

## Navigating Integration in The Netherlands: Syrian Refugees, Digital Practices, and Inclusive Communication

Noemi Mena Montes <sup>1</sup> , Yiran Yang <sup>2</sup>, and Milou Visser <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> International Business Communication (Faculty of Arts), Radboud University, The Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Independent Researcher, The Netherlands

<sup>3</sup> Independent Researcher, The Netherlands

**Correspondence:** Noemi Mena Montes (noemi.menamontes@ru.nl)

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### Abstract

This study explores how digital communication technologies and informal actors facilitate and shape the communication and network development that support Syrian refugees in navigating integration in the Netherlands. It examines how digitalization introduces both opportunities and challenges in addressing language barriers, cultural differences, and bureaucratic procedures. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 14 Syrian refugees and six Arabic-speaking mentors on whom they relied for support, the study demonstrates the significance of digital technologies and social networks in helping refugees navigate the increasingly digitalized Dutch welfare state and foster new social connections. The findings highlight the potential of platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook groups, and other online communities as dynamic tools for facilitating access to institutional information and for establishing both online and offline social networks. These networks are essential for building trust, which in turn supports the provision of translations, information verification, and navigation of digitalized procedures. In addition, the results show that offline interactions with mentors and intermediaries offer translated content and culturally contextualized guidance that further enhances integration. Overall, the study conceptualizes integration as a relational process shaped by the interplay between online and offline interactions.

### Keywords

digital tools; digitalization; media literacy; mentors/intermediaries; misinformation and migration; social media; social networks; socio-economic inclusion; Syrian refugees

## 1. Introduction

Digital communication technologies are essential for societal integration. They foster daily opportunities for inclusion, engagement, and belonging in increasingly varied and digital environments. Understanding integration processes through inclusive communication and digital engagement highlights the relational and co-constructed nature of inclusion, where both technological frameworks and human interactions determine access to participation.

In recent decades, global displacement caused by armed conflict, civil turmoil, and human rights abuses has reached unprecedented levels. The Syrian conflict is among the most enduring catastrophes, displacing millions from their homes. A considerable number of Syrians have sought asylum in Europe, with the Netherlands becoming an important destination. Between 2014 and 2024, the Dutch government granted residence permits to 157,000 Syrian nationals (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2025), positioning Syrians as one of the most prominent refugee demographics in the country.

Syrian refugees can suffer significantly beyond the simple loss of their homes and possessions. The traditional customs, dialects, and community networks that traditionally shaped their identity and cultivated a sense of belonging are now inaccessible to them. Upon their arrival in the Netherlands, Syrian refugees must navigate unfamiliar systems and services while facing considerable institutional and societal expectations to integrate swiftly and effectively. Although many demonstrate a willingness to participate in their new community, their efforts are often hindered by various obstacles, such as psychological stress, social isolation, language barriers, and inadequate familiarity with increasingly digitalized bureaucratic processes (Dagevos et al., 2018). These challenges collectively increase the difficulties of adaptation and integration.

Accessibility, cultural awareness, and encouraging the involvement of people from different backgrounds are all parts of inclusive communication. Research indicates that numerous organizations in the Netherlands persist in utilizing standardized outreach strategies that inadequately cater to the diverse needs of specific groups, such as refugees, and do not address structural disadvantages. A growing body of research has examined the rise of informal support systems, including digital communication platforms (Alencar, 2018; Alencar et al., 2018; Udwan et al., 2020) and the participation of mentors or intermediaries (Valero-Garcés, 2008).

Digital channels have become important places for many refugees to find information that is trusted and easy to locate, especially when official sources of communication are unclear or do not respond. Posts and comments that are frequently disseminated by fellow refugees or community members, composed in their native languages, and adapted to the local context (Udwan et al., 2020) offer accessible experiential knowledge.

Mentors and intermediaries, especially those who share cultural or linguistic backgrounds with newcomers, serve as vital mediators; they aid refugees in maneuvering through formal institutions and social norms while offering translated resources and culturally relevant guidance. Jaschke et al. (2022) highlight that such mentors offer individualized assistance grounded in trust, which enables refugees to navigate complex institutional settings more effectively and strengthens their integration into the host society. In doing so, they also contribute to fostering a broader sense of stability and social cohesion within the receiving community.

Throughout various stages of resettlement, refugees increasingly rely on digital communication methods to acquire experiential knowledge shared by peers inside their communities. Communications in the form of posts and messages are often shared by fellow refugees or community members, articulated in native languages, and tailored to local contexts. Mentors and intermediaries, especially those with cultural or linguistic connections to immigrants, serve as crucial mediators; they aid refugees in navigating social conventions and interactions with official institutions, while offering translated resources and culturally pertinent support. In doing so, they foster a sense of security and belonging within the host community.

