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**Coping through Digital Livelihood: Syrian Refugees
Navigating Legal Restrictions on Work and Starting a New
Life**

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of the requirements of the degree of
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Abstract

The overarching objective and purpose of this thesis is to shed light on how engagement in digital work serves as a coping strategy for Syrian refugees in different receiving countries. The stories of my participants demonstrate the multiple dimensions of this livelihood strategy, as and when they utilise it to counter structural constraints. By exercising their agency, I observe that my participants are aiming to capitalise on working online to escape from an imposed category of victimhood, social exclusion and, indeed, the refugee status itself.

My findings reveal that there is a group of Syrian refugees who refuse to be stereotyped, nor conform to the conventional image of them constructed by institutions or the public. As indicated in most of the narratives, working online to a certain extent promises my participants an imaginable future. It is at the same time a strategy for them to regain their self-worth and sense of achievement.

Importantly, this thesis exposes the role of class among refugees. This study's findings reveal that resources play an important role in deciding whether one can engage in digital work. Although digital work has a lower cost of entry in terms of economic capital, it requires a high level of cultural capital such as language skills, social skills, and certain pre-existing experiences.

Keywords: Digital livelihood, Syrian refugees, structure barriers, agency, aspirations, cultural capital

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Introduction

I met Ahmed in early 2018, when I first started learning Arabic online. It was not until we encountered some payment issues that he revealed that he was a Syrian refugee. Back then, his internet connection was not very stable. He was frustrated with it and complained a lot. As the number of our sessions increased, he would sometimes share his plight with me as a Syrian refugee in Egypt. He said that he and his family were stuck” in Egypt and not allowed to travel. His application for resettlement was never taken seriously by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). More than once, he expressed his desperate wish to return to Syria. I had the impression that Ahmed saw his stay in Egypt as temporary and teaching Arabic online was in fact his sole means of livelihood.

Two years later, I talked to Ahmed again, this time to interview him for my thesis. To my surprise, he sounded more cheerful and relaxed. He told me how busy he was, as he could now teach Arabic through Spanish, in addition to Italian and English. He also happily announced the arrival of his second baby, which had motivated him to work even harder. I felt things were working out quite well for Ahmed. He was very proud of his advancement in teaching Arabic online and had started to build a life in Egypt. When I asked him whether he still wanted to return to Syria, his answer was an emphatic “no”, loud and clear. While feeling happy for Ahmed and his improved life, I began to wonder how much of his rather dramatic change of mood and outlook was linked to his advancement in teaching online.

Many scholars have analysed the relationship between employment and resettlement. They concluded that it constitutes an important mechanism in evaluating the outcomes of integration. Specifically, for refugees, the right to work is a crucial factor in reducing their vulnerability, enhance their resilience and securing their dignity (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016). However, a majority of refugees encounter constraints in their right to work. And many

are forced to resort to informal employment that is less satisfactory and often under exploitative conditions.

Given the challenges of entering local labour markets, more and more refugees are finding that digital work is an avenue through which they can seek the kind of jobs and income that they cannot even imagine having access to otherwise (Graham & Wood, 2017). An increasing number of technological innovations offer further potential opportunities for refugees by expanding the possibilities for paid work across borders. Some refugees can now overcome constraints such as the denial of work rights and gain access to financial inclusion (The Migration Union, 2019). However, like all digital workers worldwide, refugees who make their living online face constant challenges. Online gig work is inherently insecure; and when coupled with the lack of social security in the host countries, it can even harm the well-being of the people who rely solely on online jobs (Graham & Wood, 2017). Online workers are also vulnerable to being exploited due to the constant threat of competition and lack of regulations. Many workers might find themselves slogging at their computer for long hours for what barely constitutes a living wage. The challenges are significant, particularly for those refugees who lack resources and social security in their host countries.

I began to wonder, are refugees who engage in digital work able to navigate the variety of constraints placed upon them and restart a desirable life as they would wish? The case of Ahmad, one of the participants in my study, offers some answers. Although he went through some difficulties initially, his subsequent success convinced him that his efforts were being well rewarded. Advancement in digital work provides not only a means of livelihood, but also a sense of achievement and self-fulfilment. His constantly growing student base has enabled Ahmad to envision a future and develop the confidence of taking things into his own hands. He has detached himself from the UNHCR, as he feels that he is not the kind of refugee who needs their help anymore. He identifies himself as a Syrian Arabic teacher rather than a Syrian refugee. Ahmed's story illustrates how some Syrian refugees approach difficulties in life positively and innovatively. In this thesis, I

investigate the ways Syrian refugees have overcome the obstacles they face in earning a living. The rising trend of digital work, I argue, provides an opportunity for refugees to realise their entrepreneurial ambitions and restart their lives following forced displacement.

In discussing the narratives of the participants in this study, I aim to shed light on how some refugees, who have the will to convert adversity into opportunity, can turn their lives around for the better. This thesis also explores various contexts in which Syrian refugees encounter structural constraints, victimisation and marginalisation. Drawing on theoretical insights, this thesis explains how various legal and social barriers faced by the participants have in fact triggered their imagination and driven innovation. With reference to their success stories in working online, I further argue that the existing literature on Syrian refugees tends to focus too much on the challenges and difficulties they encounter in trying to integrate into new countries. The broader literature on refugees as I discuss in my literature review has already started to discuss how refugees are globally employing innovative strategies (for example, “refugee entrepreneurship”) to escape victimhood and marginalisation. By engaging in a discussion of their problem-solving strategies, I make a case that some Syrian refugees are indeed leading lives contrary to how refugees are framed. They too have pursuits beyond meeting their basic needs. And beyond merely having an income, they too value self-fulfillment and self-actualisation as important life goals.

To explore the scenario concerning the digital work that Syrian refugees undertake, this study aims to answer the main research questions: How do Syrian refugees utilise digital work to counter structural barriers in different contexts? And the following sub questions: How does participating in digital work change Syrian refugees’ perception of themselves and the world they live in? How do these perceptions impact the image of their future?

Disposition

In this thesis I explore the digital livelihood strategies employed by Syrian refugees through interviews of eight Syrian online workers residing in different host countries. In chapter one I provide context for the structural barriers in host countries such as Syria's neighbouring countries, as well as countries in Europe where my participants reside. Chapter two reviews existing literature on the livelihood challenges of Syrian refugees and broadens into the literature covering livelihood opportunities for global refugees. I then introduce digital work as a rising livelihood strategy for refugees. Building on this, chapter three establishes my theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between structural barriers and individual agency. In chapter four I discuss my research methodology. In chapter five I present the main themes I have decoded from my findings while in my analysis chapter I analyse these findings with reference to my theoretical framework and argue that structural barriers can indeed trigger individual agency and, in fact, led my participants to actively look for innovative livelihood strategies. Digital work I observe is one innovative livelihood strategy that opens up opportunities for a particular group of Syrian refugees. However, this strategy does have its own challenges and may not be for everyone. In the conclusion, I summarise my arguments and propose some paths for future research.

1. Context

This chapter sets the context in terms of the challenges to livelihood that are being faced by Syrian refugees. Since 2011, more than 6.6 million Syrian refugees have been forced to flee their homes. As per records, though the Syrian refugees sought asylum in more than 130 countries, a vast majority of them (about 5.6 million) live in Syria's neighbouring countries – Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt (UNHCR, 2020).

By discussing the relevant policies and community barriers encountered by the Syrian refugees in the various countries where they have settled, I provide the context of their access to digital work which, in the case of the participants of my study, was crucial. First, I discuss the situation in the major refugee host countries in the Global South, especially those with large Syrian refugee populations. These states are often criticised for leveraging the value of their refugee-hosting capacity and renegotiating policies that promote state-centric agendas (Mencutek & Nashwan, 2020). I then discuss the situation in Europe where refugees may have the right to work but work online to counter other difficulties such as the bureaucracy that they face every day.

1.1 Barriers to the Right to Work in Neighbouring Countries

Turkey

Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, with 3.6 million refugees and asylum seekers residing in the country as of March 2021 (UNHCR 2021). Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (but not the 1967 Protocol) but with a geographical limitation clause that makes the country legally responsible to protect only refugees coming from Europe.

As non-European refugees, Syrians in Turkey receive only temporary protection status, restricting their ability to access citizenship rights, regular employment, and permanent residency status (Ilcan, 2017). Individuals having only temporary protection identification are not allowed to apply for work permits. The permits are issued to employers, who apply on the behalf of their employees. At the workplaces where work permits are required, the number of refugees that are hired cannot exceed 10% of the Turkish workers (Esen & Binatli, 2017). Due to the lack of sufficient command of the Turkish language, many Syrian refugees have turned to the informal labour market to

make ends meet. As such, they represent a cheap and flexible labour force (Koca, 2016).

As the number of refugee arrivals rose over time, the European states began to put intense pressure on Turkey to control departures from its coast. One example of this pressure was the March 18, 2016 agreement between Turkey and the European Union (EU) which required the turning back of refugees who arrived in Greece – a member of the EU – from Turkey (European Commission, 2016). In return, the EU agreed to settle one Syrian refugee from Turkey in Europe for every one refugee turned back. The deal also agreed for the EU to reduce visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, pay €6 billion in aid to Turkey for Syrian migrant communities, update the customs union, and re-energise stalled talks regarding Turkey's accession to the EU (Lehner, 2018).

Five years have now passed, and while the deal has proved to be beneficial to the European states, enabling them to externalise their borders and reduce the number of refugee arrivals, for the Syrian refugees living in Turkey, its benefits have been minimal. The violence between host communities and Syrian refugees increased threefold between 2016 and 2017. The Turks never stop blaming Syrian refugees for stealing their jobs and carrying out terror attacks. Although many Syrians in Turkey have started to enjoy some rights and access to services, their status is still derived primarily from the state's temporary protection regime and not international refugee law which means that their status could potentially be revoked at any time (Lehner, 2018).

Jordan

Jordan is one of the countries most affected by the Syrian crisis, as they host the second-highest number of Syrian refugees (about 660,000 as of February 2021) (UNHCR, 2021). The Government of Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. The country

deals with refugees within certain margins of discretion (Achilli, 2015). It was also widely suspected that the Jordanian government was exaggerating the number of Syrian refugees within its borders to solicit greater financial contribution from external donors (Mencutek & Nashwan 2020).

Before 2016, work permits were not being issued to Syrians due to prohibitive costs and administrative obstacles. A significant change of policy which granted Syrian refugees the right to work occurred in 2016 when the Jordan Compact was signed between the EU and the Jordanian government (Mencutek & Nashwan, 2020). On signing the Jordan Compact, the EU, with the support of the World Bank, pledged a package of nearly US\$ 2 billion in grants and low-interest loans to the Government of Jordan. In return, Jordan agreed to provide 200,000 work permits to Syrians that would be valid for selected occupations (Gordon, 2019).

The EU's contribution to the Compact was based on the theory that trade incentives could increase refugee employment in Jordan and, thus, reduce the number of Syrians seeking to relocate to the EU (Gordon, 2019). The EU also created special economic zones in Jordan which were expected to create jobs for refugee labour, but these have fallen far short of expectations.

