

## New Media Presence in the Integration Process of Refugees in Istanbul\*

### İstanbul'daki Mültecilerin Entegrasyon Sürecinde Yeni Medyanın Varlığı

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#### Keywords:

Refugees,  
New Media,  
Social Media,  
Integration Process.

#### Abstract

With the advancement of new media applications and creative technologies aiming to help integration process of refugees in their newfound asylums, this article focuses on exploring the existing communicational habits of refugees in new media, and the possibilities that new media offer to ease their integration with the Turkish society in Istanbul. The study analyzes results drawn from in-depth interviews conducted with a varied group of refugees living in Istanbul, examining their interaction with new media concerning key aspects that aid their integration with the local community. Such aspects revolve around matters of personal rights, education, cultural identity, employment, and finding acceptance. Moreover, considering the technological potential offered by new media, this research contemplates the level of connection between the refugees and their home countries. The research presents a qualitative study of 8 refugees from Syria, Iran, and Afghanistan that are currently living in Istanbul. Apart from the interview with 8 refugees, within the scope of the study, Aline Joubert, the media relations coordinator of "Small Projects Istanbul" which is a non-governmental organization working for the benefit of refugees, was also interviewed. The purpose of the study is to investigate the communicational habits and the ways for new media usage of refugees throughout the process of integrating with the local society.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler:

Mülteciler,  
Yeni Medya,  
Sosyal Medya,  
Entegrasyon Süreci.

#### Öz

Bu makale, gelişen sosyal medya uygulamalarıyla ve yeni evlerinde bulunan mültecilerin entegrasyon sürecine yardımcı olmayı amaçlayan yaratıcı teknolojilerle, mültecilerin sosyal medyadaki iletişim alışkanlıklarını ve onların İstanbul'daki Türk toplumuyla olan entegrasyon sürecini kolaylaştırmak adına sosyal medyanın sunduğu olanakları tespit etmeye odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, İstanbul'da yaşayan çeşitli mülteci grupları ile yürütülen derinlemesine görüşmelerden elde edilen sonuçları analiz ederek, onların yerel toplulukla bütünleşmelerine yardımcı olan sosyal medyadaki etkileşimlerinin kilit yönlerini incelemektedir. Bunlar; kişisel haklar, eğitim, kültürel kimlik, istihdam ve kabul görme konuları etrafında şekillenmektedir. Sosyal medya tarafından sunulan teknolojik potansiyel göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, bu araştırma aynı zamanda mülteciler ile kendi ülkeleri arasındaki bağlantı düzeyini de dikkate almaktadır. Araştırma, şu anda İstanbul'da yaşayan Suriye, İran ve Afganistan'dan gelen 8 mülteci ile gerçekleştirilen niteliksel bir çalışma sunmaktadır. 8 mülteci ile gerçekleştirilen görüşmenin dışında, çalışma kapsamında, mültecilerin yararına çalışan bir sivil toplum örgütü olan "Small Projects Istanbul"un Medya İlişkileri Koordinatörü Aline Joubert'le de görüşülmüştür. Bu çalışmanın amacı, yerel toplumla bütünleşme sürecinde mültecilerin iletişim alışkanlıklarını ve sosyal medya kullanım biçimlerini araştırmaktır.

\*: Bu çalışma, 18-19 Ekim 2018 Uluslararası Dijital Çağda İletişim Sempozyumu'nda bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.

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Geliş Tarihi : 19.11.2018  
Kabul Tarihi : 08.10.2019

## Introduction

For the last three years, the public debate has been dominated by the issue of refugees, trying to make their way from areas of Middle East into Europe. Since the signing of the EU-Turkish agreement regarding refugees in March 2016, the majority of these individuals has been diverted to Turkey. The process of the rapid migration of refugees in such a short period of time and their efforts to hold on to new living space have led to serious integration problems in terms of both their own and the host local communities. While facing new challenges arriving from the integration process, cultural differences to the hosting society, and the search for a new identity, it is crucial to realize the importance of new media that plays an important role in their attempt to acclimatize. Interaction competence of the new media has the capacity to help refugees in their integration process. Local or national media gives a certain portrayal of refugees and their home countries. This portrayal can be manipulated in different ways by the reasons of national and international political concerns. Therefore, understanding media trends and the possibilities of new media are crucial in understanding a refugee's political and social perspective.