Refugees frequently rely on digital platforms as reliable spaces for the rapid and informal exchange of crucial information in familiar languages. Fellow refugees or community members often circulate such content, adapting their messages to the current local circumstances (Udwan et al., 2020). At the same time, mentors and intermediaries—particularly those who share cultural or linguistic ties with newcomers—function as essential brokers. They help refugees interpret institutional procedures and social expectations by offering translated materials and culturally situated explanations. According to Jaschke et al. (2022), mentors play a key role by offering individualized, trust-based guidance that enables refugees to navigate complex institutional settings and fosters their integration into society. These interpersonal and culturally attuned mediation techniques foster sentiments of safety, confidence, and belonging within the host society.

However, the growing reliance on digital instruments also creates new forms of marginalization. Although the Netherlands has an advanced digital infrastructure, the ability to effectively use online services is not evenly spread among the population. Refugees may be deficient in the requisite equipment, skills, or expertise to navigate these platforms effectively (Georgiou et al., 2024; Potocky, 2021). This study seeks to examine the degree to which Syrian refugees can leverage diverse digital platforms. The aim is to examine how informal support systems, such as digital communication technologies and mentors, use inclusive communication strategies to mitigate these inequities.

This study views integration as a societal necessity and an opportunity for mutual improvement. It is regarded as an interactive, ongoing process shaped by daily interactions and reciprocal exchange (Klarenbeek, 2021). When provided with adequate assistance, refugees can offer economic, social, and cultural contributions to the host community. Without such support, there is a risk of worsening inequities and endangering long-term prosperity and social cohesiveness. This study examines these processes by concentrating on personal narratives.

This study consists of 20 semi-structured interviews with 14 Syrian refugees and six Arabic-speaking mentors or mediators. The aim is to investigate the central research question: How can digital communication tools and mentors/intermediaries promote inclusive communication and aid in the integration of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands? The analysis is guided by the following sub-questions: How do Syrian refugees in the Netherlands employ digital communication technology to enhance inclusive communication and integration? What roles do mentors and cultural intermediaries play in advancing inclusive communication and aiding the integration of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands?

This research examines the influence of digital communication tools and mentors in aiding the integration of Syrian refugees, who have been arriving and acclimating in the Netherlands for over five years. It emphasizes that integration is not solely a top-down communication process but also a horizontal, community-driven

ecosystem. These informal networks function as essential intermediaries between the former community in Syria and the new society in the Netherlands, with inclusive communication at their core.

This essay aims to enhance academic understanding of and policy strategies for refugee integration in the Netherlands. It enriches extensive discussions regarding intercultural communication, refugee integration, and digital inclusion. The study advances scholarship in communication studies, migration and integration studies, and digital media research by synthesizing existing literature with novel qualitative data. Recent studies have emphasized the increasing influence of digitalization and algorithmic systems on refugees' daily contacts with public institutions and support networks (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Latonero & Kift, 2018). In the Dutch context, these improvements are evident in the proliferation of digital government platforms and automated decision-making, which influence how immigrants access services and information. Recent research on the expansion of digital platforms and datafication (Leurs, 2023) underscores the importance of viewing digital inclusion not merely as access to technology, but as a relational and ethical process embedded within socio-technical infrastructures.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In heterogeneous societies such as the Netherlands, inclusive communication goes beyond the simple, literal translation of institutional messages; it requires a critical structural awareness of the linguistic, cultural, and digital disparities that affect individuals' access to information, services, and opportunities. This corresponds with Van Deursen and Van Dijk's (2019) concept of "digital divides," which emphasizes disparities in access, literacy, and engagement that affect migrants' interactions with technology. Refugees, particularly newly arrived Syrians, sometimes face complex bureaucratic procedures, language barriers, and unfamiliar governmental systems. In this context, digital technologies and informal contributors, such as mentors and peer networks, are essential in mitigating the limitations of formal, hierarchical communication channels.

This study emphasizes that refugee integration goes beyond policy goals and institutional criteria, encompassing a dynamic process of addressing daily challenges, often in increasingly digitized environments. The Netherlands increasingly delivers public services through online platforms, requiring residents to use tools such as DigiD to access healthcare, housing, education, and employment services. Boekhorst (2003) notes that information literacy is unevenly distributed, with the result that many newcomers lack the necessary digital competencies to engage effectively with these systems. Digitalization offers opportunities but also risks exacerbating exclusion when institutional communication is inaccessible or lacks credibility.

This study builds on contemporary literature on digital migration and refugee media practices (Alencar, 2018; Leurs & Smets, 2018) to comprehend the digital dimension of refugee integration. Leurs (2023) and Alencar (2018; see also Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019) assert that digital technologies serve as both symbolic and material lifelines, assisting refugees in maintaining transnational connections, acquiring vital information, and navigating issues of identification and belonging in unfamiliar socio-cultural contexts. Digital communication platforms function as experiential infrastructures for integration, enabling real-time information exchange, often in familiar languages and cultural frameworks (Gillespie et al., 2018). This is especially evident in diasporic Facebook or WhatsApp groups, where newly arrived refugees can collectively obtain information about housing, legal rights, education, and employment opportunities (Mena Montes & Boland, 2025).