Today, fewer than 500 Syrian refugees work in these zones – a tiny fraction of the initial projections (Gordon, 2019). The Jordan Compact was regarded as a high-profile alliance that ignored the reality of the Jordanian labour market and the political economy. Not only were the details of the Compact detached from the actual situation on the ground, but the role of the Syrian refugees as a (potential) labour force and the question of how their lives in Jordan fit the initiative was also ignored.

The Syrian refugees were reluctant to sign up for jobs which offered poor pay and were located far from their residences (Lenner & Turner, 2019). As a result, as of 2019, only about 45,000 Syrians are holding active work

permits in Jordan which is far short of the goal of 200,000. Most of them work in agriculture, construction, and low-wage services, which are the same sectors in which many of them worked without authorisation before the Compact (Gordon, 2019)

Egypt

Egypt is home to about 130,000 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR 2021). As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Egyptian state is committed to abiding by the non-refoulement principle (UNHCR, 2021). A refugee in Egypt technically has the same rights to formal employment as any other foreigner in the country, but employers must prove that an Egyptian is not more qualified for the same job. This is obviously a difficult hurdle for most refugees to cross. (Norman, 2018). Even if the refugees can somehow cross the hurdle, they still have to overcome numerous additional administrative barriers to secure legal work permits (UNHCR, 2021). However, it must be said that many migrants and refugees have been able to secure employment without official authorisation in Egypt's informal economy. (Norman, 2018). Even so, the vast majority of refugees and asylum-seekers cite difficulties in meeting their basic needs as one of their biggest challenges in this country (UNHCR, 2021)

Before 2013, Egypt was famous for its approach of “indifference” regarding refugees engaging in informal employment. As described by an international NGO, the Egyptian state “wants to do as little as possible. It knows they’re there of course, but it doesn’t want to expand any effort to do anything with them. So, it just turns a blind eye” (Norman, 2018). For refugees living in Egypt, it is not the state that provides them assistance; it is the UNHCR and other aid organisations that do so. Norman (2018) argues that the Egyptian state benefits from this type of approach. So long as there is a long-term presence of refugees, international funds from organisations like the UNHCR or the International Organization for Migration keep flowing in, and these can be used for the development of the Egyptian people at large.

Following the military coup d'état in 2013 that brought the current president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power, the Egyptian government began to shift its policy from indifference to outright repression. Syrian refugees came to be viewed as a security threat due to their alleged links with the Islamic regime of former president Mohammed Morsi (Mansour, 2018). This policy shift, however, did not stop the Sisi regime from using Syrian refugees as a bargaining chip with Europe. Sisi's government has also leveraged Europe's fear of refugees and presented itself as a reliable partner in stopping refugees from heading to there. In 2016, an EU-Egypt deal worth €60 million that was signed that coincided with the enactment of a law aimed at curbing irregular immigrants and cracking down on the smuggling of humans from the country to Europe (al-Kashef & Martin, 2019).

Upon analysing the situation in the three neighbouring countries that host millions of Syrian refugees, I observe a common thread in how structural barriers are imposed on the refugees. Refugee policies in these countries, I argue, often leverage the value of their refugee-hosting capacity to benefit themselves. Kelberer (2017) terms this phenomenon as "refugee rentierism" which is defined as countries using their host status and refugee policy as primary mechanisms of international rent-seeking. Under these circumstances, policy planning in these countries does not prioritise the real needs of refugees.

1.2 Barriers to Employment in Europe

Refugees in Europe encounter a different set of challenges. They often struggle with state bureaucracies and face long waiting times to enrol in integration programmes. Asylum seekers are thus forced to remain inactive during these lengthy waiting periods.

Germany

In Europe, Germany hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees. The large influx of Syrian refugees into Germany started in 2015 when German Chancellor Angela Merkel suspended the *de facto* policy of sending asylum seekers back to their European country of entry (Pearlman, 2020). Between 2015 and 2019, over 1.7 million asylum seekers made their way into the country. Okyay (2017) points out that Syrian nationals seeking asylum in Germany are granted two different statuses in two contexts; those granted refugee status are offered a three-year residence permit, while those granted subsidiary protection have to renew their status annually. Up until 2018, 72% of asylum seekers had been granted protection in Germany, gaining the right to work without restrictions (Keita & Dempster, 2020). However, Pearlman (2018) points out that refugees are frustrated by the red tape and interminable waiting periods during the application process. It often takes months for asylum seekers to be able to submit their applications.

New legislation was put in place in 2016 to make it obligatory for asylum seekers to enter into integration courses which consist of 600 hours of German language instruction and 30 hours of instruction on German history, culture, and the legal system. According to Okyay (2017), the language courses are often oversubscribed and undersupplied, and the waiting periods have become progressively longer. In 2016, for example, 560,000 people were approved to participate in these courses, whereas only 320,000 were able to start them. Asylum seekers are forced to remain inactive during the lengthy waiting period. Long periods of inactivity negatively impact motivation to work and participate in socio-economic activities, in general (Okyay, 2017).

Sweden

Today, Sweden is home to one of the largest immigrant populations in Europe. Migration from Syria started to increase when the civil war broke out in 2011. Sweden enjoys the reputation of having a generous refugee integration policy (Valenta & Bunar, 2010) and which is characterised as

being state-sponsored and focused primarily on housing and employment. According to the Swedish logic, welfare aims to encompass all citizens and there are usually strong ideals of reciprocity in the social contract between welfare systems and citizens (Gren 2020). A “good” citizen does not remain dependent on the welfare state, but rather works and pays taxes, to continue receiving benefits and reciprocates all the benefits that they have received from the state. Given this, the main goal of the integration programme in Sweden is designed to enable refugees to become employed or at least employable (Gren, 2020). The pressure of becoming a “good” citizen is intended to push refugees to enter the labour market at the earliest opportunity and take up less desirable jobs, to avoid being seen as eternal welfare recipients and “parasites”.

However, more often than not, asylum seekers encounter frustrations in their interactions with the bureaucracy, mainly in the form of the mandatory programmes for them to fulfil institutional requirements. (Gren, 2020). Some attending these programmes complain that they are not flexible enough to meet their needs, but they are forced to attend in order to receive the cash benefits they get as a result. The bureaucracy, as expressed in daily-life institutional requirements, leaves little room for individual agency. Refugees and immigrants thus feel trapped in a vicious circle created by bureaucratic rules they can neither understand nor escape from (Weiss, 2020).

The idea behind presenting the European context is to demonstrate that though Syrians who live in Europe have more options than their counterparts in neighbouring countries, they have other issues to deal with. The long processing times and the bureaucracies prevent them from immediately pursuing a livelihood. In such cases, working online may be an option that can enable them to counter some of the difficulties they face.

Now that we know the general difficulties Syrian refugees are facing in various host countries, the following literature review sheds light on what we

know so far as the portrayal of Syrian refugees and the narratives of the livelihood challenges they face are concerned.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, I construct the ground for my study of livelihood strategies of Syrian refugees by first reviewing the existing account of Middle East migrants. I argue that they are mostly stereotypical with a one-sided emphasis mostly on the vulnerability of the migrants. I then discuss how relevant literature lacks the understanding of Syrian refugees' rights to life and leaves out the dimension of their aspirations and ambitions. I also discuss some of the later studies on refugee livelihoods which start to move away from the traditional narrative of vulnerability to actual refugee experiences.

In the second section, I examine work on refugee studies more broadly with scholarship highlighting refugee self-reliance and aspirations which call for an increased focus on the roles of agency, imagination, and innovation in improving refugee livelihoods. In the last section, I discuss the opportunities and challenges of digital work and centre my understanding of it as a global work trend as well as an innovative livelihood strategy. This understanding is crucial to my analysis of how digital work serves as a coping strategy for Syrian refugees.

2.1 Syrian Refugees and Livelihood Challenges

Of all the immigrant groups, those from the Middle East have long been falling prey to misrepresentation and negative stereotyping. The contemporary stereotypical image concerning Middle Eastern men often suggests that they are dangerous. Kotzur et al (2019) observe that a focus on the masculinity of Middle East men during times of unrest is rhetoric that got established way before the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015. The anti-immigrant discourse emerging after the crisis only reclaimed this, to a certain extent, and sustained the existing stereotype of Middle East masculinity as being a threat.

Scholars like Şimşek (2018), note that a majority of the Syrian refugees in Turkey work in the informal economy without social protection. As a result, they face exploitation, lack safe working conditions, and are often overworked and underpaid or even unpaid. For Şimşek, these are the main reasons for the exclusion of Syrian refugees from wider society. Similarly, Mencutek and Nashwan (2020) observe that Syrians refugee workers in Jordan encounter mistreatment by managers and the negative attitudes of locals who accuse them of causing unemployment for the Jordanians. Locals are frustrated by Syrian refugees who take up jobs meant for Jordanians. Syrian newcomers are seen as a “burden on the infrastructure and economy”. Nabulsi, et al. (2020) shed light on the vulnerability of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, highlighting the high dependence of these refugees on formal assistance despite it being insufficient and their precarious overall economic situation. A majority of these refugees continue to resort to informal livelihood strategies and negative coping mechanism to provide for their basic necessities. Nabulsi et al. (2020) call for integrated and sustainable humanitarian programmes and a paradigm shift in integration policies. They claim that policies that can consider the temporary integration of refugees into the workforce can reduce the refugees’ economic vulnerability.

Al-Mahaidi (2021) highlights another barrier relating to occupational restrictions for Syrian refugees – i.e. the barring of Syrians from working in certain professions in some countries. These professions range from accounting to medicine to engineering to teaching. The UNHCR’s rapid assessment for 2016 reported that one of the most common reasons why Syrian refugees do not have a work permit is that they are unavailable for their profession. Al-Mahaidi (2021) concurs that barring Syrian refugees from accessing certain high- and mid-level professions is inconsistent with the human rights principle of non-discrimination and calls it a kind of labour exploitation.

At the community level, scholars like Stevens (2016) discuss the collapse of social networks among Syrians upon arrival in the host country. He posits that while social networks were often utilised in families' initial voyages leaving Syria, these ties were not sustained in the long run. The collapse of social networks has significantly impacted the access to the *wasta*-based relations which is crucial for securing employment. *Wasta* means a mediator or a go-between. With new networks not emerging fast enough, the Syrian refugees are left to their own devices when it comes to dealing with their loneliness, boredom and depression (Stevens, 2016).

Some other literature on vocational behaviour has acknowledged that when trying to re-establish their lives in the host country, refugees often encounter elevated levels of identity issues centred on their work (Yakushko et al., 2008). Subsequent studies confirm that the refugees' fundamental needs of worth, distinctiveness, continuity, and control are often threatened by the career barriers imposed on them (Wehrle et al., 2018).

Abdelhady (2019) discusses that Syrian refugees, in particular, are being portrayed, most of the time as the undesirable 'other'. Although the refugees from Syria may be accepted sometimes, mostly, they are considered a threat to the receiving communities. Drawing on a systematic analysis of the two largest national newspapers each in Sweden, Turkey and Jordan, Abdelhady (2019) posits that competition and conflict are the dominant frames in the newspaper coverage of refugees. It is within this frame that the tensions between individual groups or institutions are highlighted. New batches of refugees are often portrayed as a threat to the domestic workers or a drain on the receiving country's welfare system.

