

Cultural Identity;
The eternal interplay of the cultural selves

*A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity Perceptions among
Refugees and Expats in the Netherlands*

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Master's Thesis
Masters in Intercultural Communication,
Utrecht University
May 2023

"Culture is not just something we are, it's something we do."¹

-Stuart Hall

¹ "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" (1997)

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
1. Introduction	3
2. Context.....	4
2.1. Immigration in the Netherlands.....	4
2.2. The Arab Spring	7
3. Theoretical Framework.....	8
3.1. Culture and Cultural Identity.....	8
3.2. Migration and Cultural Bereavement.....	10
3.3. Acculturation and Cultural Adjustment	11
3.4. Inclusion through Cultural Adjustment.....	16
4. Methodology.....	17
4.1. Research Design.....	17
4.2. Setting.....	20
4.3. Sampling Strategy	21
4.4. Procedure.....	21
4.5. Data Analysis	22
4.6. Ethical Considerations.....	24
5. Analysis	24
5.1. Memories of Culture	24

5.1.1.	Internal Curiosity	24
5.1.2.	Family heritage and early memories	26
5.1.3.	Stigma and cultural congruity	28
5.1.4.	Religion.....	30
5.2.	“A leap to the unknown”	32
5.2.1.	Why the Netherlands?.....	32
5.2.2.	Research about the Netherlands	33
5.3.	Acculturation and Cultural Bereavement	33
5.3.1.	Cultural Assimilation	33
5.3.2.	Language.....	34
5.3.3.	Community within the community	35
5.3.4.	Cultural Perception	37
5.4.	The impossibility of returning	38
6.	Discussion.....	40
6.1.	Limitations	42
6.2.	Suggestions for Further Research	44
7.	Conclusion.....	47
8.	References	48
9.	Appendix	55
9.1.	Consent form template	55

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the impact of immigration and acculturation on the development and expression of cultural identity and inclusion among expats and refugees living in Utrecht, the Netherlands. The research question focuses on the extent to which the perception of expats' cultural identity is influenced by the time of adjustment in a new environment in the Netherlands. The study further investigates the U-curve acculturation process and the perception of inclusion within the local community of Utrecht. A qualitative research design was used, which involved conducting in-depth interviews with ten participants to explore their experiences of cultural adjustment and development of cultural identity over time. The analysis revealed several themes related to cultural identity, including internal curiosity, family heritage, stigma, and religion. Participants also reported on the challenges of the acculturation process, including language, cultural perception, and community integration. Furthermore, the study revealed feelings of nostalgia and cultural bereavement related to the loss of the participants' original culture. The findings suggest that cultural adjustment is a complex and dynamic process that requires a supportive and inclusive environment. The study has implications for future research in exploring the experiences of expat and refugee individuals in different cultural contexts and the impact of acculturation on mental health.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to De Voorkamer, an organization that supports and empowers refugees and migrants in Utrecht, for their invaluable assistance in recruiting the participants for this study. Their commitment to fostering inclusion and promoting cultural diversity in the community is truly commendable. I am also deeply grateful to the participants who generously shared their experiences and insights, without whom this research would not have been possible. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Rena Zendedel, for her guidance and supervision throughout this research. Her expertise and support have been instrumental in shaping this study. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends for their unwavering encouragement and support during this research journey.

1. Introduction

In today's era of globalization, individuals are increasingly exposed to various cultures and ways of life. Such exposure could be both enriching and challenging as individuals navigate the complexities of their cultural identity and the cultural norms and expectations of the society they reside in. Cultural identity, inclusion, and acculturation are multifaceted and dynamic concepts that have significant implications for individuals and communities. The Netherlands has experienced a significant influx of migrants in recent years due to various factors, including globalization, economic opportunities, and international politics. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in 2020, there were approximately 239,000 immigrants, a decrease from the previous year. The top three countries of origin for immigrants in 2019 were India, Syria, and Poland. In 2018, the total number of immigrants was 241,000, with roughly half coming from EU countries and half from non-EU countries. The number of immigrants in 2017 and 2016 was similar, with around 233,000 and 235,000 respectively. In 2015, the total number of immigrants was 207,000, with roughly 45% coming from EU countries and 55% from non-EU countries. As a result, the country has become increasingly diverse, with migrants bringing their cultural identities and expectations with them. However, these cultural identities undergo significant changes as individuals adjust to their new environment, leading to new cultural identities and perceptions. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how immigration to and acculturation in the Netherlands influence the development and expression of an individual's cultural identity, and their inclusion within the local community of the Netherlands. More specifically, the purpose of this research is to provide academia with an initial basis for future studies to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of expat backgrounds, cultural identity, and immigration.

The Research Question that guides this study is presented as follows:

RQ: What are the distinctions between the cultural identity narratives of expats and refugees in the Netherlands?

To address this research question, the following sub-questions are proposed:

SQ1: Which are the emerging topics that encompass the narratives of refugees and expats in the Netherlands?

SQ2: How can the perception of migrants' cultural identity be impacted based on the time of adjustment in the Netherlands?

SQ3: How do refugees and expats in the Netherlands differ in their experiences of cultural adjustment in the local community of Utrecht?

SQ4: Which is the perception of inclusion within the local community of Utrecht?

2. Context

The context chapter is an essential component of any research project, as it provides the necessary background information to understand the research problem and its significance. This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the context in which the research is situated. It presents the historical, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the research problem. By establishing a strong foundation of knowledge, the context chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters that will address the research questions and offer new insights into the topic. In this chapter, the focus is on providing a detailed description of the context in which the research on immigration, acculturation, and cultural identity takes place in the Netherlands, with a particular emphasis on the city of Utrecht.

2.1. Immigration in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has experienced a significant increase in immigration in recent years due to various factors, including globalization, economic opportunities, and

international politics. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics, as of 2020, around 25% of Utrecht's population is made up of individuals with a migration background. This influx of migrants has made the country increasingly culturally diverse, with individuals from different cultural backgrounds bringing their cultural identities and expectations with them. Expats, in particular, make up a significant proportion of the migrant population in the Netherlands, with approximately 60,000 expats living in the Utrecht region alone. Comparing Utrecht to other areas of the Netherlands, Amsterdam has a higher percentage of non-Dutch nationals, with 19.6% of its population being non-Dutch nationals. Other cities with high percentages of non-Dutch nationals include The Hague (15.7%), Rotterdam (14.9%), and Eindhoven (12.9%). However, it's important to note that the number and proportion of expats in each area can vary depending on factors such as job opportunities, quality of life, and cultural attractions.

In addition to immigration and expats, the city of Utrecht has also become a temporary home for many Syrian refugees seeking asylum in the Netherlands. According to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in 2020 alone, over 20,000 asylum seekers arrived in the Netherlands, with Syrians being the largest group (CBS, 2021). Upon arrival, these refugees are often placed in Asylum Seeker Centers (AZCs) across the country, including the AZC in Utrecht. This center provides temporary housing, language courses, and integration support for refugees while their asylum applications are being processed (COA, n.d). The presence of refugees in Utrecht, along with the already diverse population, highlights the need for research on the impact of immigration and acculturation on cultural identity and inclusion in the local community. As a result, Utrecht has become a melting pot of cultures, traditions, and

values, making it an exciting and dynamic city to study the impact of immigration on cultural identity and acculturation.

The purpose of this research is to provide academia with an initial basis for future studies to develop a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of migrant backgrounds, cultural identity, and immigration for numerous reasons.

Firstly, migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has significant social, economic, and political implications. It is therefore important to study the experiences of migrants in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that drive migration, the challenges that migrants face when settling in new countries, and the ways in which migration impacts both the sending and receiving societies.

Secondly, cultural identity is a key aspect of human experience, and it is shaped by a range of factors, including ethnicity, religion, language, and socialization. By studying the cultural identity of migrants, we can gain insights into the ways in which individuals construct their identities in response to new cultural environments, and the ways in which cultural identity may impact their overall well-being.

Finally, immigration is a contentious and often politicized issue in many parts of the world, with debates centering on issues such as border control, national identity, and the integration of immigrant communities. By conducting research on migrant backgrounds, cultural identity, and immigration, we can contribute to a more informed and nuanced discussion of these issues, and help to inform policies and practices aimed at supporting the well-being and integration of migrant communities.