In a study of refugees especially related to Turkey, knowing the differences between the concepts of refugee, migrant and asylum-seekers are important. In international law, the term "refugee" refers to people who have been outside of the country of citizenship and forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Immigrants include individuals and family members who migrate to another country or region to improve their financial and social situation and to increase their future expectations for themselves. An asylum seeker is a person seeking international protection as a refugee, but whose status has not yet been officially recognized. This term is often used for those who are waiting for the application of refugee status to be settled by the government or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). According to these definitions, this migratory mobility corresponds to the problem of asylum-seeker in the beginning, then brings the problems that are shaped around the concepts of refugee and immigrants to mind. The process of integration is more meaningful in the stages of refugee and immigration.

As a concept, integration is turning into a matter of debate both in policy-making and in the academic field. Both policymakers and scholars are focusing on the role of the receiving society to ensure a higher level of integration of migrants. For some, the responsibility of the host community is much greater in the matter of integration (e.g. Penninx and Garcés Mascareñas, 2014).

The refugee crisis has become one of the major challenges of humanities in the 21st century. "An unprecedented 68.5 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 25.4 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18" (UNHCR-1, 2018). The majority of these refugees come from Syria, which is currently immersed in war. Most often, they seek protection in the neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. Only a small portion of them look for shelter

in other regions like Europe, North America, or Oceania.

Despite an already large intake of refugees by Turkey, since the beginning of Syrian war in March 2011 (Rodgers et al., 2016), the numbers grew faster and higher than ever, after the signing of the EU-Turkish agreement regarding refugees in March 2016. The deal sought to stem the flows of asylum-seekers and migrants crossing from Turkey's shores to the Greek islands (Leghtas, 2017) by monitoring the borders closer and returning refugees who had crossed over to Europe. This leads to a significant increase of refugees in Turkey, raising their number to over 3.3 million. (UNHCR-2, 2018).

Refugees who have come to Europe find themselves in a more or less accommodating environment, where governments, the European Union, non-profit organizations, and private initiatives strive to help them integrate with the local societies. Turkey, on the other hand, does not possess such large social capital devoted to refugees. Being the buffer zone between Europe and the conflicted areas of the Middle East forced Turkey to deal with more pressing problems, like guarding its borders and internal affairs. A lot is done to help accommodate refugees in Turkey, however, there is not enough effort to help them integrate and become a part of the society. Thus, refugees have to try other methods that will facilitate their everyday life within a new community.

Anthropologist, Professor James C. Scott from Yale University, has created a concept of weapons of the weak (2008). This entails that weaker elements of society are no longer powerless in the face of the system governing them. In the 21st century, a smartphone may be considered as such a weapon. With the advancement of new technologies, today's refugees have a way to face the struggles of escaping war and finding a new settlement. A film posted by BBC (BBC Media Action, 2016) shows how today's refugees are accompanied by their smartphones every step of the way, providing them information about their whereabouts, contact with family, feedback from other refugees, and international news. All of these help in guiding them out of their country and into a safe asylum. One could call such a model of present-day refugee, a 'smart refugee' because he is dependent on the use of modern technologies and new media. These come in extremely handy for refugees in Turkey, who have managed to flee their home countries and have found themselves in a new society.

Digital technology has the potential to transform the settlement of migrants in various areas of sociopolitical, economic and cultural integration (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). Namely, the communication technologies developed in social media allow this process to thrive. Here, three key points stand out: user-generated content, many-to-many communication (information posted here are often semi-publicly accessible), and the cheap, easily accessible and media-rich way of long-distance communication.

It is essential to realize the role of new media in communicational patterns. It may be possible that refugees might seek possibilities to help out the situation in their hometown or at least their families. Local media give a certain portrayal of refugees and their home countries, which can be manipulated in different ways. Therefore, understanding media trends and the communicated content is crucial in understanding a refugee's political and social perspective, often manifested in social media as an attempt to influence the

situation in people's hometown.

### **Integration Problems of Refugees in Turkey and New Media's Impact**

In recent years, the issue of immigration, immigrant, and refugee that has occupied the whole world's agenda, especially after the civil war that erupted in Syria in 2011 is an important topic of discussion also for Turkey. This wave of immigration brought many problems, especially economic ones. The justifications that Western countries propound against their strict immigration policies are shaped around the problems that refugees have experienced in their social acceptance and adaptation processes, in a word integration. Recommendations for the solution of similar problems also began to be raised and discussed in Turkey.