Okoye (2020) makes similar observations and identifies three dominant frames that are commonly used in immigration news coverage, namely humanitarian, securitisation and economic. The humanitarian frame focuses on the vulnerability of the Middle East refugees, portraying them as people in dire need of support from the countries hosting them. The

economisation frame acknowledges that some Middle East refugees are indeed driven by economic concerns. They are often portrayed as a threat to the job opportunities that would otherwise have been available for the natives. The securitisation frame highlights the issues around the common fear about Middle East refugees being terrorists, criminals and potential troublemakers in the countries receiving them (Okoye, 2020).

Some scholars, on the other hand, notice that following the increase in the influx of Syrian refugees after the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, the representation of refugees of Middle Eastern origin has become less linear. Kotzur et al. (2019), for instance, suggest that since 2015, the sympathy in Europe towards the Syrian refugees has increased in so far as many mainstream media outlets and social media are concerned. This has resulted in a more nuanced portrayal of people from the Middle East.

I argue that the stereotyping and biased portrayal of Middle East migrants impacts the literature on refugee studies. The scholarly articles on Syrian refugees do point to the significant research effort that has gone into evaluating the difficulties and challenges that Syrian refugees encounter during the process of their integration into the host communities. The point of departure of these articles, however, is based, most of the time, on the stereotype regarding Middle East migrants. The bulk of these literatures focus mainly on the vulnerabilities and livelihood challenges that Syrian refugees face in the host countries. Syrian refugees are to a great extent portrayed or construed as the 'other' and subjected to marginalisation and exploitation. The above group of literature come across as problematic, as they undermine the position of refugees as independent agents in charge of their own lives.

2.2 Syrian Refugees and the Promotion of Self – reliance

It is in more recent literature that scholarly interest starts to take note of the alternative livelihood strategies employed by Syrian refugees, thus, introducing the idea of self-reliance and pursuit of independence on their part.

For example, Embirico (2020) has looked into refugee entrepreneurship as a possible route to achieving self-reliance in Germany. His Berlin-based study focussed primarily on the strategies Syrian refugees have employed in achieving economic self-reliance as entrepreneurs. His interviewees reveal that well-educated Syrians had a hard time finding a job in Germany and, therefore, took to becoming entrepreneurs in the hope of gaining independence from the state and a way out of unemployment. Easton-Calabria and Omata (2018) highlight the importance of rethinking and critically examining the concept of refugee self-reliance. They discuss that the promotion of self-reliance is assumed to enhance the protection of refugees' well-being and dignity. Embirico (2020) however concludes that due to the challenges that refugee entrepreneurs face, their businesses often do not cover their living costs. Consequently, these refugees may need to rely on part-time employment, savings or the welfare state.

More recently, scholars like Pearlman (2020) have started highlighting refugees' aspirations while discussing the bureaucratic attitudes that the Syrian refugees in Germany have to endure. She argues that asylum seekers are primarily motivated by their desire to rebuild their lives and pursue their dreams for a better future. We should, thus, pay more attention to their personal, professional, and educational aspirations to understand their interaction with the welfare state. Exploring the aspirations that drive asylum seekers' experiences of appreciation and frustration can allow us to detach these very real sentiments from those discourses that imply that refugees are powerless, voiceless, and passive receivers of help (Pearlman, 2020).

Building on the above discussed literature, this thesis intends to contribute to this growing body of literature which views aspiration as a key element in the refugee experience among specific Syrian refugees. I take into consideration that literature focussed on refugees' hopes, dreams, and stories of how they strive to escape from victimisation and marginalisation is still limited. This limitation, I argue, is based on two main issues. The first issue is the blanket usage of the refugee label. With that label, refugees become

conflated with certain characteristics and needs depending on the context they are in and the degree and nature of the control exercised, and opportunities provided by institutions and aid organisations in their host countries (Zetter, 1991, p. 41). The refugee label – often coloured by victimhood, passivity, and emergency (Malkki, 1996; Janmyr & Mourad, 2018) – does not connote long-term migratory aspirations and future hopes, other than that of safety.

The second issue is the methodological problem of foregrounding the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. This “methodological nationalism” supports the dominance of a national framework in defining integration, rather than considering the aspirations and experiences of refugees – more specifically concerning how refugees live their lives (Glick-Schiller & Wimmer 2002). The way to go should probably be to dwell upon “methodological individualism” that focuses on the refugee-actor level to highlight the experiences of refugees and how these experiences are influenced by integration policies (Şimşek, 2018)

2.3 Livelihood Discussions in Broader Refugee and Migration Studies

To strengthen my argument that studies on Syrian refugees should shift to a more hopeful overtone, I discuss, in this section, the literature that provides alternative perspectives in studying refugee livelihoods apart from using vulnerability as the point of departure. I have situated this discussion in broader migration studies to provide a more conceptualised understanding of the role of aspiration and imagination in the lives of migrants.

Among the scholars who study livelihoods of refugees, Karen Jacobson was one of the first to link refugee entrepreneurship to the positive economic impact of refugees on the host states, finding that refugees in Africa often utilise their human capital and skills, with some starting small businesses to meet the needs of both local communities and themselves (Jacobson, 2002). Another essential connection is made by Betts et al. (2017) who argue that innovation and refugees are strongly connected. Based on the

case study of refugees in Uganda, Betts et al. (2017) argue that refugees, as outsiders, often have a new perspective on a given situation that affords them great potential for generating new ideas and ways of doing things. Innovation, in this context, can thus be understood as ways in which refugees can apply their agency – their skills, talents, and aspirations – to transform their structural situation into a new set of opportunities which ultimately create value for themselves and others.

More recently, Turner (2019) posits that in contrast to longstanding portrayals of refugees as passive receivers of humanitarian aid, the “refugee entrepreneur” has emerged as a prominent figure representing “innovation” and “resilience” among the refugee populations. The promotion of this figure has seemingly superseded the severed connection between the state and the citizen which refugeehood represents.

Based on studying the livelihood of refugees in four hosting countries, Cameroon, Jordan, Malaysia, and Turkey, Wake and Barbelet (2020) focus on understanding the goals of the refugees and then their strategies to attain them and suggest that the approaches which focussed on programmes often ignored the realities of refugee lives and their political, social, and economic situation. Yohani and Larsen (2009) lament that there has been little research about how refugees maintain a hopeful outlook on life during the early adjustment period in resettlement countries. They further stress that hope is consistently associated with positive adjustment and successful outcomes under a variety of circumstances. They also stress the importance of recognising resourcefulness amongst an “at risk” population. Leurs and Smets (2018) argue that as it is quite impossible to discern voluntary migration from forced migration, and scholars should embrace non-linear, continuum, and relational approaches. One way to do so is to draw on narratives of “aspiration” and “frustrations” of the people involved to arrive at new critical observations.

In a more conceptualised sense, another group of scholars is interested in looking into the notion of immobility, which is typically associated with forced displacement. A sense of “stuckness” associated with the wait for employment is viewed by scholars like Cangia (2020) as a specific case of immobility. This condition, she suggests, can trigger the willingness to act on the world, regardless of the options available for concrete change and whether or not intended outcomes are achieved. Imagination, coupled with a strong will, to a certain extent supports a person, in adjusting symbolically and effectively to liminal circumstances (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Imagination is an essentially creative act that facilitates people’s ability to move beyond structural imbalances of power and economic constraints. The process of imagination allows people to contemplate the gap between them and imagined “realities” in ways that do not necessarily imply success or failure (Salazar, 2020a). Imagination thus becomes a means through which individuals create and recreate the essence of their being beyond the confinement of structurally given positions, which are temporarily suspended in a condition of liminality (Cangia, 2020). Imagination can then be conceptualised as an embodied practice of transcending both physical and sociocultural distance (Salazar, 2020b). With imagination, even when a person is place bound, his or her imagination can be mobile, travelling to other places and other times (Rapport & Dawson, 1998).

Relatedly, Zittoun & Gillespie (2016) have developed the unique “Loop model of imagination”. This model represents imagination as “loops” created out of present, here-and-now experiences, but connected to the material reality of the current environment. What is conceptualised as triggering imagination is a “rupture”, “disruption”, or “misfit” between the given experience of the world and one’s ongoing flow of thinking. These are all situations requiring new solutions and experiences. This developmental perspective views imagination as a process that allows the individual to create a distance from the here-and-now of their current experiences and to consider alternative possibilities. It may be perceived as an act of agency on the part of the individual who turns imagined possibilities into actuality (Womersley,

2020). Imagination can thus be understood to represent the motivation behind refugees' determination to capitalise on their skills, talents and aspirations in order to transform their structural situation into new sets of opportunities which in turn create values for themselves and others.

2.4 Digital Work as an Innovative Solution for Refugees

Globalisation, technological change, and economic uncertainty have provoked a “profound restructuring of workplace relations” (Padavic, 2005, p. 113). These affect people's expectations for their careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and the structure of labour markets (Sweet & Meiksins, 2013; Petriglieri et al., 2019). The growth of online labour platforms has become an increasingly global phenomenon which enables a new form of flexible and remote work. For this thesis, digital livelihoods are defined broadly to include the following: a) work practices on digital labour platforms for remote employers such as home-based freelancing and microwork, and b) small scale digital entrepreneurialism that uses digital tools and e-commerce platforms to run and develop business, mostly from home (Hackl et al., 2021)

The overall flexibility of this kind of work is thought to be captured through the concept of “mobility” which means people can essentially work from anywhere as long as they have their computer and access to a good internet connection (Müller, 2016)

Easton-Calabria (2019) notes that the flexible nature of digital work offers new opportunities and opens up markets and networks for displaced people beyond their actual physical locations. In many instances, digital work enables refugees to circumvent local work restrictions, allowing them to access jobs that would otherwise be unavailable in their host countries. It may also help refugees to bypass informal barriers to work such as the xenophobia of the local population. The fact that most digital work occurs on an individual basis offers benefits like enabling refugees to manage their own time and tasks. When some work is accessible with payment almost immediately

through mobile phone, it can be particularly helpful to those without official identification and/or those unable to open a bank account in their host country.

Andreeva and Yolova (2019) however point out that rapid technological development and mass digitisation of the labour process affect traditional labour rights, which calls for a legal framework and mechanism for protection. The right to work is, to a great extent, linked to the employee's right to security which requires coordinated measures at the national and international levels.

Hackl et al. (2021) add to the digital labour discussion with the relevant finding that digital work presents opportunities for only a limited number of refugees who possess the skills and infrastructure required to access and succeed in a highly competitive digital labour market. Their report further reveals that geographical location matters hugely in the digital economy, with workers in emerging nations being affected the most by uneven internet connectivity, time zones, language, security, and payment mechanisms. The legal or political context of the workers' location is linked closely to their financial exclusion. For example, one of the main payment mechanisms on the digital labour platform is PayPal, which does not operate in countries like Turkey or Lebanon. Syrians also face barriers in opening bank accounts in countries like Egypt and Jordan. Syrian digital workers who have a bank account may face the unwillingness of international banks to transfer funds due to international sanctions by the US against financial dealings with Syria and individuals or groups deemed to be involved in terrorism or drug trafficking.

