

Ethnographic Study of Facebook Usage among the Persian and Arabic-Speaking Refugees and Asylum seekers in Asylum Center in Utrecht



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ABSTRACT

This research project studies the perception of Facebook ethnic spaces among a sample group of refugees and asylum seekers, who are residents of the asylum center in Utrecht, the Netherlands. I have conducted this ethnographic research project to investigate and report the experiences of refugees in using Facebook groups and pages which are made and run by refugees in their own languages. These ethnic spaces within Facebook, arguably inform refugees about the host society and are spaces of language learning, sharing experiences and finding new friends. Based on the characteristics of such spaces, this research considers them as a type of ethnic media. It is reported by the interviewees that these ethnic spaces, enhance collective learning which can contribute to what academically is known as the social capital. After briefly addressing the current Dutch asylum process and efforts to help refugees learn the Dutch language, this research explains the findings through interviews with a sample group of refugees and asylum seekers in the AZC Utrecht. For this project, 15 people were interviewed in their residence or public places in the city. They are from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The findings of this research indicate that all of the interviewed Persian and Arabic-speaking refugees have memberships in at least one ethnic space within Facebook. They use these spaces for gaining and sharing information about the host society, learning Dutch, reading news about the Netherlands, and to learn about activities for refugees offered by local organizations, as well as making new connections.

Keywords: Refugees, Facebook, Ethnic media, Social Capital, ethnography.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This study attempts to further clarify academic understanding of refugee`s experiences in using Facebook ethnic spaces, by looking at the perceptions and self-reports of a sample group of residents of AZC Utrecht. Therefore, I visited the asylum seekers center, which is also known as the camp Utrecht. My focus in this study is to collect and report the residents` perceptions in using Facebook and the relation of the reports with academic debates, especially on the notions of social capital and ethnic media. To do that, I went back to AZC.

As I was looking for Ahmad`s room, I had to walk through the long and seemingly never-ending hallway of the asylum-seekers` center in Utrecht (In Dutch: Asiel Zoekers Centrum or AZC). Very soon I realized that not so many things had changed during the four years ago when I was living there: Not the boring drawings on the wall, not the order of the rooms, nor the smells. The heavy smells mostly come from the left. Most of the residential rooms are located on the right-hand side while the public kitchens and laundry rooms are on the left. Residents of the smaller rooms share these public kitchens while private rooms, which are given to families, have their own kitchen, toilet, and small bath. Yes, smells come from the kitchens. In fact, kitchens in the AZC are a showcase of culture and diversity. One could guess the nationality of people from the aroma of their food: spices, curry, and fish. So while walking to Ahmad`s room, I was playing the same old game, trying to guess where they are from by the odor of their food. It was almost dinner time, so many people were busy in the kitchens. Therefore, out of curiosity, along my way, I stopped at and looked into every kitchen searching for familiar faces. People were so busy that they hardly noticed me, but I noticed the heavy presence of some languages, Arabic, Tigrinya, and Persian, not just because they were speaking those languages, but also because they were playing some loud music on their smartphones while cooking and chatting in the kitchens. Then I realized that it is a sign of connectivity. Now they have access to wireless internet, so they can play music directly from the internet, which four years ago was only a dream for me. Thus, Ahmad is well connected.

A few days ago, I met Ahmad in the center and made an appointment with him to talk in his room. He is 25, originally from Afghanistan and new to the Netherlands. In 2015 he left Iran, where he was born and raised by his Afghan parents, who were themselves refugees in Iran, but due to regulations in this country, he was not able to become a citizen and enjoy equal rights. Thus he decided to leave Iran for a better future in Europe, and unable to get proper travel documents, he had to cross the border to go to Turkey, and from Turkey, he had to make another dangerous boat trip to Greece. Finally, after entering the Netherlands, his friends helped him to go to Ter Apel, where the largest refugee facilities of the Netherlands are located. He was first registered by the Dutch police who also took his fingerprints. It was followed by medical checks and

interviews. During the interviews, in two different sessions, employees of the Dutch immigration service (IND) asked him how he got here and why he had to leave his home country. He had access to a lawyer and was provided with a warm meal in this center. Later, he was transferred to the AZC Utrecht. Here he receives about 60 euro per week, so he can buy ingredients and cook for himself. He lives with a group of other young Afghans, and they usually shop and cook together. He has also saved enough money to buy a smartphone, which according to him and many other refugees is an essential tool in the asylum seekers center. In the AZC he is able to use a PC for about an hour a day. However, now that he has a smartphone, he is also able to use internet 24/7. After entering his room, he offered me a cup of tea, which is the most common way of welcoming a guest in countries like Iran and Afghanistan. As I noticed, even when he was preparing the tea and talking to me, still he was checking his Facebook status.

There are many people like Ahmad who are currently living in asylum centers across the Netherlands. In fact, the Netherlands is a prominent country in receiving and hosting refugees. According to the website of the COA (Central Agency for reception and accommodation of Asylum seekers in the Netherlands in Dutch: Centraal Opvang Asielzoekers), there are currently 28,629 individuals living in asylum centers across the country. Among them are 11,000 people who have already received the permission to stay and live in the Netherlands as refugees.¹ The Dutch immigration service states that in 2015, 57,000 individuals applied for asylum in the Netherlands and approximately 14,000 family members joined them as a part of the family reunification program.² As a consequence of the wave of immigration, discourses of migration and integration have become some of the most contested and debated issues pertaining to refugees, in the media and politics. As an example, researchers like Mc Gregor and Siegel discuss that media, in general, can have an educative role for refugees. In their article “Social Media and Migration Research,” they assert:

It is possible that social media can assist in the integration. There are a Plethora of online forums, Facebook Groups, Twitter feeds and blogs that can provide both official information by governments such as US Citizenship and Immigration services, or local migrant support services (Mc Gregor and Siegel 2013, 10).

While they acknowledge the important educational role of Facebook for refugees, by emphasizing platforms constituted by the government and non-profit organizations, the role of Facebook spaces made by refugees and for refugees is still absent.

¹ Coa.nl

² Ind.nl

Therefore, in order to shed more light on these discourses and debates, this research strives to study the perception of social media among refugees and asylum seekers in the Netherlands. Thus the research question is how a sample group of refugees and asylum seekers in AZC Utrecht report about and describe their experiences with Facebook ethnic spaces. The sub questions of this research are, how their experience with Facebook ethnic spaces suggest the existing literature about ethnic media in learning Dutch, and broadening their networks, and how their descriptions and perceptions on sharing experiences, accessing news and information reflect upon the academic debates on increasing social capital.

Several aspects of the role of internet and new media for minorities and ethnic groups have been academically discussed. For example Daniel Miller and Don Slater in their article “The Internet An Ethnographic Approach” (2001) discuss why the internet is a way for ethnic minorities to have a presence in global media. The article also argues that minorities use the internet to express their identity and as a means of communication. While this research focuses on minorities` self-reports on using internet for purposes such as sharing information, learning from each other and making new connections.