Overall, the importance of researching migrant backgrounds, cultural identity, and immigration lies in the potential to better understand the experiences of a diverse and growing population of individuals who are navigating complex cultural environments and contributing to the social, economic, and political fabric of their new

communities. By building a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of these topics, we can contribute to the development of more effective policies and practices aimed at supporting the well-being and success of migrants and their communities.

2.2. The Arab Spring

The Syrian crisis, which began in 2011 with the Arab Spring, has had a profound impact on the lives of millions of people (Acharya, 2016). Syria has a diverse population, with various ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians (Ababsa, 2014). The ongoing conflict has led to widespread violence, displacement, and loss of life (United Nations, 2021). The displacement of Syrians is one of the largest refugee crises in history, with over 6.6 million refugees fleeing the country since the conflict began (UNHCR, 2021). The situation has been dire, forcing people to flee their homes and seek refuge in other countries. The Netherlands has been one of the countries that have opened its doors to Syrian refugees, offering them a chance to start a new life in a foreign land. For many, the decision to leave their homes and families behind and embark on a dangerous journey to a foreign country was not an easy one. It was often a choice made out of desperation, with the hope of finding safety, security, and a better life for themselves and their loved ones. In the city of Utrecht, the Asylum Seeker Center (AZC) provides a temporary home for many refugees, offering them shelter, food, and support as they navigate the complexities of their new lives. The AZC serves as a vital lifeline for many refugees, as they adjust to their new surroundings and work towards building a better future. Despite the challenges, Syrian refugees in the Netherlands continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, strength, and perseverance in the face of adversity. In order to frame this thesis, a theoretical framework that delves into the topics of culture, identity and relevant concepts will be presented.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Culture and Cultural Identity

Understanding the notion of cultural identity is essential for successful cross-cultural interactions and for navigating the increasingly diverse and interconnected world. However, in order to define the term, vital to begin with the definition of culture; one of the most difficult terms to define since, as a term is interdisciplinary. According to traditional definitions, culture encapsulates the “best that has been thought and said” in society (Hall, 1976, p.2).

Culture encompasses everything from language and religion to art and cuisine and can refer to the shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that characterize a group or society. It is a complex and multi-faceted concept that has been studied from various perspectives and disciplines. One perspective on culture is Edward T. Hall's theory of high- and low-context cultures. According to Hall (1976), high-context cultures rely heavily on nonverbal and indirect communication, while low-context cultures rely more on explicit and direct communication. High-context cultures, such as Japan, rely on context and background knowledge to understand messages, while low-context cultures, such as the United States, rely on explicit statements. Hall's theory has been widely used to understand cross-cultural communication and has been applied to various contexts. Cultural identity refers also to the way in which individuals define themselves in relation to the groups to which they belong. This includes the values, beliefs, and norms that individuals internalize and identify with based on their culture (Phinney, 2018).

The concept of cultural identity stems from the definition of culture and individual identity and can be interpreted in more than two different ways. Cultural identity is a complex and dynamic construct that is influenced by various factors such

as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. It is shaped by the individual's experiences, interactions, and relationships with others in their cultural group as well as in other groups (Matsumoto & Juang, 2016). According to Hall, there are at least two separate ways to approach the concept of cultural identity. One approach suggests that one's identity is their one true self" being a member of a bigger shared culture; a complex of "more superficial or artificial selves". This concept requires the perception on "many selves" that share a historical background, common cultural codes and stable conception; the "oneness" of a cultural identity. This perception of cultural identity plays an important role to in all post-colonial struggles that have reshaped our world as it portrays a powerful representation of people that are hitherto marginalized and bring light to their existence (Hall, 2013).

The other way of approaching cultural identity suggests that despite the numerous similarities between the individuals that constitute a cultural group, the discrepancies in the past and the future need to be takes into consideration. This perception recognizes that cultural identity "is a matter of becoming as well as of being" (Hall, 2013 p. 225).

Communication patterns and values are essential components of cultural identity. According to Hall (1976), culture is not just a set of static practices and behaviors but is dynamic and constantly evolving. Communication patterns, such as language use, nonverbal cues, and social norms, are significant markers of cultural identity. They reflect the cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes that shape the way people interact with each other. Understanding cultural identity is essential for promoting cultural competence and respect for diversity, which are increasingly important in today's globalized world.

3.2. Migration and Cultural Bereavement

Valentine and Sporton (2009) posit that the forces of globalization and global conflicts have significantly affected international migration patterns in the 21st century, thereby raising inquiries about the potential implications of such mobility on processes of identification and identity formation. Jenkins (2014) asserts that identity, as a concept, has become something that is actively "managed" in the contemporary era. This perspective suggests that in the age of migration, identity is not an inherited, ascribed, or achieved status, but rather one that must be "maintained" in various contexts.

Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of the "identity project," which claims that in late modernity, the self must be reflexively constructed in order to respond to the anxieties brought about by rapid social change. Thus, self-identity can no longer be viewed as something that is simply given, but rather something, that must be routinely created and sustained through the reflexive activities of the individual. Giddens attributes this to the fact that modern societies no longer offer stable "anchor points" for the self, resulting in the ongoing construction and reconstruction of the self as a means of coping with uncertainty.

In accordance with this perspective, Ward et al. (2014) argue that in order for individuals to maintain regular interactions with others in the everyday world, they must constantly integrate events from the external world and classify them into their ongoing narrative about the self. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, we define identity as the narrative about the self. Additionally, the concept of how life events shape people's identities in the era of globalization has gained significant attention in the field of migration studies, where identity construction is understood to involve lived

experiences as well as a mental state that is susceptible to significant life changes involving place, people, and culture (Pugh, 2018; Kebede, 2010).

Furthermore, it has been noted that migrants are significantly more exposed to identity change than other social groups (Pugh, 2018; Piacentini, 2008; Bhugra et al., 2005). The forced migration experience often results in a loss of identity, also known as cultural bereavement. Additionally, migrants often face uncertainties upon arrival to their country of settlement that raise questions about belonging and identity. Giddens (1991) argues that "What to do?" "How to act?" and "Who to be?" are questions affecting everyone in modern societies, prompting an identity crisis in each individual. Thus, if forced migration is viewed as being inextricably linked to modernity, as other scholars have suggested (Pugh, 2010; Hack-Polay et al., 2021), then Giddens' perspective is particularly relevant in analyzing the identity issues faced by forced migrants (1991). However, for forced migrants, the magnitude of the identity crisis is more pronounced due to the spatial, demographic, temporal, economic, and cultural dislocation they experience. As Kebede (2010) argues, in the context of forced migration, forming and reforming identities are part of the struggle to ascertain belongingness in a new sociocultural domain. This assertion entails the occasional dramatic deconstruction and reconstruction of the self and its association with various communities and identities (Kebede, 2010; Woodward, R., & Jenkins, K. N., 2012; Kumsa, M. K., 2005). In examining the process of deconstruction of forced migrants' identity, JW Berry's concept of mutuality in acculturation is helpful (1997).

3.3. Acculturation and Cultural Adjustment

The concept of acculturation, as defined by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p.149) as "phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the

original culture patterns of either or both groups", has been widely utilized in cross-cultural psychology. However, as noted by JW Berry (1997), the gradual erosion of the original meaning of the concept has resulted in it becoming synonymous with assimilation, leading to criticism (e.g. Vasquez, 1984). To address this, a parallel conceptualization known as interculturalization has been developed, primarily among French-language scholars (Camilleri, 1990; Clanet, 1990). The concept of interculturalization is defined as "the set of processes by which individuals and groups interact when they identify themselves as culturally distinct" (Clanet, 1990, p. 70).

Berry (1997) posits that a comprehensive examination of acculturation should begin with a detailed analysis of the societal contexts of both origin and settlement. The cultural characteristics of the individuals entering the acculturation process, as well as the political, economic, and demographic conditions in their society of origin, should be studied to understand the degree of voluntariness in their migration motivation. Additionally, Richmond (1993) suggests that migrants can be placed on a continuum between reactive and proactive, with the former motivated by constraining or exclusionary factors and the latter motivated by facilitating or enabling factors. This concept, known as push-pull factors in earlier literature on migration motivation, highlights the importance of understanding the context of origin in the acculturation process.

