, since she says refugees are often given abundant yet general information all at once. In her words, "we are now guided by the municipalities, they give us support, [they have] given to us some sort of assessment in order to involve us. But it's too much and also too theoretical." This general approach to health support can be very challenging among the Syrian community, as Masoud explains:

The government helps you they say "If you want to go to the doctor you do this" and give you a map of the city where you are living in [ . . . ] but it's too much information in short time. We [Syrians] are known for not reading.

Digital tactics of community resilience were also expressed by informants who stressed their felt obligation to provide health support to other fellow refugees by creating Facebook pages and groups and contents on YouTube while fostering specific "imagined affordances" of social media platforms (Witteborn, 2018). Murad, a 31-year-old, for instance, says he created a page on Facebook because as a pharmacist and refugee, it is his duty to help his people: "it is for free, anyone can join, and it is accessible and ask questions. I'm also on YouTube [ . . . ] I make videos about all this."

Despite the relevance of refugee-led digital initiatives in the context of health promotion and well-being, informants do not trust all the information available in social media. Most preferred discussing their health issues via social platforms with trusted social networks or family members with medical backgrounds. Fatima, for example, says, "my husband helps me get all needed information or access what I need [ . . . ]." Refugees' well-being and coping mechanisms were not only supported by social (media) interactions with family and friends but also through their engagement in meaningful digital practices (O'Mara, 2012).

## Digital Identity

I share all my ideas on Facebook, and especially my political views and my religious thoughts. I can write clearly what I want on social media. (Ayham)

Ayham perceives Facebook as allowing him to regain his own voice. Online, under a pseudonym, he feels he can claim his right to communication, community, and identity (Hamelink & Hagan, 2020) in contrast with political, cultural, and social restrictions he experienced in Syria. Digital identity construction practices reveal another digital resilience paradox. The ways in which informants do digital identity reveals how they “disrupt becomings” and negotiate “existential journeys” (Gough & Gough, 2019, p. 1): they actively digitally negotiate between various ties, obligations, and expectations in the Netherlands and in Syria, which are oftentimes contradictory. Whereas Nurhayat Bilge (2018) in her study attests that for refugees “social media serve as a cultural unifier, where cultural identity is maintained and perpetuated” (p. 1), the digital self-identification informants tactically assemble as resilience resources are not straightforward but reveal a complex and multi-faceted engagement with intersecting and conflicting norms of nationality, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class, among others.

First, informants express they strongly value digital practices for reliving memories and memory making, and working through trauma. “Performative engagements with the past” (Erlil & Rigney, 2012, p. 2) may play a distinctive role in refugees’ search to become resilient. For example, Areej reflects on how his digital photo and video archive on his phone and social media profiles offer painful reminders of traumatic events, but also offer possible means for catharsis:

We are all in the same house, and suddenly these people we left behind, and the house became empty. So every time we see their photos and video we began to cry and wished that we could restore them through those photos. And wished that they are alive as they are in those videos.

Social media platforms are taken up by informants in their desire to save their memories and unique moments in life, particularly when having a sense of having lost memories as a result of forced migration as Nour expressed: “I use Snapchat because I like photography and I like to keep memories, we have lived through a lot of things but unfortunately I wasn’t able to document them.”

Second, informants engage in “technology enabled code switching” (Lingel et al., 2014, p. 1) between communities. For the informants who find difficulties to release their stress and pressures through face-to-face interactions, social media allows them to discharge emotionally. Zohoro’s YouTube channel helps her to express what is going in her mind and addresses various diverging audiences:

The most beautiful thing I did in my channel is “my homeland.” It was my beginning of my life here, and it was as prediction to

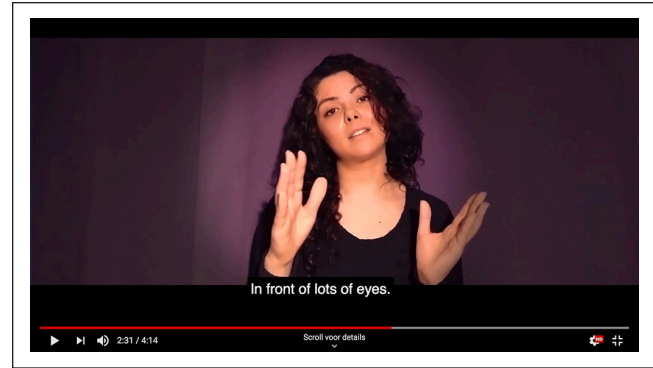


Figure 1. Still taken from Zohor’s own favorite vlog.

what I would do later. When I did “my homeland” it affected me a lot, when I recorded it I cried a lot.

Addressed at Syrians in Syria and the diaspora, in the video she expresses herself in Arabic, reflecting on expectations she experienced while coming of age in her homeland. She reflects how she felt policed and restricted through strict gender norms and how now when she is living abroad she is developing a new attachment to her homeland, on her own terms and resisting various disciplinary gazes: “in front of lots of eyes” (see Figure 1).