Nevertheless, digital tools serve purposes that extend beyond their basic functionality. They have highlighted the role of emotions and relationships, demonstrating how they engage in “digital resilience scaffolding” by leveraging social networks to foster trust, alleviate uncertainty, and provide mutual support. This is achieved through the sharing of knowledge and experiences. These efforts highlight the horizontal and peer-oriented nature of refugee information-sharing, which either supplements or replaces formal government programs (Udwan et al., 2020).

The notion of digital migration infrastructures is crucial for understanding the integration of digital behaviors with tangible support systems. Leurs (2023) asserts that these infrastructures encompass not only devices and platforms, but also the actors and institutions that influence digital engagement, including NGOs, cultural intermediaries, mentors, and policy frameworks. This theoretical paradigm allows the understanding of inclusion as a relational and co-constructed phenomenon that comprises both human interaction and technological mediation. From this perspective, integration is not provided by the state to passive recipients; rather, it occurs in everyday contexts—both online and offline, formal and informal.

Mentors and intermediaries fulfill an essential role. Their work aligns with the theory of intercultural mediation (Gibb & Good, 2014; Valero-Garcés & Martin, 2008), which emphasizes the facilitation of understanding between culturally varied groups. In the refugee context, mentors act as cultural mediators, helping newcomers to navigate language, implicit social norms, institutional expectations, and digital bureaucracy. This case study demonstrates that mentorship is not a static role; instead, it involves a dynamic shift from receiving support to offering it, highlighting the progressive nature of integration.

Mentorship among migrants often arises organically from shared experiences rather than from formal appointments. This relational, grassroots dynamic echoes Klarenbeek’s (2021) definition of integration as a reciprocal, localized, and engaged process, wherein both host communities and newcomers negotiate meanings, obligations, and practices. This corresponds with (Modood, 2021) distinction between multiculturalism, which focuses on cohabitation, and interculturalism, which promotes participation. Intercultural communication, especially when facilitated by trusted people, helps newcomers understand the “whats,” “hows,” and “whys” of local culture.

This framework is underpinned by conviviality theory (Gilroy, 2004) and Pozzo and Ghorashi’s (2021) notion of contextual diversity, both of which contest assimilationist perspectives on integration. Recent studies have built on these notions by linking conviviality to media use (Duru & Trenz, 2017; Georgiou, 2017), highlighting how everyday communication practices in digital contexts affect perceptions of diversity and intercultural exchanges. In superdiverse societies, such digital interactions foster an “everyday cosmopolitanism,” allowing individuals to navigate differences through mediated exchanges and shared digital infrastructures. These behaviors illustrate that conviviality is not simply a societal ideal but a dynamic process expressed through online interaction, narrative exchange, and mutual visibility across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Rather than insisting on conformity to established norms, integration is viewed as a mutual, dialogical process of learning, negotiation, and adaptation. Mentors and digital peers aid refugees in adapting to Dutch society while collaboratively creating inclusive spaces that promote knowledge sharing, affirm their sense of belonging, and cultivate community.

This concept views integration as a relational and co-constructed process that incorporates principles of inclusive communication, digital involvement, and conviviality. Human actors and digital infrastructures continuously affect one another, creating both new opportunities and barriers to participation. The idea highlights how individuals exercise communicative agency by actively seeking out information, resources, and social networks in order to participate and build a sense of belonging. This focus on the relational dynamics between human agents and digital environments shifts attention away from research centered solely on technology adoption to that which demonstrates how inclusion develops dynamically in both online and offline situations.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the integration experiences of Syrian refugees with Arabic-speaking mentors and intermediaries in the Netherlands. The study specifically analyzed the influence of digital communication technologies, such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups, together with mentorship, on access to institutional information, public services, and a sense of community. The study recognized that integration is not a homogeneous process, but rather, it is shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, education, employment history, and duration of residence. The study aimed to clarify the complex relationships between individual and structural attributes and the digital and social resources that either promote or hinder integration.

#### **3.1. Participants**

The research included 20 subjects: fourteen Syrian refugees possessing residency permits and six Arabic-speaking mentors or facilitators. Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques. We established initial contacts using personal networks and digital communication platforms, particularly WhatsApp. We primarily reached out to refugee participants via direct messaging, often employing referrals from other participants. The snowball method successfully engaged individuals who might have been otherwise unreachable due to language barriers or minimal institutional involvement.

We collaborated with mentors and intermediaries with Kémi Ra, a community-focused NGO in Apeldoorn committed to the integration of migrants and refugees. The creator of the NGO served as a gatekeeper, facilitating introductions to volunteers who met the study's criteria. All six mentors had previously interacted with Kémi Ra through volunteer endeavors, intervention initiatives, or informal community involvement.

We deliberately chose individuals to ensure diversity in age, gender, education, migratory background, and length of residence in the Netherlands. This variety enabled the study to investigate how varied personal backgrounds affect digital access, communication practices, and navigation in integrated systems.

