

## **A Digital Space for the Displaced**

The Roles of the Mobile Phone in Syrian Refugees' Wellbeing in the Netherlands

Student Name: Jonathan Tossell

Student Number: 460031

Supervisor: Dr. Isabel Awad

Master Media Studies - Media, Culture & Society  
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication  
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the increasing role played by information and communication technology (ICT) in facilitating transnational migration by focusing on the mass resettlement of Syrian refugees in Europe as a result of the ongoing conflict and displacement in Syria. Although considerable academic attention has been paid to how modern technology is used by migrants to navigate and overcome obstacles during their journey, less emphasis has been placed on the role of ICTs once they arrive at their destination. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the roles played by the mobile phone in contributing to a Syrian refugee's material and emotional wellbeing in a popular destination country, the Netherlands. A total of ten in-depth qualitative interviews have been conducted with male Syrian refugees in various parts of the country. Through data analysis, the study outlines the role of the mobile phone in securing respondents' access to practical opportunities and services, as well as its role in facilitating contact and support both from local networks and those back home. The findings indicate that refugees' previous experiences with mobile technology, especially during their journey, have fostered strong bonds with the device that can shape its subsequent usage in the Netherlands. Yet even within the Dutch context, different usage patterns emerged between resettled refugees and those awaiting status approval, and also between those who actively embrace the multifunctionality of mobile technology and those who seek to limit mobile usage to communication. The mobile phone seems unique in its rapid ability to mobilize and canvas networks of support, but its role in generating such networks in the first place is also highly user dependent. Finally, this study asserts that the mobile phone plays an irreplaceable role in maintaining contact between refugees and their friends and families in Syria, to the extent that all such communication is mediated through the device. This dependency has redefined family practices and dynamics, and can also place a significant burden upon the Netherlands-based refugee. With the Syrian refugee crisis ongoing and Dutch society becoming increasingly digitally connected, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into a particular user group that faces the prospect of a growing reliance on mobile technology in the near future.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Migration, Mobile Phone, Refugee, Syria, Mobility, Networks, Connectivity, Transnationalism*

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## 1. Introduction

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“Now you can see them, talk to them, sometimes spend like an hour or so just talking to them as if you are sitting together. Without this it would be, of course, much [more] difficult, especially for me personally, I...I find it really difficult to leave my home country and to leave my family and to be separated from them and be totally alone.”

The above quote provides an insight into the emotional distress experienced by a young Syrian refugee who has been living in the Netherlands for less than two months, away from his friends and family back home. This man, labelled Respondent 6 (R6, from Damascus) throughout this thesis, was one of ten Syrian refugees interviewed for this study in order to investigate the role played by the mobile phone in a refugee’s material and emotional wellbeing in their destination country.

More specifically in the above anecdote, R6 was asked to imagine his situation 30 years ago, or to envisage the differences in his life before and after the development of modern information and communication technology (ICT) and the smartphone, a device with the capacity to convey instantaneous audio-visual communication across thousands of miles, alongside various other functions. As the quote demonstrates, R6’s phone plays an integral role in facilitating some representation of the family community dynamic he used to have, while simultaneously reducing his feelings of separation and loneliness.

The mobile phone plays an ever-increasing part in people’s lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but its context-specific roles and meanings are extremely diverse. This thesis will focus on the roles played by the device among a particular user group, Syrian refugees who have relocated to the Netherlands.

### 1.1 Societal and academic importance of study

The relationship between Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and their mobile phones is a subject matter of considerable societal and academic significance. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) labels the situation in Syria as “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time”, with almost five million Syrian citizens having fled the country between 2011 and March 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). Within the same timeframe, Syrian refugees have made over 937,000 asylum applications to resettle in Europe, the vast majority of which were made in 2015 and 2016. 33,579 Syrian refugees have so far sought asylum in the Netherlands (UNHCR, 2017), making the country a key focal point for academic research into the wellbeing of these new inhabitants.

Yet it is not just the unprecedented numbers that characterize the Syrian refugee crisis, it is also the methods of communication and travel that are redefining modern migration patterns. A Syrian refugee’s journey, from their decision to leave Syria and travel

to Europe to their resettlement in their destination country, is greatly facilitated by ICTs, and in particular the mobile phone. The hardware itself is relatively inexpensive and easy to operate, but it can provide the user with emotional support and reassurance, logistical information such as maps and directions, and the opportunity to forge new networks and contacts in a new environment (Refugee Phones). There is a growing sentiment among refugee service providers and NGOs that the mobile phone is in fact now fundamental to a refugee's wellbeing (O'Malley, 2015), and Gillespie et al. (2016) observe that "for refugees seeking to reach Europe, the digital infrastructure is as important as the physical infrastructures" (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 2). A 2016 study by UNHCR and Accenture concluded that as well as a means of contacting those back home, many refugees themselves considered a mobile phone and its internet connection to be as essential to their safety and security as food and shelter during their journey (UNHCR, 2016).

Therefore, it is of pivotal societal and academic importance to study the relationship between the unprecedented displacement and resettlement of Syrian people, and a technological device that is now considered essential to the 21<sup>st</sup> century migrant. During the 2000s, several studies analysed refugee and migrant's usage of mobile phones, and indeed highlighted the centrality of the mobile device to their journey (Vertovec 2004, Collyer, 2007), however it is important to consider the rapid rate of technological advancement and the current functions and services offered by the smartphone in 2017. Since the first version of the iPhone was announced in 2007 (BBC News, 2007), the mobile phone has transformed over the past decade from a means of establishing contact and staying in touch primarily through phone calls and text messages to a device that allows the user to easily connect to the internet and its associated social networks, locate themselves and plan routes via GPS, and document their lives through reasonable-quality photography and filming hardware. Although more studies in recent years have focussed on the multi-functional smartphone and how it is used by refugees (Gillespie et al., 2016, Frouws et al., 2016, Zijlstra and Van Liempt, 2017), it is apparent that academic research has largely struggled to maintain pace with the technological development of the mobile phone.

Moreover, despite several notable exceptions (Harney, 2013, Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), the majority of academic attention has been paid to the refugee's use of ICTs during their journey (Schaub, 2012, Frouws et al., 2016, Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). This is understandable given that the refugee is faced with the most immediate dangers during the journey, and also because of the significant impact that mobile technology has had in overcoming border surveillance and controls (Harney, 2013). However, in light of the sheer volume of Syrians who have relocated in Europe since 2011, and with the conflict in Syria set to continue, along with its associated displacement, for the foreseeable future, it is necessary for greater research attention to be paid to the relationship between Syrian

refugees and their mobile phones in their countries of destination. Once resettled, these individuals must go about forging new lives for themselves, seeking out employment opportunities, further education, and new social circles, and there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the role of the mobile phone in these endeavours.

### **1.1.1 The procedures of refugee resettlement in the Netherlands**

In order to further support the choice of the Netherlands as a highly suitable location to study the relationship between Syrian refugees and their mobile phones, and to contextualise the results, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of refugee resettlement procedures in the country. Once they arrive in the Netherlands, a refugee must report to the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), located in Ter Apel in the north of the country. Here they stay for a maximum of four days and then are assigned to a “process reception location” centre, ideally close to the municipal office that will process their asylum application. The refugee is granted six days’ rest before asylum procedures begin, and a preliminary decision is made within a further 12 days (Government of the Netherlands, 2016, COA). At the end of this period the refugee is informed whether their asylum application has been successful, unsuccessful, or will require further investigation, and they are moved on to an Asielzoekerscentrum (AZC), an asylum seekers’ centre. AZCs are makeshift refugee camps operated by the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA), and can take the form of repurposed prisons, hotels, army barracks and so on, in a variety of urban and rural locations throughout the Netherlands (COA). If the refugee’s asylum has been granted, the COA takes a maximum of 12 weeks to locate suitable permanent accommodation in the country. However, even once this has been identified, it can take between 9-12 months before a refugee is able to move into their new home. If the asylum request requires further investigation the refugee must remain at the AZC indefinitely, while if the request has been unsuccessful the refugee has a maximum of four weeks to stay at the AZC and prepare to depart the Netherlands (COA). During their stay in the AZC, each adult receives a weekly stipend of between 20 and 45 Euros for food, and 13 Euros for other expenses (Reuters, 2015).

The refugee has no input regarding their final destination in the country, it depends upon the next available suitable accommodation that the COA can source. Furthermore, many refugees spend time in multiple refugee camps as they are moved around to accommodate incoming migrants and in light of complexities in their specific cases. Within three months of being granted a Dutch temporary asylum residence permit, family members of the refugee are entitled to apply for a dependent asylum permit (IND). Anecdotal evidence from this study suggests the Dutch family reunification policy is considerably more accommodating than other European countries, and is a significant motivating factor in

influencing a refugee's desired country of destination. "Right to reception" provisions, such as the weekly allowance, medical insurance, and accommodation, are discontinued once the refugee moves into permanent accommodation. The local municipality then offers a series of loans to cover costs such as basic furnishings and assistance with rent, while student loans are available (for those aged between 18 and 27), in addition to the same jobseeker's allowance that is offered to Dutch citizens. Additionally, the Dutch central government introduced a loan scheme in 2013 whereby refugees could apply to fund their study of the Dutch language. If they pass a "civic integration exam" within three years, the loan is written off as a gift (Klaver, 2015).

## **1.2 Research question and key concepts**

This thesis will examine the phenomenon of the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis and the increasing impact of ICTs within the specific framework of the following research question:

What roles does the mobile phone play in a Syrian refugee's material and emotional wellbeing in their destination country?

Here it is necessary to elaborate on several key concepts of the research question. Firstly, the "mobile phone" in this context typically refers to the "smartphone", as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "a mobile phone that performs many of the functions of a computer, typically having a touchscreen interface, internet access, and an operating system capable of running downloaded apps" (Oxford Dictionary). Refugees' use of older or less sophisticated mobile phones will of course be taken into consideration, but the expectation is that all respondents featured in this study will own a smartphone, given the essential role and services it provides. However, it is important not to conflate the services provided by the mobile phone with those of the internet in general. Refugees use mobile phones to obtain information and services that can also be accessed from a stationary computer, such as Facebook, YouTube, and search engine queries. Hence, although these are not mobile-exclusive functions, the key distinction is that the mobile phone allows for such information to be accessed on the move. The use of mobile devices to access the internet and online platforms has become so popular that some argue the two are converging and becoming increasingly indistinguishable (Castells, 2007), but it is nonetheless important to highlight that this study will focus on information and opportunities sourced through the mobile phone. Aside from the ability to make and receive phone calls, additional features such as GPS mapping and instant messaging applications also take on a new dimension when used via a mobile phone because of the technology's in-built location tracking and camera that allow for real-time, personalised information to be obtained and sent.

Secondly, the term "refugee" in the research question refers to any individual who has been forced to leave Syria since the outbreak of conflict in 2011 in search of asylum. It is



worthwhile noting that in the forthcoming theoretical discussion, and previous studies on the relationship between refugees and ICTs, the term “irregular migrant” is often used in a manner interchangeable with “refugee”. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there is no set definition of “irregular migration”, but it is travel between countries that occurs outside of “regulatory norms” such as passport controls or border checkpoints (IOM, 2011). Mountz (2011) further adds that the difference between the terms migrant and refugee is somewhat arbitrary and is becoming increasingly clouded. The nation-state assigns identities to incoming individuals on account of its legal frameworks and immigration policies, while subsequent strategies and media coverage can misleadingly portray refugees and those who have entered the country through “regular” channels as wholly different entities. Mountz concludes “as sovereign territory becomes more dispersed, migrant and refugee categories are blurred” (Mountz, 2011, p. 266). Therefore, although this study will focus on the experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, it will also incorporate theories into the effects of mobile phone use upon migration in general.

“Material and emotional wellbeing” is defined as the refugee’s access to practical means of survival – such as accommodation, employment, healthcare, and financial insurance, as well as their access to psychological support – sustained through regular contact with friends and family, and their ability to foster new relationships after resettlement. This concept of wellbeing is closely linked to notions of network and social capital, which shall be explored further in the theoretical background section. “Destination country” in this case refers to the Netherlands, and the research will be restricted to insights from Syrian refugees who have settled in this country.

### **1.3 Research methods and outline**

This study will answer the above research question through a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with Syrian refugees living in the Netherlands. This has been deemed the most appropriate research method to answer the question because it allows for the in-depth exploration of existing theory from the perspective of the refugees themselves. The flexible structure also allows for the emergence of new themes that can be explored at greater length via interview probing and additional questioning, and the method caters for greater elaboration in areas where respondents feel they have more to say. Ten participants were sourced from a mixture of snowball sampling and in response to a general call for participation, and interviews took place in May and June 2017.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows: Chapter Two consists of an overview of pertinent academic theory and previous academic research that relates to the relationship between refugee communities and mobile phones. Chapter Three outlines the research design adopted in greater detail, while also addressing its limitations and steps to

ensure the validity of the findings. Chapter Four details the results of the study in full, obtained after a thematic content analysis of the interview transcripts. Finally, Chapter Five provides a conclusion and recommendations for future research.

## 2. Theory

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This chapter will outline the theoretical foundations necessary to adequately examine Syrian refugee mobile phone use in the Netherlands. It will firstly explore the significant changes in migration theory that have been brought about by social, political, and technological developments over the past decades. Secondly, it will examine the key theoretical concepts that distinguish the mobile phone as a communications device, namely its ability to facilitate mobility and portability, and also its multifunction flexibility that allows for the phone to be adapted to different social environments. The third section of this chapter will then examine how these defining characteristics relate specifically to refugee and migrant communities, as an indispensable means of fostering and maintaining social capital and networks. Finally, the chapter will account for previous studies of the relationship between refugees and mobile phones, outlining lessons that have been learned and areas that require further insight.

### **2.1 The development of modern migration theory**

Migration, both forced and voluntary, is constantly evolving in accordance with a variety of socio-political factors. For example, conflict and natural disasters can spark mass displacement with little or no prior warning, and dramatically reshape global migration patterns as a result. However, there is a consensus among migration researchers that the rapid advancements in technology, transportation, and communication over the past three decades, which have simultaneously been characterised by increased globalization, have changed the dynamics of migration in general.

In order to verify this, it is first necessary to consider studies of migration in the 1980s. Boyd (1989) outlines migration in the 1980s, stating that it was orientated around a one-way linkage between the sending and receiving country, based on respective economic and social conditions. The migrant would abandon their country of origin, uprooted from their family and culture, in search of a better life elsewhere. Zolberg (1989) furthers the idea of formal, state-centred migration by stating that individual, national migration policies and border controls allowed for “very limited international movement” at the time, and the receiving country ultimately determined whether a migrant’s journey could take place (Zolberg, 1989, p.406). For Mountz (2011), the nation-state has historically been the primary regulator of movement and mobility, bolstering its sovereignty with the demarcation of borders and the issuance of passports, but also reinforcing an innate sense of territorial affiliation and distinction among its citizens.

Migration theory developed in the 1990s with the incorporation of the term “transnationalism”, first introduced into the field in 1992 (Gabaccia, 2015). Glick-Schiller et al. (1992) define transnationalism as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick-Schiller et al.,

1992, as cited in McGregor & Siegel, 2013, p. 4). Such processes, spanning national, cultural, and ethnic borders, render contemporary migrants as “transmigrants”, whose simultaneous interactions with multiple locations is increasingly enabled by ICT. Indeed, as Glick-Schiller et al. (1995) observe, “The tendency of today's transmigrants to maintain, build, and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origin seems to be facilitated...by the possibility of technologically abridging time and space” (p. 52).