Syrian asylum seekers resided only in the border provinces and in the camps on their first days in Turkey, but they preferred to go out of the camps, as the duration of the civil war and the insufficiency of the camps. Increasing numbers of asylum seekers constantly demand to stay in the country in this process. So, it is estimated that they will not return to their country even if the civil war in Syria ends (as cited in Yıldırım et al., 2017).

Integration problems of refugees in the early days of the movement arise from two factors: themselves and the local people. Finding oneself in a foreign country different as culturally and lingually, after a hard journey to reach it, instills a level of fear in those people. Fear creates a barrier for them in approaching the newfound society and trying to integrate with it. Instead, refugees form themselves around their relatives in smaller communities in Turkey. Their fear of legal insecurity and of local citizens unwilling to help makes them distant from the Turkish society. Besides, Turkish locals who are not always open-minded and helpful as necessary to enhance the integration process are another major factor.

Social exclusion is one of the most important issues that complicate the lives of refugees (Bail, 2008), and the divergent features of refugees from host society cause them to be considered as 'others' and thus to consolidate their disadvantageous situations (Silver, 1995). In addition, the government instills certain images of refugees in the society through media and closely monitors them through police actions. By closing themselves to each other, due to fears and misunderstanding of each other's situation, the integration process becomes problematic.

According to the model proposed by multidimensional approaches to the integration process, initiatives that bring both locals and refugees together practically benefit. Integration should be considered as a two-way process characterized by the involvement of refugees and migrants as well as host societies in the adaptation of newcomers. In the projects carried out in this process, refugees, individuals of the host society, governments, and institutions should not be considered independent of each other (Avramov & Cliquet, 2005; Ager & Strang, 2004; Bommers & Morawska 2005; Zlotnik, 1990).

Alencar (2018) reminds especially the responsibilities of refugees and host society members towards each other in the integration process. She claims that both refugees and

host society members play a crucial role in making sure that refugees have access to jobs, education, housing, healthcare, culture and language and that they feel part of the new environment, instead of problematizing refugees.

Social networking initiatives designed for the integration of refugees are increasingly turning to social media (Dekker et al., 2016). Thanks to new applications, many refugees can access information through social media. New technologies have high potential to distribute the information about rights, citizenship, and local migrant support services. Also, it can help overcome feelings of isolation by making information available to migrants in their own languages as well as cultural practices of both their home and new destination countries (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

However, the role of social media posts is also important in the integration process. Even if the content on a social media page is created by any institution, users' comments on this content directly affect and increase the number of people who reach the content (Türk, 2018: 178). Social networking pages or groups established and managed by refugees emerge as much more supportive components in the integration process by strengthening the interaction between them.

As such, social media is not directly a tool to facilitate integration, but rather a way to gather necessary information that would help them settle and accommodate their needs.

At this point, the concept of interaction should be mentioned. The interaction that supports and enriches the circular structure of communication is explained by technological systems, user perception and the structure of the process. Interaction, as a structure of technological systems, is approached according to time of the system's response to the user, while the user's perception is the compatibility of user with the technological systems. Responsiveness and interchange concepts are important in the structure of the process (McMillan&Hwang, 2002; Rafaeli & Ariel, 2007; Quiring, 2009). The interactive structure of new media minimizes communication barriers that are problematic for refugees.

The interactive nature of new media that brings individuals, groups, communities together links up many different applications and topics with different types of people. Social media combines and transforms different mediums from one another and integrates with the user. It incorporates different forms of communication in different scales (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media can also be an important tool for democratic civic engagement. However, the extent of this participation may vary from country to country. Impact of social media will be different in developed countries with strong and democratic media and in countries where democracy is under pressure (Boulianne, 2019).

Refugees and migrants are mainly influenced by social media in ways of learning about the local community and possibilities that would help them organize life in the newfound society. 'Digital technology has the potential to transform the settlement of migrants in the various areas of sociopolitical, economic and cultural integration' (McGregor & Siegel, 2013). However, appropriate conditions must be provided for the refugees to utilize this potential. Otherwise, refugees will remain vulnerable groups that

will be most dramatically affected by the digital divide.

In terms of access to information and communication technologies, the problem of access created by inequalities between countries and within the same country is expressed with the concept of the digital divide and contains elements beyond access to technology. The problem of access to technology is not only a problem among underdeveloped or developing countries. Digital divide occurs in different ways, between countries, between different segments and social classes within the same country, and culturally. The opportunity of access to internet technologies varies according to many factors such as education level, geographical position, gender, age, race, and income level (Baştürk Akça ve Kaya, 2016: 304-307). It is clear that a country's unequal access conditions, which may affect even its own citizens, will deeply affect refugees benefiting from restrictive rights.