The experiences of individuals who successfully moved from one culture and merged to another has enriched the multicultural world (Kim, 2001). To illustrate the process of adapting to a new culture, many models have been discussed in the literature of studying intercultural adaptation e.g. the recuperation model, the learning model, the recovery model, the dynamic tension reduction model, and the dialectical model

(Anderson, 1994; Chen, 2013; Chen & Starosta, 2005). For the means of this research, we will dive further into the recuperation model (Alamri, 2018).

The recuperation model is explained through the study of the “culture shock” phenomenon, a term that refers to a type of anxiety that occurs in an individual when he or she arrives at a new culture (Oberg, 1960). Lysgaard’s (1955) U-Curve model of cultural adjustment, also known as the cultural adjustment curve or the culture shock curve, is a theoretical framework that describes the stages and emotions that individuals may experience when adjusting to a new cultural environment (Oberg, 1960). According to the model, individuals go through four main stages when adjusting to a new culture: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment.

- i. During the honeymoon stage, individuals are excited and eager to learn about the new culture. They tend to idealize the new culture and have a positive attitude towards it. However, as they start to understand and experience the cultural differences more deeply, they may enter the crisis stage.
- ii. The crisis stage is characterized by feelings of confusion, frustration, and dissatisfaction. Individuals may feel overwhelmed by the cultural differences and may experience homesickness. They may also feel like they do not belong in the new culture and may have difficulty communicating with the local people.
- iii. After the crisis stage, individuals begin to recover and adjust to the new culture. They start to understand the cultural differences and may start to appreciate the new culture. They may also start to develop new relationships and form a sense of belonging in the new culture.

- iv. Finally, individuals reach the adjustment stage, where they feel comfortable and confident in the new culture. They have a good understanding of the cultural norms and customs and have developed a sense of belonging in the new culture. It is important to note that the duration of each stage can vary greatly depending on the individual and their cultural background, and not everyone experiences all the stages (Oberg, 1960).

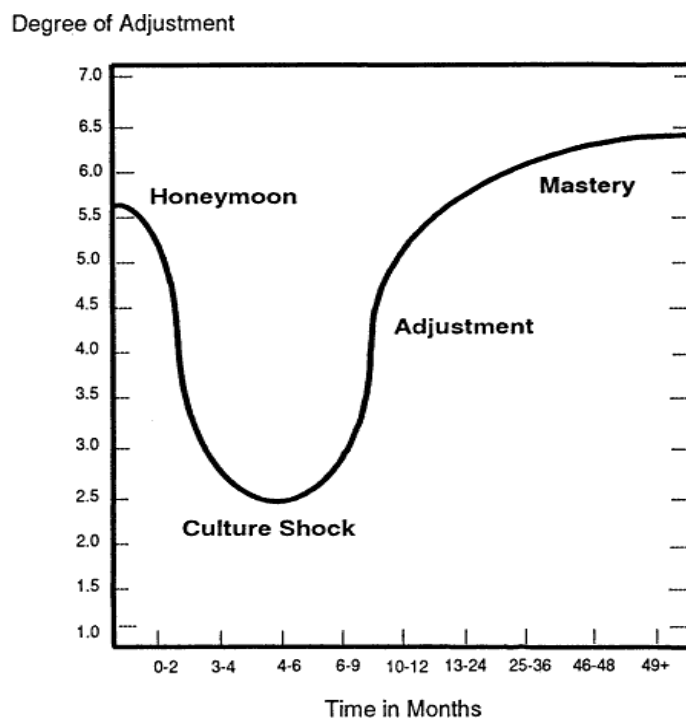


Figure 1. Lysgaard's (1955) U-shaped curve

As presented by Black and Mendenhall (1991) in their review the Lysgaard's U-curve model has been widely used as a framework for understanding the process of cultural adaptation experienced by individuals when moving to a new cultural context. However, it has also been criticized for oversimplifying the complexity of cultural adaptation and for not accounting for individual differences in the process. An alternative model that addresses some of these criticisms is the J-curve model.

Critics of the Lysgaard's U-curve model argue that the model assumes a linear and predictable process of cultural adaptation, which may not be the case for all

individuals (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). In reality, the process of cultural adaptation is complex and can involve a range of emotional, social, and psychological challenges that are not captured by a simple U-shaped curve. In addition, the Lysgaard U-curve model has been criticized for not accounting for individual differences in the process of cultural adaptation. Some individuals may adapt more quickly and effectively to a new cultural context, while others may struggle more with the transition (Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

An alternative model that addresses some of these criticisms is the J-curve model that was introduced in a study about cross-cultural adaptation by Dailey-Strand, C., Collins, H., & Callaghan, D. (2021). The J-curve model acknowledges the initial excitement and novelty experienced by individuals when they first arrive in a new culture, followed by a period of frustration and anxiety. However, it also recognizes that individuals may experience a crisis point in the process of cultural adaptation, where they may feel like they are losing touch with their original culture and identity. If they are able to persist through this crisis phase and continue to adapt, they can eventually reach a higher level of integration and understanding of both cultures (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963)

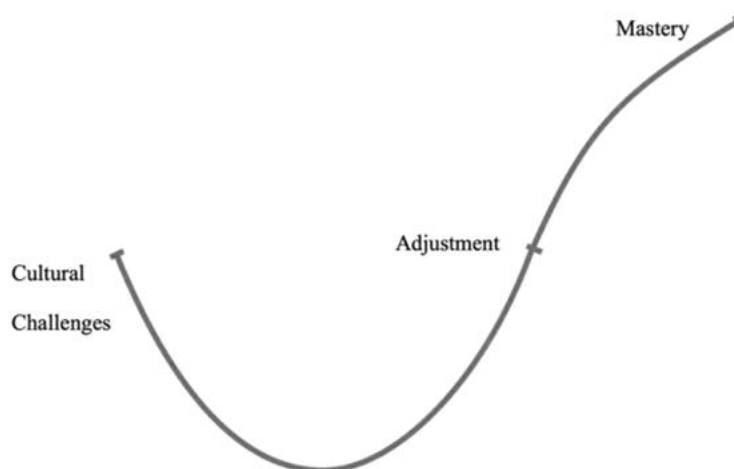


Figure 2. Dailey-Strand, C., Collins, H., & Callaghan, D. (2021). *J-shaped curve*

The J-curve model is more flexible than the Lysgaard U-curve model, as it recognizes that the process of cultural adaptation can vary depending on individual differences and the specific cultural context. It also acknowledges the emotional challenges involved in the process, such as the potential for a crisis phase, which may be more realistic for some individuals.

3.4. Inclusion through Cultural Adjustment

Cultural adjustment and inclusion are interrelated concepts that are important for understanding the experiences of individuals and groups in diverse cultural contexts (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Berry, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2019). The concept of inclusion has been widely researched in the diversity literature (e.g. Miller, 1998), with many researchers offering definitions and conceptualizations of the term. Shore et al. (2011) in their definition of inclusion define it as the feeling of belonging to the group and simultaneously the perception of the individuals as distinct and unique (Jansen et al., 2014). In their research, Jansen et al. add another factor in the conceptualization of inclusion, searching for a different element to address the need to be unique within a group, which introduces the spectator to their view on inclusion being two-dimensional: belonging and authenticity.

Cultural adjustment and inclusion are closely related concepts that are important for understanding the experiences of individuals and groups in diverse cultural contexts (Ward & Kennedy, 1994; Berry, 1997). Cultural adjustment refers to the process of becoming acclimated to the norms and expectations of a new culture. It involves the development of new skills and coping strategies to navigate cultural differences, as well as the development of a new sense of identity and understanding of the culture and oneself. Inclusion, on the other hand, refers to the act of creating a sense of belonging and acceptance for individuals and groups who may be perceived as different or

marginalized (Sue & Sue, 2019). It involves creating a welcoming and supportive environment where diversity is valued and respected.

When individuals and groups are included, they are more likely to feel comfortable and confident in their new cultural surroundings, which can facilitate the cultural adjustment process. Inclusion can also lead to a more harmonious and understanding society. However, inclusion does not always come naturally; it requires active effort, understanding, and commitment from individuals and organizations. It is important to be aware of the potential challenges that individuals from different cultures may face, and to take steps to address them. This can include providing support and resources, creating inclusive policies and practices, and promoting cross-cultural understanding and communication. Facilitating cultural adjustment can be achieved through inclusion efforts that create a sense of belonging and acceptance for individuals and groups from different cultures.