Central to the transnational theory of migration is that the contemporary migrant can no longer be characterized as “uprooted”, or one who has forgone the connections and networks of their home country and must rely solely on new bonds in their country of destination. Rather, the transmigrant can maintain strong links with their homeland while establishing new roots in their destination country (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995). Diminescu (2008) builds on such discourse by proposing the case of the “connected migrant”, who still relies on forging new alliances outside their original community in order to prosper, but who also maintains their social network in their home country through technology (Diminescu, 2008, p. 567). Like Glick-Schiller et al., Diminescu (2008) argues that the connected migrant has come about as a result of globalization and growing transnational processes.

To conclude, migration theory has developed from an envisaged state-centric process in the 1980s whereby for socio-economic reasons an individual would leave their home country, abandon their local ties and connections, and travel on to another. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, migration was increasingly seen as a process that “transcends national boundaries” (Levitt & Glick-Schiller, 2004, p. 1028), with connected migrants being able to maintain their original networks and bonds, with the help of ICT, while simultaneously forging new ties. Heralding the modern era as *The Age of Migration*, the title for their 2013 book, Castles, De Haas, and Miller identify further modern trends including a greater “globalization” of migration, whereby more countries, rather than merely the origin and destination state, are directly involved and affected by migration flows, which in turn are predominantly heading toward Europe, the primary modern migration destination.

However, although migration theories have evolved in recent years, it is important here to refrain from conceptualizing the modern era as inherently distinctive in the field of migration studies. As Favell (2015) observes, “people have always moved at all kinds of scale with all kinds of networks” (p. 321). Moments of significant technological or societal shift, for example during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution, can often lead to claims of an accompanying “mobility transition” that can neglect history and incorrectly portray previous eras as relatively immobile (Lucassen & Lucassen, 2009). As a result, several scholars have contested the labelling of the modern era as “the age of migration” as it imposes an unnatural periodization when in fact the present may not be as different from the past as presumed (Gabaccia, 2015). Nevertheless, modern theory places particular

emphasis on the transnational dynamic of migration, and the migratory practices this has redefined.

### **2.1.1 The development of modern migratory practices**

In an overview of contemporary migration theory, Favell (2015) proclaims, "If something was new in the recent "global era" ...it must have been the technology that enabled so many of these new mobilities" (p. 321). This underscores a key point, namely that while certain aspects of modern-day migration may be nothing new, advancements in technology and communications have dramatically redefined migratory practices. The notion that technology is a fundamental facilitator of migration is longstanding, with Lee (1966) observing that as communication becomes easier and transportation cheaper, migratory practices ultimately develop and evolve.

Modern day communications devices allow for refugees and migrants to simultaneously interact with multiple locations, networks, and communities. Ito and Okabe (2004) highlight how mobile phones allow migrants to maintain an ongoing awareness of those back home, as a kind of "ambient background presence", while at the same time remaining open and attentive to new communication channels and contacts on the move. Text messaging (and now online instant messaging) is key to this dynamic, as it is less engrossing than voice communication and allows for multiple conversations to take place at once (Ito and Okabe, 2004, as cited in Panagakos and Horst, 2006, p. 112). Vertovec (2009) elaborates further to describe the mobile phone as the "the social glue of migrant transnationalism" because of its ability to foster connections between multiple geographical locations (Vertovec, 2009, as cited in Wall et al., 2015, p. 243).

These technological advancements have even led to radical proclamations such as the "death of distance" for modern-day travellers (McGregor & Siegel, 2013, p. 4), yet although 21st century migrants can be conceived of as less "uprooted" thanks to the possibility to maintain contact in real time, this does not necessarily imply that their status or welfare is more secure. Indeed, the same technological developments that have given rise to the connected migrant have also been appropriated by states and migration control authorities to stem irregular flows. In addition to espousing the emancipative effect of technology upon migrants, Favell (2015) also remarks "the counterpoint to this has been the refinement and precision with which the state has also developed those techniques of disciplining...which can easily be observed in the shifting management of borders and bodies, both externally and internally" (p. 321). Collyer (2007) points to "transit spaces" that appear as a result of rapid technological advancements opening up new areas of access, only to be thwarted by evolving migration controls that seek to close them. For Collyer, the modern-day migrant and refugee therefore remain in a constant state of transit despite their

greater connectivity and network access. EU member states have moved on from a focus on ports of entry to a more expansive “remote” border control system that incorporates visa permits and sanctions. This has led to a rise in “transit migration”, a practice of covert travel overland or oversea in order to circumvent border controls (Collyer, 2007, p. 671). Surveillance procedures are also constantly changing and adapting to the behaviour of irregular migrants and refugees, who in turn are rapidly finding new routes and techniques (Frouws et al, 2016).

The increasingly globalized and transnational world, facilitated by ICTs, has led researchers to argue that migration and counter-migration practices have not only been redefined in the past 30 years, but are now inexorably linked to technology. Collyer (2007), for example, asserts that modern migrant journeys would be unfeasible without the use of cheap mobile communication devices. Schaub (2012), however, while recognising the “transformative influence” of ICTs upon migrant journeys, warns against “essentializing” technology and points out that social infrastructure and economic factors still determine the success of a journey (p. 138).

In light of the above discussion, it can be expected that the results of this study will show that respondents’ journeys to the Netherlands involved significant recourse to ICTs and extensive transnational communication. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the majority of respondents will have participated in transit migration, especially to access EU member states amid expansive and prohibitive border security, and it will be of particular interest to ascertain whether technology in these cases also proved a hindrance in terms of detection and tracking.

## **2.2 The mobile phone and mobility**

As outlined in the introduction, the link between evolving irregular migratory practices and technology centres around one device in particular, the mobile phone. The mobile phone is unique in terms of its ubiquity, portability, and ability to facilitate mobility, but it also carries different meanings among different social groups and environments.

Some scholars, such as Panagakos and Horst (2006), have played down the idea that the device has had a revolutionary influence, arguing that although modern mobile phones and computers are more powerful and capable of a variety of functions, they still represent the same technology that was developed decades ago. However, with the 21st century development of wireless technology and advancements in digital storage, battery life, and cheaper component costs, mobile phones today offer portability in an unprecedented manner, and this has redefined social behaviour. It is this relatively recent convergence between the internet and mobile platforms in particular that has made these devices ubiquitous, and democratized communication (Castells, 2006). Chayko (2008)

describes the “portability of social connectedness” that is afforded by mobile phones, as a result of social ties and whole communities being sustained through mobile communication (Chayko, 2008, p. 5). Castells et al. (2007) add that the mobile phone’s portability also allows for the phone to be shared among a given peer group. For example, a phone can be borrowed or lent, while information and messages received from the device can be read aloud to wider audiences, and an oral conversation can take place not only between two phone users, but also those accompanying them. This final point is particularly pertinent for those who have relocated to different surroundings, because they can share their phone with others for certain tasks or conversations, as their associates may possess particular linguistic skills or insider knowledge.

Mobility refers to an individual’s ease of movement and several researchers have touched upon the emancipative powers of the mobile phone in this regard. Urry (2012) argues that mobile phones free their users from the confines of spatial fixity (p. 28), while Gillespie et al (2016) claim that mobility is greatly enhanced by the phone’s ability to locate its position, thereby connecting people to physical spaces. Schaub (2012) distinguishes between the spatial and social dimensions of mobility, and concludes that the mobile phone helps to negotiate both. In terms of spatial mobility, Schaub introduces the concept of a region’s “topography of mobility” (Schaub, 2012, p. 127), which is constituted by the local communications infrastructure, the region’s urban and road infrastructure, and the respective migration controls and restrictions. If a region’s topography is sufficiently developed and appropriate, Schaub argues that a migrant will only be able to successfully navigate it through the use of a mobile phone.

Diminescu (2008) envisages a “global system of mobilities” that refugees and irregular migrants must negotiate in modern society where people are constantly on the move, to the extent of “hypermobility”. A migrant’s mobility must therefore be organized and managed, and the mobile phone in particular is key as it allows for the mobile storage and subsequent interpretation of huge volumes of digital information and connections, which Diminescu terms “traces of mobility” (Diminescu, 2008, p. 570, 574).

It can be expected that the results of this study will highlight the significance of ICT-facilitated mobility for respondents during their journeys to the Netherlands, but also during their time in Syria and now in the Netherlands, where in both cases it might be advantageous to conduct certain activities on the move or from a flexible location. Moreover, past experiences with mobility could have a strong influence on a refugee’s present-day lifestyle choices in the Netherlands, and therefore it can be expected that respondents will continue to display a tendency for mobile practices despite the fact that they have resettled and are in a stable location.

### **2.3 The social shaping of technology and mobile phone use**

A central framework for this study is the social shaping of technology (SST). This theoretical foundation emphasises the “negotiability” of technology, stressing the non-linear trajectory of innovations such as mobile phones, and how one particular social group’s usage and meaning attributed to the device can differ significantly from another’s (Williams & Edge, 1996). SST warns against analysing phenomena such as the “impact” of mobile phones upon refugees, which implies a technologically determinist standpoint, and instead advocates analysing how human choices and actions have defined refugee mobile phone use. As Lievrouw (2006) points out, SST and analysing technological developments as social phenomena allow for research with more “human centred” benefits (Lievrouw, 2006, p. 249), which certainly resonates with the aims of this project.

The way in which users adapt and appropriate technologies, such as the mobile phone, and draw meaning from them depends upon a variety of social and geographical factors (Winner, 1993). For example, a decade ago Castells et al. (2007) argued that in the “developing world”, the mobile phone’s affordance of basic connectivity was far more valuable than its potential for mobility. In communities where there was no landline telephone, mobile phones were often the only means of communication and were sometimes even plugged in to a permanent location (Ureta, 2004, as cited in Castells et al., 2007). However, as the mobile phone’s functions and technology have developed, so too has the device’s symbolic meaning, and in the decade since it is arguable that global infrastructure advancements mean that far fewer people use mobile phones as a means of basic connectivity, and a variety of socio-economic factors mean that far more people rely on mobile phones to achieve connectivity on the move.

#### **2.3.1 Mobile phone use in Syria and the Netherlands**

As SST is about taking into account local culture, context, and individual differences, and relates to how technology is shaped by users for particular uses, it is important to take into account the specific contexts of migration and the technological landscape through which Syrian refugees travelling to the Netherlands are operating.

Syria’s telecommunications environment is reasonably expansive, albeit underdeveloped by regional standards, and has been distorted significantly since 2011. There are two mobile operators, Syria Tel and MTN Syria, whose geographic coverage in 2012 covered 90 percent and 80 percent of the country respectively (Callanan & Dries-Ziekenheiner, 2012). In 2015, there were 64.3 mobile phone subscriptions per every 100 people (World Bank, 2015). Third generation (3G) mobile internet was widespread but expensive before the conflict, and since 2011 it has become costlier (one gigabyte of 3G data cost roughly \$5.50 in 2015) and restricted to areas of government control (Al-Khatieb,



2015). In 2015, about two thirds of Syria was disconnected from Syrian internet service providers' (ISPs) coverage, meaning that internet access was instead secured via WiMax wifi microwave links from Turkey, or satellite connections (Freedom House, 2016). Finally, due to US sanctions on Syria, the official "sale or supply" of any Apple goods is prohibited in the country, and neither the Apple App Store or Google Play Store can be accessed (Linshi, 2014). Although such measures are circumvented by the smuggling of devices and pirated applications, respondents in this study observe that this has inevitably skewed local popularity in favour of Samsung smartphones and the Android operating system (since Android apps are widely available outside of Google Play).

The EU 2017 Digital Progress Report describes the Netherlands as "among the best in terms of connectivity in the EU" (p. 9). In 2015 there were 123.5 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people (World Bank, 2015), and in 2016, smartphone penetration alone was quoted at 87 percent. Fourth generation (4G) mobile internet is used by approximately half the population, with mobile internet speeds in some cases exceeding that of local wifi networks (Deloitte, 2016). There are four mobile network operators, KPN, Vodafone, T-Mobile, and Tele2 (P3 Network Analytics, 2017), which provide close to universal signal coverage and 91 percent 4G coverage nationwide (EU Digital Progress Report, 2017). The permeation of the smartphone in Dutch society is made explicit in the findings of the Deloitte 2016 Global Consumer Survey, which reveals that over 60 percent of Dutch respondents use their mobile phone as their primary device to navigate and access social networks, while over 50 percent also use it to send emails, access news, and conduct banking transactions (p. 49). The Netherlands is also a pioneer in terms of laying the infrastructure for the so-called "internet of things" (IoT), becoming the first country in the world in 2016 to have installed a nationwide LoRa (low-power, long-range) network of smart meters and remote sensors (EU Digital Progress Report, 2017). As the country prepares to connect even more devices and services online, it seems inevitable that the mobile phone will become increasingly intertwined with Dutch daily life in the near future.

An examination of the ICT infrastructure in both Syria and the Netherlands inevitably raises the issue of a "digital divide" between the two. Hamel (2009) defines the digital divide as "the disparity that exists in access to ICTs between, for example, countries or regions, communities, ethnicities, the sexes, or age groups" (p. 4), and some researchers place significant emphasis on this issue. For example, Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017), in their comparison of home internet access in Syria and the Netherlands (citing 39.4 percent of Syrians with home access and 94.6 percent of citizens in the Netherlands), argue that a "very small part" of the Syrian population "has become familiar with the possibility of obtaining the information and communication that the internet offers" (p. 178). However, this interpretation fails to take SST into account and how Syrians have shaped technology to

overcome such barriers. Unreliable home internet connections do not necessarily mean that Syrians are excluded from the online world, but rather that they make greater use of mobile or public wifi and satellite internet, download and store content and information in preparation for service losses, and even use offline applications to facilitate information and communication. Based on the responses in this study, it would appear that a far higher proportion of Syrians are familiar with the functions and services offered by the internet than Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) would presume. Of course, there is a very real disparity between access to ICTs both within social groups in Syria and in comparison to the Netherlands, and this has had an inevitable impact upon migration. Gillespie et al. (2016) argue this digital divide is not only skewing migration, but also migration studies, toward a focus on well-educated and affluent refugees who have access to ICTs, and therefore international mobility.

Finally, it is important in this section to guard against an ethnocentric approach to the study of the mobile phone and its role in a Syrian refugee's wellbeing in the Netherlands. Focussing on refugees as a particular ICT user group immediately insinuates a distinction between the Syrian refugee and the general Dutch populace, or that a Syrian refugee's familiarity or experience with the device is fundamentally different to that of other groups. While this may be the case in some areas, it is also entirely conceivable that this user group shapes and uses the technology in a manner similar to other residents of the Netherlands. Based on the above overview of mobile use in Syria and the Netherlands, it is expected that this study's results shall show that Syrian refugees use their phones in a similar manner to other user groups in the Netherlands, particularly regarding mobile apps and services that are specific to Dutch society. However, it is also expected that the results will uncover a number of refugee-specific uses, especially when interacting with relatives in Syria and the ICT environment there.

#### **2.4 Social capital, network capital, and migrant network theory**

Castells et al. (2007) observe that throughout history, access to communication and information have been the key sources of power and change, and central to this is the notion of social capital. Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1985) as "the aggregate of...resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1985, as cited in Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p. 403). It is the connected means through which individuals gain access to support, material gains, and opportunities. Paxton (1999) elaborates further by pointing out that the relationships that form an individual's social capital must be "trusting and positive" (Paxton, 1999, as cited in Lamba & Krahn, 2003, p. 338), and this has particular implications for refugee and migrant communities. For such groups, to a

larger extent than others, it is not sufficient to place trust in family and friends, they must also constantly develop new ties on the move, and establish trusting relationships in their country of resettlement (Lamba & Krahn, 2003). Social capital requires the forging of ties that are both strong (family and friends) and weak (otherwise unrelated social groups that possess access to certain information), and displaced people face a constant struggle to renew and maintain such ties in new environments.