For this project, I interviewed 15 individuals currently living in the Utrecht asylum center. They are refugees (Statushouders), who have obtained permission to stay or asylum seekers still in the process of asylum. These individuals are Persian-speaking people from Iran and Afghanistan as well as Arabic-speakers from Iraq and Syria. During the interviews, this sample of Persian and Arabic-speaking refugees in the Netherlands have argued that they use Facebook in several ways such as communicating, sharing experiences, garnering news and information about their new society, and finding answers about the social life questions in the Netherlands.

Thus considering the perception of interviewees who are residents of AZC Utrecht, I have concluded that this sample group has four approaches in using Facebook spaces. These spaces are mainly made and run by other refugees, in relation to learning about the host society, and they might be associated with opportunities to gain social capital. The interviewees reported that they use Facebook groups and pages to share the experience with each other, learn the Dutch language, access the news about the Netherlands and to make new connections. Furthermore, I argued that what refugees describe as using experiences of other refugees and learning from them, can be evaluated in the framework of what is academically described as social capital.

The same concept, the role of new media in assisting a diaspora in their new environment, has been academically emphasized by researchers like Nelly Elias of the University of Ben Gorion Israel in her research on new immigrants from former soviet countries (Elias and Lemish 2009). Similarly, Rianne Dekker and

Godfried Engbersen (2012) assert that “new media gives a rich source of unofficial insider knowledge on migration” (Dekker and Engbersen 2012, 401). However, it should be mentioned that researchers like Lee Komito of the University of Dublin, argue that social media usage by refugees can have a negative effect on their education, language learning, and integration. He believes that social networking would serve as an ‘emotional buffer’, which will lead to a decrease in motivations to integrate (Komito, 2011). While in contrast, the interviewees of this research argue that Facebook ethnic spaces can assist them in learning about their new society.

In the following section, the academic positioning of this research is discussed. After that, the theoretical framework including the concepts of ethnic media and social capital and their importance in this research are discussed. These concepts are emphasized by researchers such as Barbara Lasticova, investigating the role of new media used by the Slovak migrants in the UK. She argues that new media contribute to an increase in social capital of immigrants (Lasticova 2014). Following that is the methodology of the ethnographic research in which details of interviews are shown. After methodology, the findings of this research are discussed in detail, and finally, the conclusion is made. As it will be discussed, the sample group uses Facebook ethnic spaces to share information, learn the language, read news and broaden their network.

ACADEMIC POSITIONING

Based on the experiences of interviewees, the findings of this research indicate that some refugees in the Netherlands have formed their own social platforms or ethnic spaces on Facebook for the purpose of communicating with each other, sharing experiences, and learning about aspects of life in the Netherlands, including the language. Therefore, this research is academically important since few studies address the self-reports, perceptions, and feelings of the refugees themselves regarding using internet and social media. In fact, the perceptions, experiences and description of such refugee groups have been absent or summoned less attention in the academic literature.

According to interviewees of this research, the spaces of Facebook are multifunctional spaces for them. They argue that these are spaces of sharing information between refugees. Arguably sharing information via these platforms can empower refugees. Similarly, the phenomenon of creation and popularity of these Facebook spaces is absent from the research of Elias and Lemish, while they only focus on Russian websites for migrants in Israel (2009). Some other researchers have even claimed that social media does not seem to play a crucial role in the education of migrants. In her research on Slovak migrants in the UK, Barbara Lasticova of the Slovak Academy of Science asserts that “Facebook is

used for sharing emotions rather than to build a community and share practical information” (Lasticova 2014, 406). Similarly, as mentioned before, researchers like Lee Komito, oppose the idea that social media can help refugees, claiming that “social networking can act as an ‘emotional buffer’, decreasing motivations to integrate” (McGregor and Siegel 2013, 9). In contrast, the arguments of participants of this research indicate that the sample group uses such ethnic social networks to facilitate education and networking. Findings also indicate that refugees have shaped groups to share experiences. Therefore, this research is an attempt to provide a better understanding of refugees’ experiences with ethnic spaces of Facebook. Moreover, based on perceptions and description of interviewees, the research aims to study the relation of refugees’ experiences with academic debates on social capital. The research wishes to raise further debates on new forms of ethnic media by arguing that ethnic Facebook groups and pages should be also considered as new forms of ethnic media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the academic findings of the concepts of social capital and ethnic media are discussed. This research project argues that the Facebook spaces are new forms of ethnic media which help refugees to share information, learn more about their new country and build new networks. These spaces are mainly made and run by refugees and as reported by individuals in this sample group can, in academic terms, increase social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

The interviewees described how important it is to be connected to other people and local communities. All interviewees stated that connecting with other refugees has contribute to their learning or success in a new society. They mentioned concrete examples of finding a job, getting A driver's license, and applying for social benefits. This concept is academically known as social capital.

For example, Ahmad explained to me that his friends in the Netherlands have been very important to him. They helped him in the process of applying for a refugee status, information about the process and how to deal with the stress during the process. After he was transferred to the AZC Utrecht, he had to begin forming a new network. He says, “Although I had money, I didn’t know where to go to buy food and what food to buy” In fact, other interviewees have also emphasized on the importance of a social network, which assists them by offering answers to different daily problems. It should be considered that most refugees do

not speak English or Dutch. Thus such networks are essential in the life of a refugee in a new country, especially in building social capital.

Ethnic spaces on Facebook provide vital information and answers to the issues and questions in the life of migrants by other members of the network. This information can contribute to the notion of social capital. “Social capital broadly refers to the resources accumulated through the relationships among people” (Ellison et al. 2007, 1145). Adler & Kwon assert that social capital “Has been linked to a variety of positive social outcomes, such as better public health, lower crime rates, and more efficient financial markets.” (Adler & Kwon 2002) Although social capital may also be used for negative reasons, but generally, the notion is considered as “a positive effect of interaction among participants in a social network” (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). According to Ellison et al, “computer-mediated interactions have had positive effects on community interaction, involvement, and social capital” (Ellison et al. 2007, 1146). Ellison et al also emphasize that, “It is clear that the Internet facilitates new connections, in that it provides people with an alternative way to connect with others who share their interests or relational goals. These new connections may result in an increase in social capital” (Ellison et al. 2007). Additionally, findings of Lasticova in her research on the Slovak diaspora in the UK confirms that community building on Facebook and “Sharing practical information (housing, jobs, services, cultural, and sport events” contributes to social capital.

Similar to the findings of Lasticova, findings of this research also indicate that refugees use Facebook to connect and reconnect. I have found that via Facebook groups, the sample shares experiences with their connections and learn how to deal with obstacles of life in the new society. As one of the interviewees mentioned, “Facebook helped me to use the experiences of many other people in one place.” This confirms the argument of Pamela Paxton in her article, “Is Social Capital Declining in the United States?” (1999) She explains personal achievements by social capital as, “For individuals, social capital allows a person to draw on resources from other members of the networks to which he or she belongs. These resources can take the form of useful information, personal relationships, or the capacity to organize groups” (Paxton 1999). Therefore, it can be claimed that refugees’ Facebook spaces have a crucial role in increasing the social capital of the members.