For migrants, social media offer a relatively cheap, easily accessible, and media-rich way of long-distance communication (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Social media have become an indispensable source of information for today's refugees. They often access social media and other types of online information through smartphones (Dekker et al. 2018: 9). The number of academic studies highlighting the importance of using the smartphone and social media by refugees in the integration process has significantly increased (see Emmer et al., 2016; Dekker et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016; Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017).

In a study trying to explore social representations of social media users toward Syrian refugees in Turkey, 98 entries acquired from the frequently used social dictionaries in Turkey were examined. As a result of this study, it was determined that social representations for Syrian refugees are mostly negative and that refugees are perceived as a threat to the future, economy, peace and social structure (Özdemir and Öner-Özkan, 2016).

Also in Turkey, as a result of the examination of news between 2011 and 2017 about Syrian refugees in 3 mass newspapers; it has been found that refugees are represented through problematic, discriminatory and othering discourses on issues such as economy, education, language, health, legal regulations, social cohesion in proportion to the period of their stay in Turkey (Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017).

The stronger and healthier the social ties that are established in the integration process, the more their linguistic competence of refugees, competencies in economic life, family ties, cultural needs and their ability for survival will be strong and healthy.

### **Research Questions**

Throughout the conducted research, there are three questions that stand out guiding the direction of the study. Firstly, it is important to discover what kind of opportunities do new technologies and media offer to the refugees to enhance the integration process in the newfound society. In order to find and understand these opportunities, one needs to search

for and analyze specific social media groups that might provide essential information about job offers, language courses, cultural events, material aid and so forth for refugees. Exploring new media in this manner gives a refugee's perspective on the availability of valuable information. It shows how a communication network is formed around problems of people who had to escape their homes and look for safe asylum elsewhere. Examining the used language also shows their attitude towards the local community.

The other question is how do refugees communicate between one-another. This matter requires investigating to help comprehend not only the integration with locals but with other refugees as well. It is important to see how do refugees find support in the country of asylum. The help of the local society is an important factor, but a lot depends on inter-refugee communication. People trying to settle in a new reality need help of the surrounding to fit in their new place in the local community. It is, however, easier to find such places amongst other refugees who have arrived earlier and may provide basic information on how to start a new life. Investigating the communicational patterns between settled refugees and newcomers should provide information on the role that new media communication plays between themselves and in facilitating their process of integrating.

The final question moves away from the refugees and focuses on the local society. There is a need to show a different angle and perspective, by showing the reactions of the locals towards the subject of refugees. The question is, how are refugees portrayed in local media, but also, how do locals portray them in their private encounters in social media? Is the subject spoken of at all, and if it is, are the citizens opposed or open to helping newcomers? By talking to refugees, the research works to show their impressions in the local online contents and how do they perceive their portrayal by locals.

### **Purpose and Importance**

The purpose of this study is to explore how global trends in new media are incorporated into the everyday lives of refugees in Turkey and how new media helps refugees to integrate into the new society. Also, this study aims to investigate the communicational patterns in new media regarding refugees in Turkey. Although there are some studies about the integration process of refugees and the effect of social media, this topic is still widely unexplored. As such, we do not possess information on a larger scale of the causes and effects of the refugees' new media use. Studying this subject on smaller scales (see Alencar, 2018) will provide data that will help governments and civilians to ease the refugees' integration process, which is heavily related to new media, in particular social media. Seeing how Turkey is now at the heart of the refugee crisis, every day taking in more refugees than any European country, this study is important because it could provide different information on the situation, to what it is in Europe. On top of everything, this study seeks to understand the role that new media plays in the integration process of refugees in Turkey, and so, could be important in helping to improve this system.

## Method

Listening to different experiences of people called ‘refugees’, helps in creating a wider spectrum of struggles that this whole group endures. To see how the group integrates into a new society, it is crucial to analyze individual approaches towards integration. Thus, this study is based on in-depth interviews. The in-depth interview technique carried out within the method of this study is a “qualitative data collection method that offers the opportunity to capture rich, descriptive data about people’s behaviors, attitudes and perceptions, and unfolding complex processes” (B2B International, 2018).