Rapid technological advancements, particularly since the 1990s, have given rise to a new model of social capital. Primarily through the internet and Web 2.0, communication and information are now being exchanged more horizontally rather than hierarchically, and this new era has been termed the “network society”. In such a society, it is vital to build and maintain networks online in order to gain an advantage in this space of information flows, and the rewards of doing so become exponentially more beneficial with the growth of the network (Castells, 2011). Here mobile communications are decisive in how social networks are formed and maintained, and “network capital” has emerged as a 21st century incarnation of social capital. Acevedo (2007) states that network capital is “‘ICT-enabled’ social capital” and “a measure of how people collaborate through electronic networks for personal, communal and even global benefits”. According to Urry (2012), network capital also relates to the ease in which one can access the resources that are essential to mobility in the network society, such as appropriate travel documentation, movement capacities, communications devices, safe and secure meeting places, and distant contacts that can provide hospitality. Hence, it is clear that network capital is a fundamental concern for modern-day migrants and refugees, for those with a higher degree of network capital are better placed to make social connections and extract the associated material and emotional benefits. Moreover, people on the move are judged and categorized as either a welcome guest or a threat according to their network capital (Gillespie et al., 2016). The mobile phone facilitates and democratizes the creation of such ties because anyone can now “engender and sustain social relations with those people...who are mostly not physically proximate” (Urry, 2012, p. 27). This democratization in turn helps diminish certain aspects of the digital divide, albeit so long as an individual has access to a smartphone in the first place.

The significance of network capital, and the ability to freely interact with that network, is paramount to refugee communities. “Migrant network theory” is an expression of network capital particular to migrants. As described by Schaub (2012), it points to the particular importance of strong ties between migrants and their family and friends back home, which serve three purposes – an initial source of information, an insurance mechanism, and emotional and psychological support. Liu (2013) expands on this by pointing out that the family’s provision of information and material and emotional resources can significantly reduce the costs and risks of both the journey itself and the migrant’s resettlement in their

destination country. In turn, the success of the migrant's experiences "directly affects the migration likelihood of those in his or her social network" (Liu, 2013, p. 1245). Here the initial migrant plays the role of a "key informant", a contact based in the destination country who has successfully migrated there and can offer first-hand advice, assistance, and support to prospective travellers (Schaub, 2012).

There is some contention within the field of migration studies as to whether strong ties are more significant than weak ones, as migrant network theory would suggest. Indeed, Dekker and Engbersen (2014) claim that migrants and refugees' weak ties, typically sourced and created via social media on route or when a particular situation must be overcome during the journey, can often be more useful than strong ones. Liu (2013), focussing on the stage of migrant resettlement, outlines the benefits of weak ties in the destination country for access to employment. Grieco (2004) also warns that an overemphasis on strong ties back home can alienate a migrant in their new surroundings, by "maximising links with and orientation towards the society of origin" (p. 247).

The findings of this study will lend further insight into the debate as to whether strong or weak ties are more fundamental to a refugee's social capital, but in light of the above overview it is also possible to offer some preliminary expectations about the role of the mobile phone in facilitating such networks. Given the physical distance and ongoing Syrian conflict, it is reasonable to assume that all respondents in this study maintain their network capital with friends and family in Syria exclusively through ICTs, and most probably the mobile phone. Furthermore, considering the extensive digital infrastructure and proliferation of online services in the Netherlands, it is also conceivable that incoming refugees formulate the majority of their weak ties through mobile access to online social networks and resources.

## **2.5 Previous research on refugees and mobile phones**

There has already been considerable empirical research examining the relationship between mobile phone technology and refugee lives. Existing studies have concluded that refugees use ICTs before, during, and after their journey to maintain strong ties and facilitate weak ones (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), while also overcoming practical challenges through maps, GPS, money transfers, and real-time news and information, all facilitated through the mobile phone (Frouws et al, 2016).

Regarding the stage before the refugee's journey is undertaken, several studies have looked at how travel is planned, and the role of ICTs in reducing the risks associated with this. In an overview of mobile phone use in trans-Saharan migration, Schaub (2012) places particular emphasis on the "preparations" stage and considers the role of the key informant essential to any undertaking of migration. The study argues that the migrant's first step is to

contact a friend or family member located in the country they wish to head for, and to make preparations for the forthcoming journey through “repeated telephone conversations” (p. 133, 135). Frouws et al. (2016) also detail how refugees in the planning stage of their journey use ICTs and social media to sound out potential smugglers and devise routes. Other studies highlight the mobile phone’s stature as “the migrant essential”, arguing that no refugee or migrant can contemplate commencing their journey without first securing one (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 23). This perception inevitably draws attention to the digital divide and those who cannot secure a smartphone or lack the skills to operate one. Collyer (2007) observes that changing migratory practices and the increasing reliance on cheap, mobile communication means that there is an increasing segregation between those with access to international mobility and those without. Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) warn that refugees’ increasing dependency on smartphones could permanently entrench the “selectivity of migration” from the outset (p. 178).

The majority of research examining the relationship between refugees and mobile technology pertains to the journey stage. Here considerable focus is devoted to the mobile phone’s function and reliability as a mobile information source, primarily conveying news, security advice, and directions via social media and established contacts. Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) argue that refugees on the move process information in accordance with a “hierarchy of trustworthiness” (p. 176) and Gillespie et al. (2016) elaborate on this by asserting that refugees trust mobile information from their family, friends, and people in the field, but are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from other sources. Research has also looked at which applications are most used among refugees as information sources, with instant messaging service WhatsApp proving most popular due to its encryption, while social networks such as Facebook are viewed with more suspicion and sometimes necessitate the use of pseudonyms. Other applications such as Google Translate also play an essential informative role in advancing the journey depending on the country and context (Frouws et al, 2016). Schaub (2012) evaluates the network capital of refugees on the move and concludes that in some cases it is not necessary for the migrant to always carry a mobile phone during their journey – even citing examples of individuals selling their mobiles en route - as long as their key informant does, and is constantly accessible via payphone or internet café. Other scholars studying the journey stage of migration examine the phone’s influence in redefining migratory practices. For example, accessible support networks and mobile information help to reduce reliance on smuggling gangs and people traffickers, leading to so-called “do-it-yourself migrants” (Collyer, 2007, p. 673). Some studies also addressed the limitations of mobile phone effectiveness for travelling refugees. Gillespie et al. (2016) remark on an increasing trend on the part of NGOs and refugee support groups to create mobile applications in response to all manner of problems that refugees face when

travelling from country to country. The authors cite empirical evidence demonstrating that in some cases, traditional communication such as physical leaflets and public information maps are more effective.

Finally it is necessary to touch upon studies into the role of ICTs once the refugee reaches their destination country. Harney (2013) suggests that at this stage, the mobile phone is used by refugees and irregular migrants as a solution to the “precarity” of their circumstances. Precarity is an existence without security or guarantees regarding emotional, physical, or material subsistence. Butler (2004) elaborates on its consequences, describing the situation as “ongoing unpredictability and insecurity in which people may be displaced and are frequently the objects of violence” (Butler, 2004, as cited in Wall et al., 2015, p. 2). For Harney (2013), the threat of precarity for migrants in Europe has been exacerbated by the rise in neoliberal governance and the associated political economy of temporary labour contracts, fewer workers’ rights, and the diminishing welfare state. In this environment, the mobile phone helps to reduce the risk of various existential threats (such as homelessness, unemployment, deportation, and criminal exploitation) by establishing informal tip-off networks and devising coping strategies through instantaneous communication. This is an example of SST specific to the study’s context, Naples, where an estimated 25-35 percent of the local economy is illicit (p. 544). Wall et al. (2015) examine the role of mobile phones in Syrian refugees overcoming “information precarity” in Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan. In this case, information precarity refers to a situation where “access to news as well as personal information is insecure, unstable, and undependable” (p3). Here, refugees use their phones to substantiate the stories they hear on the news or through word of mouth about the war in Syria. The phone can provide instant access to trusted networks within Syria who can verify particular details.

Lastly, Dekker and Engbersen (2014) detail ICT and social media use among migrants who have relocated to Amsterdam and Rotterdam. They contend that such online platforms are an effective means for newcomers to expand and maintain their network capital, yet they also stress these “do not seem to operate at the expense of offline networks, but they are an extension of them” (p. 410).

### **2.5.1 Contributions to be expected from this study**

Although there are exceptions, this study has identified three significant gaps in the literature with regards to the relationship between refugees and mobile phones in the destination country. As outlined above, studies focussing on refugees’ use of mobile phones in their destination country have tended to frame the refugees’ situation there as precarious, for a variety of reasons. This study will also address the emotional and material precarity experienced by its respondents, and the centrality of the mobile phone in this situation, but it

is also worth noting there has been little academic attention focussed on the role of ICTs in situations where the refugee is perhaps in a more stable setting. For example, there is a gap in the literature with regard to refugees using mobile phones to learn a new language, study, or negotiate the administrative procedures and civic commitments that come with relocating to an EU member state, especially after an initial period of acclimatisation. With the conflict in Syria entering its seventh year, it is imperative that research demonstrates how refugees are coping with the prospect of long-term, or indefinite asylum, and how their access to services and opportunities compares to that of other groups.

Secondly, although some studies (Collyer, 2007, Schaub, 2012) contain interviews with key informants in destination countries, the findings are focussed on migrants still on the move, and how they interact with mobile technology. This means that the practices and emotional considerations of the key informants themselves have been largely overlooked. This study aims to provide first-hand testimonies of such individuals living in a destination country, and how they use mobile phone to facilitate their newfound role. The concept of self-presentation is of particular interest in this dynamic. For example, Frouws et al (2016) argue that refugee's positive accounts and visual images of life in their destination country, even if staged, can have a profound effect on influencing those considering migration. Self-presentation refers to how an individual attempts to portray themselves and their life in order to control or shape how they are perceived by others. This takes on added dimensions when the individual presents themselves through ICTs and online platforms, because a variety of digital tools and functions are at their disposal to selectively curate, manipulate, or enhance the reality they are living (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Thus, this research will investigate how Syrian refugees in the Netherlands portray their new lives to their friends and family based in Syria, whether there is a difference in terms of information disclosure and self-presentation depending on the audience, and whether the refugees are now acting as key informants for others.

Finally, there has been considerable academic research into refugees' network capital and how a mobile phone can help facilitate and exploit this throughout their journey by providing instant contact with strong ties back home, and the opportunity to create problem-specific weak ties through tailored social media groups. However, aside from the aforementioned articles, very few studies have examined refugee network capital at the point of destination, and whether strong or weak ties are more useful in the resettlement process. It is also pertinent to examine whether new ties created through mobile social media are reliable, or somewhat superficial. Many scholars for example have criticized the perception of social media as an "enabling instrument for social interaction", instead arguing that such platforms foster a culture of making connections purely as a symbol of status or personal gain (Van Dijck, 2012, p5). In a highly digitally-networked society like the Netherlands, it is

necessary to establish whether refugees actually derive tangible benefits from connections they create with wider society purely through digital means.

Moreover, although Dekker and Engbersen (2014) comprehensively examine Brazilian, Ukrainian, and Moroccan migrants' ability to form networks through ICTs in the Netherlands, it is important to note that this study focusses exclusively on Syrian refugees. The centrality of the mobile phone to a refugee from a conflict zone, who may have fled abandoning all other belongings, may differ considerably to that of a regular migrant who has taken the time to weigh up their options and prepare accordingly. Ongoing conflict means that Syrian refugees' strong ties are also less stable or under threat, while the impact of war and political decision-making on the volatile Syrian communications infrastructure means that their relationship with certain online networks and digital platforms has a "spatial and temporal character" that is subject to change (Rohde et al., 2016). For these reasons, this study's dedicated focus on Syrian refugees in the Netherlands covers new ground with regards to ICTs and the social capital of resettled forced migrants.



### 3. Methodology

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This chapter outlines how the roles played by the mobile phone in a Syrian refugee's material and emotional wellbeing in the Netherlands have been identified through this study. It consists of a brief overview of the research process and how it was conducted, before examining each of the core aspects of the research design in more detail.

#### 3.1 The qualitative interview

In order to evaluate the roles of the mobile phone in a Syrian refugees' material and emotional wellbeing in the Netherlands, qualitative, in-depth interviews were selected as the optimal research method. The rationale stems both from this method's specific merits and the successful examples of previous academic research. The experiences of each Syrian refugee living in the Netherlands are unique and influenced by a variety of individual, socio-economic factors. As such it is highly problematic and inappropriate to make sweeping generalizations, and far more effective to attempt to glean personal insights into the processes they perform and the meaning that is derived. As Schmidt (2007) notes, qualitative methods based on in-depth interactions with a relatively small research sample can "[be] better at identifying problems or patterns in situ, clarify or propose causal chains, and be more exploratory" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 85). In this sense, qualitative interviews are deemed the most suitable method because of their dual ability, firstly to provide detailed descriptions into events and relationships that the researcher, or anyone other than a refugee, has little first-hand exposure to, and secondly because it is possible to integrate these multiple perspectives (Weiss, 1995, p. 9, 10).

From an epistemological standpoint, this study adheres to the principle of the active interview, whereby both the interviewer and respondent are "active" in the creation of meaning through the interview encounter itself. The respondent is not perceived as an independent archive of information to be extracted through careful questioning, but rather the knowledge they put forth is formulated by the interview dynamic and their interactions with the interviewer, to the extent that "meaning construction is unavoidably collaborative" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 118). Moreover, a sizable part of this study is concerned with the role of the mobile phone in a Syrian refugee's emotional wellbeing, and therefore the interview is seeking to uncover the "authentic value of the subject's feelings" with an emphasis on "sentiment and emotion, the ostensible core of human experience" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 110). In this regard, the key to an effective interview lies not so much in the rigid adherence to pre-determined, focussed questioning with a view to post-interview analysis, as may be the case with a more objective, controllable subject matter (Weiss, 1995, p. 9, 10), but rather in the flexibility of the interview dynamic. As Denzin (2001) states with regard to interviewees, "speakers leap forward and backward in time. More than one

voice can speak at once, in more than one tense” (p. 29). The role of the “consciously active interviewer” therefore is to intentionally provoke responses, guide the respondent’s narrative and encourage them to develop certain ideas or topics (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p115). However, the commitment to flexibility is also paramount, accounting for the sentiments, priorities, and thought processes of each interviewee, in relation to the interview setting.

To ensure a flexible approach to the interview, questions should be “non-directive” – inviting the respondent to express what is important to them in their own terms, with the interviewer playing the role of an interested listener (Richards & Emslie, 2000). Therefore, the interviews and questions in this study were “semi-structured” – consisting of a list of themes to be covered during the interview, and a rough template of questions used as a flexible guide (see Appendix A), depending on the nature of the conversation. The theoretical background provided the basis for the themes and semi-structured questions.

Interviews provide the opportunity to explore the research question in detail, taking cues from respondents’ answers to focus on particular themes that emerge and probe further. In this particular case, respondents’ mobile phones were also used as physical prompts during the conversation, allowing for visual demonstrations and a first-hand understanding of how the device is used. The presence of the researcher during the interview can also allow for immediate explanation of complex terminology, and the articulation of themes such as mobility, network capital, and SST.