4. Methodology

In this next chapter, the methods that were used to answer the research question of this study will be elaborately discussed. The interviews were conducted to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants related to the changes in perception of cultural identity. This chapter outlines the research design, sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis process.

4.1. Research Design

The research design for this thesis project was qualitative in nature and was based on the principles of phenomenology, which involves exploring the subjective experiences of individuals related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For the means of this research, 10 in-depth, open interviews were conducted to gather data from participants and to explore the experiences and perspectives of participants related to

the research question. The choice of the semi-structured interviews was picked because of the form of the research. The main goal was that the interviewees open up about sensitive and personal subjects, something that could not be done by a structured interview with specific questions that could give a different character to the conversation.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews that were conducted in both private and public setting, based on the preference of the interviewee. The length of the interviews, as well as the space where the interview was conducted varied depending on several circumstances. The table below presents all the relevant information about the data gathering process.

Table 1. *Participants' information*

Participant Number	Group of Interviewee	Gender	Interview Space	Interview time
1	Refugee	Male	Bar	1h 24 mins
2	Expat	Female	House of the participant	1h 8mins
3	Expat	Male	University office	1h 32 mins
4	Expat	Female	House of the participant	1h 16mins
5	Expat	Male	House of the participant	1h 16mins

6	Refugee	Female	Café	46 mins
7	Refugee	Male	Café	1 h
8	Refugee	Male	Café	2h 30 mins
9	Refugee	Male	Plan Einstein	1h 16mins
10	Expat	Female	House of the participant	33 mins

All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants (see Appendix 9.1.) A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interviews, which included open-ended questions related to the changes in perception of cultural identity. This format enables the interviewer to address interesting topics and questions that arise during the interview, providing further insights. Interviewees are furthermore encouraged to elaborate on issues that arise in an exploratory manner (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). Overall, the same questions were posed, but not necessarily in the same order as the interviewees had the option to narrate in their own way.

In order to follow a semi-structured plan, a topic list was used as a guidance as well as a mind map in order to address relevant data. The interview plan consists of four parts that address a specific point in the interviewee's life as seen in the table below.

Table 2. *Form of the Interview*

Parts	Description	Guiding questions
First part – icebreaker	General information about the interviewee	Introductory questions
Second part	Focusing on the origins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is cultural identity to you? • Which do you consider your cultural identity? • What does it mean to you to be of that cultural identity?
Third Part	Procedure of moving to the Netherlands	Why did you choose the Netherlands?
Forth Part	Adaption	Inclusion in Utrecht

4.2. Setting

The setting in which the interviews were conducted is a big part of the research. Since the research topic touches sensitive subjects and involves a lot of emotional cargo, the interviewees were encouraged to conduct all the interviews in person and at an environment of their choice. For this reason, the interviews were conducted in bars, coffee places, university buildings as well as private properties (see table xx). My main goal as a researcher in this thesis was to help people trust me in order to confess their true feelings about their cultural identity.

4.3. Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy used in this study was convenience sampling. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research question and their ability to provide rich and detailed information related to the topic of the study. The inclusion criteria for participants were that they had to be adults, have experience relevant to the changes in perception of cultural identity, have a good knowledge of the English, have been in the Netherlands for at least 8 months and be willing to participate in an in-depth interview. The amount of time spent in the Netherlands was set to a minimum of 8 months in order to attempt fitting in the limits of the acculturation models that are used for the essay (see 3.3). Participants were recruited through personal networks and professional associations.

4.4. Procedure

The research interview was an important opportunity for the participants to express their experiences and feelings, often about challenging life events. It was made clear from the very beginning that there was no set format or structure for the interviews, encouraging the interviewees to speak freely and openly about their lives. This approach allowed the participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories and to express themselves in their own unique way.

As the interviews progressed, it became clear that the participants were eager to share their current life situations and the challenges they were currently facing. Some participants recounted stories of resilience and strength, while others shared painful memories of trauma and abuse. Despite the difficult nature of these stories, the interviewees showed a remarkable level of courage and openness in their willingness to share them.

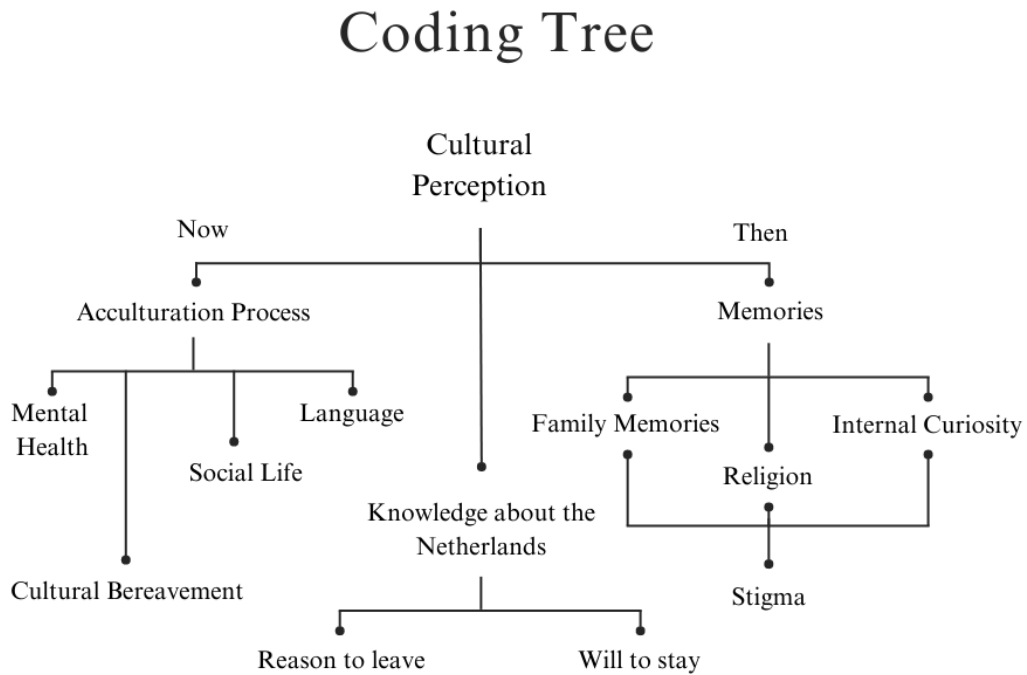
During some of the interviews, the intensity of the emotions and memories being shared resulted in tears and emotional outbursts. However, I attempted to provide a supportive environment and showed empathy and understanding toward the interviewees, allowing them to feel comfortable and safe in sharing their stories.

Overall, the research interview provided a valuable opportunity for the participants to speak openly and freely about their lives and experiences.

4.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word and the software Otter.ai, and the transcripts were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. In the course of conducting qualitative research, it is not uncommon for the coding process to evolve as the data analysis progresses. In my study, I employed both inductive and deductive coding methods, drawing on my theoretical framework to create initial codes that would guide the analysis. However, as I delved deeper into the data, I encountered unexpected insights and nuances that prompted me to revise and refine my coding scheme. This iterative process allowed me to capture the complexity and richness of the data, as well as to uncover new themes and patterns that had not been anticipated in advance.

Figure 3. *Coding Tree Chart*



Moreover, my research question also underwent a transformation as I immersed myself in the data. While I had initially formulated a specific question that aligned with my theoretical framework, the data led me to reframe and expand my focus. Through careful analysis of the data, I identified key themes and issues that demanded further exploration, prompting me to modify my research question accordingly. This iterative process of data analysis and refinement allowed me to arrive at a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Overall, my experience underscores the importance of flexibility and openness in qualitative research, as well as the need to allow the data to guide the research process rather than simply relying on preconceived notions or theoretical frameworks. At the same time, I

was highlighting the “quotes” that seemed relevant to be mentioned in the research paper.

The codes were compared across the data set to identify patterns and relationships, which were used to develop themes. The themes were reviewed and refined multiple times to ensure they accurately reflected the data.

4.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time (see Appendix 9.1). The research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines set out by Utrecht University.

5. Analysis

5.1. Memories of Culture

Following Berry (1997), in order to conduct a thorough study of acculturation, it is utterly important to start with a comprehensive examination of the two societal contexts: that of origin and that of settlement (p. 16). The interviewees of this research, being a limited sample of 10 people, presented their various family backgrounds that portrayed their perceptions of themselves in their societal context, providing the researcher with information about their state of origin and their cultural backgrounds.