ETHNIC MEDIA AND THEIR ROLE FOR REFUGEES

The ability of participants in the sample to increase the social capital via the online spaces can be severely limited by language, the type, and topics of information and content available in the mainstream forms of media. As a result, it is the ethnic and linguistic character of the spaces that makes them very

important for refugees. Therefore, it can be claimed that these ethnic media forms which enhance accessibility of the refugees to the media content. This accessibility in return can associate with gaining social capital for refugees.

The participants in this research have emphasized a growing interest in using the ethnic spaces in Facebook. It is mainly argued by interviewees that the need for more information about the host society and the absence of necessary language skills are the most important motivations to use such platforms. Also, a large majority of the individuals who participated in this research have emphasized that these spaces are their main source of information and news about the Netherlands. Furthermore, they have called these spaces the most relevant available sources for learning Dutch or making new connections.

Nevertheless, a review of the literature on the popularity of diasporic new media can explain discussions on the popularity of ethnic Facebook pages and groups and motivations of diasporic groups to visit them and seek their membership. This phenomenon has developed an academic interest. For example, Karim Karim, in his article “From Ethnic Media to Global Media” (1998) argues:

“Global migration trends have produced transnational groups related by culture, ethnicity, language, and religion. Whereas members of some of these groups had generally operated small media (weekly newspapers, magazines, radio and television programming) to meet the information and entertainment needs of their communities, the emergence of digital technologies is enabling them to expand such communication activities” (Karim 1998, 1).

Karim’s arguments have can also be correct in the Netherlands too. During this research, I have identified and reviewed several Persian and Arabic online websites, blogs and YouTube Channels which perform as new ethnic media for refugees in the Netherlands (Appendix). As other researchers also indicate, the new ethnic media platforms are in types of weblogs, websites, and social networking groups using social media platforms (Elias and Lemish 2009). My interviewees also asserted a huge interest in all forms of new media platforms for newcomers, especially those which are made by refugees themselves. McGregor and Siegel believe that one of the reasons of the popularity is the fact that such platforms are now easy to make. “The shift to Web 2.0 has also influenced diaspora communities with an expansion of websites run by individuals without specific IT expertise alongside social networking platforms that greatly enhanced the opportunities available to migrant communities to organize online” (McGregor and Siegel 2013). It is also observed that such platforms are enhanced with a Facebook page which promotes their material and can be seen as the main point of entry to the website. As one of the blog editors interviewed for this research said, “More than 80 percent of our visitors come from Facebook; it is the

most popular social media for refugees and they reach us from Facebook. So whenever we publish a new post on the site, we share it on Facebook page too.”

Other research projects have shown a growing popularity of ethnic media. For example, the Dutch researcher Stefan Meulenstein has indicated in a report that, “the number and reach of (particularly print) media produced by and for minority groups has been growing steadily, especially in the period between 1999 and 2003” (Meulenstein 2003). While the popularity of such minority media is contested. Some researchers believe that this popularity is an “expression of increasing worldwide migration patterns to these countries (Georgiou 2005). While researchers like Mark Deuze of University of Amsterdam, argue that popularity of such (news) platforms should be seen in a wider global context, for example in the contexts of global communications and the fact that minority media are mainly absent from “mainstream journalistic practice emerging both online, and offline” (Deuze 2006, 263); a fact that has motivated minority activists in creating their own media. Deuze also asserts that ethnic media has been coined as community media (Jankowski and Prehn 2002), we media (Bowman and Willis 2003), citizen’s media (Rodriguez 2001), and grassroots journalism (Gillmor 2004).

Considering the nature of this research, which is also intended to provide a better understanding of education for refugees, it should be mentioned that previous research has demonstrated that social media is a useful way of delivering information about the host country to migrants and can assist them in their integration (Hwang & He 1999; Walker, 1999). In addition, a recent policy brief highlights the potential role of IT in helping migrant families overcome feelings of isolation when they first arrive in a country by making information available to new migrants (often in their own language); allowing the exploration of migrants’ own cultural heritage as well as the cultural practices of the destination country; providing learning and training opportunities particularly in the area of language acquisition; and promoting integration into schools for young immigrants by providing inroads into social networks and promoting language acquisition (Redecker, Hache and Centeno 2010). Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the role of ethnic media in supporting migrant communities have grown global interest in the role and functions of such media. For example, Ben Viccari, the dean of Canadian Ethnic Media, argues that “through the ethnic media, the newcomer can learn about Canadian culture, history, social services and a multitude of other things that can help him or her understand the privileges and the responsibilities inherent in Canadian citizenship” (Karim 1998, 6). Just like Canada, the Netherlands also enjoys similar organizations to support ethnic media and foreign, exiled journalists.³

³ Onfile.eu

To conclude, it can be claimed that new ethnic media are platforms for newcomers which as participants of this research explained, allow for what might be called an increase in social capital/assist them to increase their social capital. Many of these platforms are made and run by migrants themselves. The role of these platforms has summoned academic interest. It is argued that these platforms can also help newcomers in learning about their new society. In my research, I have observed a huge growth of such platforms in the Netherlands. The interviewees have described their enthusiasm in seeking membership in such spaces

METHODOLOGY

To study the experiences of refugees using ethnic groups and pages on Facebook, I chose to perform an ethnographic research. I believe that this research method is the only one that can help to provide an understanding of my research question, on how residents of the refugee accommodation center in Utrecht reflect on their Facebook usage. Through this method and approach, I provide a first-hand report of the interests, habits, and approaches of interviewees towards learning about Dutch society.

In his first chapter of his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz discusses that ethnographer's work should be based on the thick description of signs. According to Geertz, in order to interpret and report the meaning within a culture, the ethnographer should watch and observe, record, and finally report the elements. Geertz emphasizes that the final report must be based on the "thick description" of signs. Thick description can provide sufficient information about all the possible meanings. He uses the example of a wink of the eye to clarify this point. He asserts, when someone winks is it just "rapidly contracting his right eyelid" or is he "practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking conspiracy is in motion" (Geertz 1973, 6). Similarly, in this research, I followed the refugees in where they live and tried to provide a deeper description and interpretation of their online behavior regarding using ethnic spaces of Facebook. The interpretation of Facebook usage provided in this project is based on the personal engagement of working and living with refugees for rather a long time, as well as participant observation. In *Person to Person*, Barry Michrina and Cherylanne Richards argue that "participant observation is the technique of blending in with natives in such a way that they begin to behave in natural manner in your presence" (Michrina and Richards 1996). In my project, and as a former refugee, blending in with the participants was not hard for me. I can argue that based on my country of origin, refugee background and the fact that I lived in the same center, the participants still considered me as one of themselves. Thus, I believe that participants acted and answered the questions quite normally in a way that has largely benefited this project.