### **3.1.1 The use of interviews in refugee studies**

The use of qualitative interviews is also supported by established academic practice. Jacobsen and Landau’s (2003) content analysis of 18 studies of displaced people in a 2002 issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* concluded that all relied on interviews for data collection. Furthermore, previous empirical studies explicitly mentioned in this study, such as Collyer (2007), Schaub (2012), Harney (2013), and Gillespie et al. (2016), all use snowball-sampled interviews with refugees and migrants as the basis of their research. Alternative methodologies were given due consideration, for example Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) introduce “trajectory ethnography” as a technique whereby the researcher follows a refugee’s journey (either in person or via ICTs) and conducts informal conversations or interviews with respondents when they are making key choices. Although this method allows for unparalleled levels of insight and the opportunity to gain a real-time understanding, it is not considered appropriate for this study as the focus is on the refugee’s experience in the destination country, rather than the journey.

Jacobsen and Landau (2003) assert that interviews are useful in refugee studies in particular because of their ability to provide thorough and illustrative anecdotal information, which can suggest themes, variables, and expectations for future research. They elaborate

further by saying that “in areas...about which people know very little, these descriptive data reveal much about how forced migrants live, the problems they encounter, their coping or survival strategies, and the shaping of their identities and attitudes” (p. 190). However, in a critique of modern refugee research, Schmidt (2007) advocates the need for greater reflexivity on the part of the interviewer, and a greater awareness of the interviewee’s capacity for referential reflexivity. Reflexivity here is the ability of the interviewer to self-consciously reflect upon the interview structure and their behaviour as it unfolds, in awareness of the impact that this has upon the knowledge created. Referential reflexivity refers to the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, whereby the latter is aware of the former’s behaviour and intentions and adjusts accordingly. Schmidt (2007), deliberately phrasing the concept in crude terms, remarks “this is about whether ‘they’ know what we’re doing – or have their ideas about it” (p. 83). Schmidt (2007) conceives the interview setting as structurally unequal in many refugee studies that are carried out by international NGOs, which are often characterised by an immediate “time-space distancing” caused by a far-away researcher visiting respondents “in the field”, a lack of transparency about the intentions of the interview and findings, and their taking place in a politicised, high-stakes atmosphere. As a result, “‘They’...have structurally conditioned ideas about what ‘we’ are doing” (p. 93).

Thus in light of the above discussion it is clear that qualitative interviews can contribute significantly to the research proposed by this study, as the collection of anecdotal data can illustrate the lives of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands and their use of mobile phones in a uniquely rich manner, incorporating emotional insights and first-hand perspectives. In order to negotiate some of the pitfalls associated with this method and the subject matter of refugees, it is important to be as reflexive as possible throughout the interview process by keeping notes during the conversation and evaluating what could have been done differently, or better, next time. Although the interviewer-interviewee relationship remained inherently uneven, the interview setting helped to mitigate some structural inequalities – both the interviewer and interviewee were current residents of the Netherlands and the intentions of the study were clearly defined as academic, which helped to depoliticise the atmosphere.

### **3.2 Sampling, time frame, and data collection**

Initially, it was hoped that at least ten respondents could be sourced via a process of snowball sampling, a technique that Sturgis (2016) asserts is appropriate for garnering responses among minority groups, stemming from an initial call for participation. The initial call consisted of an email disseminated to the sizable network of Syrian refugees who work, or have recently worked, for the Middle Eastern media and education NGO Fanack, which is

based in The Hague. Fanack was chosen as an appropriate starting point as the researcher holds a part-time position there, which allowed for an initial rapport to be built with prospective Syrian interviewees at the organization, and also for the researcher to provide first-hand assurances about the nature of the project and the ways in which data collected would be used. Although this initial participation call predisposed a certain type of respondent – an educated, English-proficient, typically male Syrian with an interest in the media – it was hoped that through repeated snowball sampling a more diverse and representative sample of the Syrian diaspora would emerge.

However, although this technique provided access to the first four respondents – two current Fanack employees, one ex-employee, and a fourth individual recommended by another staff member – it soon became apparent that snowball sampling would not provide the requisite number of participants. The Syrian contacts working at Fanack were initially wary of the study, with Respondent 1 (R1, from Damascus) explaining that Syrians in the Netherlands had “come from a culture of fear” and were hesitant to participate in any research that might bring unwanted attention to their illegal methods of migration or jeopardize their residency. After being assured that their participation could be completely anonymous, and that they were free not to answer any question or divulge any information they did not feel comfortable with, most initial respondents agreed to be interviewed but intimated that their Syrian friends and acquaintances would be less willing to do so. Some did provide contact details of potentially-interested individuals, but it proved difficult to initiate meaningful contact with them on account of never having met before. On one occasion when a recommended individual agreed to an interview, he subsequently withdrew his participation some days later, citing his unease about disclosing personal information.

As a result, the latter six respondents interviewed in this study were sourced via a call for participation (see Appendix D) posted on the west Netherlands Facebook page of the Refugee Start Force, an online community of refugees, local citizens, organizations, and businesses “with the aim to help refugees to integrate more quickly in the Dutch society” (Refugee Start Force). This organization’s Facebook page was selected as the most appropriate because of its considerable number of members<sup>1</sup> and also due to a recommendation from the Dutch Refugee Council. A short message was posted, in English, outlining the aims of the study and asking any Syrian refugee who was interested in participating or keen to know more to leave a comment below the post. Through this method six further Syrian refugees volunteered to participate in an interview. Here it is important to note that inviting participation through Facebook also engenders certain biases – most obviously requiring the participant to be an active Facebook user, and therefore a computer

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<sup>1</sup> As of June 2017, the “Refugee Start Force – West” Facebook page had over 1,700 members.

literate individual with a willing social media presence. The fact that the message was posted in English also predetermines a respondent with a particular competency in, and exposure to, the English language, and most likely attracts those with higher levels of education. Lastly, the privacy settings of the Refugee Start Force group itself, being an “open” Facebook group where any message posted by a member can be seen by all their contacts, means that respondents had to register their interest in an overtly public fashion by posting underneath the original message, unless they contacted the researcher privately. Although this point may seem trivial, it is conceivable that potential respondents were discouraged from participation out of concern that any of their contacts could know of their involvement.

Aside from the biases identified above, it is necessary to highlight that snowball sampling as a method cannot be considered representative because by definition the initial interviewee is used as the basis upon which further respondents are identified, and therefore all “observations are necessarily interdependent” (Schmidt, 2007, p86). The method also “risks oversampling certain types of respondents, such as those who are most active in the migrant community” (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014, p406). For similar reasons, the use of social media to invite potential respondents ensures neither a representative nor random sample.

Finally, this study’s sample consists entirely of male interviewees, potentially owing to the environment in which participants were sought but also due to cultural and societal factors associated with the researcher being male. Yet, as some scholars point out, representativeness itself can be a form of bias in the field of refugee studies, encouraging a focus on larger groups, rather than individuals, in instances of widespread displacement and forced migration (Kaiser, 2004, as cited in Schmidt, 2007). As such, in line with previous qualitative interview studies on migrant communities (Collyer, 2007, Schaub, 2012, Dekker & Engbersen, 2014), this study makes no claims to be representative, but it is hoped that the sample’s diversity, achieved in several demographic areas outlined in Table 4.1, can provide a nuanced insight into Syrian refugee lives.

### **3.3 Operationalization**

Operationalization concerns the process of defining variables into factors that can be measured. In this context, aside from the concepts defined in the introduction (such as mobile phone, refugee, and country of destination), it is important to elaborate further on how material and emotional wellbeing are identified, and how they will be measured through data analysis.

As outlined earlier, material wellbeing refers to an individual’s access to practical means of survival such as food, accommodation, health care, and employment. It is fundamentally linked to social inclusion, defined by Warschauer (2003) as “the extent that

individuals...are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies” (Warschauer, 2003, as cited in Andrade & Doolin, 2016, p406), as well as Harney’s (2013) understanding of precarity. Thus, in the context of this study it will be measured by asking respondents about their access to various services and opportunities in the Netherlands, and the role of the mobile phone in facilitating this access, throughout the course of the interview.

Emotional wellbeing pertains to the individual’s state of mind and the prevalence of positive sentiments such as satisfaction, enthusiasm, and optimism, as well as negative sentiments including loneliness, anxiety, guilt, anger, and frustration. It is important to note that the researcher in this study has no grounds or qualifications to robustly assess refugees’ state of mind, but in order to measure emotional wellbeing, respondents were regularly invited throughout the interviews to elaborate on how certain situations made them feel, and to discuss both the positive and negative aspects of the mobile phone and the roles it plays. There were also more general questions intended to glean insights into the respondents’ impression of their overall situation, such as “what do you think of the Netherlands or Dutch people?” Interviewees were willing to discuss their emotional state with a surprising degree of candour; however it was also important not to probe excessively or risk upsetting the respondent with overly-personal questioning.

Of course, the concepts of material and emotional wellbeing are inevitably interdependent, and there is significant overlap between the identified definitions. In terms of measurement this must be taken into account as in certain cases, themes and examples of mobile phone roles could be coded simultaneously, and indeed differently, to reflect their contribution to material and emotional wellbeing, while in other cases the distinctions between material and emotional contributions could be less clear-cut. Therefore, the results section will make explicit reference to the material and emotional role of the mobile phone where possible, but at other times it will state that the two are being treated as a single entity.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Once conducted, all interviews were transcribed, coded, and analysed. The analysis method focuses on interpreting the meaning conveyed in the participants’ answers, and followed the prescribed steps of meaning coding, condensation, and interpretation, as outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Transcripts were read through on average four times as part of the initial analysis stage. Notable segments of text were identified and categorized through the attribution of keywords that corresponded to the overriding theme of that segment. Examples of keywords include “journey-specific roles”, “camp-specific roles”, “Dutch-specific roles”, “attitude towards technology”, “impressions of Dutch society”, “emotional support”, “emotional limitations”, and “practical limitations”. Themes were primarily theory-driven,

sourced from the literature review and previous studies, however the approach remained flexible so as to accommodate new themes specifically derived from the data. In order to ensure a consistent and valid approach, a “code memo” was maintained throughout the analysis phase, detailing the date of the particular coding, definitions of codes used, and the researcher’s thoughts and observations on the coding process (Gibbs, 2007, as cited in Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 202).

Once all pertinent information from the text had been coded, data from different interviews was combined to develop a more informed understanding of refugee mobile phone use, and to ascertain which roles and practices were widespread among the sample and which were specific to individuals. Attention here was also paid to deviant cases, or examples offered by one or two respondents that contradict the behaviour of the majority, and these are explicitly referred to in the results.

### **3.5 Validity**

From the perspective of the active interview, it is inappropriate to suggest that this study is objective. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) observe, “one cannot simply expect answers on one occasion to replicate those on another because they emerge from different circumstances of production” (p. 109). Forgoing claims to objectivity, it is more appropriate that this study is accountable, and therefore all interviews have been recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In the pursuit of credible qualitative research, Silverman (2011) outlines several measures that allow for the data analysis process to be replicated. One such measure is the “inter-rater reliability” test, whereby other researchers analyse the recorded or transcribed raw material, using the codes and themes identified in the original study but also their own interpretations, in order to observe the key similarities and differences (Silverman, 2011, p. 364). Yet with regards to the findings of this study, the product of active interviews, it would again be inappropriate to consider them replicable. Denzin (2001) envisages the qualitative interview as a “miniature and coherent world in its own right” (p. 25), with interpretations and findings that stand “in an interpretive relationship to the world that it creates” (p. 30). As such, the findings here are intrinsically linked to the researcher’s role as the interviewer, and the meaning that was constructed within the setting of the original interviews.

Yet this is not to say that the study lacks the requisite measures to ensure reliability. In order to maximise the validity of the findings, a process of triangulation has been adopted where possible. Ideally, this entails “gathering information pertaining to the same phenomenon through more than one method” (Kopinak, 1999, p.171), however as outlined above, the unique meaning-making attributes of qualitative interviews and the somewhat abstract subject matter of the study mean that a multi-methodological approach is not

feasible. Instead, this thesis has closely followed the triangulation technique employed by Rohde et al.'s (2016) study of mobile media use in the Syrian civil war, consisting of 17 interviews with Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters, activists, and refugees. In order to ensure their empirical findings were valid, Rohde et al. (2016) adopted three steps: talking to different actors about similar topics, matching interviews and observational data with "internet-based materials", and following international media coverage of the Syrian civil war (p520). For this study, broadly-speaking the same topics have been explored with all ten interviewees, and anecdotal evidence recounted has been cross-referenced where possible with media and official accounts in order to give greater background and context to the interviewees' experiences, and lend validity to their claims. Furthermore, with reference to a research project on the relationship between refugees' health, well-being, and their immediate environment, Kopinak (1999) asserts that triangulation can be achieved partially through a demographic questionnaire to accompany qualitative interviews, which significantly contributed to the study's nuanced findings into refugee health conditions. This study therefore requested all interviewees to fill out a short, optional questionnaire (see Appendix B) prior to the interview, which all agreed to. The questions draw heavily from Kopinak's example, outlining basic demographic information such as age, occupation, and marital status, although given several respondent's particular reservations about anonymity and overly-invasive questioning, the option not to provide information on any given topic was made explicit.

### **3.6 Shortcomings and ethical considerations**

As a methodology, the qualitative interview has shortcomings that must be acknowledged in this section. Oakley (1999) observes that during such an interview, cultural practices and social values are "performed, contested, and reinforced" (Oakley, 1999, as cited in Broom et al., 2009, p52). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refer to this as the "power asymmetry" of qualitative interviews, where the interview does not represent a conversation between equal partners (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 33). The interviewer directs the conversation, evaluates the results without further interviewee input, and benefits from a prior grounding in literature that the respondent does not have access to. As a result, particularly regarding subjects of personal or situational sensitivity, the interviewee may deliberately withhold information or feel a sense of suspicion or manipulation. In this case, albeit to a limited extent, the method of snowball sampling affords the researcher an initial rapport and degree of trust with each respondent, owing to the existence of a mutual acquaintance.

Both the subject matter of this proposed thesis and the chosen research method raise several ethical concerns that must be safeguarded against. A Syrian refugee's journey to the Netherlands can be a highly traumatic experience and examining themes of material



and emotional wellbeing are likely to trigger emotional and nostalgic responses. Examining how a mobile phone maintains societal and family ties could also make the respondent feel uncomfortable or upset, particularly if they have suffered a bereavement or have lost contact with certain relatives throughout the course of their journey. As such it is imperative that the respondent is well informed before the interview about the nature of the questions and topics that will be discussed, and at any point throughout the process they reserve the right to cancel the interview or change the subject.

As Jacobsen and Landau (2003) note, “the problem of ‘doing no harm’ in refugee research is particularly difficult to anticipate or control” (p. 193). Information that refugees reveal in interviews can be used against them either in their present location or areas of origin. To address this, an informed consent (see Appendix C) form was distributed to all participants, outlining what will happen to their data once collected and providing an opportunity for the participants to ask further questions, make an anonymous complaint, or request anonymity. Two of the ten respondents requested to remain anonymous, but were happy to fill in the demographic questionnaire. Nevertheless, the respondents’ reasons for anonymity were quite different, and their identities could in fact be compromised by other biographical and demographic information they have provided. Thus, in order to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of all respondents, all names have been removed from this study and replaced with simple monikers such as “Respondent 1”, “Respondent 2”, and so on. In cases where additional biographical details have been deemed a potential indicator of the respondent’s identity, these have also been withheld from the final findings, with an explanation in Table 4.1.