5.1.1. Internal Curiosity

During the course of the interviews, it became evident that the vast majority of the participants expressed a profound sense of incongruity with the dominant cultural values and norms that surrounded them. It is noteworthy that this sentiment of nonconformity was more prevalent among the group of expat interviewees, rather than

the refugees. This was reflected in their inner thoughts and feelings, which were often at odds with the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of their social milieu. The participants frequently described a pervasive feeling of being out of place or disconnected from their surroundings, as if they were somehow different from the people around them. This sentiment was articulated in various ways throughout the interviews, with many participants using phrases such as "not feeling in the right place" or "feeling like an outsider." The theme of nonconformity emerged as a recurring thread that ran through the narratives of the participants, highlighting the complexity of individual identity and the challenges of navigating cultural expectations in contemporary society.

Quote 1. Participant 2, Female, 4 years in the NL

There have been periods or situations that I've struggled with where I didn't feel like in the right place [...]. Like it's not in a way that outside is better. Like I don't have this [...] illusion.

Quote 2. Participant 5, Male, 3 years in the NL

Like my father, he never went out of his hometown. [...] That was his entire life. His brother, same, same thing. And we are not like that. We like to explore. We like to go to unknown.

Conversely, when the refugee participants were asked about their thoughts on leaving their home country prior to the onset of conflict, the overwhelming majority reported that they had not entertained any such notions. Instead, they expressed a sense of contentment with their local communities and a deep attachment to their cultural and social roots. For these individuals, displacement was not a choice, but rather a consequence of external circumstances beyond their control. It is important to note that while the expat interviewees had actively sought out new cultural experiences, the

refugee participants had been forced to leave their homes, not expressing a preexisting desire to leave.

Of particular significance is the fact that the refugee participants' willingness to leave their home country underwent a drastic shift in response to the Arab Spring (see 2.2). As one of the respondents put it in their interviews when they were explaining about the reasons why they left:

Quote 3. Participant 6, Female, 4 years in the NL

There is no life in Syria!

The political turmoil, deteriorating financial situation, and growing concerns for personal safety created a sense of urgency among the participants, prompting them to reassess their previous contentment with their local communities. The prospect of a new world with new opportunities emerged as a powerful motivator for these individuals, leading them to view displacement as a viable option. Despite the challenges and uncertainties associated with leaving one's home country, all of the refugee interviewees expressed a strong desire to leave Syria with certainty.

5.1.2. Family heritage and early memories

Culture is an intricate and multifaceted concept that is shaped by a wide array of factors. This passage will investigate thus the importance of family in the emotional and intellectual support during the procedure of decision-making. One of the most significant and profound influences on an individual's cultural perceptions as well as their decisions is their family background. Numerous scholarly studies have documented the critical role of the family in shaping cultural values and beliefs. For instance, Soto-Santiago and Galvin (2020) emphasized the importance of family socialization in transmitting cultural values and shaping identity. The interviewees, being a limited sample of people have presented their diverse backgrounds, focusing

on whether the support of their family and social circle. Both in the case of refugee and expat groups of interviewees, the vast majority of the families have been supportive of the individual's choice to leave and explore their potential furthermore, even though this was not the conventional societal choice, as presented in the quote below:

Quote 4. Participant 10, Female, 3 years in the NL

But I would say that in India, when I was growing up, it was not really common for girls to, you know, pursue education or do their job. It was always a mindset that “Oh yeah you're a girl. You have to, you know, get married have kids and that kind of thing”. But my parents were pretty broad minded and they always wanted me to study and you know, have my job and do whatever I want to. And so in that term, I was very fortunate to be being grown up there and with my mom and dad. So that was easy.

Quote 5. Participant 2, Female, 4 years in the NL

[...]like I always felt like not that I felt different or something but yeah, I was really always curious about the outside world and things so I and I had the chance to through my dad to to travel a bit and to sort of be exposed to other cultures. So and I just did just nurtured my curiosity and just wanted to go after this more and more and more.

Naturally, the cases of war refugees differ from that of other expats due to the critical influence of political instability and safety concerns on their decision to leavemaking process. In many cases, refugees flee their home countries due to a variety of complex factors, including war, persecution, and human rights violations. As a result, their decision to migrate is often not voluntary and may be influenced by critical life-threatening circumstances. Apart from this, most of the interviewees reported that their immigration was inevitable and supported by the people around them.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the limited sample size employed in this study precludes the possibility of drawing big scale conclusions, as the findings merely

pertain to a highly specific range of family backgrounds. It is thus imperative to exercise caution when extrapolating the results to other populations, as they may not accurately reflect the broader population. Such limitations must be taken into account when interpreting the study's results and drawing inferences based on them.

5.1.3. Stigma and cultural congruity

The data collected in the research highlights the relationship between stigmatization and marginalization with individuals' sense of belonging to their country of origin. According to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory, people derive a sense of self-identity and self-esteem from the social groups to which they belong. When individuals experience stigmatization and marginalization due to factors such as ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status, they may feel excluded from their society and disidentify with the larger group (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012). This process can lead to a sense of alienation, a lack of belonging, and can even result in people rejecting their national identity (Brubaker, 1992).

This theme of the research does not differentiate the two groups of interviewees, as the feeling of marginalization was part of some expats' narratives as well as some refugees. The stigma of privilege, for example, was one of the patterns detected in two of the expats' interviews, as presented in the quotes below:

Quote 6. Participant 2, Female, 4 years in the NL

But for instance, like from a very young age, actually, like from yeah, in primary school. Like the fact that my so my dad is a pilot so he happened to travel a lot. And, and then like we had, like lived in in the UK. And somehow I was not bragging about it in any way. But I was in a small like primary school like in the countryside. And so I mean, of course, everyone knows everyone's life. And then I was actually turned out to be a bit

stigmatized. [...] And so I was sort of pointed out for being different though I didn't feel different, but people were like picking on things and sort of like making me self-aware.

Quote 7. Participant 3, Male, 5 years in the NL

I think I just [...] don't like the kind of privilege that comes with. [...] it makes me feel like I have some kind of burden to be better. [...] since I remember but from a quite a young age that this was an issue for me. I was kind of ashamed and embarrassed. I guess that they (my parents) come from a wealthy background.

Moreover, the refugees also belonged to smaller ethnic groups within the same country, a fact that highlights how they have been long subjected to discrimination and repression. For instance, Kurds in Syria have long been subjected to discrimination and repression by the Syrian government, which has resulted in a lack of recognition of their identity, language, and culture (Gunter, 2011). Similarly, Palestinians in Syria have been marginalized and excluded from Syrian society due to their status as refugees, which has resulted in a lack of access to education and job opportunities (Al-Hakim, 2016).

The rates of mental illness among ethnic minorities may be influenced by ethnic density, which is the proportion of a particular ethnic group in relation to the total population of a specified area. When cultural and social characteristics of an individual differ significantly from those of the surrounding population, a sense of alienation may occur, whereas a sense of belonging may arise if the individual and the surrounding population share similar cultural and social characteristics. Bhugra (2004) highlights the significance of factors such as ethnic and cultural congruity, interaction patterns, and cultural identity in the emergence and maintenance of mental distress in migrants. Cultural congruity refers to the degree of consistency or discrepancy between an individual's culture, beliefs, and expectations and those of the surrounding population.

The emotional impact of stigmatization, as expressed by the participants of the research can be summarized in this quote:

Quote 8. Participant 2, Female, 4 years in the NL

But so when I talk about the stigma, it was not like every day and that that was things like this, but night comes every now and then... it's an injury!

5.1.4. Religion

A deeper understanding of the role of religion in cultural perception is essential for comprehending the diversity and complexity of human societies and cultures. Religion is an integral component of cultural perception and identity, and it has significant implications for human behavior and societal norms. Religion provides a framework for understanding the meaning and purpose of life and helps individuals navigate life's challenges, providing a sense of continuity and stability in the face of rapid social and cultural change (Geertz, 1973).

It is undoubtedly interesting how the concept of religion is mentioned and discussed further by the refugees, while the expats present themselves detached from the concept of religion. As mentioned before, this gives info about the country of origin.