The other fact that enhanced this research for me is that as a former resident of the AZC Utrecht (2011-2013), I have a volunteer job in the center as a translator for the VCU (Stichting Vrijwilligerscentrale Utrecht), a non-governmental organization that helps refugees to find a volunteer job. The job contributed to my research by providing face-to-face contact with the residents. However, necessary steps in contacting the COA and informing them about the research were taken. Two letters of recommendation provided by Utrecht University and the UAF (Foundation for Refugee Students) that introduced me and my project were emailed to the central office of the COA, informing them about the research. Following that, I received tips and advice on contacting the refugees from the COA. Then I began the actual process. Every Thursday, all residents of the AZC Utrecht must report to the aliens' police (in Dutch: Vreemdelingenpolitie), in order to register their presence in the center (in Dutch melding) and in the Netherlands. The process usually begins at 14.00 and finishes at 16.30, at the main information desk of the COA (infobalie). I was also present during this time and approached those residents that I personally knew due to my job. I explained the nature of this research project to them and asked for their cooperation. Most of the individuals who had a Facebook account agreed to participate in the interviews. I asked for their telephone number and email so we could plan an interview. The interviews were performed in the individuals' rooms or in public areas of the city. An informed consent form explaining more details about the research, interviewee's rights and contact information for the researcher and supervisor were provided which were handed over to each individual in print. (Appendix 1). Some interviewees also helped me by introducing their friends, who had an interest in participating in the research. This process is called snowball sampling. According to Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf of San Francisco State University:

“Snowball or chain referral sampling is a method that has been widely used in qualitative sociological research. The method yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 141)

Similarly, this research enjoyed the snowball sampling. Some participants helped by introducing their friends or roommates. It helped me interview more people.

Before conducting the interviews, I made a list of open-ended questions to ask. The questions were to help encourage the participants to talk about their online manners regarding this research project. Thus, the project enjoyed semi-structured interviews. The importance of such an approach is also academically emphasized. In their article “Collecting Data Using a Semi-Structured Interview” (1994), Alison While and Louise Barriball argue that semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection have two main advantages for the researcher:

“they are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers. Second, the varied professional, educational and personal histories of the sample group precluded the use of a standardized interview schedule.” (Louise and While 1994, 330)

By allowing the refugees to talk about their goals, needs, and interests, the method helped me to recognize details of their Facebook lives.

A total of 15 refugees and asylum seekers in the AZC Utrecht participated in this research project. The participants are from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and consisted of 13 males and 2 females. They are between the ages of 19 to 54, single and married. Their educational backgrounds differ from high school to master degree. It is worth mentioning that during the research, I had to contact a few interviewees for a follow-up meeting. The follow-ups helped in completing the research by asking a few more questions and clearing some others.

The interviews were conducted in English and Persian. Persian language is spoken in Iran and Afghanistan, and thus also in my mother language. In the case of two refugees who could not speak English, a trusted volunteer Arabic translator helped with interpretations. He is also a former refugee who volunteers for numerous humanitarian organizations which help refugees, such as Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland. He voluntarily helped me in the project by translating the questions and answers.

The interviews concentrated on the individuals' activities and approach to pages and groups within Facebook which are targeting the host society, covering news and information about the Netherlands only and are in the mother language of the refugee. Therefore, a semi-structured interview was performed. I provided a list of questions to investigate the interviewee's behavior on Facebook, while providing room for them to discuss and describe their experiences. Generally, the questions for each individual were not the same but the answers led to the next question. The questions included, for example: “How much time do you spend on Facebook?” “What are the most useful pages and groups for you?” and “What type of content about the Netherlands are you interested in?” It was planned to record the interviews for the sake of the research with the recorded files being deleted after the research was completed. However, those individuals who have been interviewed did not wish to be recorded. The anonymity of the participants is of a very high value in this research project and therefore they were asked to choose a pseudonym. Furthermore, it was promised to the participants, who are interested, that they will receive a copy of the final version of this research via an email.

Furthermore, the interviews helped to provide a list of the most visited Facebook groups and pages by the sample group. Each individual introduced a

few ethnic spaces which he/she uses for getting information about the Netherlands. In fact, as one of the questions, I asked them to introduce the pages and groups that they mostly visit to learn more about the Netherlands, or is their favorite space in this regard. For that reason, I asked some of the interviewees to allow me to take a look at the pages and groups that they are a member of, although it was explained to them that they are not obliged to do that. Here the focus was on the patterns such as how many groups and pages are they members of and what type of patterns can be found in their membership of these platforms. After identifying these Facebook spaces, I visited them and provided a short description of them (Appendix 2). It should be mentioned that in order to do so, I contacted some of the admins and asked them a few questions, which has helped me in noting the short description.

The most visited platforms on the most visited Facebook spaces which are mentioned by the residents of the AZC Utrecht are mentioned below. For Persian-speaking diaspora, interviews indicated two main ethnic platforms which were most frequently mentioned by Iranian and Afghan interviewees:

PERSIAN:

- 1- Akhbar Holand be Farsi (The News of the Netherlands in Persian)
- 2- Niazmandi haye Farsi zabanen Holand

ARABIC

- 1- Holland bel Arabi: Holland in Arabic
- 2- Holland Al Aan: New to the Netherlands

LOCAL

- 1- New Neighbors
- 2- Welcome to Utrecht

LIMITATIONS

There are a several limitations which can be named regarding this research. The main limitations of this research are gender of participants, legal status marital status of interviewees and choosing the ethnic group.

Most of the people interviewed for this research are heterosexual men. Only two women participated in the research and this limitation can lead to biases in

the results of the research. The main important discussion here is the different interests and needs of female refugees in using Facebook. In other words, female refugees have different experiences in using Facebook ethnic groups. That was mentioned during the interviews with the two female participants of this research. Although the interview results show similar interests between men and women in using Facebook for learning Dutch, the female's interests in ethnic spaces were more to learn about the possibilities of higher education and Dutch life style. As another example, they showed less interest in the political news and the election of Dutch Parliament. They also stated that due to some experiences, they are not willing to participate in a discussion. As Zohreh a female refugee from Iran says, "Whenever I ask a question in some of the Facebook groups, I receive many ridiculous messages. Thus, I prefer to read other people`s experiences, rather and asking questions." It can be concluded that female interviewees have mentioned some difficulties in participation in ethnic spaces, as well as describing different interests in consuming the content of these spaces. Therefore, it should be confirmed that if the majority of people in this research were women, the results could be different. For example, the content that they search for and the level of participation could be different. The gender imbalance in this research is a limitation, and it is recommended to future researchers to consider in their research projects.

The other limitation of this research is the legal status of participants. This research did not differ between the people with permission to and people without. People with permission to stay in the Netherlands are officially called refugees. They are called *statushouders* in Dutch and hold a Dutch residence permit. On the other hand, asylum seekers are awaiting a decision by Dutch Immigration Service. Both groups live in AZC Utrecht. While the first group has to wait for a house in a municipality in the Netherlands, the second group struggles with different issues such as providing documents for their lawyer, changes in asylum policy and other possibilities to apply for a residence permit, such as medical cases and Child Pardon Act. While there are many similarities in their experiences in using Facebook ethnic spaces, their needs are different. An example here is as follow. According to the interviewees, the first group is more interested in learning Dutch, possibilities to work and schooling, while the second group follows the news to learn about possible new policies about refugee status. It can be argued that the needs of the both groups are somehow different. So for example, if this research had focused on people without permission to stay, the result of their experience could be limited or mainly focused on individuals` search for content to help them to get a permission to stay. While the other group who is not worried to be deported to their country of origin is mainly focusing on new challenges like how to get a driver's license in the Netherlands, and how to travel to other EU countries. Thus, these differences can impact their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, it can be recommended to other researchers to perform separate studies on

refugees and asylum seekers. This focus can provide a better academic understanding of each group.