The Syrian refugees in our sample demonstrated a diverse range of digital literacy, proficiency in Dutch, and autonomy in acquiring information and services. The majority had limited formal education, with five participants having completed only elementary or secondary schooling. Four individuals possessed vocational qualifications in practical or technical fields (e.g., mechanics, construction, office administration), whereas three held academic degrees. This educational distribution enabled us to gather perspectives often

marginalized in digital integration research, particularly from individuals encountering structural obstacles and constrained formal schooling possibilities. Their narratives offer crucial insights into the many strategies migrants employ to utilize digital technology and manage trust in online information, particularly on official channels.

The mentors and intermediaries, ages 30 to 61, all had refugee backgrounds and originated from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, or Palestine. Their shared language and cultural ties with the Syrian populace enhanced their credibility and effectiveness as intermediaries. They had all achieved functional or fluent proficiency in the Dutch language. Their experiences in navigating Dutch institutions informed their mentoring roles, allowing them to aid others in understanding cultural norms and bureaucratic processes.

### **3.2. Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, employing two tailored interview guides: one for Syrian refugees and another for Arabic-speaking mentors or intermediaries. Each guide delineated the specific tasks of participants while incorporating overarching topics such as migration history, access to governmental information, use of digital communication platforms, informal networks, and integration experiences. The guidelines were developed in accordance with recent literature on refugee integration and digital inclusion (Alencar, 2020; Leurs, 2023).

The interview methodology was crafted to be linguistically and culturally suitable. Participants could choose to do the interview in either Dutch or Arabic. Although all participants were Arabic-speaking, most preferred interviewing in Dutch, since it allowed them to express themselves in the language they usually use when engaging with institutional entities in the Netherlands. In four interviews, a qualified interpreter facilitated communication by translating questions from Dutch to Arabic and rendering the participants' comments back into Dutch. The translation prioritized clarity and participant comfort.

This flexible linguistic approach fostered trust and clear communication, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in the language in which they were most adept. It also enhanced the complexity and contextual relevance of the narratives, particularly when discussing complex or sensitive issues such as forced displacement, digital exclusion, and bureaucratic interactions.

We performed a thematic content analysis of the interview data, utilizing both deductive and inductive methodologies. We systematically arranged responses in an Excel matrix, facilitating comprehensive within-case analysis and comparative cross-case evaluation. We developed an initial codebook based on theoretical ideas relevant to the study, such as digital resilience, inclusive communication, and informal mentorship, and subsequently refined it iteratively as new themes and patterns emerged during the analysis.

The analysis revealed distinct patterns between the refugee and mentor groups. Mentors typically demonstrated heightened computer literacy and greater faith in Dutch institutions, while refugees, particularly those with lower educational attainment or weak Dutch language skills, relied more on informal support networks, social media, and translation tools. These findings highlight the varied aspects of digital inclusion and point to the importance of culturally grounded mentorship in providing access to key tools and information.

### **3.3. Ethical Considerations**

The investigation was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Radboud University. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures established to protect their privacy. Identifiable data was anonymized during transcription, and all materials were securely stored in password-protected files.

In light of the potential sensitivity of migrant tales, we created a respectful and culturally sensitive research environment. Participants were allowed to choose a comfortable setting for their interviews, and we approached all topics with flexibility and empathy. The involvement of a linguistically and culturally proficient interpreter enabled rapport building.

In addition to protecting participants, we ensured reciprocity and ethical engagement. By focusing on the perspectives and experiences of those involved, we sought to provide insights that could guide the development of more inclusive policies and communication strategies, especially for individuals whose limited education or digital access often results in their underrepresentation in academic and policy discussions.

## **4. Results**

The 14 narrative interviews with Syrian refugees, along with six interviews with mentors and intermediaries, revealed several key themes. In relation to digital communication technologies, three main themes emerged: access to information, soft integration and cultural learning, and distrust. Regarding mentorship, four themes were identified: mentors as system translators, intercultural mediation, the limits of mentorship, and the reciprocity of mentorship. The sections that follow go beyond each of these themes to illuminate the complex dynamics that shape the integration experiences of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands.

### **4.1. The Role of Digital Communication Technologies in Inclusive Communication and Integration**

#### **4.1.1. Access to Information: "There's Always Someone Online Who Can Answer Questions Faster Than the Municipality"**

The first theme focuses on how digital communication platforms support Syrian refugees in the Netherlands in accessing practical and institutional knowledge for their asylum applications and during the integration process. Participants consistently reported using WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and, increasingly, Instagram and TikTok to navigate complex systems related to housing, healthcare, education, and employment. These platforms serve not only as informal repositories of practical advice but also as digital entry points into Dutch bureaucratic systems. Peer-shared experiences and testimonials, circulated within diasporic networks, enable refugees to learn. This peer-driven model of information exchange illustrates a form of digital conviviality (Gilroy, 2004), where everyday encounters across linguistic and cultural differences are negotiated and sustained through shared digital practices.