Syria is known for its religious diversity, with a variety of religious groups coexisting within its borders. Islam is the predominant religion in Syria, with the majority of the population following Sunni Islam². However, there are also significant

² Shia and Sunni Islam are the two major branches of Islam, with some significant differences in beliefs, practices, and leadership. Some of the key differences between Shia and Sunni Islam are:

1. Succession: "Sunnis believe that the first four caliphs, including Ali, were rightfully appointed as leaders after the death of the Prophet Muhammad" (Esposito, 2011, p. 7). "Shias believe that Ali was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad and that the leadership of the Muslim community should have remained in the Prophet's family" (Esposito, 2011, p. 8).
2. Leadership: "Sunnis believe in the consensus of the community in selecting religious leadership, while Shias believe in divine appointment through the Prophet's family" (Esposito, 2011, p. 8).
3. Prayer: "Shia Muslims combine their midday and afternoon prayers and their evening and night prayers, while Sunni Muslims pray them separately" (Esposito, 2011, p. 9).
4. Religious Practices: "Shia and Sunni Islam have differences in religious practices, such as the way they mourn and the observance of religious holidays" (Esposito, 2011, p. 10).

Shia Muslim, Alawite, and Druze populations in the country (Khoury, 2013). Christianity has also been present in Syria since ancient times, with various denominations such as Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches. In addition, Syria is home to several smaller religious communities, including Yazidis, Ismailis, and Jews (Khoury, 2013). Despite this religious diversity, there have been conflicts between different religious groups in Syria, particularly during the ongoing civil war. The Syrian government has been accused of favoring certain religious groups, leading to tensions and violence between groups (Nasr, 2013). Nevertheless, religious diversity remains a defining characteristic of Syria's cultural landscape.

The Syrian interviewees, comprising individuals from Druze, Ismaili, Muslim, and atheist religious backgrounds, present a diverse sample of perspectives on their past experiences. While refugees often frame their narratives around their religious affiliations, the group of expats does not focus on this aspect of their identity. This highlights the role of religion in shaping the experiences of refugees, as it can serve as a source of continuity and meaning in the face of displacement and loss. Conversely, the lack of emphasis on religion among expats may reflect a shift in identity and a greater sense of adaptation to the host society of the Netherlands. These findings suggest the importance of considering the role of religion in shaping the experiences and identities of refugees and expats, and the dynamic nature of cultural identity in the context of migration.

An additional noteworthy observation is that refugees who have resided for an extended period in the Netherlands tend to exhibit a sense of disengagement from religion. This trend may be attributed to the influence of the Dutch cultural context and

5. Religious Authorities: "Shia Islam has a hierarchical religious authority structure, with a Grand Ayatollah at the top. Sunni Islam does not have such a hierarchy and relies more on the interpretation of the Quran and the hadith by individual scholars" (Esposito, 2011, p. 12).

its values, which tend to emphasize secularism and individualism. The distancing from religion may also reflect a process of adaptation and integration into the host society, whereby refugees seek to align their beliefs and practices with the social norms of their new environment. These findings underscore the complex interplay between cultural identity, religious affiliation, and the context of migration, highlighting the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural identity over time.

5.2. “A leap to the unknown”

5.2.1. *Why the Netherlands?*

“But, why the Netherlands?”. Once this particular question was posed to the interviewees, it was observed that all of them exhibited a level of uncertainty in providing a direct response.

In analyzing the data collected from the interviews, it is crucial to categorize the participants into two distinct groups. The first group shares a common pattern, which includes individuals from various backgrounds, such as Indian, Serbian, and Polish, who have faced adverse political situations, limited financial prospects, and a lack of access to education. In some cases, the desire to provide a better future for their families was also a motivating factor for their relocation. The second group consisted of Syrian participants who had experienced the devastating effects of war, and faced the challenge of societal narrow-mindedness and limited opportunities. Despite the differences in their circumstances, both groups shared a common pattern of feeling that there was no future for themselves or their families in their current situation. As a result, they embarked on the difficult and uncertain journey of seeking a better future elsewhere. These findings underscore the importance of creating opportunities and prospects for individuals and families to realize their potential and feel a sense of belonging in their communities.

5.2.2. Research about the Netherlands

Quote 9. Participant 1, 8 years in the NL

I didn't know much about the Netherlands. Anyways, I always knew that they have a lot of cows here.

The available data suggests that a majority of individuals immigrating to the Netherlands did not conduct in-depth research about the country prior to their arrival. Specifically, none of the respondents indicated having undertaken extensive research before their migration. Among expats, the most commonly cited reason for moving to the Netherlands was educational opportunities, with three-fifths of respondents identifying this as their primary motivation. For another two-fifths of expats, the desire for a better future for their families was the primary driver of their migration. In contrast, all refugees cited family reunification and positive perceptions of the country as the main factors motivating their move to the Netherlands. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the factors that shape migration decisions and the need for effective communication and support for newcomers who may lack extensive prior knowledge of their host society.

5.3. Acculturation and Cultural Bereavement

5.3.1. Cultural Assimilation

The process of cultural assimilation has been one of the most important parts for this research, since it presents the pieces of the puzzle that may help or be a burden to the acculturation of the migrant to the country of settlement.

Syrian Refugees are proactively looking for ways to be assimilated and build their life again. Despite the challenges faced by these refugees, they have shown resilience and an unwavering determination to rebuild their lives. Irrespective of their duration of stay, ranging from eight months to eight years, these refugees strive to

integrate themselves into the host society. They all explained how important it is to feel included and rebuild their life in the country of settlement, highlighting the need to be assimilated. They are volunteering for jobs in order to feel useful even if their asylum seeking face is a burden to their professional development. Education is essential for personal development and helps refugees acquire the skills they need to reintegrate into the workforce. At the same time, those with educational backgrounds are demanding job opportunities that match their skills, allowing them to make the most significant contribution to the host community. All the refugees express their gratitude for the local NGOs and organizations that guide them and help them acquire their rights.

Of course, there are several occasions where the cultural differences as well as the institutional differences have played a major role in the feeling of readjustment. The following quote describes this procedure:

Quote 10. Participant 9, 8 months in the NL

Sometimes it is hard because I lived in Turkey for eight years. And all what I learned in Turkey. I feel like it doesn't work for me here is different standards. I feel like it's useless, like almost useless. I mean, laws in Turkey are different here in the Netherlands, culture are also is also different. People are different. Something I feel like all what I have learned in Turkey doesn't work for me.

As explained in the quote above, the immigrating populations experience the situation of having to readapt to different types of environments every time they would have to move. New environments always equal new rules and new circumstances, a fact that was proven a difficulty for the participant.

5.3.2. Language

The importance of acquiring knowledge of the Dutch language in order to achieve cultural assimilation and community inclusion was a big part of the interviews.

The belief that language acquisition is synonymous with cultural assimilation and community integration has become commonplace among the personal views of the interviewees and thus a pattern. Even if the language was presented as “hard to learn”, complex and not easily like, the participants expressed the importance of learning the Dutch language in order to be a part of the local community or even a necessity for communicating with Dutch people that do not know English. Depending on their time spent in the Netherlands, they either speak the language already or are in the procedure of learning.

Despite the acknowledgement between the interviewees of the importance of language acquisition for integration in the Netherlands, a paradox has been identified; the experience of feeling pointed out because of the accent. One interviewee noted that even after speaking the language for a period of 40 years, they might not necessarily feel fully integrated into the Dutch community. Then, the knowledge of the English of Dutch people led another interviewee to stress out that they felt awkward speaking in Dutch with their colleagues, since their original communication was in English. These observations, as well as many more individual ones detected in this research, suggest that the relationship between language acquisition and cultural assimilation is not a straightforward one, and that there are multiple factors that can affect an individual's sense of belonging in a new community.

5.3.3. Community within the community

Another interesting pattern identified during the process of the interviews was the tendency of expats to create smaller communities inside during their acculturation process. Both groups create micro communities within the main community of the Netherlands; smaller groups of friends of social acquaintances with which they share common characteristics.

A prevailing pattern among expats was the formation of initial social circles composed primarily of other international individuals, with the potential for integration into Dutch social networks later on. The participant number 10 below presents a great example of this:

Quote 11. Participant 10, female, 3 years in the NL

So yeah, I did not have Dutch friends in the university at all.

When asked about her social circle in the first years of university, she stated that her main friend groups consisted of international students and she had no Dutch friends. It was later on in her life that she managed to integrate, creating relationships with Dutch people.