The interviews with refugees were carried out face to face, allowing the interviewees’ input and notes on the study. The real presence of the interviewer and interviewees, their eye-to-eye conversation open more communicational opportunities, which in effect grant more data values to the research. It is so because both communicators experience and express their emotions and body language. Also, interviews with refugees were conducted in Turkish and English languages, in a complementary way to each other.

The interviews were conducted and guided by a plan based on questions included in the questionnaire. This eased the process of acquiring information, as most questions were open ended, leaving the interviewee a lot of freedom. At the same time, it helped the interviewer to stick to a planned narrative. But, the interviewer could be flexible in this case and might change the narrative as the discussion unfolds. The objective was to dig as deep as possible to receive as much valuable information. The interviews were conducted with 8 refugees from Iran, Afghanistan and Syria, and also The Media Relations Coordinator Aline Joubert, from “Small Projects Istanbul”, a non-governmental organization working for the benefit of refugees.

## Comments and Findings

Data drawn from the conducted interviews shows that most of the interviewed refugees used their smartphones to gather information during the time of their migration. The rest used private computers.

User-generated content spreads a wide range of information that creates certain opportunities in the new media, to enhance the refugee’s integration process in the newfound society. This content is valuable because it draws on experiences of single individual users, which is publicly accessible, thus commented on and verified. Such feedback found in various social media presents the refugees in Turkey basic information about organizations and institutions willing to help. One of the refugees from Syria, Ahmed, interviewed for the purposes of this study said: “On my first day in Turkey I was helpless. I didn’t know anyone and had no real perspectives. I had to find a place to stay, buy some food, organize my first days here before I go to the offices and take care of all the paperwork. The worst thing was, I did not have too much money and did not know Turkish. So, I went to a restaurant where the workers allowed me to use WiFi for free. I logged on Facebook, found a group called ‘Refugees Resources Istanbul’ (see Refugees Resources Istanbul) and asked to join. Within minutes my invitation was accepted, and

in the next hour, I found people there who offered help with shelter and food. Later on, they gave me many helpful tips on how to stand on my own feet in Istanbul”. Again, from Syria, Yusuf conveyed a similar first-day story. He said, “On my first day in Turkey, one of the things I wanted most was to encounter a Turk who speaks my language. I had too many questions to ask. I could not remember any helper except for my mobile phone. I was a member of ‘Istanbul Helps IH’ (see Istanbul Helps IH) and ‘Hand in Hand’ (see Hand in Hand) groups which I found via Facebook on the first Wi-Fi connection that I found for free. My English was not good enough, so I benefited from the dictionaries, but once I see people in the same situation as me and the messages in our local language, the happiness I had was very big. I overcame with the help of the people I met in this group, from the top of many difficulties.” This shows how user-generated content is often the first connection between a refugee and the new reality they find themselves in. These are not governmental websites that a refugee would turn him or herself to, in order to find information that they are looking for. They draw from the experience of others, who share it online as verified users of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.

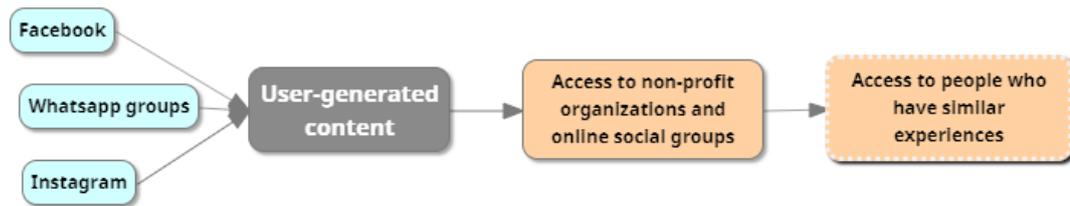


Figure 1: User-generated content and gains

Experience with user-generated contents brings up the next element of technological advancement in the area of new media communication and how it facilitates refugee integration. Many-to-many communication granted by online forums, groups, chats, and such allows faster access to more verified information. Individual users post contents that may direct a refugee to larger organizations. Non-profit organizations functioning in Turkey have their own pages where they share contents informing refugees about opportunities that can let them integrate better with the society. Refugees do not have difficulties in finding cheap or free Turkish language lessons, simple job possibilities, material help, and others thanks to publicly accessible opportunities. ‘Small Projects Istanbul’ is an important example of such an organization. Considering the information gathered from Aline Joubert, the media relations coordinator of the organization, we find out that the organization has three Facebook pages with over 10,000 followers, many of whom are refugees sharing information for newcomers about opportunities that will ease their process of integration. Aside from that, the organization has an Instagram account with over 2000 followers, where pictures are being posted to alert necessities needed at the moment, for refugees seeking help at the organization. This broadens the audience, Turkish locals and foreigners willing to help, giving them specific information about what the refugees require at the moment in terms of aiding their settlement. However, Joubert said, the posted contents are in English and do not aim to influence Turkish