The perceived usability and informality of digital communication platforms, particularly social media, contrast sharply with the inaccessibility of official governmental websites, which participants describe as

linguistically complex and overly formal. Several participants emphasized that content shared on informal digital platforms influenced their migration decisions even prior to arrival. As one participant explained: “I chose the Netherlands because I saw Syrians posting about family reunification [on my social media]. It looked possible there!”

A key finding drawn from the data is that refugee-led Facebook groups function as dynamic, real-time information hubs. These spaces allow users to crowdsource bureaucratic advice, clarify institutional procedures, and stay informed about policy changes. Such online communities collectively build experiential infrastructures for integration (Gillespie et al., 2018). Participants describe these groups as offering practical information in a detailed and relatable manner, while also providing emotional support, facilitating connections with others in similar circumstances, and fostering a sense of mental connection and belonging through online interaction. In this way, these peer-led information infrastructures act as decentralized alternatives to state-led orientation programs. As one participant noted: “There’s always someone online who can answer my questions faster than the municipality.”

In addition, formal requirements are frequently reformulated into practical, step-by-step instructions through information shared among peers, illustrating how community-driven communication contributes to processes of digital resilience (Lee & Hancock, 2023). Participants reported joining niche digital communities, particularly in WhatsApp and Facebook groups—designed for Syrian and Arabic-speaking populations in the Netherlands. WhatsApp, in particular, was described as an indispensable tool due to its affordability and flexibility for both voice and video communication.

In sum, these peer-driven digital communities allow refugees to bridge information gaps, both large and small, in a timely manner and in a familiar language. Moreover, they overcome the geographic constraints of face-to-face networking by expanding opportunities for connection. Our findings illustrate how refugee information-sharing practices can serve as both complements to and, at times, substitutes for formal state initiatives (Udwan et al., 2020).

#### **4.1.2. Informal Integration and Cultural Learning: “I Learned More From YouTube and Talking With My Girlfriend Than From the Class”**

In addition to the functional role, digital communication technologies also served as tools for soft integration and cultural learning. While formal Dutch-language classes were widely available, participants frequently emphasized the value of informal learning pathways. These pathways enable learners to apply their Dutch-language skills in practical contexts rather than limiting their knowledge to textbooks. Such activities included watching YouTube videos, listening to music, and engaging in everyday conversations with Dutch-speaking partners or friends. As one participant remarked: “I learned more [Dutch] from YouTube and speaking with my girlfriend than from the class.”

Some participants reported following Dutch influencers on TikTok and Instagram to become familiar with Dutch customs, linguistic nuances, fashion trends, and even Dutch humor. These elements are often absent from official integration courses. When discussing how digital communication platforms influenced their cultural adaptation, one participant remarked: “In Syria, you just show up. In the Netherlands, you need an appointment for everything—including visiting a friend!” This example illustrates how social media

facilitates informal cultural learning, thereby complementing and, in some cases, substituting for formal integration programs.

Cultural adaptation was described as a gradual process. Participants often encountered cultural differences through real-life experiences, then interpreted and confirmed them through indirect, peer-shared explanations online, or vice versa. This dual exposure, through both personal encounters and digital reflections, appeared to reinforce an awareness of cultural expectations, especially among those aiming for integration.

#### **4.1.3. Distrust: “Google Translate and ChatGPT Often Lacked Contextual Nuance and Could Lead to Misinterpretation”**

Digital communication platforms have become an increasingly important source of both formal and informal information for Syrian refugees, but some participants also voiced worries about the spread of false information. Although these platforms enabled rapid access to advice, many participants reported a degree of skepticism toward unverified content. These concerns led them to adopt strategies such as cross-checking and triangulation. As one participant noted: “I always double-check what I read online. Sometimes people spread things that aren’t true.”

Another participant pointed out the limitations of automated translation tools such as Google Translate and ChatGPT, noting that they often lack contextual nuance and can lead to misunderstandings. As one participant shared: “I didn’t trust the translation, so I sent it to a friend who knows both languages. That was faster and more reliable.” While translation tools can support engagement with Dutch-language content, they are unable to convey the underlying cultural assumptions or contextualize the lived experiences of Syrian refugees. In some cases, they may introduce additional misinterpretations.

A trade-off between efficiency and authenticity is consistently evident. Official sources of information often appear less accessible, whereas digital communication platforms, despite being more approachable, lack authoritative credibility. Consequently, digital engagement alone cannot fully encapsulate the refugees’ integration journey, even though it plays a visible role in facilitating navigation through this process. The integration journey is thus co-constructed through the interplay of technological mediation and human interaction.

### **4.2. *The Role of Mentors and Intermediaries in Inclusive Communication***

#### **4.2.1. Mentors as System Translators: “Even as He Understood the Rules, Declaring Taxes Himself Felt Overwhelming Without Support”**

Mentors, often Arabic-speaking refugees who had resided in the Netherlands for a longer period, play a critical role in facilitating refugees’ access to bureaucratic systems and social services. Many of these mentors became involved through personal connections with the NGO Kémi Ra, having encountered its founder at local events, language classes, or municipal programs. The support offered by mentors ranges from linguistic translation and digital literacy training to cultural mediation and practical assistance. Mentors reported sharing specific information on topics such as housing, school enrollment, healthcare access, the functioning of municipal systems, and the correction of common misconceptions.