As discussed in the literature in this section, the impact of digital work on Syrian refugees is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it appears to be an innovative solution that enables skilled Syrians to circumvent right to work limitations and achieve economic independence. On the other hand, it means that refugee digital workers are exposing themselves to deep-seated global

patterns of inequality characterised by cheap labour, lack of security, and work relationships between workers and buyers that entrench a South-North divide (Hackl, 2020). Engaging in digital forms of labour might make labour more vulnerable in a legal sense because working online or remotely may be a legal grey area in some countries, particularly for asylum seekers or refugees. Though digital jobs are often home-based and invisible, if workers are not formally allowed to work, they are still exposed to a risk that could well endanger their status.

In sum, the current literature offers insightful directions for this research. By providing a closer look through qualitative analysis of the life experiences of a few Syrian refugees who engage with digital work as a means for their livelihood. The deeper analysis I provide sheds light on the ways digital work represent opportunities and challenges and probes the meaning Syrian refugees attach to their digital experiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I first discuss the concepts of structure and agency combining the theoretical insights of Bourdieu and Giddens. I proceed then to provide a framework drawing on the concepts of “aspiration as cultural capacities” and “agency and imagination”. By connecting these theoretical insights, I create a structure that allows me to examine the opportunities and challenges that Syrian refugees face when they adopt digital work as a livelihood strategy.

3.1 Bourdieu’s Theory of Habitus

Bourdieu’s theory of habitus provides a useful lens to analyse refugees’ livelihood strategies, as it allows for the consideration of the interplay between structural and individual characteristics. Bourdieu (1977, p. 78) defines “habitus” as “a system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of

perceptions, appreciations, and action and makes possible the achievement of infinitively diversified tasks”. Along with habitus, the concept of field and capital represent the interrelated building blocks of the theory. A field is defined as a setting in which agents and their social positions are located. Each social field has its own rules, logic, and power dynamics (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). The position of agents has been described as the accumulation of economic (money, resources, and property), social (relationships), and cultural (attributes and skills) capital where people are subordinate to or dominant in the fields (Bourdieu, 1986). Agents can become powerful only when they possess capital that is relevant to their respective fields. This implies that capital is relational and that a change of field would thus change the value of one’s existing capital portfolio (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). As such, Refugees experience a depreciation of their credentials as the capital they acquire in their homeland field is not valued in the same way in their new field. With the relational nature of capital, refugees thus have to create new capital and find ways to validate it in a new country. Considering that an agent’s capital portfolio could enhance or reduce his/her possibilities in a specific field, those with an unfavourable capital set may develop strategies to increase its value (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018).

To bring Bourdieu’s theory closer to my thesis, I look at the exploration of the notion of “habitus” in the context of refugees’ entrepreneurial actions. The study of Refai et al (2018) discusses the influence of cultural capital and embodied dispositions on entrepreneurial activity operated by non-professional entrepreneurs in a deprived context. They, first of all, argue that opportunity recognition is not just linked to the individual, but is dependent on the knowledge and information that individuals have in a given context. The refugee entrepreneurial activity itself, they concur, is characterised as an embodied disposition based on survivability.

To consider the precarious positions of refugees, Bourdieu acknowledges there are “blips” and “misfirings” in his definition of habitus.

This may lead to “discordances” among those in contradictory social positions, thus generating a “destabilised habitus, torn by contradiction and internal division”. (Bourdieu, 2000). The troubled experiences of social context may then lead to “suffering” among the “occupants of precarious positions”, and in such context, subjects are “constrained, to live or survive, to practice a kind of self-analysis, which often gives them access to the objective contradictions which have them in their grasp” (Bourdieu, 1999: 511). Bourdieu’s (2000) work also portrays what it feels like to be out of place in a given social and temporal context, and habitus interruptions. What he refers to as a “cleft habitus” – forces individual subjects who find themselves in new and unfamiliar spaces to think not only of where they are now, but also where they came from (Refai et al., 2018). Bourdieu (2000) moreover states that those who are in the “wrong” place in their social world are more likely to bring to consciousness that which for others is taken for granted, because they are forced to keep watch on themselves and consciously correct the “first movements” of a habitus that generates inappropriate or misplaced behaviours.

Throughout his writing, Bourdieu was on a mission to reconcile structure and agency. To him, both structure and agency have equal roles in constructing a person. External structures are internalised into habitus, as the actions of the agent make the mechanism through which different forms of capital are externalised in a person. Habitus cannot determine particular features or actions or even the actions themselves. Instead, actions are the sole managers of the material society around the actor and practice is innocent of the actor’s intentions. While Bourdieu’s notion of habitus provides one perspective in analysing my findings, I take into consideration the critique of some scholars which point to his failing of resolving the subject – object dualism of social theory (King, 2000). I concur that his concept grants too little knowledge to actors, while at the same time failing to recognise that action itself may be articulated in terms of ontological principles (Karp, 1986).

3.2 Giddens' Structure and Agency

To further facilitate my analysis of structure and agency in answering my research question, I draw on Giddens' Structuration Theory, which provides a deeper understanding of the twin view of structure and agency and elaborates the dual relationship in a more refined and reflexive way.

To Giddens (1979), the chief problem of many discussions between "action" and "structure" lies in the one-sided conception of actions as restricted by structures. He advocates that agency produces structure and that structure is comprised of rules and resources by which that same agency is recreated. Structure, he argues, should be distinguished from social systems. The former consists of rules and resources out of time and space, which then yield or produce social systems. Social systems comprise sets of relationships between actors or collectives within time and space. Social reality is in that sense a process; it is neither a fixed institutional structure nor a set of discrete actions, but the ongoing interaction between these elements. Thus, we are the agents of society; we act on its behalf, freely but within its constraints. We are not the puppets of the social structure nor is social reality whatever we wish it to be (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens takes the essentially Weberian position that action can be understood as having a multiplicity of motives and is goal-directed. People are reflexive and self-monitoring beings, which enables them to respond to changing situations. As existential or ontological security is vital for human beings, there exists a sense of belonging, personal continuity, security, and well-being. The reflexive nature of actors is an element of social action and, hence, an aspect of structuration (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994).

Since individual agency cannot be understood independent of power relations. Giddens' account of the relationship between power and agency is key to a more comprehensive understanding of refugees' agency against structural authorities. Power is defined by Giddens as situated in

“transformative capacity”. It is a representation of the logical connection between human action and transformative capacity. Thus, power is tied to determination, to relations of autonomy and dependence. He sees power relations as continually produced and reproduced in contexts related to the invocation of rules and the mobilisation of resources. Power is, in a way, an exercise through which individuals draw on personal resources to alter the balance of power. Therefore, people are not helpless dupes, or passive pawns (Ulrick, 1992).

Complementing Giddens’ thought on relational power, Goffman (2005) posits that power comes in many forms: economic, political, social, cultural, and symbolic. And actors rarely dominate them all. Therefore, no actor is powerless. As such, everyone can mirror the relationships between agency and structure to learn and to organise collective or individual action. Since my argument is that structural constraints trigger Syrian refugees to exercise agency to explore innovative livelihood strategies and solutions, the theories of Bourdieu and Giddens are key to a deeper understanding of the correlation between the two.

3.3 Capability to Aspire and Imagine

To evaluate further the opportunities and challenges encountered by Syrian refugees while working online, I focus also on the aspect of cultural capital. Cultural capital is defined as a crucial form of capital by Bourdieu and one that should be accumulated for success. To put it simply, it refers to one’s skills, taste, behaviour etc. which one acquires by being part of a particular class in a particular culture. Adding to Bourdieu’s argument, Appadurai stresses the adjectival form of the word, “cultural”, to move away from the concept of culture which carries associations with the discursive realm of race, which also neglects the facts of inequality and differences in lifestyles. The adjective cultural he concurs, recognises differences, contrasts, and comparisons. In short, Appadurai resists the normative form of culture that implies the idea of actual social groups as a culture. Rather, his adjectival

approach to culture stresses the contextual, heuristic, and comparative dimensions and moves to the idea of culture as difference (Appadurai, 1996).

In his later writings, Appadurai adds to his cultural discussion by bringing in the aspect of future. By discussing the nature of aspirations and the capacity to aspire, Appadurai (2013) brings a new aspect to his discussion on culture as difference. Aspirations encompass the factors of wants, preferences, choice, and calculations, which have long been considered as terms in the discipline of economics. Appadurai (2013) argues that aspirations are indeed parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas that derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual; they are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life. They should thus be included as a dimension of what is cultural (Appadurai, 2013). The capacity to aspire is described by him as the ability to “read a map of a journey into the future” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 76). His description requires us to place futurity rather than pastness at the heart of our thinking about culture. Although aspirations for the good life exist in all societies, Appadurai stresses that not everyone possesses the same capacity to aspire. He claims that the “better offs” in a society have a more fully developed capacity to aspire. He believes that when you are better off in terms of power, dignity, and material resources, you are more likely to be accessible to the immediate objects of aspiration. Being better off is then defined as having a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes. They are in a better position to gain certain experiences from trial and error. They are more accessible to opportunities and possibilities. They too may express their aspirations in concrete individual wishes and wants. They are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through goods and services that are tied to more abstract norms and beliefs.

Apart from aspirations, Appadurai also recognises imagination as one of the human preoccupations that contribute to the shaping of the future. Imagination has long been regarded as important in defining the causes and effects of human behaviour. Sixty years ago, sociologist C. Wright Mills

established the concept of sociological imagination. Sociological imagination demonstrates how an individual perceives social forces and involves thinking beyond one's current situation and is an aspect of sociology that takes one's imagination to another level. It means that people's activities are shaped by a variety of factors, i.e. the period, the values they uphold, their social context (for example, the country they are in), their current situation and the influence of the people around them (Mills, 1959). Sociological imagination, thus, enables people to step away mentally from the common routines of their lives and observe these events from a new perspective. To acquire a sociological imagination, one must distance oneself and pull away from the situation at hand. It is one's ability to shift perspectives and observe the social world from the viewpoint of others that triggers sociological imagination.

Relatedly, Zittoun and Gillespie (2016) look at imagination as a social and cultural process facilitated by the use of resources. Resources include personal experiences, information, and images from technology and social media and representations of self and others. As such, resources "fill in" the content of imagination. Resources can facilitate an expansive experience, which may have real-world consequences in mobilising action or be constraining (that which is impossible to imagine) and, thus, limit future action.

To sum up, there are two theoretical insights derived from the discussion of aspiration and imagination that are relevant to this study. First is the idea of aspirations and imagination as cultural capacities. By considering this, I can better understand the cause and effect of an individual Syrian refugee's relationship with the social forces surrounding him. Second, the capability to aspire and actualise imagination is for people who are better off and, more specifically, for those who have resources (Appadurai, 1996). This insight provides directional guidance in my exploration of the role of class in pursuing a digital livelihood.

4. Methodology

This chapter provides an outline of the research methodology employed to answer the research questions. The research approach, data collection process, ethical concerns and the importance of reflexivity are all discussed in this chapter.

4.1 Research Approach

In view of the exploratory nature of this study, the method chosen for this thesis is qualitative phenomenological research. As Mason (2018) rightly points out, qualitative research is characteristically exploratory, fluid, flexible, data-driven and context-sensitive, all of which links well to the research aim of investigating the narratives and perceptions of Syrian refugees regarding digital work. Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz (2018) believe that qualitative research has a particular importance for migration studies, as it is more likely to produce in-depth, rich and nuanced analysis. It also permits a higher validated conceptual refinement. Qualitative study moreover enables a better understanding of the voices of particular groups, especially those who lack the means to participate and are underrepresented in mainstream society and politics (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). As for empirical analysis, I do not seek to generalise from patterns or similarities, nor to produce representative data, but aim to gain in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and attempt to contextualise, describe and analyse it. To this end, the qualitative method is appropriate.