A second ethical consideration concerns the nature of a face-to-face interview itself, which may be considered culturally inappropriate or even invasive in particular circumstances. Although certain respondents may appreciate the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences in the presence of a stranger, others may feel intimidated or embarrassed. Moreover, the body language and nonverbal communication of a face-to-face interaction can significantly influence the direction and content of an interview, and therefore some participants may feel more able to express themselves freely at a distance, perhaps over the phone (Fielding & Thomas, 2016). In order to accommodate this, potential respondents were asked via email to confirm they felt comfortable with a face-to-face interview, and if not then an alternative, such as a telephone or email interview, was suggested. During the interview, Syrian refugees were encouraged to respond to the questions in English or Arabic, whichever they felt comfortable articulating themselves in, and for the very few passages spoken in Arabic the researcher relied on Arabic proficiency.

A final ethical consideration relates to using the Syrian refugee crisis as a topic for academic research, or the accusation of “reducing” a humanitarian tragedy to an analysis of

new media technologies. Qualitative interviews serve as a means of countering such accusations because they allocate greater time and significance to the respondent's life and experiences (Broom et al., 2009), in this case the Syrian refugee. Through respondents' stories it is hoped that the thesis can create a narrative that articulates refugees' experiences in their own words.

### **3.7 A general overview of the interviews in this study**

To conclude this section, the following is a brief overview of the interviews conducted for this study, and the interviewer's position and influence on proceedings. The interviews were held throughout May and June 2017, the duration of which ranged from the shortest, 42 minutes, to the longest, 56 minutes. Nine interviews were conducted face-to-face, typically in a café setting, and these conversations were held in The Hague, Delft, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Tilburg. One interview was conducted via Skype, with the participant based in Amsterdam, because he was observing Ramadan and was therefore reluctant to meet in public while fasting. A rough template of ten questions (see Appendix A) was used to structure the interview and ensure that topics of conversation remained relevant, but over the course of the research process new themes and conversation angles emerged, meaning that the latter interviews were less reliant upon the original format. Interviews were recorded using a Samsung s4 mobile application, and transcribed within 24 hours of completion.

The majority of interviewees (seven out of ten) were unknown to the researcher beforehand. Typically, an initial meeting would take place at the local train station and then both interviewer and interviewee would proceed on to a nearby café. During this brief transit, it was possible for the interviewer to make an informal introduction, elaborate further on intentions for the study, and also touch upon background knowledge in the fields of migration, the Middle East, and the Arabic language. Both parties would also discuss mutual interests and matters unrelated to the study. This introduction helped to foster a relaxed, cordial relationship, and on occasions this conversation with the respondent would last for up to 30 minutes before recording began. While the interview itself was taking place, reference was often made to these initial talks, as the respondent might have unwittingly touched upon a certain theme or made an interesting observation about their life in the Netherlands. For the interviewer, while it was important to come across as a compassionate listener, overtly aware of the physical and emotional magnitude of the journey and resettlement that these individuals had undertaken, there was also a desire to explore their other interests and activities that can often be masked or overlooked by their labelling as Syrian refugees. Finally, conscious efforts were made through initial discourse and introductory language so that the interviewer did not appear pitying, or worse as a condescending academic examining some unfamiliar phenomena.

Once initial conversations drew towards the interview, the respondent was once again asked if they were happy to proceed and was then presented with a consent form (see Appendix C) and brief introductory questionnaire (see Appendix B). The interview usually began by prompting the respondent to elaborate further on some of the topics covered by the questionnaire, such as how long they have been living in the Netherlands, what they do for a living, and why they chose to come here. There was no explicit reference to the mobile phone in these early exchanges, but rather the intention was to shed light on each respondent's unique circumstances, information that would then influence the type of themes and subjects explored later in the conversation. Although there was no rigid structure, the interview would generally move on to a more focussed examination of the respondent's mobile phone use in different environments. The respondent would describe their journey from Syria to the Netherlands, and their perceptions of mobile phone usage throughout, and subsequently explore their current situation and their relationship with technology. Here specific inquiries were made into how they formulate networks, overcome everyday problems, and carry out tasks unique to the Dutch environment. Questions were often phrased asking for specific examples, or requesting the respondent to imagine certain situations, in order to elicit more personal insights and anecdotes.

## 4. Results

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This chapter will examine the roles played by the mobile phone in a Syrian refugee's material and emotional wellbeing in the Netherlands. It will do so by exploring a series of themes identified in the qualitative interviews, and relating them to the theories and concepts put forward in previous studies and literature.

### 4.1 Overview of respondents

As Table 4.1 shows, the Syrian refugees interviewed for this study have lived in the Netherlands for a variety of timeframes, from four years to less than two months. The majority left Syria between 2013 and 2015 and arrived in the Netherlands in 2014 and 2015, reflecting a more general trend in Syrian refugee flows to northern Europe, which have since been significantly impeded by the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal. The deal stipulates migrants arriving in Greece from Turkey will be sent back if they do not apply for asylum or their case is rejected, which effectively blocks access to a major migrant transit route to the rest of Europe. A further condition is that for every Syrian sent back to Turkey under the new deal, one Syrian already living in Turkey will be legally resettled in the EU (European Commission, 2016). The EU cites a peak of around 7,000 migrants crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey every day in October 2015, to 47 per day in May 2016 (European Commission, 2016). Indeed, regarding the only two respondents who arrived in the Netherlands in 2016 or later, one was resettled from Turkey as part of the EU-Turkey deal, while the other was able to claim short-term residency in Greece before travelling onwards.

Nine of the ten respondents in this study undertook some form of irregular "transit migration". In most cases, this involved an initial crossing of the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece. From here, some refugees took a flight, using false documentation, from Greece to Amsterdam or a nearby airport, while others travelled overland through the Balkans towards northern Europe. Two respondents travelled directly by boat from Turkey to Italy, one hidden inside a lorry, and then proceeded to travel overland to the Netherlands from there.

The decision to undertake such a journey with its associated risks and upheaval was not taken lightly. Respondents made the decision to leave Syria because they and their families' existence was under threat, and in some cases they fled as the result of particular bombing campaigns or direct persecution from Islamic State (IS) and other extremist groups. After leaving Syria, several refugees attempted to establish new lives in nearby countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, but changing political dynamics and a lack of employment opportunities compelled them to come to Europe. The rationale behind selecting the Netherlands specifically as the destination country varied among respondents, and indeed in some cases it was not the first choice, but popular reasons include the country's family reunion procedures for migrants, citizens' widespread proficiency in the

English language, and a general preconception among respondents that Dutch society is relatively tolerant and welcoming of newcomers.

Respondents are aged between 25 and 38 with diverse academic backgrounds, but seven out of ten have obtained at least an undergraduate university degree. Most have studied or worked in fields such as journalism, language and literature, and education, although engineering and IT also feature prominently. Three respondents are married, two of whom have children, but all refugees interviewed undertook their journey to the Netherlands independent of their families. In fact, the vast majority travelled in informal groups consisting of people they had never met before, employing the services of smugglers at specific transit points.

**Table 4.1** Overview of respondents' socio-economic demographics

Name	Year of arrival	Home town	Occupation/previous occupation in Syria	Education level	Marital status
R1	2014	Damascus	Journalist/ journalist	Advanced university degree	Married
R2	2016	Damascus	Event manager/ journalist	Advanced university degree	Single
R3	2014	Latakia	Artist/ manual labour	High school	Single
R4	2014	Hama	Freelancer/ English teacher	Undergraduate degree	Married
R5	2014	Raqqa	Supervisor/ teacher	Advanced university degree	Geographically separated
R6	2017	Damascus	Unemployed/ English teacher	High school	Single
R7	2015	Damascus	Student/ student	Undergraduate degree	Single
R8	2015	Damascus	Not stated/ manager	Undergraduate degree	Single
R9	2015	Idlib	Student/ not applicable	High school	Single
R10	2014	Aleppo	Unemployed/ telecommunications	Advanced university degree	Married

*Note:* Information deemed overly-specific to the identity of respondents has been omitted from this table.

## **4.2 Past experience and new perceptions - participants' previous use of mobile technology**

In order to understand the roles played by the mobile phone in a Syrian refugee's life in the Netherlands, it is first necessary to consider how they used mobile phones in the past, particularly in Syria and during their journey. In line with the SST approach introduced in the theory chapter, such contextual experiences can shape refugee behaviour and the habits they adopt once resettled.

During their time in Syria, all respondents remarked that mobile phones were used primarily to keep in touch with friends and family through voice calls or text messages. After war broke out, the need to stay in regular contact with relatives unsurprisingly intensified, with Respondent 4 (from Hama) recalling his frantic attempts to call family members after being in the vicinity of two bomb explosions. Responses varied regarding issues such as access to the internet or 3G communication networks, but the dominant theme portrayed access to such technology on mobiles as widespread, although conditions deteriorated sharply after the conflict began. Interviewees such as R1 and Respondent 7 (R7, from Damascus) point out that after 2011 it was difficult to maintain constant access to electricity, and therefore wireless networks were unreliable. Respondent 8 (R8, from Damascus) recounts an incident in 2013 when a chemical weapons attack occurred in the region surrounding Damascus and all internet and telephone signals were blocked for two days. Respondent 9 (R9, from Idlib), points to the popularity of offline mobile functions in such an environment, for example using the offline features of the Facebook app to access news feeds during internet shortages, or downloading multimedia content during times of connectivity and storing it for later offline use. Bandwidth-heavy applications such as Google Maps were considered ineffective because of the rudimentary satellite mapping of Syrian towns and cities. Therefore, although all respondents stated that smartphones were used universally among their social circles in Syria, phone use was limited to communication and low-bandwidth surfing of the internet, particularly to check social networking websites. This corresponds with the wider characterisation of the Syrian communications landscape, as outlined in the theory chapter, and it is clear that mobile use in this context was shaped to account for obstacles such as internet outages, while the device's basic phone signal connectivity gained added contextual significance after conflict began and the whereabouts of loved ones became uncertain.

Refugees reported a more diverse usage of mobile technology during their journey from Syria to the Netherlands, perhaps reflecting the varied means by which they travelled, and whether they were able to cross borders through regular means or via smugglers. As previously observed, only Respondent 6 (R6, from Damascus) was officially relocated from Turkey to the Netherlands via the EU and UNHCR resettlement program, and all other

respondents participated in some form of clandestine travel. Throughout this journey the mobile phone was considered essential for two main purposes – obtaining one’s location via GPS and providing friends and family members with regular updates and reassurances. Mobile phones were also used to access specific migrant WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages outlining border regulations and tipping off forthcoming police patrols. Respondents reported very few instances of technology being used against them by state security forces, or fears that their mobile activity might be detectable, but Respondent 2 (R2, from Damascus) reveals he was asked to keep his phone concealed while crossing the Aegean Sea because the light could draw attention. The exposure to real-time, credible travel information on the move, in addition to accurate location data, greatly enhanced the respondents’ mobility and allowed for relatively short overland journeys (typically taking between two to three weeks to reach the Netherlands).

The journey phase, when access to the internet or networks can prove sporadic, offers further examples of the mobile phone’s offline functions and portable storage capacity. In Syria, R9 prepared for his forthcoming journey by downloading several routes from the offline mapping application Maps.Me, which he proceeded to combine with his phone’s GPS signal to navigate the boat journey from Turkey to Greece. Respondent 10 (R10, from Aleppo) likewise downloaded offline Google Translate dictionaries for Italian, German, and Dutch, enabling him to identify unknown words regardless of his access to the internet or phone signal. In this environment, mobile technology has been shaped and exploited for its ability to facilitate independence, providing a repository of information tailored to the traveller’s needs that can be accessed on the move. Although most respondents contend that such a journey would have been possible before the advent of mobile phones, all observe that this would have entailed prolonged periods of no contact, as well as greater reliance upon smugglers and the goodwill of strangers in order to obtain directions and country-specific information.

The journey phase also carries unique social dynamics and therefore a unique expression of network capital. Refugees typically travelled in small groups of around ten individuals, but lasting “strong ties” among these groups were not observed through the interviews. None of the respondents who were travelling in an unfamiliar group maintain regular contact with their fellow travellers nowadays, aside from basic Facebook interactions. This corresponds with Collyer’s (2007) assertion that inter-migrant contact serves to facilitate and advance individual journeys, with little emotional connection. Certain individuals in the group with strong network capital were seen as particularly vital due to their technological and linguistic prowess. Travellers who could confidently navigate via GPS or communicate with officials and locals through their mobile phones were considered indispensable to the journey. Practical issues, such as charging phones or purchasing new sim cards in each

country, which have been highlighted as challenging in previous studies (Frouws et al., 2016) were not considered burdensome amongst this study's sample. Sim cards were often cheap, if not free, while in certain countries, particularly Greece, phone networks offered tailor-made plans for migrants in transit.

Only one respondent, R9, alludes to a downside of using his mobile phone extensively during his journey. He describes the upheaval caused by passing through countries almost on a daily basis from Syria to the Netherlands as a "nightmare". He remarks that the constant travelling left him and his companions anxious and paranoid, fearing that something bad would happen to them. R9 feels that his mobile phone was of little comfort in this situation, and sometimes even intensified his unease because its usage meant a relentless stream of news updates and contact from Syria, most of which was negative. As a result, on occasions of prolonged downtime or enforced waiting during the journey, he would often avoid his mobile phone, stating the desire to detach himself from reality, "to create your own world in your head and sleep". In contrast to the findings in Wall et al.'s (2015) study on refugees, mobile phones, and information precarity, during his journey R9's phone actively exacerbated his sense of information precarity as he lacked the time and space to fully process and substantiate the news he was receiving from Syria.

The ways in which refugees used mobile phones, in Syria and on their journeys, have a profound impact upon their relationship with the devices in the Netherlands. In line with SST, environment-specific requirements and adaptations mean that some mobile uses among respondents are grounded in context. For example, R8 – who travelled via boat from Turkey to Greece, and then towards northern Europe using a fake passport – believes that the experience of irregular migration made him more insular, and in turn more reliant on his mobile phone:

"I...suddenly came to a different country with the purpose of, eh...doing something illegal. So, eh...I was almost careful with talking to anybody, I was almost always away [sic] of anybody, so I have my mobile with me all the time."

The experience of leaving Syria and the subsequent travel to the Netherlands has resulted in a significant level of attachment between respondents and the devices they used on their journey. Although many of these phones are outdated or no longer work, almost all respondents reported that they still keep hold of them as a memento. Respondent 3, (R3, from Latakia) explains that even though his old phone was broken, "you know, he's [the phone] like my friend now. You know, he was with me and...yeah. He just like part of you now, it's difficult to separate." R7 echoes the same sentiment, "he [the phone] came with me to here. So, it's not nice if I throw him".



#### **4.2.1 Past experience and new perceptions - refugee views of mobile technology in the Netherlands in general**

Having established how Syrian refugees used their mobile phones in Syria and on their journey, and how these experiences have shaped certain behaviours in their destination country, it is also pertinent to note the respondents' general perceptions of mobile technology and phone use in the Netherlands. These insights will allow for observations on the influence, or otherwise, of a digital divide, and will also support or disprove certain expectations offered in the theory chapter about the extent to which findings are refugee-specific or correspond to wider trends among people living in the Netherlands.