The research could also benefit from separate studies on married and single refugees or asylum seekers. The participants in this research are mostly single. Therefore, it can be argued that another limitation of this research is the marital status imbalance of participants. Married people in AZC Utrecht have indicated that they are interested in looking for information regarding the status of their family members, education and social benefits for children, and education for their spouses. In short, the married interviewees' interests are seen to be slightly different in their Facebook usage experience. While most of these issues are completely absent from the experiences of single people. To conclude, the perception and experiences of married and single refugees are slightly different. Each group has demonstrated some different interests in using Facebook ethnic spaces. Therefore, only a balanced study of the both groups can provide a better understanding of refugees' Facebook experience. It can be recommended to other researchers to either have a balance of single – married participants in their interviewees or perform separate research projects.

Other limitations can be named as choosing the ethnic groups, timing, in the selection of participants, needing a translator, and the limiting of snowball sampling. Accordingly, this study has covered the Persian and Arabic-speaking refugees. It does not cover all nationalities residing in the AZC Utrecht. Covering more individuals from other nations could provide a better understanding of the refugee's approach towards Facebook. For example, this study cannot provide details on experiences of Eritrean refugees regarding Facebook ethnic spaces. While according to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) after Syrians, Eritreans are the largest refugee group in the Netherlands.⁴ Considering the fact that after Syrians, Eritreans are the biggest refugee group in the Netherlands, it is recommended to other researchers to study perceptions of Eritrean refugees in their research projects. Furthermore, the time itself has been a limitation to my study. Arguably, the following of and engagement with refugees for a longer time could benefit such research. For example, it could help to better understand the behavior of individuals after they leave the center and begin their life at their own home. The snowball sampling can also be seen as a limitation. The majority of people who participated in this research were referred to me by their friends. Community bias and non-random sampling are considered as disadvantages of this method. Other methods of data selection, such as the sending a survey could be considered, however, such method could not provide details of life experiences and the struggles of refugees.

ETHICAL MATTERS

⁴ <http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=83102NED>

The research has cautiously considered the ethical matters. Many of the participants of this research come from countries with dictatorial regimes. Some have experienced civil war and brutal conflicts. As a researcher, I took these facts into consideration when contacting them and trying to gain their trust. It is personally very understandable to me that I should be cautious about their security. The informed consent sheet was given to each interviewee and their names, used in this research are pseudonyms which they have mainly chosen by themselves. In acknowledging the demands of most of the participants, the interviews were not recorded. The final research will be emailed to those who are interested and submitted their email address.

FINDINGS

Sam (42) considers himself a veteran, one of the oldest people in the AZC. Still in the asylum procedure, he has been living there for 3 years now and has a child. He is happy that he can now use the wireless internet even inside his room, enabling him to access Facebook. Sam uses Facebook to read news about Dutch politics on pages in the Persian language. He is mostly interested to know who is going to win the March 15th election in the Netherlands, and what consequences it might have on his asylum application which was already rejected once. However, politics is not the only matter of interest for Sam. During our interview, he mentioned some other subjects that he follows on Facebook, such as the weather, Iran in Dutch media, possible black job opportunities, or jobs where in you do not need to pay tax, the Dutch language, and the local news. He emphasized that Facebook has helped him to find new friends and connections. For example, since he can read a little Dutch, he follows events and programs via the Facebook pages and plans to attend them. He has also joined the Facebook page of Vrolijkheid, an organization that helps refugees' children in the AZC by training them and holding events, activities, and celebrations.

In addition to making new connections, Sam emphasizes that Facebook has eased access to information and news for people in his situation. He said that to fulfill his areas of interest, he uses Facebook pages and groups which are made and run by refugees like himself. He mentioned:

There are many groups on Facebook talking about the Netherlands, that are made by different people, like expat groups. However, considering the language and content, those made by other refugees are the most relevant for me.

In fact, the same claim was made by all the refugees that I interviewed for this research. To emphasize the informative and somehow educational effect of Facebook spaces in informing them about the new society, one refugee explained:

Of course, not everything on Facebook is useful; I just go to certain pages and groups for refugees. It is very educational for me, I call it Facebook University!

Therefore, based on interviews with refugees like Sam who repeatedly discussed how much they value ethnic Facebook pages and groups in the Netherlands with me, I have observed that Persian and Arabic-speaking refugees in this sample have formed Facebook groups and pages in their mother languages that contribute to the education of their diaspora and what is academically explained as increase in their social capital. This section will discuss four areas of functionality for these spaces, which perform first, as sources for experience sharing, second, as platforms for news and information distribution, third, as language learning spaces, and forth, as a resource for making new connections which might contribute to increase of social capital of the members. These findings are discussed in the following sections.

1-FACEBOOK GROUPS FOR SHARING EXPERIENCE

The interviews with residents of the AZC Utrecht helped me to recognize and distinguish between two different types of online communities for refugees within Facebook. These communities are groups and pages. Although they both serve refugees for the same goal, but perform differently. In other words, they have their own specific characteristics, which use affordances of Facebook for their purposes. Essentially in the Facebook groups, every member is allowed to post texts or ask questions, but pages are mainly used as news and information platforms, where only admins can share texts. The focus of this section however is on the groups where members contribute by sharing content. In fact, the interviewees of this research emphasized and showed me that refugees in the Netherlands have established their own groups. In the groups, every member is able to post a text, ask questions and contribute. The contributions of refugees are also in the form of answering other people`s questions, announcements over new and important matters, advertising their services and products, and introducing new possibilities for jobs, housing, transport, etc. According to this research, it is, in fact, these contributions that have made such ethnic spaces very popular among the refugees. All interviewed refugees have mentioned that they are members of one or more such groups and some consider the groups as their main source of information.

Moreover, I found out that most of the group admins have set regulations to encourage the contribution of members via such spaces. For example, they ask members to post issues only related to the community in the Netherlands and avoid sharing news and information about back home. Some group admins even clearly mention that such unrelated posts will be deleted. They emphasize that this

policy is made in order to focus on life and issues concerning the diaspora in the Netherlands and avoid distribution of the content which is not related to this target. However, it should be mentioned that not all the groups adhere to the same policy. For example, in the groups managed by the Syrian diaspora, a large amount of content is related to daily news about the civil war in that country. One interviewee from Syria, Fares 22, explained further:

Although I like to learn more and more about the Netherlands, it is still important for me to know what's going on in Damascus, Syria. I have family back home and I am concerned about their situation.

He also added:

Some people in this group are actually still living in Syria and they are the best sources of information. While you cannot trust most of the news agencies, it seems like you can trust them. Although the focus of the content is on the Netherlands.

However, the Iranian refugee Behnam (31) opposes the idea of sharing content related to back home. He said:

There are a tremendous number of websites which publish news about Iran. Some like Radio Zamaneh are also receiving their budget from the Dutch government. So, if one wants to read the news about Iran, they can go to their website. These groups should remain the way they are...only about the Netherlands.