At the material level, interviews revealed that all participants owned smartphones, though access to additional devices such as tablets or laptops was limited. While smartphones enabled them to use digital communication platforms to obtain information related to social services and integration, most participants struggled to navigate the Dutch bureaucratic system using only their phones. Limited digital literacy, in particular among older refugees or those with little prior education, combined with exclusive reliance on mobile phones, raised significant barriers to accessing and interacting with complex digital systems. For instance, four out of six mentors highlighted the difficulties refugees faced in applying for and using DigiD, a mandatory tool in the Netherlands for securely accessing various government and public services, including tax authorities, residence permit applications, and health insurance portals: "I helped a woman use DigiD. She didn't know it was needed to do almost everything here."

Mentors identified several key barriers that refugees face when attempting to access official information. One of the most significant challenges was the formal and complex language commonly used in official communications, which posed a particular obstacle for newcomers. As one mentor explained:

When they are new, the language is difficult, making it hard to understand. After living here for more than three years, they can search on their own. Initially, he couldn't find anything himself if he wanted to make an appointment with the government or municipality.

This highlights the linguistic and bureaucratic hurdles refugees must overcome in the early stages of their resettlement and underscores the need for tailored support during this critical period.

In addition to language barriers, many refugees, particularly newcomers, exhibited a lack of confidence in navigating life independently in the host country. They often expressed a fear of making mistakes, especially when dealing with official procedures, and preferred to seek reassurance from individuals with more experience living in the Netherlands. Several mentors observed a general lack of proactive behavior among newly arrived refugees, noting that many felt overwhelmed and disoriented in the early stages of resettlement. As a result, newcomers often adopted a passive approach, waiting for assistance rather than actively seeking out information or resources.

Refugees often require a "guide" to help them become familiar with Dutch systems. Even those who are able to search for information online and use tools like Google Translate often struggle to fully comprehend the structure and functioning of these systems. Despite having access to translated content, many refugees remain uncertain about their understanding within the new context and feel anxious about taking action without confirmation or guidance from someone more experienced:

I can explain the laws and rules to refugees, but that doesn't mean they can manage everything on their own. In practice, things become more complicated, for example, when financial issues are involved. I once helped a man understand the tax system. He grasped it, but he was not confident enough to file his taxes himself because it felt like such a tremendous responsibility. He preferred to have someone else do it on his behalf.

Therefore, interaction with a mentor goes beyond mere language translation because accessibility does not equate to comprehensibility. Mentors also serve as system translators, providing the scaffolding necessary to build refugees' self-confidence and autonomy in navigating life in the Netherlands.

Further, the integration process involves more than language learning and completing official documentation. While online translation tools such as Google Translate can help address language barriers when accessing information, they are often insufficient for tasks that require effective information output, whether oral or written. Refugees frequently face situations that demand active communication, such as speaking with teachers, attending school meetings, opening bank accounts, or navigating unfamiliar locations—these are often accomplished with the support of mentors. Mentors emphasized the significance of ongoing in-person guidance, especially to offer immediate support and aim for individuals with low confidence or limited digital skills.

#### **4.2.2. Mentors as Intercultural Mediators: “I Translated and Narrated in Arabic to Ensure People Truly Understood It”**

Beyond one-on-one, in-person explanation and accompaniment, mentors also play a key role in contextualizing Dutch bureaucratic and social norms, often by adapting official materials to make them more culturally relevant and accessible. For example, mentors offer immediate support and aim to foster long-term independence by guiding refugees in managing their financial situations. One mentor described providing Arabic narration for a municipality-produced financial literacy video to ensure better understanding and engagement:

I collected information through Kémi Ra and sometimes directly from the municipality. For example, the municipality produced a video on how to manage money, which I translated and narrated in Arabic to ensure people truly understood it.

Mentors viewed themselves as information curators rather than mere conveyors during the process of translating language and systems, and they occasionally reinterpreted procedures. They cross-verified content from multiple sources, including municipal websites, NGOs, their experiences, and social media, before sharing it with refugees.

This illustrates a gatekeeping function, whereby mentors actively filter and validate content to ensure its accuracy and cultural relevance. Their mediation allows information to be better tailored to Syrian refugees by connecting it to their previous experiences and highlighting key differences in the host country. Such labor is often overlooked in policy discussions, yet it is foundational in reducing misinformation and fostering trust. This work aligns with the theory of intercultural mediation (e.g., Valero-Garcés & Martin, 2010), which extends beyond simple information-sharing to include culturally sensitive adaptation of narratives and focus specifically tailored to the needs of the target group, in this case, Syrian refugees. As noted in the methodology, participants were purposively selected for diversity in education, gender, and migration history, which contextualizes variations attributed here to social class.

Mentors emphasized that they did not share information indiscriminately; rather, they triangulated multiple sources before dissemination to ensure both accuracy and contextual relevance. This practice underscores their role as trusted intercultural mediators operating at the intersection between refugees and institutional systems.