Firstly, there is a general consensus among respondents that the mobile phone is more important to everyday life in the Netherlands than in Syria, with the former possessing a more developed "topography of mobility", although mobile phone use is widespread in both countries. Respondent 5 (R5, from Raqqa) observes that "everything here depends on...internet and technology", more than in other European countries such as Germany for example, while Respondent 4 (R4, from Hama) states "I think here in Netherlands, you have to have a mobile phone." The reason for this perceived increased importance could be simply due to time elapsing, with the rapid development in mobile technology in recent years since the respondents left Syria, and mobile applications permeating even more aspects of social life across the world. Another reason however could be cultural and linked to SST, as several respondents were keen to point out that Dutch social norms were more conducive to extensive mobile phone use than Syrian ones. R1 contends "relationships between people is not the same here in the Netherlands or in Europe" and believes that Europeans are more content to communicate virtually with minimal face-to-face interaction. He elaborates "for you as an Englishman [sic] it will be quite normal not to communicate with him [face-to-face] but, for us, the people coming from the Orient, it's a very important value." R3 agrees, asserting that people in Europe have more time to spend on their phones, or on the internet, because "they are more independent or separated from their family." Finally, some respondents pointed to a difference between social behaviour in northern and southern Europe. R8 cites a Syrian maxim, "as long as you have your tongue, you'll never get lost", to explain how he managed to navigate while in Italy without the use of a phone. He adds "I can't imagine this here in Holland".

Some respondents welcome the added significance of the device in the Netherlands and prefer to conduct as many tasks and interactions as possible through the mobile phone. R5, despite owning other communication devices and having lived in the same apartment in the same location, The Hague, since 2014, prefers to do as much as possible through his phone because "everything now became easier. You can talk with anybody through the mobile phone." Others, recognising the permeation of mobile technology in Dutch society,

are prepared to spend significant sums of money on mobile phones, prioritizing this above other investments. R2 explains how he saved up to buy a new device for €700, rather than a mid-range, €200-300 model, because he uses it extensively in his professional and private life, and does not own a laptop. He also explains that because of the connected, online nature of many Dutch services, he spends a considerable amount per month on a data contract, because “I need the internet more than I need phone calls”. R7 reveals that when he was granted a €10,000 scholarship to study in Amsterdam, he immediately spent €1,200 on a new mobile phone and 6 gigabytes of data per month, anticipating that it would be his primary study and social device. However, one respondent in particular, R4, actively seeks to go against the perceived mobile connectivity of Dutch lifestyle. He reveals that now he has settled in the Netherlands he wishes to use his phone only to communicate, transferring all apps from his phone to his desktop computer, which he perceives as more stable and powerful.

In light of this perception of the ubiquity of mobile technology in the Netherlands, respondents spoke of feelings of isolation and vulnerability during periods without a mobile phone. R8 remarks that on occasions when his phone has cut out, or suddenly stopped working, “you feel that you’re alone [laughs]. And you’re completely lost”. R7 describes the “terrible feeling” when he thought he’d lost his phone in Maastricht, not because of the cost but due to photos and numbers stored, and the sense that his phone “became a piece of me”. He recounts getting the next available train from Amsterdam to Maastricht, without being able to return that night, in order to retrieve his phone as soon as possible. R6, who went for 2 months without access to a mobile during a year and a half spent in Turkey, describes his situation as “like hell” and being “totally alone”, with the disconnect causing him to become depressed. Although the final example does not relate to refugee phone use in the Netherlands, it nevertheless illustrates the heightened emotional and practical significance of a mobile communication device for a migrant living in unfamiliar surroundings.

To conclude, there is unanimous agreement among respondents that mobile phones are used more extensively, or at least in more aspects of life, in the Netherlands than in Syria. However, the extent to which one buys into the mobile lifestyle does not appear refugee-specific. As is the case with other residents of the Netherlands, it appears a matter of individual choice among refugees as to how much to adapt one’s behaviour and conform to this perceived mobile society. Rather than a general societal pressure, the specific practical needs of the refugee likely determines the roles played by the mobile phone and their dependency on the device, as shall be discussed further in section 4.4.

### **4.3 Refugee status as a defining factor of mobile phone usage and significance**

While it is important not to generalize the behaviour of all Syrian refugees living in the Netherlands, it is also important to differentiate between the behaviours, circumstances, and social contexts of those who have acquired temporary status, and those who are still waiting to be assigned residency. For example, it can be assumed that the latter face greater exposure to precarity and have had less opportunity to accumulate network capital, and therefore the roles played by the mobile phone in their situation merit specific analysis.

Every respondent spent some period of time in at least one refugee camp upon arrival to the Netherlands, ranging from a few days to several months. During their time in camps, respondents complained of boredom and having to entertain themselves for long periods. There was no opportunity to participate in official language classes or seek out employment opportunities as the refugees (apart from R6) lacked the necessary status requirements. Moreover, refugees in the camps were living in shared accommodation, sharing their room with several other people they did not know. R9 had to live in a particularly challenging environment upon arrival, being housed in a basketball court near Zwolle that had been temporarily transformed to provide beds for 400 refugees. He remarks on a sometimes uneasy, tense atmosphere within the all-male facility that consisted of a single hall without partitions, and likens it to “living like in a jail”. Meanwhile R8, who stayed for eight days at the IND headquarters in Ter Apel, near Groningen, asserts that outside the camp, locals were not particularly friendly or accommodating due to the presence of the large refugee centre. This led to heightened feelings of isolation, especially among those who had just arrived.

This environment shaped a particular kind of phone use that was not observed among respondents once they had been officially resettled. Precarity, both in terms of Harney’s (2013) social status and Wall et al.’s (2015) access to information, is a very real concern in this environment with the refugee living in a constant state of anxiety while their case is reviewed, in addition to not knowing where and when they will be resettled. R7, for example, stayed for six months in a camp and recounts constantly thinking that the authorities might send him back at any point. Communal living also hinders privacy and increases the refugee’s immediate security concerns. R6, the only respondent who, at the time of the interview, was still living in a refugee camp, explains that his phone in this environment affords a greater degree of privacy compared to other devices:

“I have a shared room with four people – four other guys, I don’t know them – and, eh, they usually have a lot, a lot of guests, so, eh, I kind of, like eh, scared of showing my laptop, or just keep it out all the time, so it’s in my closet most of the time. Yeah, so that’s why I’m using my mobile phone more now.”

Others, citing the lack of structure to their daily lives in the camp, explain how they used their phones to download or stream movies and video clips via the wifi network and spent hours watching them on their mobile screens. Several respondents point out that this activity also served as an informal means of learning basic Dutch and English through the use of subtitles. R9 claims to know several refugees who were later able to pass the second level of mandatory Dutch examinations purely through YouTube tutorials they had completed during their stay in the camps. However, most respondents state that it was difficult to concentrate on constructive activities during this time because of the distractions posed by their roommates.

The combination of their uncertain status, unfamiliar surroundings, prolonged absence from loved ones, and the need to keep themselves occupied also prompts refugees in the camps to spend a considerable amount of time talking to friends and family back in Syria. For those who are unable to communicate through the wifi network, this can be an extremely costly activity on a Dutch network package. R2, who works for Lola Lik, a cultural and creative hub adjoining the Wenckebachweg refugee centre in Amsterdam, states that “the most thing I notice...because I’m dealing with a lot of the refugees here, and most of them, they finish the internet very fast”. He observes that incoming refugees are constantly using their phones to communicate with their friends and families elsewhere, and regularly come to him to request the use of his phone to send a message once their data and minutes allocations have expired. This in turn leads to a dependency and places significant pressure upon the refugee centre’s public wifi system. R9 remembers a technical problem with the wifi at his camp near Zwolle leading to two days without internet. He reveals that the inhabitants became aggressive “like someone who just, eh, smoke a cigarette and after that he just, eh, cut it down”, and small fights broke out as refugees were denied their primary communication and entertainment source.

With only limited opportunities to interact with service providers and the wider Dutch populace, camp denizens form network capital among themselves by fostering weak and strong ties within their immediate confines. The transient communities formed in the camps rely on internal mobile networks, and here mobile technology can serve to enrich community dynamics but also simultaneously entrench a sense of differentiation. Nearly all respondents talk about using the Lyca mobile network when first arriving in the Netherlands, typically because someone in their camp has recommended it. The Lyca sim card is favoured among Syrian refugees, as new arrivals to the country who are at first largely restricted to camp interactions, because it offers free phonecalls to other devices on that network. R2 describes the situation for residents of Wenckebachweg: “They are in the camp and everybody they know is around, you know they have been there for, like, one year now so they have a lot of friends there”. As such the majority of residents are connected by Lyca, and R2 recalls they

will often consider “is he Lyca or not?” before attempting to get in touch with another camp member. This use of a network of free calls can provide incoming refugees with a vital initial means of unlimited communication among their immediate community, however respondents report that the Lyca sim card is less suitable for use in wider Dutch society. For example, its data plan is deemed insufficient, partly why so many camp residents rapidly use up their internet allowance. It also simultaneously demarcates and insulates refugee groups within the confines of their temporary residence. R2 remarks how a self-perpetuating micro community can form within these conditions with refugees only communicating among themselves, and often resorting to him, who possesses considerable network capital, when they need to communicate with Dutch authorities or service providers outside the camp. He adds “they don’t talk English and they don’t talk Dutch, so the only communication between me and them is Arabic, so...I talk to them [Dutch authorities and service providers] in Dutch or English after”. Indeed, several respondents observe that switching from Lyca to a major Dutch network represented a significant milestone in their resettlement process.

From the above insights, it is clear the mobile phone plays a pivotal role in refugee wellbeing in a camp setting. It provides a source of entertainment and distraction that is vital to fill the refugee’s time. Moreover, it serves as the only communication device through which strong ties are maintained with relatives in Syria, who can offer emotional support and assurances as well as news and information clarification. Finally, the mobile phone is also a prominent means through which incoming refugees create weak and strong ties within the camp environment itself, which comes to resemble a micro community sustained by free networked calls. However, it is also apparent that the roles of the mobile phone here are short-term and context-specific. The centrality of the device in this environment ultimately nurtures a dependency, and could actively hamper a refugee’s interaction with their wider community. Lastly, the phone in this context does little to assuage the refugee’s sense of precarity, given that their long-term status in the country is largely outside their control.

#### **4.4 The role of the mobile phone in a refugee’s material wellbeing**

As outlined in the methodology operationalization, there is no clear-cut distinction between material and emotional wellbeing as the two are interlinked and symbiotic, and it is of course evident that the respondents in this study derive emotional as well as material benefits from the cases described below. For example, an individual’s employment and accommodation provides emotional reassurance and confidence, and alleviates precarity, at the same time as providing physical access to finance and shelter. However, it is necessary in this section to outline the role of the mobile phone in securing practical necessities and opportunities for refugees in the Netherlands, regarding largely material concepts such as employment, education, and civic duties.

Before and after the refugee is assigned residence status in the Netherlands, the mobile phone helps to enhance their material wellbeing through a variety of functions and applications that are of specific use in the Dutch context, and also by expanding their network capital and in turn, access to opportunities. Every respondent who reported being in full or part-time employment stated that they use their phone as part of their daily job. R2 uses his to perform daily tasks as event manager for Lola Lik, where he describes the need to be “online all the time” in order to be in touch with other internal staff, make appointments, and respond to external requests for information and advice. R2 opts to use his phone for work rather than a laptop, even for word processing tasks, and he appreciates the ability to conduct all tasks through one device. Despite the fact that R2 was granted refugee status in the Netherlands over 14 months ago, and with it a fixed address, it appears he has developed a strong resonance with the mobile phone’s mobility and portability even in a stable location, and has grown accustomed to utilizing its multifunction capability.

R3 is less enthusiastic about the extent of modern day mobile phone use, but concedes that the device is essential in order to promote his artwork. He estimates that he spends on average three hours per day on his phone, communicating with friends and family but also networking with other artists in the Netherlands, taking pictures of his work and posting them to social networks, and searching the internet for inspiration for forthcoming projects. R3’s phone also previously played a significant role in his career direction, as he taught himself to draw using instructional YouTube videos on his phone during a year-long stay in Egypt before moving to Europe.

For those who are still searching for employment, the mobile phone is used both as a means of job searching on the move and an accessible storage device for employment documentation, should an opportunity arise. R5 enhances his mobility in this regard, revealing he has his CV stored in .pdf format on his phone “so I can apply when I found something”. Being part-time employed in an international school in The Hague, R5 is typically looking for freelance translation work, and he says the informal manner in which most of these jobs are advertised – either as posts on Facebook or sometimes by word of mouth – means that carrying a portable CV in digital format makes that application process easier. R6 and R9 both report joining LinkedIn since arriving in the Netherlands, claiming that the platform is barely used in Syria, and again through their phones they search for potential job opportunities while travelling or in their free time. Thus, since online networking and job advertising is a key part of the informal and formal Dutch labour market, Syrian refugees use mobile phones to boost their professional online presence and network capital, whether through digital CVs or LinkedIn profiles. On the other hand, R10 argues that digital job hunting can be futile unless there is “someone seriously willing to help you” access the labour market. He also uses a mobile phone extensively to market himself to potential

employers but describes his LinkedIn connections as “only numbers”, and questions the value of the network capital he has accrued through the service.

For Syrian refugees who are studying or are seeking to do so in the Netherlands, the mobile phone provides a portable means of study support, and can even facilitate education itself when refugees have few alternative options. All respondents interviewed are currently engaged in an official Dutch language course, and the majority spoke of using dictionary, translation, and language practice apps either in classes or at home to enhance their learning. Three respondents explicitly referenced the language learning app Duolingo as the primary way in which they learned basic Dutch upon arrival. Arabic-Dutch, English-Dutch, and even Dutch-Dutch mobile dictionaries were popular among almost half the respondents, and they use these resources during Dutch classes and in everyday life to identify the meaning of words independently. Google Translate is also popular, however R8 and R9 both observe that its Dutch-Arabic mobile service is unreliable and often produces incorrect results. R7 and R9, the two youngest respondents, are both involved in WhatsApp groups created for members of their Dutch course and derive specific benefits from this mobile-centred social network. Through these groups, participants can post words that they are struggling to translate, and other members can offer definitions and assistance.

In terms of refugees' attempts to study other subjects beyond their required Dutch commitments, mobile study applications can provide temporary solutions in another example of SST theory. As proof of Dutch or English proficiency is a prerequisite for refugees to enrol in a university course in the Netherlands, all respondents who wished to participate in higher education were still negotiating the administrative process of registration at the time of the interviews. However, R6 describes himself as an “online student”, using the free online education resource Coursera to complete short, accredited courses while waiting for a university place to be approved. Having just been assigned accommodation at the time of the interview, R6 had mainly used the Coursera mobile app to study so far in the Netherlands because it has been shaped for his particular context - “designed for people who are on the move or travelling”.

Respondents also make use of a host of other applications specific to the Dutch context, the most popular being travel and transport service 9292. Of all respondents, R5 was the most prolific user of Dutch-specific mobile apps, using his phone to search for second-hand items nearby (Marktplatz), to manage his domestic electricity tariff (Eneco), and for internet banking. However, other respondents, in particular R3, expressed reservations about using so many mobile applications and restricted themselves primarily to navigation and transportation services.