Quote 12. Participant 10, Female, 3 years in the NL

That can help me integrate into the culture because his friends were all Dutch. His parents are Dutch and now I feel more part of his family and so I like it that way. I think, yeah, he was the one who helped me break this or helped me integrating the culture.

Conversely, some participants noted ongoing challenges in their interactions with Dutch individuals, highlighting potential cultural barriers that may impede their assimilation. The stereotypes of “Dutch directness” and “individualism” were very often a primal part of the conversation, as many participants felt that they could not relate to the people in the Netherlands due to different life experience. However, this has not been a common experience for all the expat participants, as some stated that they find it easy to “fit in” and “integrate” with Dutch people since the very beginning, while they felt they are very welcoming. Even in the latter case though, the international group of friends was existent. As described by Sarah Ahmed, “it is the uncommon

estrangement of migration itself that allows migrant subjects to remake what it is they might yet have in common” (Ahmed, 1999 p.344).

During the course of the interviews, it became apparent that the participants from a refugee background reported a greater level of integration within the Dutch community compared to those from an expat or expatriate background. They acknowledged having a multitude of Dutch acquaintances and peers, and even claimed that their social circles were predominantly composed of native Dutch individuals. However, it is noteworthy that despite this perceived sense of social connectedness, some refugees still reported having trouble in establishing close interpersonal relationships with Dutch individuals.

5.3.4. Cultural Perception

The changes in the perception of the individuals’ cultural perception were gradual and unavoidable. The distinction between forced migrants and expats is an important one to consider in discussions of identity and belonging in the Netherlands.

The participants noted that time changes everything and yet nothing at the same time. Inevitably, all the participants confessed that their relationship with their countries of origin has changed over the years and is continuously changing. The members of minority ethnic groups continue to maintain their sense of identity even after many years of living in the Netherlands. For example, a Kurdish refugee interviewed for the study on forced migration noted that they still feel their Kurdish identity. On the other hand, some refugees have come to feel a sense of “Dutchness” after a number of years in the country. Expats, on the other hand, often preserve their original identities, but may still struggle with a sense of not belonging in their adopted country. As an expat, put it, "I never felt like I belonged here. I was just kind of an outsider."

Some of the participants also challenge the idea of nationalities, as an inclusive concept:

Quote 13. Participant 6, 4 years in the NL

"We're all human beings, we're all the same."

While most participants acknowledge their roots, many express a sense of freedom in their new surroundings, using words like "free" and "freedom" to describe their experience. However, there is still a pervasive sense of alienation among some. Despite this, the Dutch culture and society are not actively promoting the rampant assimilation of people, and individuals are encouraged to be themselves and express their thoughts freely, as well as to be their true selves within the country of settlement; not hiding their cultural identity.

As mentioned above, the expats' internal curiosity led to them stating that they don't feel like they belong anymore. Despite their acknowledgement of their cultural roots, these individuals also recognize that their self-perception has undergone a significant transformation; a realization that undergoes some more negative paths as identified in the quote below:

Quote 14. Participant 3, male, 5 years in the NL

It's so easy being an expat, but if you live in neither of the places really, I think it's more difficult because you're just at some point you're alienated both from your country and for home and from the place where you're living.

5.4. The impossibility of returning

The responses of a diverse group of participants, including both expats and refugees, were aligned in their description when they were asked about their willingness to remain in their current country of residence. A majority of the participants, including the Syrian refugee who shared her experiences, expressed their unequivocal desire to

leave their current country due to limited opportunities and unfavorable living conditions. Specifically, the group of expats cited the lack of a future in their current country, while the group of refugees explained that they felt their current place of residence offered them no life. The refugee participant added that, given the ongoing conflict in their home country, staying there would not only be detrimental to their future prospects but could also potentially result in death. The Netherlands was identified as a preferred destination, where participants hoped to find stability and improve their living conditions.

While some participants, such as the younger members of the group, were still weighing their options, the majority had already settled into their new lives and were in a different stage of life. Despite their differing circumstances, all participants were actively seeking employment and endeavoring to become active members of their new communities.

However, it is worth noting that some members of the group expressed doubts about their willingness to remain in the country long-term. For instance, a Ph.D. student participant mentioned that they did not see themselves staying in the country beyond their studies, and a refugee participant who had observed that many international students who came to the country did not seem to be interested in settling there permanently shared this sentiment.

Overall, the responses of the participants provide insights into the complex and multifaceted experiences of individuals who migrate to other countries seeking better opportunities and living conditions. Their future is in a way blurry and their own decision may depend on family, partners or academic opportunities. Even though all the participants are going through undoubtedly different life situations, what ties them all together is one idea; the impossibility of returning.

6. Discussion

Migration is a complex process that involves numerous psychological and sociological factors. One important aspect to consider is the cultural background of the individual and the society they have migrated from and to. According to Berry (1997), the acculturation process, or the psychological changes and adaptations that occur when individuals encounter a new culture, can have a significant impact on an individual's mental health and well-being. In particular, the degree of similarity or difference between the individual's cultural background and the new culture can affect their level of acculturation stress, or the stress resulting from the process of adapting to a new culture (Berry, Kim, & Minde, 1987).

Culture is a complex construct that can manifest in numerous ways, including values, beliefs, social norms, and attitudes. Two broad cultural dimensions that have been extensively studied are individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultures value personal autonomy, self-reliance, and independence, while collectivistic cultures emphasize group harmony, interdependence, and cooperation (Triandis, 1995).

The cultural dissonance resulting from the clash between individualistic and collectivistic cultural values can lead to significant difficulties during the migration process. As Bhugra (2004) suggests, individuals who migrate from a collectivistic culture to an individualistic one may struggle to adjust to the new cultural norms, especially if they hold collectivistic beliefs themselves. This cultural mismatch can result in feelings of isolation, a lack of social support, and difficulties in establishing meaningful relationships in the new culture (Bhugra, 2004).

In this comparative analysis of the adaptation of expats and refugees in the Netherlands, it is essential to distinguish between these two groups. Expats are

individuals who voluntarily choose to live in a foreign country for various reasons, such as work or education, while refugees are forced to flee their homeland due to persecution, war, or violence.

The expat focus group reported a U-curve of cultural adjustment, which implies that they initially experienced a high degree of culture shock, followed by an adjustment phase, and eventually settled into a new cultural environment. However, as explained in the theoretical framework, this may not be entirely accurate since participants exhibited varying degrees of resilience in different situations. Some expats adapted more easily to the new culture and had a quicker adjustment phase, while others struggled more with culture shock and required more time to adapt (Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

On the other hand, for the group of refugees, cultural challenges were an inevitable and predominant aspect of their initial months in the Netherlands. They exhibited a J-curve model of adaptation, whereby they experienced a gradual transition from cultural challenges to successful adaptation. The J-curve model suggests that refugees experienced a significant degree of culture shock upon arrival in the Netherlands, followed by a gradual improvement in adaptation as they learned to navigate and adapt to the new cultural environment.

Depending on their length of stay in the Netherlands, it was evident at which chronological point they were in. For example, refugees who had been in the Netherlands for a longer period had a better understanding of the culture and had adapted more fully than those who had arrived more recently.

Moreover, the discussion of the reaction of the Netherlands to the newcomers and the distinctions made are important to be addressed. According to the experiences

reported by the expat and refugee focus groups, there are significant differences in the way newcomers are treated in the Netherlands.

The expat focus group reported more issues with the culture and Dutch people, indicating that it was more challenging for them to establish connections with the locals. This finding is supported by a study conducted by Voogd and Penninx (2018), which revealed that expats in the Netherlands often feel isolated and struggle to integrate into Dutch society. They also face challenges related to language and cultural differences, which can hinder their ability to form social connections and establish a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, the refugee focus group highlighted that they are surrounded by Dutch people and have established their main friend groups consisting of Dutch people. This finding is consistent with research conducted by Lensink and Schmeets (2019), which suggests that refugees in the Netherlands have a strong desire to integrate into Dutch society and form social connections with Dutch people. The study also found that refugees who had more extensive social networks with Dutch people had a higher level of social integration and overall life satisfaction.

In addition to the cultural mismatch, migration can also be associated with other stressors, such as language barriers, discrimination, and economic difficulties (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). These stressors can have a cumulative effect on an individual's mental health and well-being, potentially leading to psychological distress and mental health disorders (Alegria et al., 2008). PTSD as well as other mental health issues are more than important to be addressed and further researched.