#### 4.2.3. Limits of Mentorship: “It’s Based on an Individual’s Personal Experiences, and They Shared It as Absolute Truth Sometimes”

However, the mentor support system is not without its limitations. One interviewee deliberately avoided seeking assistance from Arabic-speaking intermediaries due to prior experiences with misinformation received from a mentor: “I used to obtain wrong advice, so now I rely on official websites and Dutch people I trust.” He distinguished between two approaches to finding out how to apply for documents or subsidies:

To begin with, newcomers often rely on information shared by other Syrians, but this advice is not always accurate. Because it is usually drawn from personal experiences, people may present it as absolute truth, which can confuse newcomers and lead to misunderstandings and mistakes. I am against only building our own people within a new country instead of integrating. This can be very confusing for newcomers, causing mistakes and misunderstandings. It’s based on individuals’ personal experiences, and they shared it as absolute truth sometimes. However, for a more reliable approach, you need to research the official rules yourself. I try to do this in English, even if my English is poor. I put significant effort into searching online or contacting customer service. Official Facebook pages of the government or municipal bodies are trusted sources. Dutch people, especially those who are highly educated, are more reliable sources of information than those with less education.

This response stands out from other interviews, suggesting that it requires a more individualized approach to support. Differences within the refugee group may stem from varying educational backgrounds and levels of digital literacy. In addition, social class could influence integration experiences beyond shared nationality and legal status. We should not overlook some refugees’ desire to maintain autonomy in navigating the integration process.

#### 4.2.4. The Reciprocity of Mentorship: “At First I Asked Others for Help; Now I Give Tips”

One of the important findings is that mentorship was described as a reciprocal process. Many mentors experienced a transition from receiving support to providing it to others: “At first, I asked others for help; now I provide tips. I tell people what works and what to avoid.” On one hand, the mentor role serves as a crucial bridge between Dutch bureaucratic systems and newly arrived refugees. On the other hand, some mentors viewed their role as an opportunity to deepen their integration by gaining a greater understanding of, for example, the Dutch education system, language, and cultural norms: “It is beneficial for me to improve my Dutch and gain more knowledge of the Dutch education system. I wanted to acquire additional information and compare education systems.”

This dual orientation, serving others while simultaneously improving oneself, highlights the reciprocal nature of mentorship. When mentors support others, they share knowledge and strengthen their own sense of belonging in Dutch society. Many mentors perceive themselves as still undergoing the process of integration and position themselves not only as guides but also as peers within the refugee-inclusion ecosystem. In this light, social integration occurs not only through top-down systems but is also cultivated horizontally through community relationships.

In sum, digitally literate peers and mentors serve as essential curators within this ecosystem. They share information and contextualize bureaucratic knowledge. Through their support, integration is understood not as a linear trajectory but as a relational, dynamic, and participatory process embedded within networks of mutual learning and shared experience.

## 5. Discussion, Limitations, and Future Research

### 5.1. Discussion

This study investigates how Syrian refugees in the Netherlands navigate integration through the interaction of digital communication technologies and interpersonal mentorship. The findings indicate that digital technologies function not as independent support systems, but as mediating infrastructures that enhance communication, foster trust, and provide access to information among the diverse individuals and institutions engaged in the welfare process. In this scenario, integration emerges as a relational and co-constructed process, influenced by the interplay between technological affordances and human mediation.

The findings advance the notion of digital migration infrastructures (Leurs, 2023) by elucidating the co-production of understanding and trust through iterative human–digital interactions. Refugees' capacity to make use of information does not depend solely on connectivity or access but also on the interpretative efforts of mentors and peers who authenticate, translate, and contextualize bureaucratic knowledge. These constitute a significant "missing middle" in integration infrastructures between information access and its operationalization, as informal and community actors convert raw data into usable knowledge.

The study simultaneously exposes the limitations of digital dependence. Participants revealed skepticism towards automatic translation technologies, apprehension regarding disinformation, and dissatisfaction with the limitations of mobile-only platforms when undertaking administrative and instructional tasks. These problems help to refine current perceptions of digital inclusion (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019) by demonstrating that exclusion endures even in technologically advanced cultures when institutional communication is linguistically, culturally, or emotionally inaccessible. Thus, digital proficiency should be understood as a relational interaction between system accessibility, user competence, and societal trust.

The results further contribute to discussions on conviviality (Gilroy, 2004) and intercultural mediation (Gibb & Good, 2014; Valero-Garcés, 2007) by clarifying the role of mentors as system translators who bridge linguistic, cultural, and institutional gaps. By employing methods such as articulating procedures in Arabic, verifying information, and modeling bureaucratic interactions, mentors equip refugees to anticipate local norms and expectations. Significantly, mentorship was perceived as reciprocal: many participants described a transition from dependency to direction, exemplifying the participative aspect of integration highlighted by Klarenbeek (2021). This horizontal and community-oriented inclusion aligns with Modood's (2021) interculturalist perspective, which emphasizes conversation and reciprocal adaptation rather than assimilation.