The phenomenological approach helps to answer my research question of how digital work serves as a strategy to counter the structural constraints on a group of Syrian refugees. The approach refers to the process of studying an idea or concept containing a shared meaning for a small group of people. It helps me to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of my study participants. The process of collecting data in phenomenological

research can be streamlined using single or multiple interviews (Aspers, 2009). Though the stories I have collected for this research vary in detail, they are all personal experiences of how refugees have dealt with employment challenges. Each of the participants in my study offers their narratives on the meaning of work.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), meanings are multiple and subjective, and they are negotiated through history and social norms that organise an individual's life. For meanings to form, interactions and means are not constant; they are arbitrary and socially constructed. At the same time, the narratives offered by my study participants are largely guided by my interview questions and probes. They are thus co-constructed between the teller (participant) and listener (researcher) (Hall, 2011). The knowledge generated in this study is essentially based on subjective meanings, social phenomena, and actions associated with the persons under study, within a defined context. This study is thus best described by the constructivism paradigm. A point to note in this study is that as far as constructivism and political neutrality are concerned, I have a motive to push for a theoretical shift from narratives of vulnerability to those of self-empowerment.

4.2 Data Generation Process

In this research, I position myself as engaged in constructing knowledge about the world rather than as a mere neutral collector. Thus, it is more relevant to speak of the process as data generation than data collection.

For the purposes of this research, I recruited only Syrian refugees who have found in digital work a source of livelihood. To define the sample further, I refer to refugee online workers who have taken on digital jobs for at least 20 hours per week. A purposeful sampling has therefore been chosen to locate suitable participants based on a rather specific criterion. Patton (2002) emphasises that the power of purposeful sampling lies in the selection

of information-rich cases that yield insights and in-depth understanding, rather than empirical generalisations.

To commence the process, I first reached out to my previous Arabic teachers, whom I knew from my online Arabic lessons over the past two years. Two of them work with an online language platform, while one works on his own website. The three immediately agreed to be interviewed, becoming my first batch of participants. The sourcing of other participants followed a classic snowball route, with my former Arabic teachers referring me to suitable informants. Snowball sampling is applicable when samples with the target specifics are not easily accessible (Naderifar et al., 2017), which is the case in this study. In the ocean of the digital work world, it would have been impossible for me to locate suitable participants without the referrals of established connections.

Additionally, my past relationships with these teachers quickly won me the trust of my participants and made them comfortable about talking to me. Bloomaert and Dong (2010) highlight the importance of establishing rapport in gaining the trust of interviewees. O'Reilly (2009) stresses that the time spent in knowing a participant is an essential component in building rapport. Participants are believed to be more willing to share their honest personal experiences and reflections with a person they know (Brewis, 2014). A satisfactory level of cooperation was therefore achieved through a shared desire to talk to each other.

I conducted eight interviews with Syrian refugees residing in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Germany and Sweden. I consider the number of interviews appropriate in phenomenological research since my goal is not to achieve generalisations, but to gain detailed insights into my research topic. The digital work my participants engage in varies from teaching Arabic, to 3D model design, and online investment, to producing YouTube videos. Among the eight participants, six were male and two were female: a seemingly uneven gender distribution. While the gender aspect of refugee digital

workers is not a major concern of this study, I have constantly reflected on the gender positionality and power dynamics between the participants and myself.

In order to guarantee their anonymity, the names of the participants have been replaced with pseudonyms in this thesis. At times, other details have been omitted for the same purpose.

4.3 Semi-structured Interviews

Due to the nature of my study, the restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the location of the participants, it was logical for the interviews to be conducted through online channels. Seven of the eight interviews were conducted through Skype video calls. By leveraging the web camera, the interaction on Skype is considered comparable to the onsite equivalent for the presence of non-verbal and social cues (Janghorban et al., 2014). However, I am also aware that a “head shot” provided by webcam would potentially obstruct observation of the participants’ body language. To me, all my participants appeared to be at ease during the interviews, partly due to their being in a comfortable environment—their home—and partly because speaking with people online is what they do regularly. We did not once encounter any technical issue or disruptions.

One-on-one interviews are a suitable tool to understand the reality of digital work from the refugee’s perspective. Interviews allow them to express their life situations freely in their own words and simultaneously promote closer interaction between the researchers and their informants (Kvale, 2006). The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, over a 45- to 60-minute duration. They were all recorded electronically. No interview was conducted without the verbal informed consent of the participants. Whilst a list of pre-determined questions was prepared, informed by the literature and my research questions, all the interviews evolved into conversations with the participants who offered their stories in a free-flowing manner.

The interview questions were intentionally chosen to generate conversations around their refugee experiences as well as their livelihood strategies. Through the interviews, I paid full attention to my interview accounts, with due explanations and building up probes whenever appropriate. This flexibility to deviate from the pre-determined questions offered an opportunity for my participants to explore issues they consider important (Longhurst, 2016). Most of my participants spent quite a lot of time elaborating on their future work plans and providing insights into what matters most to them in their careers. This proved helpful later on, when I did the grouping of themes.

All the interviews were conducted in English. Although it is neither my native language nor that of my participants, English was chosen, as it is a more common medium of communication. All my informants speak fluent English and had no problem in expressing themselves. This to a certain extent reflects their privileged and skilled backgrounds. Although I did not stipulate education level as a criterion when recruiting participants, it turned out that all my informants hold higher education degrees and some post-graduate degrees. It is important to note that in a qualitative study, the researcher relies heavily on people's capacities to verbalise, understand language and interact throughout the interview. Conducting interviews in a language we are both fluent in thus reduces translation problems and inaccuracies. Further, it speeds up the transcription process and enabled me to listen to the recordings repeatedly with no language barrier.

4.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is recognised increasingly as a significant strategy in knowledge generation using qualitative research (Berger, 2015). Researchers have to be increasingly reflective on self-knowledge and sensitivity, better understand the role of the self in the creation of knowledge, and carefully

monitor the impact of their own biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research (Berger, 2015).

My researcher's positioning impacts my research at many levels. First of all, it affects my access to the "field". My position as a former student of three of my study participants grants me easier access to suitable informants. While our established teacher-student connection facilitates their willingness to share information, it inevitably inserted a power hierarchy, with these three informants speaking in a noticeably more authoritative tone. This could be because they are older and have more working experience in their own field or simply a result of patriarchy. I consider this as an opposite power dynamic which is an aspect in qualitative interviews in which researchers are being studied (O'Reilly, 2011). My position as a non-refugee, international student with access to rights and citizen status, however, helped to balance the power dynamic. My teachers were in general quite open to discuss with me the issues of growing up in developing countries and their views on racism and White supremacy.

Berger (2015) explains that the worldview and previous experience of the researcher affects the way he or she uses languages, poses questions, and chooses the lens for making meaning of the information gathered. This may then shape the findings and conclusions of the study. In this regard, since I am a person with many years of working experience and had myself gone through numerous career struggles, I inevitably adopt this lens of experience in taking meaning from the narratives of unfulfilled individuals.

Emotional responses to participants are an element that cannot be ignored. Whenever there is human interaction, there are emotions, and emotions govern actions. It is important for researchers to consistently reflect on the role of emotion, as it impacts the power position and ultimately the outcome of the study. Reflexivity, therefore, becomes a means I employ to monitor the tension between involvement and detachment. To maintain objectivity with my presentation of self during the process was of the utmost

importance to avoid the production of one-sided and biased knowledge. I am also aware that narratives are told by people for particular purposes, from particular points of view (Narayan, 1993) and are, thus, not transparent representations of what happened; researchers have to be mindful too of the power relations at play concerning class, race, gender and personal experiences.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As far as ethical issues are concerned, I am fully aware that I am advancing the interests of a particular group with some pre-set assumptions (Mason, 2018). My view that refugees' participation in digital work may be a solution to their denial of work rights may differ from the stand of the authorities. This is linked directly to the importance of the confidentiality and anonymity of this study. Although most of the informants reiterated their view that digital work has nothing to do with their right to work, they are nonetheless in a legal grey area. Participants were therefore assured that any details which may lead to their being personally identified would not be disclosed in this thesis. At the beginning of each interview, I explained clearly the nature of my study, clarifying that the participant has the right to refuse answering any question and withdraw participation at any point.

Davies and Spencer (2010) point out the need for researchers to recognise that qualitative fieldwork will be viewed at some level as an intrusion into one's world and private life. We researchers are like uninvited guests, and once welcomed, we should behave with consideration. This may refer more to ethnographies, but I applied this principle to my interviews. I ensured that I treated my study participants with respect, mindful of my attitude and strived to interact in a humane and non-exploitative manner. After all, an interview will be effective only when both the researcher and respondent feel good, rewarded, and satisfied by the process and outcomes. While researchers should constantly reflect on their positionality, I strived to avoid falling into the trap of influencing the participants to say something I

wanted to hear or fulfil any pre-set answers. I was aware all the time and prepared to acknowledge that the interests of my participants were diverse and contested. I was careful not to cause my participants any emotional stress. I tried to balance objectivity and sympathy whenever stress or negative memories of displacement were brought up during the interview. I reflected constantly on staying clear of any researcher bias as I understand fully that any deviation from objectivity may affect my interpretation of the data collected (Mason, 2018)

5. Findings

5.1 Profiling the Participants

This study is based on the interviews I conducted with eight Syrian refugees—six males and two females—aged between 26 and 44 years. All of them left Syria between 2011 and 2015. My participants are from different cities in Syria and are now residing in different host countries. All of them are working online, and six of them see online work as their fulltime occupations. In this section I present the findings I gathered from seven video calls on Skype and one face-to-face interview.

Rahim is 44 years old and from Aleppo. He left Syria in 2013 and is now residing in Turkey with his family. He has worked fulltime since 2017 as an online Arabic teacher and is affiliated with a China-based international online language platform. Rahim earned a bachelor's degree in English language and literature at Aleppo University and was later sent to England to continue his master's studies in English Language Teaching. He repeatedly mentioned that he had lived and worked in the Oxford area before. Rahim takes roughly seven to eight lessons a day and charges the highest among all the Syrians I interviewed.

Ahmed, 36, was the most experienced as an online Arabic teacher. He shares some similarities with Rahim. They both have university degrees

in English Language and literature, and each considers himself to be the best online Arabic teacher. Ahmed left Syria in 2011 and is now living in Egypt with his family. He started to teach Arabic online mainly over Skype, before leaving Syria. However, since demonstrations erupted in Egypt in 2011, the regime started to interfere with the network, and he was unable to provide online lessons anymore; he had to move to a place where he could continue his job. Ahmed teaches Arabic in English, Italian and Spanish and has students all around the world.

Yusuf is 30 years old and lives in Germany with his wife. Among all the participants, Yusuf was the only one who expressed an intention to return to Syria whenever there is an opportunity. Yusuf too is a university graduate and has studied English literature. Yusuf encountered a lot of difficulty in finding a job in Germany when he arrived in 2015. He landed a manual job at a freight processing centre after a long period of searching. Then, three years ago he decided to try his luck online. He registered with the same online language platform as Rahim. However, he is not doing as well as Rahim or Ahmed. His online earnings are in fact less than what his manual job paid him. Although he likes to teach online, he does not feel it is a long-term occupation. A job with a permanent contract is what he hopes for.