Thus, it can be concluded that the refugees rely on these groups as platforms for learning more about the host society through reading about other people's contributions. As Rami (37), one Syrian interviewee explained:

Via these groups you get to learn other people's experiences with different things. People come and ask their questions and other people answer them. It's a great way of sharing information with people you do not know but are in the same boat just as you. When someone asks a question in the group, I read all the comments and you can easily understand how to deal with it. It's a kind of free help and consultation.

Furthermore, observation of the groups revealed that the majority of questions that lead to sharing can be divided into several main categories: legal and asylum procedure in the Netherlands, finance and banking, choosing a school and field of study, transportation, travel abroad for refugees, looking for accommodation, and job opportunities. Considering these areas, it can be claimed that such an approach of asking questions and receiving different people's ideas, points of views and experiences, can contribute to progression and self-development of refugees. This phenomenon has been academically investigated.

Aretxabala and Riezu argue that “a coherent migrant community can actually assist integration” (Mc Gregor & Siegel 2013, 9). It can also be interpreted as giving access to a broad database of first-hand ideas and experiences that provide a collective learning environment for the members. However, it should be mentioned that interviews and observing this group shows that not every member is willing to participate in asking questions. As Rami said, “I am new here and instead of asking questions I would like to read other people’s questions.”

Thus, analysis of these interviews and Facebook groups has shown that these spaces allow access to everyone and encourage newcomers to ask questions and discuss their issues about challenges of life in the new society. Some groups’ admins have set rules which sometimes limit the type of the content to share. Furthermore, I noticed that all interviewees in the AZC Utrecht are already members of at least one such group, but very few have already asked questions publicly in the groups. Many also stated that they have not participated in the discussion by writing a comment. The reason is they mostly feel that as newcomers they have less information than other older members of the group and therefore at this stage they prefer to learn by reading and not by asking questions or contributing. However, some mentioned that if it is necessary, they will ask questions. Therefore, compared to the findings of Dekker and Engberson suggesting “new communication channels opened by social media can facilitate migration by creating a rich source of insider knowledge”, it can be asserted that findings of this paper add to the current academic literature, by providing details of communication channels between refugees. (Dekker and Engberson 2012, 402)

Furthermore, the refugees in this sample report engaging in activities that can, in academic terms, increase social capital. In these spaces, experiences of other refugees are shared and by asking different questions about life in the Netherlands, members get advice and working directions. Moreover, via these spaces, people find new jobs, discuss their problems and find out about new opportunities. Bourdieu and Wacquant explain social capital as being “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 14). Based on this argument and the other discussions mentioned earlier in this paper, it can be concluded that the interview participants report the perception that these online ethnic spaces allow for what might be called gaining social capital.

2- PLATFORMS TO LEARN THE DUTCH LANGUAGE

Findings of this research indicate that some Persian and Arabic-speaking refugees in this sample have established Facebook groups to learn and teach the Dutch language. These groups are very similar to the previously mentioned

groups, but their function is only or mostly based on providing information about the Dutch language. Thus, in many cases, members are not able or allowed to post content unrelated to the purpose of the group. These groups usually translate language material, discuss several forms of regular and irregular Dutch verbs, share Dutch songs and post other educational content about the Dutch language. Furthermore, such groups translate grammar rules of the Dutch language into Arabic and Persian. They also encourage their members to ask questions or share their new findings about the language.

These types of groups are much more popular among the Arabic-speaking refugees in this sample. As Hasan, a 30-year-old refugee from Syria says:

I have no university education or foreign language learning experience. Here in the camp, they told us to attend classes that I hardly understand. Well, I do understand their words but grammar rules are very hard for me. Then in the computer room, a friend of mine who is also from my country told me to join a Facebook group for refugees that teaches Dutch. They translate the rules and give examples in Arabic which makes it understandable for me.

The popularity of these spaces can be very well related to the fact that they use the mother language of the refugees. For example, translating Dutch proverbs and finding the similar proverbs in Arabic or Persian has become very popular. Synonym and antonym words are also discussed in the language of refugees. Fares (22) sees it as a useful approach:

One other benefit of these groups is that you learn new words by reading the meaning in your own language and sentences are also translated. That's great for me. So far, I have learned many new words in Dutch.

Finally, refugees use these groups as an educational opportunity. For example, when I talked to Hamid 29 from Iran I understood that it is important for him to become a member in groups with an educational purpose. He said:

Whenever I see a Facebook page about the Dutch language and the Netherlands I (like) it. I have a lot of free time and instead of wasting it on Facebook I would rather read the useful things. I introduce these good pages to my wife too. Simply by writing her name in the comments or telling her about it. She is also very keen to learn Dutch.

Similar to Hamid, other interviewees asserted that such Facebook groups can assist them in learning the language, and finding new source material to study

As interview participants expressed, language acquisition through these spaces also can contribute to what is academically known as increasing in social capital, because members of the groups help each other by providing new

resources and information which can be very important tools in learning the Dutch language. They also share practical information about educational organizations and language learning centers. Furthermore, refugees share dictionaries, educational websites, possibilities to find a language body and other resources related to the language. Language acquisition as an element of social capital is academically emphasized by some researchers. In his article “Language as social capital” (2006), Thomas Clark of Victoria University (Melbourne) argues, “If there is a substantial phenomenon called social capital, then one of its manifest forms is language. The main proof is that language descriptively conforms to the defining characteristics of social capital” (Clark 2006). Similarly, in their article “Social Capital and Language Acquisition during Study Abroad” (2011), Smith et al argue that language acquisition is an element of social capital.

In conclusion, I have found that some refugees in the Netherlands have established groups on Facebook to provide spaces for helping each other in the process of learning the Dutch language. The educational role of online communities and virtual support networks is also emphasized by other researchers. For example, Negin Dahya and Sarah Dryden-Peterson who are researchers at the University of Washington, Seattle who conducted research into the role of virtual support networks for refugees assert that “participants indicated that online information and support came in the form of online social networks (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2016, 295). Their findings are aligned with the refugee’s use of Facebook groups and pages in this research. These spaces facilitate the learning process of the Dutch language using the mother language of refugees and according to self-reports interviewees value these spaces because they provide opportunities to make social connections and thus increase social capital. Such interest of refugees in learning the host society language via digital platforms, and through a collective work of refugees themselves, provides an interesting research opportunity for further investigation. It is a rich area of research, however, has not yet summoned much attention.

3- ACCESS THE NEWS THROUGH PAGES AND GROUPS

All refugees who participated in this research project confirmed that they are interested in learning more about Dutch society by reading the news, and preferably in their own language. However, they indicated various points of interest, from the weather to Dutch politics and the parliamentary elections. This interest has also been investigated by other researchers. Connie Christiansen of the Roskilde University in Denmark describes that refugees in Denmark turn to local ethnic media due to “difficulties in the acquiring relevant news, and partly as a consequence, a feeling of lack of news and information, which in some cases gives rise to frustration” (Christiansen 2004, 195). Similarly, some of the

interviewees in this research have pointed out the same feeling of having a lack of informational sources. Furthermore, they have claimed that the ethnic spaces on Facebook have provided spaces for accessing to news in the Netherlands for refugees.