audience directly. When asked the reason of this, she replied that it is mainly done to avoid local censorship and inspection of the government. She added that “most of the refugees seeking help at the organization are invited to the WhatsApp group, which has now over 150 users. There, seeing that the messages are secured, is safer to share contents regarding help for refugees. A person shared a link to a free application that teaches the Turkish language to foreigners. Someone else said he is looking for employees in his restaurant. A woman wrote she needs a set of clothing for her newborn child and found other mothers who gave her their children’s old clothes” said Joubert. This shows how many-to-many communication brings immediate solutions to refugee problems regarding their integration, without the necessity to reach out to the local government.

All this information, helpful users, friendly organizations, and in general people working to help to integrate the refugees in Turkey are available for them through cheap and easily accessible new media technologies compatible with smartphones. Those are very easy to get a hand on. Sahand from Iran said he came to Turkey to reunite with his sister, who came to Turkey a year earlier. Despite the fact that she could provide him with opportunity, he needed to find new friends, people from a similar background that he could relate to. He said “My sister took me to the Kurtuluş market where I bought a smartphone for only 20 Turkish Liras. After that, I searched on the internet for focus groups on my interests. It turned out there is a group for Iranian refugees and immigrants, where I have connected with one of my best friends now”, said Sahand. In these days, easy access to technology and new media allows refugees to find not only information but also a social group to share their experience, which is important in every human beings’ life. Also, as Sahand’s experience shows, integrating with other refugees already based in Turkey, opened further connections with their local Turkish friends, making it easier to integrate with the community.