Ibrahim is 30 years old and has been teaching Arabic online for one year only. He was a student at Aleppo University, majoring in Economics, before the war broke out. He came to Turkey with his family in 2015, when the border was still open to Syrians. In the first few years, he worked in a carpet cleaning company, putting in long hours in a physically demanding job. Ibrahim is probably one of those teachers whom Rahim and Ahmed referred to as lacking teaching experience. Ibrahim is aware of his limitations and hence charges quite modestly. However, he is doing surprisingly well, considering his limited experience. On a busy day, he could have up to 15 lessons.

Xavier, 28, is a friend of Ibrahim, and lives in Istanbul. He has more than 10 years' experience in 3D modeling and computer graphics. He works with a few global online freelance platforms and has clients in London, Turkey, Dubai and Saudi Arabia. Xavier is serious about his job and invests in upgrading his equipment and software periodically. Xavier has on average one to two projects each month, which require him to work sometimes up to 12 hours a day. Xavier struck me as a real doer, but relatively less outspoken than the other participants. He lamented that many Syrians were complaining too much, which he found pointless. What he believes in is to work hard and keep improving himself in order to raise his living standard.

Omar is 30 years old and has been living in Sweden since 2015. Omar was a university student in Aleppo when he was shot on the street in 2012. One bullet went through his mouth and another one through his shoulder. The scar on his face is still rather visible. That was the time he decided to leave Syria and seek medical treatment elsewhere. He showed me his route to Sweden on a map. It was a long and dangerous route. Upon arrival in Sweden, Omar registered in the integration programme and found a job immediately thereafter. Three years ago, he started investing online, first in cryptocurrency and then in funds. Online investment has subsequently become his sole source of income. Omar was happy about his decision to come to Sweden, which has changed him completely.

Nawra is one of my two female participants among. She is 34 years old and is an online Arabic teacher working with a US- based online language platform which hires only refugees. Nawra left Syria and arrived in Jordan in 2011. She worked as a director with a kindergarten in Syria but was not allowed to work in Jordan. In 2017, she started to teach Arabic online which she likes a lot. Apart from allowing her to circumvent her work restrictions, working online also gives her the flexibility to stay at home with her two young children. She works about five to six hours per day, six days a week. She also gives online cooking classes once a month to introduce Syrian culture to her students.

Fatima, 26, was a trained pastry chef in Syria. She moved to Germany a year prior to the interview to reunite with her husband. Fatima is a YouTuber who produces videos on pastry-making and intends to make money through hosting advertisements in her videos. Her videos are nicely produced, but she went through a steep learning curve in video production and familiarising herself with YouTube logistics. Fatima's German language training was interrupted due to the lockdown, but it did not bother her much, as she was not keen on finding a job in Germany. Fatima's ambition is to start her own online pastry shop.

In the rest of this chapter, I organise my findings according to the themes I have identified in relation to my participants' livelihood experiences across various host countries. I have categorised the data in a sequence that helps to provide insight into my analysis on how digital livelihood serves as a strategy for Syrian refugees to counter employment barriers. The findings will cover the structural barriers encountered and the proactive mindsets I identified as crucial to their choice of livelihood. I have followed these with the satisfactions drawn from engagement in digital work as well as how they see themselves when compared to other Syrians. Lastly, I have detailed my findings on the challenges of working online and how digital work changed my participants' imaginations of their future.

5.2 Encountering Structural Barriers

Despite their high educational level (or perhaps as a consequence of it), all my respondents encountered various degrees of difficulty in finding jobs matching their qualifications when they first arrived in the country they resided in at the time of our interview. For example, Rahim, who taught in a Syrian university before he left, had to work as a teacher's assistant in a language school in his first year in Turkey. All he did was paperwork and no teaching. Later on, he was made redundant and had to take up another part-time job for five hours each week. He was a little embarrassed when he

recounted seeking help from his brother: “My economic situation was very bad; my brother in Germany had to help me. He was a refugee himself too, but I really couldn’t survive on my own”.

Ibrahim, who came to Turkey with his family, worked illegally in a carpet cleaning shop for 12 hours a day without any insurance coverage. He explained that what kept him going was the thought that “it’s going to be temporary”.

Nawra and her husband were not allowed to work in Jordan as refugees. As they were not living in a refugee camp, they received only minimal aid. It was her Jordanian cousin who supported them upon their arrival. Nawra remembers that for the first six years in Jordan, she did not own a computer or a smartphone. She could not even afford to renew her passport, which is essential for opening a bank account.

The online Arabic teacher Ahmed managed to continue teaching online in Egypt after he arrived in the country in 2013. However, he was frequently called upon by the security service. Initially it was about receiving money from abroad and he was twice taken to the investigation bureau and asked to explain the sources of his funds. The officers also challenged him about his permission to work. Luckily, however, there was no law specifically applying to online work, and Ahmed was allowed to go home. He speaks of the authorities with intense dislike, “It was all a show, the government is not keen on doing anything about or for the refugees”.

Yusuf was disappointed with the jobs he was offered in Germany. “My friends always said what you couldn’t find in Syria, you could find in Germany. It was a total misconception!” He said he was naïve to think that he could work doing whatever he wanted. He complained that most of the job offers for asylum seekers were for manual jobs. He worked at a DHL processing centre until he injured his back during work. “My back is more important so...no more manual jobs...two years are more than enough!”

Omar who lives in Sweden had a better beginning compared to the other respondents. His asylum application was approved within 45 days, and he was immediately enrolled in an integration programme. However, he chose to leave the programme six months before he completed it, as he found a job which paid more than the financial aid he was receiving from the programme. Omar admitted that he struggled a lot with the language when he first started working. It was also hard for him to study and work simultaneously; as a result, it took longer than he anticipated for his Swedish language skills to improve.

Despite differences in their access to rights and services in the different countries where they resided, all the respondents agreed that their early experiences and struggles were their motivation to look for ways to get around the system. Their lack of job satisfaction and fulfillment also pushed them to look for jobs that could provide them with a greater sense of achievement. They all believed that refugee status should not be a constraint to their pursuits. As Xavier summed it up, “You should just stop complaining, and work hard instead to improve your situation”.

5.3 Triggering a Proactive Mindset

My respondents stressed that no one should allow themselves to be defeated by failures. They all believed that change is the only constant thing, and one should develop a progressive mindset. All my respondents come across as people who look for the silver lining in situations and tended to focus on solutions rather than on problems. As Rahim told me, “I sent numerous applications to schools and received no answers; the situation was getting harder and harder, I simply had to find a way out”. While searching for translation work online, he noticed that teaching websites were flourishing and decided that they fit his qualifications best.

Both Ibrahim and Xavier did a lot of research on how to work better online. Ibrahim grew his knowledge by talking to friends he met on language exchange platforms. Xavier gained tips on how to work as an online freelancer through YouTube videos. As a 3D visual artist, Xavier knows the importance of a powerful computer and expensive software:

“I didn’t have everything I needed in the beginning, but I knew I needed to upgrade what I had if I wanted to do a good job. I calculated the money I needed, and whenever I received money from a job, I only took enough for my living and saved the rest for equipment upgrades”.

Omar stressed repeatedly that he reads a lot to monitor the financial market: “I spend a lot of time studying the funds that I invest in. I needed to know what was happening. I have to make sure I have good information”.

Omar felt good about continuing to learn new things. He told me proudly that he is making full use of the free education offered by the Swedish government and enrolled himself in an advanced English course. Apart from the financial market, Omar also has a good grasp of e-commerce and has been exploring business opportunities on Amazon. When I asked him whether his success has more to do with his entrepreneurial mindset or the integration system of Sweden, he replied with a confident smile, “Both!”.

Ahmed, who prefers to recruit students through his website, is aware that he lacks the resources of a platform. When I was learning Arabic from him two years prior to the interview, he told me that he had just started to learn Spanish and hoped to recruit students who can speak only Spanish. When we met, he could give lessons in Spanish in addition to Italian and English. He was also aware that he was not protected by a platform. To avoid non-payment by students, he asks everyone to pay for ten lessons upfront.

Fatima spends a lot of time every day watching other YouTubers' videos to learn from them. She notices that lack of English subtitles may be one of the reasons why her videos are lagging in subscribers. She seeks the help of her husband who is better in English, to translate her recipes. When I talked to her again two months after our interview, she happily told me that her subscribers were increasing after she inserted English subtitles in her videos.

Looking at how my respondents strive to improve their quality of work, I saw that they all aspire to developing their careers or more precisely, to overall advancement. They tend to make the most of the resources on hand and constantly scout for breakthroughs.

5.4 Satisfaction and a Sense of Achievement

Monetary rewards play an important part in terms of job satisfaction; but interestingly, most of my participants do not like to talk about money. Our discussions about income usually stopped at how much they charge with none of them willing to talk about the improvement in their lives in financial terms. They were, however, very forthcoming about the other types of satisfaction they gained from working online. The majority of the participants said that being able to progress in their career in a new country was the main motivation for them to continue. Working online has helped them to rediscover the meaning of work and, perhaps, their self-worth too. "I love my job", "I love what I am doing" are two phrases that come up often.

Rahim spoke highly of the language platform he was collaborating with and was happy that his bookings for lessons were staying stable. He tried to avoid the topic of financial progress and preferred to discuss his professional background and how good he was at designing teaching material. He was particularly proud of his "professional background" which included extensive teaching experience and a master's degree in language teaching from a British University. While Rahim derives satisfaction from being able

to put his knowledge into practice, for Xavier, career advancement is the result of being able to expand his client base internationally. He stated that his client base had grown from mostly local Turkish clients at the beginning to a majority of international clients today. He enjoyed the side conversations he had with his clients a lot as it helped him to learn about other cultures.

Ibrahim's principal source of satisfaction stems from the feeling of independence. "I don't have a boss; I am my own boss. It is a very good feeling when you know that no one is controlling you". He recalls that when he worked as a manual worker, he constantly had to report to managers or bosses, and as a result, he developed negative feelings towards the Turkish people and even the country. Now that he has gained confidence by working on his own, he has become more open to the people as well as the country.

As someone who has made some good investments online, Omar stresses that his satisfaction springs not from the monetary returns, but from the ability to keep learning new things. Omar is fully aware of the volatility of the financial market and has to ensure he is always abreast of current information. "There is too much to read, you need to constantly focus on what's happening". He explains that many people are hesitant to invest for fear of losing money. Omar however does not care about losing money, as long as he can learn something new. "You don't need to invest \$100,000; you can invest \$10 just to learn something new". "When you learn all these new things, you are going to be able to make more and more money online later".

I see a common tendency in all of the participants to de-emphasise external or objective success such as income. Their feeling of pride and personal achievement is perceptible in almost all the participants. Even for Fatima who hasn't started to make any money yet on YouTube. She was content that she could put her knowledge into practice by producing videos on pastry-making. When I asked her about how much she hopes she could make on YouTube, she just shrugs her shoulders and says, "I don't mind how

much I make, as long as it gives me a reason to keep making my pastries. Anyway, you have to start somewhere”.