In a second video, she laments the situation of being separated from her beloved family members living elsewhere, as she states:

I am the virtual daughter, I am the virtual wife, I am the virtual friend. I am the virtual sister. I am the virtual sweetheart . . . In my alienation, I hug my mobile phone at night. Every morning, I give that metallic phone a virtual kiss.

In a third video she addresses in Dutch fellow Dutch people, shifting the stereotypical frame of refugees as vulnerable or in need of help: “I’m not a special person, I’m like you. I have two children, and I have to take care of my family.” Here, we see how making digital videos addressed at multiple intended audiences, as a resilience tactic may offer a multiplicity of “affective rewards” (Ekbia & Nardi, 2014). More scholarship is needed to explore whether vlogging as an outlet for articulating cultural identity as multifaceted may function to reduce the post-migration stress of acculturation, necessary for post-traumatic recovery (Groen et al., 2019).

In keeping in contact through social media, informants actively seek out the affordances of platforms to avoiding context collapse and to negotiate the experiences and activities they share across different groups of contacts. Most informants express feeling ashamed sharing their everyday mundane experiences revolving around school, work, entertainment, food, or leisure with loved ones in Syria who are living through hardship of the ongoing civil war (Leurs, 2019). However, for others avoiding context collapse between different intended audiences is necessary to avoid



risking family and friends in Syria to get prosecuted. For example, Sam describes,

I have two Facebooks, and one is for my European life. Because I'm gay. So yeah I post different things on [one profile] I post really nice pictures, nothing like too provocative with friends, what i do, it has my friends in college . . . However, on my other account, it's different. It's my gay life, let's say. I post pictures with my boyfriend . . . Look at what we did in the gay pride, the funny part, look at the picture, no body cares what we are doing . . . And we were wearing tutu's! . . . i don't add Arabs on . . . more of my Dutch friends and my European friends.

As such, informants illustrate practices of code switching between various segments of one's personal network across geographies and contexts to paradoxically negotiate how these "tools of connectivity generate socio-cultural complications to the point of rupturing" (Lingel et al., 2014, p. 1502). These practices nuance previous scholarship on transnational communication as a connected presence (Diminescu, 2020; Madianou & Miller, 2012) and a seemingly friction-free collapse of distance.

## Conclusion

In this article, as a corrective to the embrace of austerity, efficiency, neoliberal market-driven, and individualized understandings of resilience by governments, NGOs, and corporations, we contribute a critical, *relational understanding of resilience*. An agency-centered focus on refugees' own resilience tactics is urgent; refugees, like other marginalized groups such as queers or people with disabilities, are commonly defined by their victimhood in media and policy frameworks. As a result, their agency is denied and their voices are not heard (e.g., Smets et al., 2019). We ground our understanding in the everyday lived experience of 22 Syrian refugees, focusing in particular on the ways they engage with digital media to make do with the arrival infrastructure and complexity of integration systems in the Netherlands. Our fieldwork resurfaces paradoxes of digital resilience: (a) transnational communication with loved ones in Syria is felt as a daily compulsion; however, besides social support, it is also draining in as it demands careful emotional digital labor to balance what feelings and information to share and what information to withhold; (b) engagement with digital technologies revealed socio-cultural factors that can both preclude and shape refugees' adoption of digital practices for health promotion and well-being; (c) digital practices shed light on memory making as a tactic of emotion-management as well as digital identity assemblages at the intersection of migration status, gender, sexuality, religiosity, and location revealing active code switching between distinctive normative frameworks of several audiences.

While we have emphasized several digital resilience tactics refugees mobilize for self-support, health, and identity management, we want to avoid our results being co-opted by

governments to demonstrate their policies of no-policies and retraction of assistance are successful. An awareness of agency against the grain cannot be celebrated without a thorough power analysis. For example, participants oftentimes mentioned that at a first instance, they expect to see some advice from someone in the same of position as them to share their health experiences in more intimate platforms such as Facebook. This finding suggests opportunities for health service actors to leverage on the potential of digital technologies for improving health assistance and treatment for refugee populations in their host countries, as well as more meaningful contact between doctors and newcomers (O'Mara, 2012). More generally, more involvement of refugees in the development of digital initiatives and decision-making processes regarding the obstacles they face is needed, addressing issues of medical assistance, enhancing effective communication and information-sharing practices between stakeholders, among others.

Top-down imperatives of resilience risk erasing structural inequalities, particularly when they result from austerity measures. For instance, European governments have increasingly highlighted that the involvement of NGO and individual actors is crucial for promoting the long-term resilience and well-being of host communities, and that top-down integration policies cannot solve complex societal issues alone. In this regard, it is also important to note contradictory resilience discourses and practices shape digital humanitarianism (Jacobsen & Sandvik, 2018), which construct binaries between benefactors as "second class citizens" and "entrepreneurial survivors" (Ong & Combinido, 2018, p. 86). While resilience has become a key feature of neoliberal humanitarianism to support and implement innovative, sustainable forms of refugee assistance and attract sponsors to their variety of (digital) programs and activities, it has also contributed to undermining the real needs of displaced people and refugees on the ground (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). At the same time, little research exists about the ways in which resilience strategies and tactics might be facilitated (or halted) digitally.

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