Rostam, a refugee from Iran, emphasized that he likes to read about the Netherlands on daily basis:

I follow “Dutch News in Persian.” It is a great page for me to learn more about the Netherlands. Most of the Persian websites about the Netherlands just talk about the tourist attractions of the Netherlands and things like a museum and so but this page; they live here and translate news and information about the Netherlands. They also share links and websites which are useful to learn about the Dutch culture and language.

Another experience was from Ahmad (43), the Iraqi refugee:

One of my favorite pages is “Hollanda Alaan,” aka New to the Netherlands. I follow it because I like to watch Dutch TV programs but I don’t understand it. However, via this page, you can watch programs with subtitles in Arabic. They also subtitle the everyday news. I found all my needs on this page.

Samir (25) from Syria, similarly added:

I follow Arabic pages because they make things easier for me. For example, you can learn about the weather.

Just like others, Ahmad, the young Afghan refugee mentioned that he believes it is important for refugees to read the news about the Netherlands, and since they cannot read Dutch, the best sources are platforms where you can read the news in your own language.

It can be observed that these ethnic spaces of Facebook act as ethnic media for refugees and newcomers. In fact, ethnic media have been developed in several ways, from print to TV and new media forms. However, studying these spaces, for example, Dutch news in Persian and Holland Alaan, shows the emergence of a form of ethnic media, as space inside a giant social media such as Facebook. These spaces translate the news and information for their visitors and therefore enhance the accessibility of the members to the news and information about the host society. As it was argued earlier, the interviewees’ reports the accessibility allow for what could be academically called an increase in social capital by connecting the members and providing room for experience exchange.

To conclude, refugees in Utrecht indicated that they have an interest in observing the news about the Netherlands on subjects such as foreign and local

policies, elections, and more. Considering the language barriers, they turn to locally-established ethnic groups and pages which use the refugees' mother language to give them access to the news. Many of these spaces are made and run by refugees themselves. Therefore, as discussed in the theoretical section, in this research they are referred to as ethnic media. After all, these spaces are media for informing refugees. Migrants' interest in news about the host society, has been academically investigated by several scholars. For example, according to interview data from immigrants in Denmark, Christiansen argues that "people of ethnic minority background express a desire to obtain television news about the country in which they are now residing" (Carøe and Sell, 2000, 191). Interview data of this research indicate the same result while showing that there is more interest in accessing the news about the host society via digital media. These spaces enhance access to news and main stream media and help refugees in this sample report engaging in activities that can, in academic terms, increase social capital of the members.

4- MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS

Finally, I observed that refugees use local Facebook groups to connect with each other and the Dutch people. Refugees in the AZC Utrecht have indicated that they become members of such groups to find new friends, to find language coaches, and to learn about events and entertainment. Samir 25 from Syria explained:

I follow "Welcome to Utrecht", "New Neighbors" and some other groups. Most of the time they have new activities for refugees and afterward, they put pictures of the events on the Facebook. Through them, you find new Dutch friends and they help you to learn Dutch. Moreover, they organize lots of fun activities which can help you get out of the AZC and enjoy yourself.

Samir's experience was also repeatedly mentioned by other interviewees, indicating that making new connections is important for them. Damon (26) from Afghanistan says,

"When I got here everything was different from my own hometown. Nature, the cities, and people. After reading other people's experiences, little by little I understood that the Dutch are just people like us and if we learn their language we can communicate with them."

In both examples, the local groups and pages have obviously helped refugees to make new connections. Samir mentioned:

I met Mr. F. during an event here in the AZC. He represents “Welcome to Utrecht” and he told me that if I follow them on Facebook I can get the news about their programs right away. Now I have many Dutch friends and we do many cool things together.

Finding new friends and building a network is important for the sample group. In order to make more contacts with Dutch people, they turn to local Facebook pages and groups.

It was confirmed by many interviewees that the development of local Facebook groups and pages for newcomers have facilitated contact between Dutch nationals and the newcomers in Utrecht. Platforms such as New Neighbors contribute to the connection of refugees and volunteers. These volunteers, as I have observed in the groups, help refugees to learn more about the culture, language and even help them in the process of finding a job, moving and organizing other related tasks. A clear example of the function of such groups is finding language coaches. They provide a unique opportunity for refugees to exercise Dutch with language buddies. Activists of these groups also make events for refugees, where they can meet new contacts. In these events, such as a dinner where all the participants bring their own food, refugees can meet Dutch people, and other refugees. Thus, this event helps them to broaden their network and learn about other refugee`s experiences.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that the communication languages in these groups are Arabic, English, and Dutch. These ethnic media type spaces help to make contacts between refugees and residents of Utrecht, to inform newcomers about the events and entertainment programs in the city of Utrecht and broaden their networks. Research shows that online networks contribute to the social capital of the members (Ahmed 2014, Williams 2008). Thus, these spaces mediate contact between people and by providing opportunities to make social connections can contribute to what is academically known as social capital. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the interviewees have shown a great interest in seeking membership in such local groups and all interviewees have indicated that they appreciate the role of such groups in making the new contacts.

As the last word of this section and to emphasize the role of Facebook for refugees, it is good to mention Abbas (19) from Afghanistan who asserts that ethnic spaces on Facebook have helped him to learn about the Netherlands in a different way. In his interview he told me:

I did not have Facebook in my country. I did not need it. But here I need it. You can learn about other people, see where your friends are and learn a lot about the Netherlands.

CONCLUSION

Just like many other refugees that I interviewed, Abbas is a self-motivated and enthusiastic person who wants to learn the Dutch language and regulations to live here in the Netherlands. He told me that he wants to join his cousins who have a mobile phone repair shop in Amsterdam, but he must learn Dutch first. So, he said, he does not have time to waste and wants to use all possible instruments to learn. He admits that not all residents of the center feel the same way, but many do, especially that “You can even lay on your bed and have internet.” He confirmed that he has learned a lot from just reading the content of pages and groups in Facebook, and has already made new friends with refugees and Dutch people.

Many people in the sample group have the same dreams of learning the language, studying or working, and they clearly stated their desires during interviews. Interviewing 15 residents of AZC Utrecht, helped this research to collect the self-reports and perceptions of refugees about Facebook ethnic spaces, their experiences and the relation of these self-reports with academic notions of ethnic media and social capital. This study intended to additionally elucidate scholarly comprehension of refugee`s online activities, via ethnic spaces, using an ethnographic method.

During the interviews, it was revealed that the interviewees appreciate the fact that they are connected to the internet and can use support groups established by other refugees to learn more and share experiences. During my research, I identified three types of groups made by refugees: support groups, language learning groups and local groups. The first type of the groups serves as spaces for asking questions, discussing issues and problems, and offering a service. Via these groups people ask questions related to their life in the Netherlands, such as banking, housing, health and so on. They ask for a job, sell an item, or ask for other people`s opinions. The second type of refugee groups are language learning groups. In these spaces people share their findings about the language, translate words or grammar rules. They are spaces of collective learning. Local groups are the type of groups where refugees and Dutch people come in closer contact. These groups enhance finding a language body or a language coach, as well as informing members about the local activities.