5.5 Dealing with Competition and Uncertainties

Regardless of the satisfaction and sense of achievement the participants enjoy from working online they are all aware that this choice of livelihood does have its downsides. For example, a majority of them expressed their wish to charge more in the future. Their inability to charge more right now, however, reflects the reality that online workers are often subject to competition and wage undercutting.

Rahim feels he can charge more with his qualification; but “now I can’t charge the price that I want to because we have a lot of competition”. He has to pay commission to the platform as well, but Rahim does not have much choice, because of the payment issues he encounters as a Syrian in Turkey. Online payment platforms like PayPal are banned in Turkey, while other similar platforms charge huge fees. Rahim has made a deal with the language platform to transfer the funds to his bank account when his earnings accumulate to a certain amount. This makes it difficult for him to disconnect from the platform.

Ahmed is not collaborating with any platforms, but he too is cautious about his charges and has increased them by just \$1 over two years. He also feels he could charge more but is worried about his students’ ability to afford his classes. “Some of my students are young university students, they want to learn Arabic, but if they can’t pay, they will go”. The good thing is that Ahmed lives in Egypt, and his earnings are enough for him to build a decent life for the whole family. “It would be different if I were in Europe. That’s why I am not so enthusiastic about moving there”.

Ibrahim shares Ahmed’s view: he is even more pragmatic in the sense that he feels he could charge more but is also aware that he is not so

experienced. He constantly compares his charges to those of other teachers: “If they charge \$10, it doesn’t make sense if I charge \$20; however, if they charge \$15 and I charge \$7, I will harm them by doing so”. Ibrahim also points out that because he is paid in dollars and lives in Turkey, he can take advantage of the currency exchange rate and still do fine with his current charges. He says he would charge more when he has built a more solid foundation. After all, he has only a year’s experience in teaching Arabic online.

Ibrahim’s friend Xavier shares his habit of monitoring what other people are charging. He would compare himself with other designers with similar experience and portfolios and then decide whether he is charging too high or too low. He usually has a fixed hourly rate, which he reduces when he does not have enough projects. He would not compare his charges with designers in Europe or the US. “They could charge five times higher than my rate, but clients know I live in Turkey, they know we don’t need that much money, so they won’t pay me that much”.

On the other hand, Yusuf, who lives in Germany, complains that he makes less money online than through his manual job. He blames it on the currency: “You get your income in dollars, and here in Germany, we spend in Euros, and everything is so expensive here...” However, he is not considering raising his fees due to the fear of competition.

5.6 Distinguishing Themselves from Other Syrians

Apart from the challenges encountered by the participants, most of my respondents felt they were doing much better than their fellow Syrians by working online. A few of them even considered themselves the best in their field. Both Ahmed and Rahim despise Arabic teachers who do not have proper training. They disapprove of teachers who falsely claim years of experience and condemn them for exploiting foreigners who do not know Arabic. For them, teaching Arabic is a serious job, and they are concerned

about the progress of their students. Rahim is particularly proud that the design of his material is based on his past experience of working with teaching materials from Oxford and Cambridge. He brought up Oxford four times during the interview, which was his way of setting himself apart from others who make claims of superior qualifications. He truly believes that his professional background, particularly his UK experience, sets him apart from other “non-professional” teachers.

Ahmed was frustrated at having to correct the many mistakes of his students who were taught by other teachers before him. Rahim also complained that the material provided by other teachers was not up to standard.

Xavier sees himself as having better chances than other Syrian refugees in Turkey. He credits this to his positive attitude. He thinks that other refugees complain too much, which is not going to help their situation. Similarly, Omar also comments that many Syrians in Sweden are not doing anything to improve themselves but are relying too much on the financial aid provided by the government. Yusuf and Narwa are more modest in that regard. Although they recognise themselves as better Arabic teachers, they do not feel they are doing better than other Syrians. While other respondents compare themselves with other Syrian refugees in the same country, Yusuf compares himself to Syrians who live in other parts of Europe and envies their better situation. Narwa is happy that she has found a viable solution for getting around the right to work restrictions in Jordan. She admits that she is lucky in that sense; however, she sounds a little bitter when she talks about her ex-colleagues in Syria, who managed to find teaching jobs in a Swedish university.

It is interesting to note that when my participants compare themselves to their fellow countrymen or women, they never explicitly compare themselves in terms of material possessions. They are convinced that it is their

knowledge, their attitude, and their professionalism that sets them apart from others.

5.7 Imagining the Future

All the participants' understanding of their future is based on their imagination of where their digital work is going to take them. With this imagination, most of the participants have worked out plans accordingly.

Rahim is considering expanding his teaching to online classes, where he can teach more students. Instead of teaching one student, he imagines that he can teach 20 students or even a hundred students in a class. Rahim is aware that a lot of planning and arrangements would be needed to achieve this goal. But he is working hard now on teaching materials and hopes to achieve his goal in a couple of years.

Ahmed is hoping to increase his student base by perfecting his language skills. Currently, he can teach Arabic in English, Italian, and Spanish. Although he claims that his Spanish is not perfect, he is confident of acquiring more Spanish-speaking students, which is his goal for the immediate future.

Xavier wants to start his own online advertising agency in collaboration with freelancers around the world. He has started to share his idea with friends working in the field. He knows this is not something he can achieve in a short time, but he is working in that direction.

Ibrahim is working hard to develop his podcast and Instagram page. He has the ambition of starting a language school and embraces the idea of becoming an influencer on social media.

Omar is expanding his entrepreneurial mindset to selling and trading goods online. Leveraging platforms like Amazon warehouse, he aims to

diversify his online income to mitigate the risk of online investing. He imagines that he will be working 100% online in the future.

Fatima intends to continue producing YouTube videos on pastry-making and dreams of starting an online pastry shop and bakery school one day.

To sum up, the above findings provide a thorough understanding of my participants' path in choosing digital work as a livelihood strategy. The findings shed light on the opportunities and challenges of working online for Syrian refugees. The narratives also reveal how advancement in digital work can help to shape refugee's self-perception as well as their imagination of the future.

6. Analysis

Based on the findings detailed earlier, I provide, in this chapter, an analysis by applying the insights gained from the theoretical discussions and literature review. The findings will be critically analysed against the concept of structure and agency, relational power, forms of capital, and capability to aspire, to answer my research question.

6.1 Countering Structural Barriers Through Exercising Agency

Structural barriers are often related to the challenge faced by refugees. As discussed in the chapter detailing the context, Syrian refugees who settled in the neighbouring countries are mostly excluded from work, while Syrians in Europe are mostly excluded from decent jobs. As evident in the narratives of my participants, all of them encountered various degrees of exclusions upon arrival in their host countries. People like Narwa or Ahmed (who live in Jordan and Egypt respectively) had been deprived of work rights, whereas Rahim and Ibrahim (both residing in Turkey) went through an extended period of exploitation. Considering the theoretical insight of Bourdieu and

Giddens, the experiences and challenges the participants of this study face in their new, changed field bring to light the duality between individuals' way of acting and the social structure they encounter. Arguably, countering structural barriers has been the driving force behind the motivation of all of my participants to engage in digital work. In this new field of settlement, as far as livelihood is concerned, constraints are directed between the majority (locals) and the minority (Syrian refugees) who face unequal conditions in habitus and social, cultural, and economic capital. Most of my participants complain that the income from manual jobs is hardly enough to cover their living costs. At the same time, they also lack the social connections to secure a better job.

Just when my participants are suffering in a field that deprives them of legal rights to a decent livelihood, their agency is triggered and motivates them to actively look for creative solutions. The action of my participants in seizing the opportunities presented by digital globalisation embodies Giddens' observation that individuals have free wills to exercise agency to overcome disadvantages, despite the structural settings. These actions on the part of my participants can also be explained by what Betts et al. (2016) call innovation. As reflected in the literature, innovation represents the process of refugees applying their agency, skills, talents, and aspirations to transform structural limitations into a new set of opportunities, eventually creating value for themselves and probably others too. In a way, all of my participants went through the same innovative process that encapsulates Giddens' notion of structuration (Betts et al., 2016).

The process my participants went through can be broadly broken down into four stages. First, all of them encountered difficulties related to employment when they first settled in the host country. Most participants failed to continue their previous profession and had to resort to physical labour for eking out a livelihood. They were all subjected to various degrees of exploitation. In theoretical terms, the failure to pursue a decent job could first be understood as a personal problem, and when my participants'

respective agency was triggered, they could identify their problems to be the result of a social force, which in this case was a combination of structural constraints. Once they realised that the origins of their problems lay in the larger social issue(s), my participants started proactively looking for solutions, which can, in turn, change the social structure.

Once my participants developed an awareness of the failure in the social structure, their agency, in actively engaging in digital work, was perceptible. Despite their experience of displacement as refugees, they refused to conform to the refugee label. I argue that, in a way, the mobile nature of digital work facilitates the enhancement of my participants' respective agency. The virtual working environment allows them to overcome work-related structural barriers, provides them the space to advance their careers, builds their client base, and sets their charging schemes. I posit further that their presence in the online workforce allows them to identify themselves and feel like capable workers. Consequently, it helps them to regain self-worth and rebuild their identities, which were shattered in the course of their displacement.

In terms of the structure–agency context, it can be interpreted from Giddens' work that humans are not individuals programmed to act only unintentionally. By analysing their own lives through social imagination, my participants can explain their acts and the social forces behind them. I argue that all of them possess the wisdom to distinguish good acts from bad ones and modify their behaviour and strategies accordingly, which is indeed consistent with the third stage of the abovementioned innovative process, while it involves piloting and adapting a solution (Betts et al., 2016). My participants can thus be characterised as able persons, actively engaged in creating their identities and positions relative to their respective agency. This validates, to a great extent, Giddens' assumption that humans are reflexive agents, and self-identity is construed as a reflexive development. Self-identity, therefore, cannot be considered a group of observable characteristics or qualities; it is an individuals' unique perception of understanding their

biography. For example, among my participants, Rahim's and Ahmed's self-identify is being the best online Arabic teachers. Omar, Ibrahim, and Xavier identify themselves as their bosses and are doing much better than other Syrian refugees. All of my participants wish to continue or expand on what they are doing at present. Thereby, my participants enter the fourth stage of this innovation process, where they intend to scale up their solutions at an appropriate time. I posit that their vision implies that self-identification and awareness are characterised by continuity, which is the result of an individual's reflexive belief – relative to his or her biography (Giddens, 1976). Giddens further argues that social structures comprise institutions, conventions, moral codes, and traditional methods of doing things; but when such elements are ignored by people, they can be altered (Giddens, 1976). I concur that my participants' narratives validate Giddens' argument to a certain extent.

6.2 Transfer of Capital and Relational Power

Digital work has offered certain livelihood opportunities to refugees that they had never encountered before. In this sense, my participants will not be singled out as a group of people compelled to flee their motherlands for survival. They will not be viewed as vulnerable people deprived of rights and agency and prone to exploitation by the local communities. Hence, this livelihood strategy enables my participants to escape a noticeable transfer of field and deprivation of capital the way Bourdieu sees it. Bourdieu argues that when people arrive in a new "field", the different forms of capital they possessed before do not seem relevant anymore. They must then start again to accumulate capital to thrive. With the emergence of digital work opportunities, I argue that different forms of capital can now be migrated across fields. Participants like Ahmed and Rahim, who have been teaching Arabic before they left Syria, can continue their profession and put their knowledge to profitable use by teaching online. Both claims to benefit from the stable internet connection in their host countries, and their endeavours are flourishing. The low cost of entry and well-organised payment schemes

through reputable platforms enable my participants to accumulate economic capital. The mobile nature of digital work enables them to establish social capital in a much bigger network. Both Narwa and Xavier point out that their satisfaction arises not only from having established an international clientele but also from the friendships that have emerged from their work relationships. Good reviews by their other online students are how Rahim and Ibrahim increase their student base.