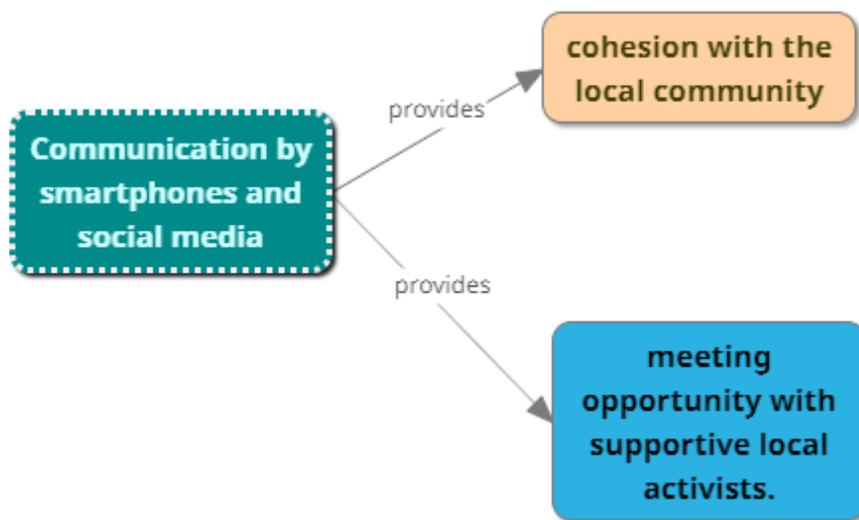


Figure 2: Possibilities offered by smart phone and social media

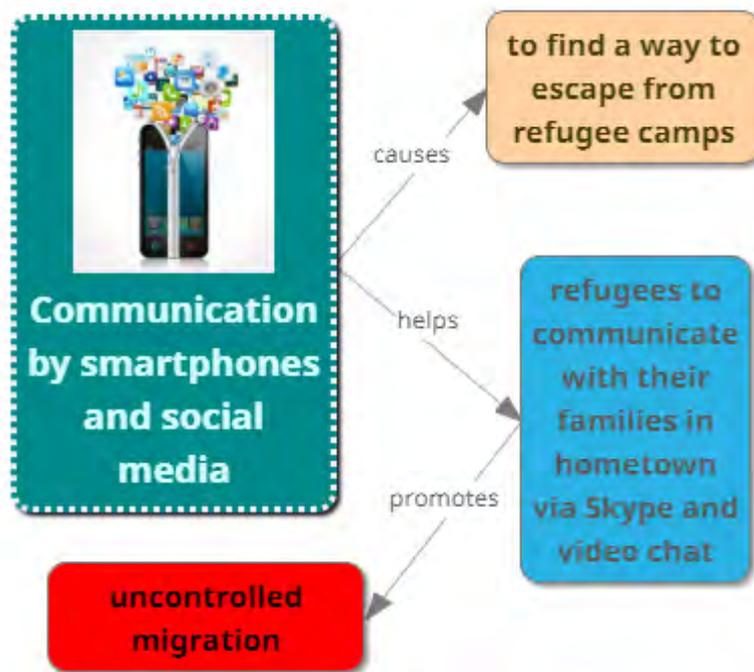
In another example, Zara who took refuge in Turkey with her family, fleeing from the civil war in Syria, said that today one of her best friends is Turk and the relationships she has established through social media are very important for her. She said, “We came to Turkey with my mother, father, and little sister. We had no relatives here, and my father had no idea at the beginning on how to evaluate their savings from Syria in Turkey. We needed people from the local community to lead us, but we did not know what to do about how to reach them from the right channel. I was a university student in Syria, and I could write and speak English at the medium level. We had fears that the local people had too much prejudice against us, and how their attitude towards us would be in an in-depth communication. Since social media has reduced the risks of face-to-face communication and has given people the opportunity to express themselves better, I found myself writing in the refugee groups where there were local people who were there to help them and other refugees who had come to the country before us right after a short search on Facebook. Today, one of my best friends, a university student, İdil is one of the volunteer supporters working as a human rights activist in those groups. Her helpfulness and interest were the beginning of our clinging struggle in Turkey.” Zara’s experience also shows that social media is one of the first and most effective ways to connect with local people.

Jamal from Syria said when he first came to Turkey, stayed in the camps in Hatay, but planned to go to Istanbul due to the conditions not being good enough as he wanted. He said, “Being in a camp made me feel that I did not belong to any place at all and this situation was like permanent. Since I knew that I would not be able to return to Syria in the near future, I wanted to settle up as soon as possible, and it was only possible outside the camp. Some of the locals whom I asked for help did not give me exact information, and they were not so friendly. I did not have a mobile phone, but I had a Facebook account that I used in my hometown. I sometimes used the phone of my camp friend to access the refugee groups on Facebook. I had been in contact with other Syrians who had been able to find work and places to stay in Istanbul and asked for help from them. Thanks to my Syrian fellows, I managed to go to Istanbul, but it did not take long to see that the conditions were also difficult here.

On the other hand, the communication habits are not only concerned with inter-refugee communication in Turkey, but the communication between the refugees and the home they left behind is also of great importance. Being in touch with family, being able to share the experience and one’s position help to eliminate the stress posed by the situation on both sides. Elahe from Afghanistan said during the interview: “I don’t know if I would have survived the separation with my family. Thankfully, there is the internet and Skype. In moments of greatest struggle, when I feel alone and sad, I know, that my mom is only one phone call away. She would be happy to know that I am safe, and I would be happy to hear her comforting voice.”

İskender who came to Turkey from Syria with his wife said that he had to work at first at the local barber shops at a very low price to maintain his barbering profession. He said, “I came to Turkey with my wife. My mother, father, and little sister were living in a rural area less affected by the war close to Damascus in Syria. Even if they were in a relatively safe area, I convinced them they should come here and settle, talking via

Skype with them frequently. I had to open a barbershop for myself, and the capital needed for it would only be possible with the support of my father. Almost in every video chat, I showed my mother and father the best views of the city in order to convince them how safe and beautiful it is.” Azze who had to take refuge in Turkey with her husband, separating from her family and social environment, also said that without the possibility of video calls and social media, at her first days in Turkey, she would not have preserved her sanity as it is now. She said, “During my first days in Turkey, by making video calls with my mother and sister constantly, I wanted to see that they were fine. Also, my interest in my friends on social media was much more than before when I came here. As long as I did not chat with them, I felt as if I had been abandoned. I was reluctant to make friends in the local community for a long time because I could not speak Turkish. As a result of the information I got again through social media, I learned that there are free Turkish courses and started to join them. Beginning to learn Turkish encouraged me to make friends from the local community.”



**Figure 3: Possibilities and issues caused by smart phone and social media**

However, this model is not so common. Mainly because refugees, in their communication with their home country, spend more time advertising ‘escape’<sup>1</sup>, rather than reassuring about its temporary character. This is a big problem for countries like Turkey, facing an inflow of refugees. The ones that come often invite new ones, members of their families, by advertising the good living they found abroad. In that sense, the status of the newcomers becomes less obvious. In this case, the questions such as ‘Are they

<sup>1</sup> Escape is a technique of advertising.

refugees?’ and ‘Should they be helped in integrating?’ come to mind.