It is also necessary to note that the mobile phone has practical limitations when it comes to contributing to a refugee's material wellbeing. Firstly, the primary complaint among

respondents was poor battery life, which severely restricted their mobility and portability, and also access to information at pivotal times. Some respondents sought to overcome this problem by carrying portable charging batteries. R2 carries around two external chargers in addition to his phone because of the “many situations” in which a flat battery has “let me down”, while R8, who confesses his current phone only lasts one hour and 30 minutes on a single charge, carries an external battery everywhere he goes and claims to constantly look out for plug sockets “at work, at my friends, when I reach home.” Despite these precautions and solutions, the sudden loss of battery power can have significant consequences. R7 recalls his first scheduled appointment at the municipal office to begin residence proceedings, six months after his arrival, and how he charged his phone beforehand and allocated ample time to travel to the office by train. However, a train delay meant that he had less time to locate the office than previously planned, and when his phone’s battery suddenly cut out he was unable to navigate and missed his allotted time slot. This resulted in the cancellation of R7’s appointment and ultimately a delay in his resettlement process.

Secondly, given the digital infrastructure of the Netherlands, it is also questionable whether an individual can ensure their material wellbeing through one ICT device alone. For example, R6 reports that although the Coursera app offers university lectures and tutorials specifically designed for mobile use, he considers this only a temporary solution and does not think it would be possible to complete an entire course in this manner. Therefore, according to R6, access to a laptop or desktop computer is still necessary to study in the Netherlands. In another example, when R8 tried to make an appointment on his mobile phone for an HIV test at the Rotterdam regional health service (GGD), he was unable to do so as the website had no mobile platform, and only offered information in Dutch. R8 therefore required the use of a laptop, which he also believes is necessary to access certain features on government websites using DigilD (a Dutch digital identification tool).

#### **4.5 The role of the mobile phone in a refugee’s emotional wellbeing – access to strong and weak ties in the destination country**

Besides ensuring their material wellbeing, refugees use mobile phones in the Netherlands to foster their emotional wellbeing through the utilization of support networks and the resultant network capital these afford. It is vital for refugees to have access to local knowledge and assistance with regards to problems that are specific to the Dutch context in order to reduce feelings of isolation, loneliness, and “being an outsider”.

On a small scale, R2 details how he uses his Dutch friend occasionally as a go-between to talk on the phone to government authorities or service providers when he does not feel his own Dutch language ability is good enough. On a larger scale, R7, who has lived in the Netherlands for the past two years, now believes he has accrued a network of Dutch



contacts expansive enough to call upon regardless of the problem he is facing. He cites the example of being relocated to Wageningen refugee camp after he had previously been living in Amsterdam and had started to learn English there, because he was yet to be assigned a permanent residence despite acquiring his status. Feeling dejected and once again alone, he sent a text message, copied and pasted to all his Dutch contacts in his phone, declaring: “Look, I started to learn English in Amsterdam, and now they moved me from Amsterdam to Wageningen. So you find... you should find for me solution”. R7 elaborates that many contacts did not reply, others said they could not help, but one forwarded the details of Takecarebnb, an organization that seeks to pair as-yet unhoused refugees with Dutch families, allowing the refugee to temporarily live in a preferred destination outside their designated camp. R7 was therefore able to remain in Amsterdam, close to his friends and study commitments, and attributes this to his nascent network capital in the Netherlands. He explains:

“Dutch people, most of the time, they are so nice. So if you call someone, or send them message, ‘please I need that’, or ‘I’m looking for that’, or ‘I need help with that’, if he cannot, or if she cannot help you, she...like immediately contact you someone else.”

R8, the only respondent who openly identified as homosexual, says that he has relied on mobile dating applications and social networks to meet people in the Netherlands, and specifically in major Dutch cities. In an illustration of SST, he describes meeting a partner via a dating application that led to a relationship for a “pretty long time”, but he also reveals how he has adapted his social media usage since arriving to gain increased exposure within the context of the urban LGBT community. Describing himself as initially “not active” on social networks such as Instagram, R8 details how his new Dutch acquaintances were keen to tag him in photos. After initial hesitance, R8 accepted that Instagram was a popular networking tool among the LGBT community and allowed himself a greater presence on the platform. Worried about how this might be perceived among family and friends in Syria, where he has not officially come out as homosexual, R8 observes the mainly “constructive” comments that appear under his photos, such as “we miss you”.

It is important to note that although the mobile phone can be a powerful tool for mobilizing network capital in the Netherlands, the capacity to amass the requisite capital in the first place is often dependent upon a refugee’s personal circumstances and personality. For example, R7 gives the impression of a well-connected, highly sociable young man with an outgoing personality and a willingness to participate in activities outside his comfort zone. He justifies his decision to participate in the Takecarebnb programme, and subsequently host a TEDX talk in Amsterdam about his experiences, by saying “Why not? I mean it’s new

culture for me, I'm afraid to do that but I don't have choice...just try to do." By contrast, R6, who at the time of the time of the interview had only been in the Netherlands for 45 days, admits he is struggling to expand his Dutch network. He has met one Dutch friend online and he concedes "without him it [life] would be much, really, difficult", but he feels that although the Dutch authorities have granted his status he has not been provided with adequate emotional support and laments, "I still didn't see the good in the Netherlands. I'm trying and, eh, it needs time." R6's arrival in the Netherlands via the UNHCR resettlement program allowed him to fast track the application procedure and gain status earlier than most refugees. However, he explains his journey has often been an independent and lonely one, and he has perhaps suffered from a lack of social opportunities due to his differentiation from irregular migrants.

The use of mobile phones as a means of meeting people and expanding network capital in the Netherlands also drew criticism from certain respondents. Asked if he thought it was easier to meet people in a new environment nowadays through joining Facebook groups and the mobile app Meet Up, R6 replies that it's faster and inexpensive, but this kind of interaction can also inspire bad habits. R6 explains that he struggles to find Meet Up groups near his temporary accommodation in Arnhem, and therefore has to be content with making contacts online. However, as he puts it, "you cannot just be, like...like a slave for technology, you need to do something outside, something real, get a life". R6 does appreciate that certain Facebook groups in the Netherlands, specifically catering for refugee communities, look to arrange social events so as to promote offline interaction. However, R9 believes that such initiatives are too often born out of a sense of pity and can appear patronising. He says:

"Most of them who want to meet you, it's like their, their view for you, they are just really sorry about your situation and they, yeah, look at you like a, yeah, a poor guy, you know? It's, yeah, for me I don't like it at all."

R9 has met new people in the Netherlands through his phone, but observes that this has often been through more organic, chance encounters, such as going to view an item he was interested in buying on Marktplatz, and then being invited to dinner by the seller.

In conclusion, it appears that the mobile phone plays a significant role in exploiting and expanding network capital for Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, as it provides a unique means of canvassing large networks of weak ties for specific assistance, and mobile social networks represent important digital meeting spaces for particular communities and interest groups. However, this study has been unable to provide significant evidence of the phone's capacity to help foster such ties in the first place. The ease of mobile communication encourages a passive approach to socializing, while it seems that genuine

social ties, as with R10's observation about job opportunities, require the earnest – but not patronising – intentions of both parties.

#### **4.5.1 The role of the mobile phone in a refugee's emotional wellbeing – maintaining contact with strong ties in Syria**

The most important role of mobile phones in the Netherlands among all respondents was to keep in touch with their family and friends in Syria. The emotional significance of this contact cannot be overstated, as these strong ties simultaneously provide motivation, psychological support, reassurance, and hope for the future.

Firstly, the mobile phone's multimedia and storage capacity means that the respondents in this study have portable and instantaneous access to images and video clips of their loved ones and previous lives in Syria. These files can be of great sentimental value to refugees who have been forced to abandon everything at short notice. For example, R1 describes the significance of a video clip of his wedding day, stating that he watches it regularly with his wife to remind himself of his old neighbourhood in Damascus, and asserts "you have lost all things. Those teeny things [video clips] may mean lots for you." Similarly, R3 highlights the importance of photos on his phone during his journey:

"When I was in the sea for 12 days...you look to your phone and you see photos and, you know, because if something bad happens to you, you want to keep the good things, the last, you wanna see the last beautiful things in your mind."

However, half of the respondents report that they have permanently lost images and footage documenting their lives in Syria due to a fault with their mobile phone or a failure to back up the files on another device. Even when respondents have backed up their files to cloud services such as One Drive and Google Drive, terms and conditions violations and administrative errors have resulted in some of them being permanently blocked access to their account. This causes significant despair and frustration among respondents, and illustrates the vulnerability of a heavy reliance on the mobile phone, which, despite its technological prowess, is a fragile device that is still liable to malfunction.

Of particular interest to this study is the fact that communication with Syria is exclusively conducted through the mobile phone, with respondents never using the post, landline telephones, call centres, or even laptops to communicate. Internet-based video call applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, and IMO are the most popular among the interviewees in order to talk with people in Syria, although sometimes respondents buy international call packages and dial relatives through their mobile networks if Syrian internet access is limited. R10 mentions that he regularly uses the mobile app MobileVoip, which allows the user to make a call to a landline phone anywhere in the world through the internet.

This dependency on mobile technology has reshaped social roles in both Syria and for refugees in the Netherlands. Because of the unreliability of internet connection and phone signal in certain areas of Syria (although respondents are keen to point out that communications infrastructure has improved significantly in the past year), the refugee in the Netherlands must always be available to talk to their families because they are the ones who are constantly connected. R4 says “with my friends I can maybe postpone that till later...but for my family of course, if they call me now I have to answer them”. Family members in Syria, particularly from older generations, who had previously sought to eschew technology now have little choice but to learn how to operate a smartphone and video call functions. R5 gives a common example:

“I have my father still in Syria, in Damascus. So, before my father didn’t like using, eh, mobile phones or computer or the internet, he didn’t like this thing, but later when we came here [R5’s four brothers and his mother live in Germany] he, eh, decide to trying to learn to use, eh, WhatsApp to talk with us, to send us some photos or, yes. So, it’s very, very important, eh, to talk with him through, though WhatsApp.”

R6 expresses a similar situation with his mother, who remains in Syria, “actually she, she never use it [video calling] before, but now when she got all of her sons outside she had to learn.” R7, meanwhile, points to a different family dynamic with his immediate family in Syria all sharing one device, the mobile phone of his 27-year-old sister, who plays the role of a digital translator. He explains that his mother, for example, “can type [on a mobile phone] but for her it’s difficult and she doesn’t like to”, therefore “my sister always typing to me”. When it comes to video or voice conversations, R7 remarks that the internet in his family home in Damascus is often not strong enough to sustain a coherent exchange, therefore he prefers to record individual voice messages, intended for different family members, and send them to his sister’s phone via WhatsApp. These can then be accessed whenever his family has adequate connection, however he admits that this dynamic is harmful for privacy, recalling one voice message in particular:

“I said: ‘Hey my father, I slept today with this nice girl’, like that, but I don’t want my mother, because my mother will get angry so much. But then, next day, [impersonating his mother] “[R7], I heard what you said from mobile!”

Although R7’s example was recounted in a light-hearted manner, it is conceivable that the dynamics of his family relationships have changed considerably in light of this forced communal and public communication. Being restricted to pre-recorded voice messages inevitably make R7 more conscious and guarded in what he says, while his Syrian family also face the same restrictions, and his parents must similarly give extra consideration to

their messages, knowing that they will be transmitted through the conduit of R7's sister.

The need to conduct all communication with loved ones in Syria through the mobile phone inevitably places considerable strain upon refugees. On first impression, several respondents appear upbeat about this predicament, and even contend that they adopt the same communication practices with people in the Netherlands as well. For example, R4 reveals that he speaks to his wife, who lives in The Hague, almost exclusively by phone during weekdays. R2 admits to often preferring to send WhatsApp messages to his friend in Amsterdam rather than speak on the phone or even see her face-to-face, while R7 explains that he hasn't encountered many of the residents of his university halls in person for months, and interacts with them mostly through social media. However, the difference is that these relationships use mobile communication as a convenience, and can be supplemented by physical contact at any time, whereas mobile applications cannot compensate for the very real distance between the refugees and their Syrian families.

R1 details his feelings of anxiety and helplessness when he hears harrowing stories from loved ones living in Syria with an increasingly bleak outlook:

“If you are living now in Syria and I'm calling you this month, and I will ask you what are the new things that you have done? You will say this and this and this and this. After two months I will ask you the same question and you will say nothing has changed. And that will last for...eh...for three or five years. It is the same things. They are facing the same things. And they will keep saying that it is getting worse. It's worsening.”

This distressing narrative is compounded by the fact that R1 can only communicate through his phone, and there is very little practical action he can take from the Netherlands, which in turn puts him off talking altogether. R1 recounts the difficulty of his conversations with one particular friend in Damascus, who he has urged to leave the country on account of his situation, explaining “he's, you know, he's a brother, more than a friend to me, and I am hesitating to communicate with him because if...what can I do for him?” R8 expresses a similar sentiment: “I talk to, to my family and the news there is always like, eh...this person got killed, this person got kidnapped” he says, while adding “with them they just, just want to talk to somebody, they cannot keep it in all the time...for me it's really difficult to, to get all those information, eh...especially I'm here and they are there.” R8 also reveals that he finds it too difficult to communicate via mobile video call with his family in Syria, because of the emotional impact of seeing their faces on screen.

The above section details clear examples of SST with regard to relatives in Syria exploiting the mobile phone's portability to hold entire family conversations through one device, and the recorded message serving a specific use as a storable, remotely-accessible

solution to maintaining contact in a conflict zone. The section also puts forward the case that strong ties are more important than weak ones for refugees in their destination country, given the emphasis placed on such contact by all respondents, and the emotional benefits they derived from them.

However, perversely it seems the mobile phone's greatest contribution to a resettled refugee's emotional wellbeing can also in some cases heighten their sense of anguish and despair. Mobile communication cannot adequately compensate for the real-life distance between the refugee and their loved ones, while constant connectivity and a seemingly endless stream of worrisome information can leave the refugee in a state of heightened distress and helplessness. Yet it seems reasonable to assume that the audio-visual interactions facilitated by modern smartphone technology are preferable to the situation before the advent of online telecommunication, when a refugee would have no choice but to negotiate the costs and logistics of a pre-arranged international landline call. As R6 points out when discussing his phone calls to Syria, visual communication with those back home provides at least a semblance of the family gatherings he used to enjoy, no matter how mediated:

“Now you can see them, talk to them, sometimes spend like an hour or so just talking to them as if you are sitting together. Without this it would be, of course, much [more] difficult, especially for me personally, I...I find it really difficult to leave my home country and to leave my family and to be separated from them and be totally alone.”

#### **4.6 Self-presentation and the role of the key informant**

Mobile technology and communication also plays a role in how refugees convey their material and emotional wellbeing, and how they present their lives in the Netherlands. Many respondents spoke of the pressure to convey a positive message to their families, or at least not project any concerns about their new lives in Europe, so as not to cause distress to those back home. In this manner, the narratives refugees tell from the Netherlands can have a direct impact on the material and emotional wellbeing of their relatives elsewhere.

The use of instant messaging applications when communicating with family in Syria allows refugees to consciously tailor their narratives and present perhaps a more favourable impression of their lives in the Netherlands, because this communication does not provide any audio or visual clues about their genuine wellbeing, and the refugee has complete editorial control over the message they send. R6 admits “sometimes I don't feel like talking, or there is something I don't want my family to feel, that I'm not feeling well or something like that, so I prefer to write.”