The easy access they have to information, online, further enables my participants to sharpen and expand their knowledge and skills, which, in turn, builds up their cultural capital. While Ahmed leverages language apps to teach himself Spanish, Fatima learns how to shoot YouTube videos with the help of free online tutorials, and Omar expands his online business ideas through persistent online research. The success in accumulating different forms of capital brings achievement and self-fulfilment and enhances the self-worth of this study's participants. All of my participants are simultaneously boosting their symbolic capital. Digital livelihood, therefore, enables my participants to transfer their existing capitals and arguably, helps them to retain the status they had enjoyed earlier in their own country. Social life within a digital world is then, as viewed by Giddens, produced and reproduced through actions. I argue that online jobs provide new spaces for my participants to explore and evolve, establishing new positions and representations. This is how earning a digital livelihood helps them to better adapt to and influence the contexts they arrive at and the social representations that predate them. The process of placing themselves in a global space helps them to rid themselves of cultural isolation, extreme vulnerability, and victimisation that often characterise the labels that get attached to them. Therefore, for all of my study participants, digital work is a strategy to circumvent legal restrictions, and the cost of entry is low. Once engaged, their attempts to achieve recognition (symbolic capital) for their attributes and skills (cultural capital) are less likely to be hindered by various legal and financial obstacles.

Relatedly, the different dimensions of power according to Giddens are also present in my participants' actions. At a personal level, it is expressed in my participants' abilities to pursue and achieve their interest in a suitable field. Power is then founded on skills, motivations, resources, and self-images. At an interpersonal level, power is presented as my participants' ability to influence the structure and other actors around them to achieve their interests. The ability to acquire positive reviews and word of mouth falls into this level. However, two other forms of power are beyond my participants' control and, thus, create uncertainties. The first is the visible form of power derived from the rules and processes governing the interpersonal process, e.g. the online platforms that my study participants work with. The second is the hidden form of power which determines the agendas of agents in control of the settings of their interaction and the interpersonal process such as the agendas of clients or companies who hire online freelancers. This puts my study participants in a constantly evolving power experience and forces them to stay reflexive as much as they can.

6.3 Exposure to Inequalities through Digital Livelihood

Analysing the process of how my participants ended up choosing digital work as a livelihood strategy reveals some unique personalities that my participants share. They all possess an innovative mindset and aspire to entrepreneurship. Their proactive mentality consistently seeks solutions to improve their situations. They find joy in getting things done and work hard to maintain a future-focused mindset. They are willing to take a risk, considering it a necessary step in achieving success. However, the same findings also point to the argument of Appadurai that the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed in any society.

All of my participants had access to higher education during their time in Syria and, hence, had accumulated certain cultural capital before they arrived in the host countries; they should, therefore, be considered as a group of "better off" people in the sense that Appadurai suggested. With their

“privileged” background, I argue, they could capture the advantages offered by engagement in digital work. While in a physical world where refugees are deprived of many rights, all of my participants will undoubtedly be categorised as victims lacking different forms of capital, in digital work, they can utilise their pre-accumulated cultural capital to exploit and expand their opportunities. All of my participants are university graduates and speak good English. They are internet-savvy and able to identify online training and work opportunities. All of them had at least the initial resources to invest in laptops and internet connections that allowed them to try their luck online. Riding on their advancement in digital work, my participants are now able to express their wishes, wants, plans, and aspirations. Most of them have a clear vision of what they want to achieve in the future. Digital work has indeed provided them many nodes and pathways on the maps of their aspirations (Appadurai, 2004). All of these factors indeed enhance their capability to aspire.

Upon acquisition of resources by working online, my participants can now utilise them to garner more resources. This phenomenon tallies with the general premise and the observation of Appadurai that “the rich get richer” in any society. Xavier who works as a 3D designer reinvests his income to upgrade his software from time to time. With more advanced equipment, he can accept bigger projects, enhancing his earnings. Fatima who produces YouTube videos utilises the platform to accumulate subscribers to turn them into clients one day – when she starts her online bakery classes. Ibrahim, Rahim, Ahmed, and Narwa are leveraging their current student base to expand their business bases. Omar is taking advantage of the free education in Sweden to enroll himself in an English diploma course, as he believes good English to be the key to his online success. The plans of all of my participants revolve around their achievement in online work. Online achievement thus becomes the trigger of their imagination of the future. The job satisfaction derived from digital work demonstrates that my participants possess the power, dignity, and material resources to differentiate themselves from other Syrian refugees.

The stories of my participants reveal that differences in educational background and class affect refugees significantly. Digital work, I argue, in a way amplifies this difference among refugees. In normal circumstances, when refugees are categorised as a homogenous group in need of protection and assistance, the class differences among refugees do not play a major role. However, when it comes to the digital world, the boundary between refugee workers and normal workers vanishes. Capable Syrian refugee digital workers can accumulate capital much faster than their local counterparts. Inequalities are now presented not only between refugees and locals but also among refugees themselves. On the other hand, my Syrian participants agree that, as digital workers living in the Global South, they are subjected to competition and inequalities, specifically from the third-world countries. As Xavier observes, people from America or Europe charge much higher than people from countries with lower living standards e.g. Turkey or Egypt. My participants living in these countries are therefore conscious about their charges. They all agree that they could or want to charge more, yet they are fully aware of the competitive nature of online business. Ibrahim accepts the fact that he cannot charge as much as people who live in Europe but says that he sometimes benefits from currency exchange rates. As all of my participants are paid in US dollars, income varies when converted into the local currencies, but since living standards are low in their countries, they do not find it a problem. Yusuf, who lives in Germany, is the only one who complains that his income from online teaching hardly covers his living cost, which is primarily due to the high living standard in Germany and also because he hesitates to charge more – to keep his rates competitive.

The stories of my study participants reveal the manifold inequalities Syrian refugees face. Refugees with better educational backgrounds are better off than their fellow Syrians, by engaging in digital work. On the other hand, the “better off” Syrian refugees face inequalities at a global level in the digital economy. Arguably, exploitation exists still and is only transferred to a different arena. The categorisation of my participants, therefore, shifts from precarious Syrian refugees to precarious digital workers.

7. Conclusion

The overarching objective and purpose of this thesis were to shed light on whether engagement in digital work serves as a coping strategy for Syrian refugees in different host countries. The stories of my participants demonstrate the multiple dimensions of this livelihood strategy, as and when they utilise it to counter structural constraints. I observe that by exercising their agency, my participants are aiming to capitalise on working online to escape an imposed category of victimhood, social exclusion, and indeed the refugee status itself.

By taking into account the structural barriers in the context of the Middle East, individual agency, and actual digital work experience, this thesis explores how structural failures trigger individual innovation and simultaneously promote agency. My findings reveal that there is indeed a group of Syrian refugees who refuse to be stereotyped and do not conform to the conventional image of them constructed by either the institutions or the public. My participants and other refugees like them actively seek solutions not only to establish their lives in a new country but also to reconstruct an identity of which they are justifiably proud. As indicated in most of the narratives, working online promises my participants an imaginable future to a certain extent. Simultaneously, it is a strategy for them to regain their self-worth and sense of achievement. By presenting their stories, I highlight the importance of aspirations and imagination in portraying the lives of refugees. This applies particularly to Syrian refugees, who are, since the refugee crisis in 2015, mostly portrayed as a traumatised people in desperate need of succour.

The cases of my participants demonstrate that innovative solutions often stem from individual refugees' own experiences of frustration or deprivation during their resettlement. The analysis of the path Syrian refugees has taken to secure their digital livelihoods allows me to understand how

certain problems encountered by refugees are defined, and how their solutions are identified, adapted, and scaled up. Until recently, the focus on innovation by refugees has been limited. This thesis aims to contribute to the literature that highlights the aspirations and agency of Syrian refugees and suggests that researchers on refugee livelihoods should pose queries as to what refugees' aspirations and their desires for a better life are.

Subsequently, this thesis explores how the mobile nature and inclusivity of digital work complement the needs of Syrian refugees who are "stuck" in transition. This rising trend of working online provides means for Syrian refugees to transfer their pre-existing capital and, thus, identify an easier path to personal progress.

Importantly, this thesis exposes the role of class among refugees. This study reveals that resources play an important role in deciding whether one can engage in digital work or not. Although digital work has a lower cost of entry in terms of economic capital, it requires a high level of cultural capital such as language skills, social skills, and certain pre-existing experiences. This leads to the question of inequality among Syrian refugees. Ironically, while engagement in digital work enables some Syrian refugees to enjoy a better life than their fellow Syrians, it puts them in a precarious condition in the context of the digital work world. I posit that they face the same challenges and exploitation as other digital workers worldwide. While digital livelihood serves to improve their conditions in their host countries, it does put them in a rather challenging position in a boundaryless virtual world.

8. Future Directions

This thesis represents a step ahead in highlighting the importance of incorporating aspirations and imagination in portraying refugee lives. According to my findings and analysis, participation in digital work serves not only as a strategy to circumvent structural barriers but also as a source of aspiration and a means to realise dreams. The defined scope of my study

however did not allow me to explore how accessible this coping strategy is to other Syrian refugees, for instance, those with fewer resources. Given that digital work is a rising global trend and given its suitability for refugees who are in transition, further research should investigate how to make digital work accessible to more refugees. Researchers should also investigate the possible barriers that prevent refugees from engaging in digital work and how to address them.

Moreover, future research should investigate whether digital work promotes inequality among refugees of the same origin. Past literature has always been focused on the inequalities between locals and refugees, but it has rarely discussed the class differences among refugees. It is worth delving deeper into how class, gender, age, and even ethnicity of refugees impacts digital livelihoods.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Tell me about yourself and your background

When did you leave Syria?

What made you decide to come to (name of the country)?

Why (name of the country) specifically?

Have you thought about your livelihood/how to make a living before you arrive in the new country?

Could you tell me about your employment experience in the new country?

What are the constraints you have encountered?

What is your relationship with UNHCR?

How did you end up decide to work online?

Could you describe a typical day of working online?

What are the difficulties/challenges in your current work situations?

Did it take long for you to get familiar with the online working mode?

Are you worry about regulations?

Have you encountered exploitations online?

What are your satisfactions?

Is there any situation which you would consider returning to Syria? Is work/livelihood a factor to consider?

Would you have done anything differently since arriving in the new country, if it was possible?

What are your feelings about the integration policy in your host country? Do you think you are integrating well into the society?

What are your feelings about working with locals? Do you have any experiences working with them in person?

How do you see your situation when compare to other Syrians refugees/asylum seekers?

Do you think working online is for every refugee?

What advice would you give someone in a similar situation as yours?

What is your plan for the future? Will you go back to Syria or are you thinking to move to another country?