Figure 4: The common problems of refugees



Figure 5: Administrative problems arising from social media

After all, one of the most important pillars of the integration process is the locals. They know the language, culture, and habits. If anyone has a say about the levels of progress in integrating refugees, it is them. For the purpose of this research, we have monitored public Facebook accounts and searched for contents regarding refugees. It seems that although Turkey is struggling with this issue, it is not really present in public debate. Turkish students from Istanbul University, who were interviewed, said they do not concern themselves with the topic so much. From the social media, we learned that there is not much debate going on. It is not like in Europe where there are xenophobes and nationalists, raging against pro-refugee movements. Here in Turkey, the topic is mildly spoken of. The statuses spoken about refugees are usually positive, and the local people generally want to help their integration process. These are however rare and do not point to general tendencies. A considerable number of locals seem to have avoided this issue.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the conducted research focuses on levels of improving the system of integrating refugees through social media with the society of their newfound asylum. Because new media is a relatively modern creation, it is hard to reach for examples of such integration in the past, in order to arrive and compare to better solutions. Even in the academic sources, there are few articles that treat on the subject

of integrating peoples through social media. With such limited information and narrow scientific data, it is hard to find better ways of integrating refugees in this manner.

When it comes to new media communication between the refugees and their families and friends, the information is very limited. At this point, the language barrier is a major problem. Obstacles related to common language emerges as a significant barrier in both reaching tangible data and in the efforts of refugees to integrate with the local community. In addition to the communication power of social media, it has the feature of always and everywhere reachable. At the same time, it is usually the first reference source in the new country of a refugee. For this reason, various initiatives through social media both in the form of announcements and language learning should be supported.

It is assumed that social media would serve as a tool to keep in touch and exchange personal information between two people. Instead, this research shows that refugees use online communication to encourage their close ones to leave their country and join them as well. This leads to a faster growth of refugees fleeing to foreign countries, resulting in deepening the issue of their integration. Refugees prefer to create their own communities in the country of their asylum, rather than attempt to integrate with the locals or to return hometown. This model of communication creates a negative atmosphere between the refugees and local society, with the latter's fear of a larger growth of the refugee population in the country.

Refugees use social media and new media, in general, to accommodate themselves in the new reality. They do not strive to use the given technology to infiltrate the local community. Rather than that, they contact foreign organizations and other refugees, who have moved to Turkey earlier, to find their place in the society. This leads to creating small, closed groups of refugees in Turkey, which are reluctant to communicate and coexist with Turkish citizens. As a result, it creates tensions between the two groups, spreading negative emotions towards each other.

During the integration process, the fears and concerns of refugees about building relationships with the local community are explicit. The voluntary participation of the individuals of the local community is manifested only within the framework of non-governmental organizations. In many stories outside the scope of this research, it is necessary not to ignore the individual efforts of the local community's individuals in the integration process. However, the first places that refugees seek help are civil society networks and volunteers there through social media. This research is a demonstration of existing techniques for integrating refugees in Turkey through new media. However, it also clearly shows how without the will of individual refugees and openness of the Turkish society, these techniques are limited to accommodating refugees in their new life in Turkey, rather than integrating them with its society.

Integrating with the local society is related to the psychological comfort of a refugee (to the extent that it is actually possible). Modern day technology combined with social media allows to eliminate the psychological costs of migration. First of all, refugees are able to find support and a new, friendly community amongst the refugees already based in Turkey. Social networks inform about meeting places, neighborhoods, and events where

people from Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, or other countries may find their fellow nationals. This is important to keep up the one's spirit. Refugees, as the name indicates, have been forced out of their country. Many of them did not want to leave in the first place. They are not economic migrants looking for social benefits and such. Thus, a lot of them think of returning to their home countries. Keeping in touch with their relatives here in Turkey, helps them maintain their identity, language, and culture.

Finally, it is important to mention that refugees themselves are reluctant to talk to locals. Even for the purpose of this study, it was hard to gather concrete data, because majority of the interviewed people had withheld certain valuable information in fear. Refugees often feared that the local police were seeking reasons to prosecute them or send them back to their country. This fear often moves on to the whole of Turkish society, making it harder to incorporate integration techniques into online communication.

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