The sample group also uses Facebook pages for refugees. These are spaces of information, made by other refugees. Accessing them is mainly to read the news in their own language. Interviewees have mentioned that they have an interest in the news about the Netherlands. They like to learn more about the Dutch politics, especially since this research was done at the time of the Dutch Parliamentary election. Furthermore, news about the weather, education and their country in Dutch media has been popular with them.

Social media usage by refugees has been an academic area of interest. Some researchers like Mc Gregor and Siegel, Elias and Lemish, and Christiansen, assert that social network websites like Facebook, support refugees and help them learn about their new language, and arguably help them to increase social capital. The sample group of this research confirmed that they use online spaces, made by refugees to learn more about their new society. This is based on visiting such Facebook spaces on daily bases and reading the news and information. Observation of ethnic spaces on Facebook shows that members support each other by providing information for newer members of the group. In this concept, members share information, ask questions about their needs and daily struggles and broaden their networks, which directly increase their social capital.

During the research, I observed that the refugees use Facebook to connect to each other and to the Dutch people, a process which may be associated with opportunities to gain social capital. Via groups, they share experiences with their connections and learn how to deal with obstacles of the new society, as well as make new friends. As one of the interviewees mentioned, "Facebook helped me to use the experiences of many other people in one place." Ellison et al explain personal achievements by social capital as, "For individuals, social capital allows a person to draw on resources from other members of the networks to which he or she belongs. These resources can take the form of useful information, personal relationships, or the capacity to organize groups" (Ellison et al 2007, 1154). The findings of this research show new phenomena in which refugees and locals cooperate in educational matters and seek contact with each other. Therefore, it can be claimed that such findings are of a high academic and social value.

For this research project, I interviewed 15 residents of the Asylum Seeker Center in Utrecht. The sample group is limited to individuals who speak Persian and Arabic. Therefore, several recommendations could be made for other researchers.

There is an imbalance in the gender of interviewees which can lead to a biased conclusion. The majority of the interviewees are heterosexual men. While it can be argued that a gender balance of interviewees could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of Facebook ethnic spaces usage by refugees and its impact on social capital of the members. It should be confirmed that female refugees suggest different interests in the types of news and information about the lifestyle of the host society and higher education. They have also acknowledged that women are less likely to collaborate in online discussions. Thus, a gender balanced study of refugees can be recommended to other researchers.

This paper also recommends a separate study on married and single refugees. The interviewees in this research are mostly single men thus another limitation of this paper is the marital status imbalance of participants. The married individuals have stated that situation of their families is the most priority for them

while using online ethnic spaces. As it was emphasized, perceptions and experiences of married and single refugees are different and an imbalance of study can lead to a biased conclusion.

The other recommendation regarding research is the diversity of participants in regard to their country of origin. For example, this study did not cover experiences of Eritrean refugees regarding Facebook ethnic spaces. Their experience and self-reports can be different than other refugees and asylum seekers. Thus, it can be argued that a diverse study of nationalities can lead to a better academic understanding of refugees' perceptions regarding ethnic spaces.

Other recommendations can be to broaden the sample group and using qualitative methods. These can help to provide a better understanding of refugee's behavior and approaches towards Facebook groups and pages. A quantitative study can also contribute to understanding the other aspects of social media usage by refugees. Finally, this study could benefit from a longer term of studying impacts of such groups and pages in a longer term. That would be also recommended to other researchers.

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NOTES:

- 1- I took the photo during the open day of the AZC Utrecht. It is used to show connectivity in the AZC and published in Irangids.nl and Netinederland.nl
- 2- To avoid unnecessary repetition, I used the word refugee for refugees (Statushouder), who have obtained a permission to stay and asylum seeker (still in the process of asylum).

APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT SHEET

Hereby as the researcher I would like to inform you about your rights during this interview. Please note that this research for my MA thesis in New Media and Digital Culture. This thesis will be entered into an online database, which is publicly accessible.

- 1- This interview will take half an hour to 45 minutes.
- 1- There is no obligation to participate in this research.
- 2- This is a scientific research project and is designed to provide a better understanding of refugees' activities online for education.
- 3- Participating in this research has no effect on the legal process of asylum.
- 4- You have the right not to answer any question that you want.
- 5- You have the right to leave the interview room anytime that you want.
- 6- Interviewees can choose a desired pseudonym.
- 7- The researcher guarantees the confidentiality of the information obtained during this interview
- 8- The researcher guarantees the anonymity of the participants
- 9- The interviewee should be aware that information he/she provides will only be used for an academic reason.
- 10- With the request of the interviewee, a copy of the final research will be emailed to her/him.
- 11- The researcher is obliged not to share information with any third-party for purposes other than academic reasons.
- 12- If the interviewee agrees, a follow-up interview will be planned.
- 13- The interview will be recorded, but the records will be kept confidential and deleted after the final research is written.
- 14- In case of any questions, the interviewee can reach the researcher through email:

a.sametipour@students.uu.nl

- 15- If the interviewee has any complaints or questions, she/he can contact my supervisor at University of Utrecht.

Dr. Anne Kustritz: a.m.kustritz@uu.nl

APPENDIX 2

1- Akhbar Holand be Farsi (The News of the Netherlands in Persian)

It is a Facebook page which mainly publishes a summarized translation of the local news. The page is updated on daily basis. It also posts links to other Facebook spaces, websites in Persian and Dutch, and discusses issues regarding the Persian-speaking diaspora in the Netherlands.

2- Niazmandi haye Farsi zabanam Holand

This Facebook group with almost 10,000 members, is considered the most visited Facebook page for the diaspora. Any member of the group is able to post a message. Observation shows that this space is used for asking questions about life in the Netherlands (i.e. immigration, job, healthcare, etc) where the post publisher usually receives an answer from another member of the group.

3- Holland bel Arabi; Holland in Arabic

Dutch Arabic Facebook page which is the official page of a website with the same name, and distributes news and information about the Netherlands in Arabic, mainly for newcomers of Syrian origin. The project is funded partially through advertisements and Google Ad.

4- Holland Al Aan New to the Netherlands

The website NetinNederland.nl is an initiative of Dutch National Public Broadcasting (NPO) which subtitles its videos in Arabic (English, and Dutch) to enables Arabic-speaking refugees to access the daily news from NOS news journal, as well as other videos. The videos are chosen in accordance to the integration exam which covers issues like history, culture, job market, and the Dutch language.

LOCAL

1- New Neighbors

The Facebook group is an initiative of Syrian refugees and Dutch volunteers. The group tries to enhance contact between the newcomers and residents of Utrecht. Issues such as language bodies, job, and social issues are discussed in the group. It can be called as the main support group for refugees in Utrecht

2- Welcome to Utrecht

The Facebook page is the official of Foundation Welcome to Utrecht. The Foundation provides activities such as sport, volunteer jobs, and entertainment activities for refugees in Utrecht. The organization enjoys a multi-language website and helps the refugees in educational matters.

The above-mentioned space help refugees to discover their new society in several ways; such as to discuss their needs and receive peer feedback. They also have an important role in distributing information for refugees and helping them to explore and identify different issues in their new environment.