6.1. Limitations

The present study encountered several limitations that are noteworthy. One of the primary limitations was the constrained word count and limited timeframe for

conducting the research. These limitations restricted the number of interviews that could be conducted and hence the amount of data collected. The researcher made considerable efforts to locate and contact individuals from the two groups for the study, followed by a meticulous data collection process. Despite these efforts, the number of interviews conducted, ten in total, with five from each group, may have been insufficient to generate comprehensive findings that could offer a thorough understanding of the research topic. It would be important to state that saturation for the means of this research has been reached; making it more relevant than ever to investigate the results of a bigger scale research that could enrich the findings.

Furthermore, the nature of the research topic, which focused on emotional burden and issues that delved deep into the interviewees' feelings, posed several challenges. The interviews needed to be conducted in an environment that provided a therapeutic and safe space for the participants to share their experiences. This approach required patience and empathy from the researcher and often necessitated extending the planned duration of the interviews.

Another significant challenge encountered during the data collection process was the disclosure of deeply distressing experiences by some of the interviewees. Two participants shared harrowing experiences that had a profound impact on their mental health and well-being. In one instance, a participant became emotional and cried during the interview, while four other participants disclosed their struggles with mental health issues. These disclosures further emphasized the need for a compassionate and empathetic approach to conducting the research.

Despite these limitations, I endeavored to provide a comparative analysis of the two groups, which would serve as a starting point for future research. The aforementioned challenges constituted a significant aspect of the research process,

notwithstanding their presence did not impede the attainment of research objectives. The study findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the topic and highlight the need for further research in this area.

6.2. Suggestions for Further Research

Multiculturalism in the Netherlands has been a topic of discussion for decades. The country has a long history of immigration and diversity, with large populations of Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese people.

Since the 1950's the Netherlands has implemented various policies that focus on multiculturalism, since the immigration waves of the 50's and the 60's have led to an important change in the consistency of the population. According to a report by the Dutch government, "about 22% of the population are of non-Dutch origin," and this number is expected to continue to rise (CBS, 2020). However, the idea of multiculturalism has been met with mixed reactions in the Netherlands, with some supporting the integration of different cultures and others advocating for assimilation (Joppke, 2017). Despite these debates, the Dutch government has implemented policies to promote multiculturalism and encourage diversity, such as offering language classes and supporting cultural festivals (Kymlicka, 2017) and it has been praised for its unique approach to multiculturalism, which prioritizes integration and inclusion over assimilation. According to Huijnk, Gijsberts, and Dagevos (2016), newcomers to the Netherlands are given the opportunity to voluntarily adapt to their new environment, rather than being forced to assimilate to Dutch culture. This approach is in stark contrast to the unicultural approach adopted by many other European countries, which often impose strict cultural and linguistic requirements on refugees and expats (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014).

The Netherlands' multicultural approach has been lauded for its ability to foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion among diverse populations. This approach is reflected in the country's policies on integration and citizenship, which emphasize mutual respect and equal opportunities for all. For example, the Dutch government provides language and civic integration courses to newcomers, as well as support for finding housing and employment (Huijnk et al., 2016). In addition, as mentioned by the participants, the so-called “taal café” initiatives are offered to the newcomers in the Netherlands by local organizations and NGOs.

Despite the benefits of the Netherlands' approach to multiculturalism, there have also been criticisms of the country's integration policies. Some argue that the emphasis on voluntary integration puts too much pressure on newcomers to adapt to Dutch culture, without sufficient support for maintaining their own cultural identity (Sarikakis & Sükösd, 2013). Others contend that the Dutch government's emphasis on "Dutchness" and "core values" has created a sense of exclusion among certain groups, particularly those who are seen as not fully embracing Dutch culture (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2010).

The Netherlands' strategy for multiculturalism has generated extensive deliberation and scrutiny, not only concerning the nation's diverse population, but also for other nations striving to create inclusive and integrated communities. The Netherlands' approach to multiculturalism has been shaped by its historical concept of pillarization³, which is a system that separated the population into distinct religious and ideological groups. Despite this system being abolished in the 1960s, its legacy persists and continues to affect the Dutch approach to multiculturalism. This research partially

³ Pillarization is a historical concept in the Netherlands that separated the population into distinct religious and ideological groups. This system was abolished in the 1960s, but its legacy continues to influence Dutch society, including its approach to multiculturalism. (van Krieken, 2016).

serves as a small-scale case study on Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, juxtaposed with a group of migrants who opted for the country as their settlement. The outcomes of this research reveal that the backgrounds of each group of participants play a crucial role in determining their acculturation process in the Netherlands. There is a need for further investigation in this area to explore how the multicultural approach influences the experiences of newcomers based on their cultural heritage. Specifically, case studies should be conducted to assess the adaptation of various ethnic groups, including ethnic minorities from the same country, such as Syrian ethnic minorities, as well as distinct expat groups in the Netherlands. It is more than vital to investigate the way in which intention can mediate the acculturation process. A research could be conducted with quantitative method. The future researcher could create a questionnaire based on the topics that emerged from this study.

Acculturation, defined as the process by which individuals or groups adopt the cultural norms and practices of the society they are living in, is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Understanding the role of intention in this process is crucial, as it may have significant implications for the psychological well-being and social integration of individuals undergoing acculturation.

To shed light on this issue, a research study utilizing quantitative methods could be undertaken. The researcher may consider constructing a questionnaire that covers topics that have arisen from previous research on acculturation and intention as well as the topics that emerged from this current study; religion, stigma, cultural bereavement. This may include questions on the extent to which individuals are motivated to learn about and participate in the customs and practices of the new culture, as well as their level of commitment to preserving their own cultural heritage.

Overall, an investigation into the mediating role of intention in acculturation has the potential to enhance our understanding of this complex process and inform interventions aimed at facilitating positive outcomes for individuals undergoing this experience.

7. Conclusion

As everything historical, cultural identity is constantly changing and transforming. This study aimed to explore the influence of immigration and acculturation on the development and expression of cultural identity and inclusion within the Dutch context. Through the analysis of the sub-questions, it was found that the interplay between cultural identity and acculturation significantly affects the experiences of migrants in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the experiences of refugees and expats in the process of cultural adjustment in the local community of Utrecht were found to differ. Lastly, the perception of inclusion within the local community of Utrecht was found to be a crucial factor in the successful integration of migrants into Dutch society. Overall, it is important to consider the cultural background of the individual and the society they have migrated from and to, as well as the unique stressors they may face during the migration process. By understanding the complex interplay between culture and migration, mental health professionals can develop more effective interventions to support individuals during this challenging time.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on cultural identity, immigration, and acculturation, and provides insights that can inform policy and practice to better support the integration of migrants into the Dutch society. Further research is needed to continue exploring the complexities of cultural identity and acculturation in the context of migration and to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of migrants in the Netherlands.

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9. Appendix

9.1. Consent form template



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DECLARATION OF CONSENT for participation in:
“The gradual changes in the perception of Cultural Identity”

I hereby confirm:

- that I have been satisfactorily informed about the study through the information letter;
- that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that any questions I asked have been satisfactorily answered;
- that I have had the opportunity to carefully consider participation in this study;
- that I voluntarily consent to participating.

I consent to the following:

- the data collected will be obtained for scientific purposes and retained as stated in the information letter;
- the collected, coded and anonymized research data may be shared with other scientists and/or re-used to answer other research questions;
- the collected, coded and anonymized research data may be published;
- audio recordings will be made for scientific purposes (see also the box below on the sharing and reuse of this data).

I understand that:

- I have the right to withdraw my consent to the use of data, as stated in the information letter.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date, town/city: _____

Declaration on data reuse: **to be completed after the data collection has taken place**
(please tick as applicable and sign below):

(1) Do you agree to the sharing of the collected audio recordings, which are not anonymous, with other researchers for research purposes?

Yes, I agree. No, I do not agree.

(2) Occasionally, audio recordings may be shown in scientific lectures or lessons. Do you agree to the collected audio recordings being used for these purposes?

Yes, I agree. No, I do not agree.

Signature: _____

To be completed by the researcher carrying out the study: Name: _____

I declare that I have explained to the above-mentioned participant what participation in the study entails. Signature: _____

Date: _____