However, while instant messaging allows the user to compose and tailor their message beforehand, verbal communication remains a more powerful means when it comes

to conveying a narrative of safety and security, as family members receive the added reassurance of hearing the refugee's own voice. R10 explains that his parents are particularly sensitive and apprehensive about the thought of him living in Europe, to the extent that he did not inform them of his journey from Turkey to the Netherlands until after he had completed it. Nowadays he communicates with them at scheduled times and likes to portray a routine, uneventful lifestyle. He remembers an occasion when he was out with a friend on a visit to Germany but was also due to call his parents. This posed a problem as R10 was reluctant to inform his parents that he was outside the Netherlands, for fear of unsettling them, but without access to wifi or local networks there was no way he could call them from his own phone, at their usual scheduled time. To overcome this problem, R10's friend, with a German sim card, created a mobile wifi hotspot that R10 could then connect to, allowing him to use the MobileVoip app and call his parent's landline from his own number. He held the resulting conversation with his parents thinking that he was calling from the Netherlands, and thus avoided what he believes would have been unnecessary questioning and distress.

Aside from boosting their relatives' emotional state through encouraging accounts of their lives in the Netherlands, the refugee can also help to ensure the practical and material wellbeing of family members carrying out a similar journey. Here the Netherlands-based refugee plays the role of the "key informant" - as explained by Schaub within the context of migrant journeys (2012) - who is constantly reachable to offer advice and assistance to other migrants, given the uncertainty of the journey and precarity of the communication network at the other end. Respondents in this study have used their mobile phones and the benefits of a secure communications infrastructure to provide vital and sometimes life-saving advice to other relatives in transit. R4 recounts a time in 2016 when his sister, travelling by sea from Turkey to Greece, phoned him in the Netherlands to report that the boat she was on was sinking, and urged him to send a distress call the Greek coastguard given his proficiency in English and his secure telephone connection. She was able to send the boat's coordinates via WhatsApp, and R4 was able to contact the Greek coastguard, issue a distress call, and arrange a rescue mission to the exact coordinates, all from his mobile phone the Netherlands. In a less dramatic example, R8 describes a friend who called him from Lebanon asking for advice and directions to travel to Europe. Through the use of his phone, R8 was able to provide daily contact with details of smugglers, advice on the most secure travel routes, and screenshots and pictures of notable locations and assembly points that would be encountered along the journey. His friend successfully travelled to Germany on account of R8's advice and role as a key informant.

In line with migrant network theory, the refugees' positive self-presentation of life in the Netherlands, and their presence there as a key informant, significantly influences the

decisions of others within their network to make the journey themselves. This new role is embraced by several respondents as a source of pride, however others are uncomfortable with the level of responsibility they are burdened with as a result. R5 expresses reservations about recommending his journey and destination to others, saying “if I told someone it’s good [in the Netherlands] and he came here and found not good he would tell me that ‘you are...(laughs), you told me that it’s good, why?!’” Similarly, R4 refuses to act as a key informant for anyone other than his relatives who are already committed to the journey. He explains “I don’t advise anyone. No, because if he got stuck maybe in Turkey or Athens I will be responsible for that.”



## 5. Conclusion

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This study has identified that the mobile phone plays a multitude of roles in a Syrian refugee's material and emotional wellbeing in the Netherlands. An overview of these roles, the extent to which they are adequate or could be improved, and the identification of areas in a refugee's life that cannot be enhanced by mobile technology, are all fundamental to understanding and catering for the needs of this particular social group in Dutch society. The study also serves to provide further context to the growing body of work in the field of refugee studies and ICT, with examples and themes that in some instances lend support, and in others offer a critique, to earlier findings.

### **5.1 The roles of the mobile phone in a Syrian refugee's material and emotional wellbeing in the Netherlands**

On previous stages of a refugee's journey, the device's portability or ability to facilitate mobility are essential. The ability to gain accurate location details, to be warned about forthcoming obstacles, and to ask for help, all while on the move, has given irregular migrants unprecedented levels of independence and reassurance as they travel from Syria to Europe. The refugee's reliance on the mobile phone throughout their journey not only creates a strong and lasting attachment to the particular device itself, but can also ingrain a mobile lifestyle, although not among all respondents, that is manifest in their relationship with the mobile phone in the Netherlands.

Now that they have arrived in the Netherlands, the mobile phone's unparalleled portability is not as essential to refugees, although this is dependent on the extent of their resettlement in Dutch society. Anecdotal evidence suggests that life in a temporary refugee camp or asylum centre necessitates mobile and portable technology use to ensure a degree of privacy and security, while the use of mobile phones in this context is also shaped to nurture an inter-camp community and new ties.

There is a universal perception among respondents that life in the Netherlands necessitates a certain level of basic affinity with technology and regularly requires the access of information online. However, respondents have shown that this engagement with technology can be facilitated through a laptop or a more stationary device, and it is a matter of personal choice whether to rely heavily on mobile applications, as in the case of R5, or reduce the mobile phone to simply a communication tool, like R4.

Indeed for many aspects of material wellbeing, such as employment and education, it seems the centrality of the mobile phone depends on the individual, much like it would for anyone living in the Netherlands, regardless of nationality or residence status. The premise that the mobile phone democratizes network capital is true to a limited extent in this case. It certainly provides the refugee with increased access to job opportunities or educational

resources, but the ability to make tangible progress in these fields requires strategic contacts and sometimes the use of other devices. However, for those who claim to rely on their mobile phones extensively or exclusively, whether in their employment or wider everyday lives, in particular R2 and R5, this reliance has likely been shaped by past experience, given that the majority of respondents have spent significant parts of the past five years on the move, in a variety of countries and temporary locations, often with the mobile phone as the only constant.

The mobile phone also plays a role in the creation and utilization of new networks in the Netherlands, and can serve as a means to overcome problems and issues specific to the Dutch context. Here there is stronger evidence of the phone's democratization of network capital as once resettled a refugee, like any other citizen of the Netherlands, is instantly able to independently navigate, make appointments, and purchase goods through their personal device. As described by the respondents, refugees who have accumulated network capital can then rely on their phones as a means of mass mobilization or canvassing, to send out blanket requests for help, participation, and advice. Through such a strategy and the phone's facilitation of mass contact, it is almost inevitable that the refugee will receive the desired response. However, this study has revealed mixed responses with regards to the ability of the mobile phone to create this capital in the first place. The ubiquity of mobile apps and mobile communication make contact and networking easier and faster for refugees in the Netherlands, but some of the ties formed also have a tendency to be more superficial. This reflects Van Dijck's (2012) critique of digital networking in general, as online interaction in general requires less investment, emotional or otherwise.

The mobile phone undoubtedly plays its most essential role in the maintenance of strong ties between the refugee in the Netherlands and their family elsewhere. Aside from the vital practical usage of mobile communication in allowing the refugee to direct and assist others making the journey to Europe, the device clearly serves the everyday function of Vertovec's "social glue" (2004), connecting families both orally and visually. The multitude of communication apps available, allowing for simple text messaging, image sharing, and voice recording, help to create Ito and Okabe's (2004) "ambient background presence" of interaction among family and friends, which reduces the stress and uncertainty of living away from home. The transnationalism afforded by messaging and communication apps also allows for Syrian families – some of whom are dispersed across several countries in Europe and beyond – to all participate in a private, collective digital space.

However, the mobile phone in this role can also have an adverse effect on a refugee's emotional wellbeing, because constant audio-visual interaction mediated through a screen reinforces the spatial distance between them and their families. Relatively speaking, friends and family in Syria face far greater precarity and existential threats than the resettled

refugee in the Netherlands, who in turn feels helpless and even guilty when routinely reminded of his loved ones' predicament. Nevertheless, the benefits of being able to see familiar faces living in Syria, albeit through a screen, and instantly share multimedia memories with them, likely outweighs the stress and guilt caused by constantly being made aware of their problems and suffering. However, it is important to point out that these assumptions cannot be categorically substantiated by the findings of this study alone, and the psychological impact of prolonged, enforced mobile communication is certainly a subject for further research.

## **5.2 Limitations, observations and future research**

This study has several limitations, most notably regarding its research sample. Although it was anticipated that the method of identifying respondents – firstly via snowball sampling and then through a targeted Facebook call for participation (see Appendix D) – would predispose a certain type of Syrian refugee, it is regrettable that the study failed to attract at least one female participant. Previous research, such as the work conducted by Walker et al. (2015) among Australian refugee communities, has focussed on the dynamics of mobile phone use among refugee women in particular, and this study would have been able to make a more sizable academic contribution if this research could have been incorporated and results compared. Moreover, as outlined in the methodology section, the sample cannot be considered representative of the Syrian male refugee population in the Netherlands. The fact that all calls for participation and subsequent interviews were conducted in English, interspersed occasionally with Arabic when a respondent felt unable to articulate themselves, means that the sample is heavily skewed towards highly educated and at least bilingual Syrians.

Given that the majority of respondents were first notified of the study through Facebook, this has led to a relatively young, digitally literate sample group with an interest in talking about their mobile phone usage. As a result, this study can only make a limited contribution to the debate surrounding the digital divide, and uneven access to mobile technology among migrant communities or indeed communities considering the possibility of migration. The respondents in this study cite nearly universal affinity with mobile phones within their social circles in Syria, but it is important to recognise that these individuals were able to travel to the Netherlands on account of their relatively privileged socio-economic position. As R9 observes with regards to the migration of Syrian refugees, “the more you pay, the more, eh, safe journey you have.” The correlation between access to resources and successful migration means that this study is unable to account for the experiences of those without digital means or expansive network capital to facilitate their journey.

Issuing a call for participation (see Appendix D) through Facebook also presented a

further, unforeseen obstacle. Refugee Start Force is a highly popular online group, and especially as Syrian refugees in the Netherlands are often the subject of requests for information and research, it was imperative to post as concise a message as possible, stressing that further information would be sent in private to anyone interested in participating. This led to the study being misinterpreted by some users. Although the reaction to the call for participants was overwhelmingly positive and constructive, some members of the group took offence to what they perceived to be an attempt to study Syrians living in the Netherlands as if they were “aliens” who had never experienced mobile technology, and several negative comments were posted. This was an unforeseen by-product of attempting to source respondents outside of snowball sampling, where previous participants at least have the opportunity to introduce future participants to the topic first hand, and explain in detail what the project entails. In retrospect, more care should have been taken over the wording of the initial Facebook post, with greater awareness of the fact that the audience was completely unknown, and had no means of gauging the researcher’s intentions or background.

Aside from the study sample, the use of qualitative interviews also presents its own limitations and observations. In general, respondents seemed at ease in the interview setting and were prepared to divulge significant personal information about their feelings and private circumstances. Several reported after the interview that it had been a somewhat cathartic process for them to talk about their experiences in such detail. In practice, this sometimes resulted in the respondent wanting to focus on a particular example or experience that was of great emotional significance to them, most often during their journey to the Netherlands, and it was occasionally challenging to try and steer the conversation in the direction of the research question, or to encourage the respondent to move on to a new topic while they were visibly engrossed in a particular anecdote. The one Skype interview conducted provided an interesting contrast to the other conversations, as it was notably more difficult to interject or explore a sub-point in greater detail without being in the physical presence of the respondent.

Overall, this study provides a valuable insight into Syrian refugee mobile phone use in the Netherlands, and into the relationship between ICT and international migration. Future research could examine in greater detail the differences in mobile phone use between refugees who are pending an asylum decision and those who have received residence status, perhaps by conducting interviews among incoming refugees housed in asylum centres. It would also be particularly interesting to examine the centrality of a mobile phone to a refugee who speaks neither English or Dutch, especially as the majority of online services in the country are offered solely in these languages. It would be expected that translation applications would be fundamentally essential to the refugee’s everyday life in

this case. Finally, as the conflict in Syria continues, there is a need for future research to address the changing relationship between refugees and ICT over time, and whether they forge a greater dependency on mobile technology or otherwise as they live longer away from their relatives and create more lasting connections in the Netherlands. Two respondents with young families briefly mentioned the difficulties of attempting to return to Syria in years to come as their children become more engaged in Dutch society and education, and suggested the possibility of applying for permanent residency. The role of the mobile phone and particularly its facilitation of international communication would be of notable interest in this scenario, as it could no longer be seen as a short-term solution.

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## Appendices

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### **Appendix A: Interview questions template**

1. How long have you been in the Netherlands? What do you do here?
2. How did you travel from Syria to here? When did you leave Syria?
3. How did you use your mobile phone in Syria? Were they common/widespread throughout your social circle? Do you have the same phone now?
4. How did you use your mobile phone during your journey? What were the most useful/popular applications?
5. How do you use your mobile phone in the Netherlands? What specific services do you use a mobile phone for? What are the most popular applications?
6. Do you use other communication devices? For example a laptop, internet café, landline phone, post etc?
7. Practicalities: Do you back-up your phone? Has it ever broken down? Do you buy a new sim card per country?
8. Can you imagine conducting your journey 5, 10 or even 30 years ago?
9. Can you give an example of a time either in the Netherlands or after you left Syria where your phone was specifically useful? Can you give an example of a time when your phone let you down?
10. How do you use your phone to maintain/expand/create networks:
  - a) among family and friends in Syria
  - b) among family and friends in other countries
  - c) among new contacts in the Netherlands

## Appendix B: Demographics questionnaire for respondents

This is an optional questionnaire, you are free to answer as many, or none, of the questions below as you like.

For all questions, please leave **blank** if you would rather not give the information.

1. What is your gender?

---

2. What city/town are you originally from?

---

3. How old are you? (Exact age or range is fine)

---

4. When did you come to the Netherlands?

---

5. What is your marital status? (Please tick)

- a) Single, never married
- b) Married or living with partner
- c) Divorced
- d) Legally separated
- e) Geographically separated from partner/spouse due to leaving country of origin

6. What is your current employment status? (Please tick all that apply)

- a) Employed full time
- b) Employed part time
- c) Student
- d) Unemployed
- e) Spouse or Partner Employed
- f) Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. What was your occupation before coming to the Netherlands?

---

8. What is your occupation now?

---

9. What is your highest level of education?

- a) Completed high school
- b) Completed undergraduate university degree
- c) Completed advanced university degree
- d) Completed professional course
- e) Other \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C: Interview consent form**

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

Jonathan Tossell  
12D Anna Paulownastraat, Den Haag, 2518BE  
jonathantossell@gmail.com  
0623910521

### **DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to participate in a research study about Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, and their use of mobile phones. The purpose of the study is to understand the centrality of the mobile phone device to the user's wellbeing, and how it is used to maintain and create networks in Syria, the Netherlands, or elsewhere.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms,

- the questions of the interview will be related to your mobile phone use during your journey from Syria to the Netherlands, and how you use your mobile phone currently.

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

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

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

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, such as your Syrian home town or process of travel to the Netherlands, in the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified, by the use of pseudonyms in all references to your answers.

I will use the material from the interviews exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

### **TIME INVOLVEMENT**

Your participation in this study will take between 45 minutes and one hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

### **PAYMENTS**

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

### **PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS**

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

## **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS**

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Isabel Awad, Department of Media and Communication at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (Telephone: 010 408 8894, Email: awad@eshcc.eur.nl, Address: Woudestein, Van der Goot building, M8-12, P.O. Box 1738, NL-3000 DR, Rotterdam).

## **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.

I give consent to be audiotaped 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 D: Copy of Facebook call for participation**

*The following was posted on the discussion page of the “Refugee Start Force -West” public Facebook group on 17 May 2017:*

Hi all,

I am a master's student at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. I am doing my master's thesis on Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, and their use of mobile phones in their everyday lives.

I have already interviewed several participants around the country but I need a few more for my study. If any Syrian refugees - anywhere in the Netherlands - are interested in taking part in an interview or would like to know more, please send me a message to get in touch and I will be happy provide more details!

Many thanks,

Jonathan