These findings also correspond with Duru and Trenz's (2017) concept of conviviality as the practical, daily negotiation of differences, which in this context is manifested through digital peer networks and mentor–refugee interactions that promote cooperative coexistence despite institutional obstacles. Shared WhatsApp communications, peer-led information groups, and reciprocal knowledge exchange between

refugees and mentors demonstrate conviviality both locally and online. These digital and interpersonal contexts can be seen as “convivial spaces” where differences are pragmatically managed and which facilitate cooperation, problem-solving, and mutual help despite linguistic, cultural, or institutional barriers. Conviviality provides a valuable framework for analyzing the relational and procedural aspects of integration identified in this study: Instead of a straight trajectory toward adaptation, integration arises from the everyday actions of negotiating meaning, sharing experiences, and collaboratively overcoming problems within hybrid human-digital infrastructures.

Social media and messaging services, notably WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, have developed as decentralized frameworks for the circulation of information and emotional connection. These digital platforms enable migrants to navigate bureaucratic processes while simultaneously cultivating emotional resilience and a sense of community. Peer-to-peer communication and horizontal networks encourage the gradual cultivation of independence even as individuals remain connected to supportive communities. The study effectively connects the digital and interpersonal realms, demonstrating that technical mediation and human mentorship collectively support both practical and emotional integration.

Integration outcomes materialize when technical platforms, communicative practices, and human mediators are in alignment. This relational paradigm expands current methodologies for digital inclusion by redirecting focus from mere technological access to communicative relationality—the ability of human and digital infrastructures to jointly provide the conditions needed for meaningful participation and a sense of belonging.

## **5.2. Constraints and Prospective Investigations**

This qualitative study, based on semi-structured interviews, offers compelling insights into the lives of Syrian refugees and Arabic-speaking mentors in the Netherlands, although it also suffers from several methodological and contextual constraints. The limited, non-random sample emphasizes interpretive depth rather than statistical generalizability, indicating that the results cannot be extrapolated to represent all refugee experiences. Despite the implementation of methodological safeguards, including reflexivity, triangulation, linguistic accommodation, social desirability bias, and transprecautions, these limitations may have affected participants’ responses.

Furthermore, the mentor sample, which predominantly consisted of Arabic-speaking individuals with refugee backgrounds, omits the viewpoints of host-society mentors or institutional representatives. Future studies could adopt a multi-actor approach that incorporates politicians, caseworkers, and Dutch-born mentors, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural mediation within digitalized integration frameworks.

The study is situated within the highly digitalized Dutch welfare state, characterized by modern digital infrastructure and civic integration activities. This specificity limits the applicability of findings to other national contexts with distinct digital governance frameworks, welfare models, or migration policies. Nevertheless, this limitation highlights the Netherlands as a key case study for comprehending the worldwide shift towards digital governance and its implications for integration.

Future research could expand upon these discoveries in various avenues. Comparative studies across European and non-European contexts could explore how different digital migration infrastructures (Leurs, 2023) influence refugees' trust, agency, and engagement. Longitudinal designs would be particularly valuable for examining how mentorship progresses from dependency to reciprocity and how former beneficiaries transform into agents of inclusion over time, thus reinforcing Klarenbeek's (2021) participatory perspective on integration. Moreover, participatory and co-creative research methodologies could investigate refugee-led initiatives and digital innovations, including peer-verified video tutorials or multilingual AI chatbots, as emerging infrastructures for inclusive communication.

Finally, in light of the increasing impact of artificial intelligence on translation and bureaucratic communication, future research should critically investigate the ethical, epistemological, and cultural impact of algorithmic instruments on refugee integration. Such an investigation could link to critical digital literacy frameworks (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) and conviviality theory (Gilroy, 2004), examining how AI-mediated communication affects trust, power, and belonging in superdiverse societies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integration in a digitalized welfare context is fundamentally relational and communicative. Syrian refugees and mentors collaboratively construct integration through digital and interpersonal mediums. Our view of integration as a communication ecology in which tools, institutions, and human interactions intersect emphasizes the pivotal roles of mentors, NGOs, and peer networks. Hybrid human-digital strategies that are culturally grounded, relational, and trust-centered can promote integration systems that are technologically efficient and socially equitable.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## About the Authors

**Noemi Mena Montes** is an assistant professor at Radboud University. Her work focuses on migration, gender, intercultural dialogue, and digital inclusion, using participatory action research for social impact. Her research bridges academic and community-based perspectives.

**Yiran Yang** is an independent researcher. Her research focuses on political communication, media effects, and intercultural dialogue in digital spaces. She has experience in interdisciplinary and international research projects.

**Milou Visser** holds a master's degree in global communication and diversity from Radboud University. She currently works as Risk and Compliance Officer at the Kadaster. Her professional background includes research and internship experience with the Municipality of Apeldoorn and the Kémi Ra Foundation, shaping her interest in societal issues and governance.