

The Role of Media on Syrian Refugees' Agency in Turkey

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Introduction

Refugees have many several definitions in the literature and the public. UNHCR defines refugees as individuals "who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order." (Refugee Definition - UNHCR|Emergency Handbook, n.d.) Refugees' issue generally plays well in the hands of politicians and the political games. They are usually referred to as a crisis that receives much attention in the media and the public sphere for some reason. The characterization of refugees in the media has a far-reaching effect on their life choices. The dominant definition of refugees portrays them as passive pawns or desperate individuals with no or minimal range of options that are displaced due to a crisis and unavoidable catastrophe.

De Haas (2021) believes that in the literature on migration, migrants are typically portrayed unrealistically as passive victims "desperately fleeing situations of destitution, oppression, and human misery." De Haas (2021) is also of the opinion that although limited, refugees are somewhat in control of their migration, which should be investigated and made more visible.

During the study, refugee agency was investigated concerning their migration. Furthermore, this study aims to answer two questions: first, is there any meaningful relationship between media consumption in general and social media consumption in particular in shaping refugee immigration? Second, what role does agency play in the movement of refugees to another country? Throughout the following sections, we will take a brief look at the conceptual understanding of some of the significant concepts.

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Refugees and Agency and Media Role in Agency: Conceptual Overview

Before elaborating on the Syrian refugees, a brief discussion on the definition of the concept of refugees is warranted. Like most other concepts of the social sciences, the status of the refugees in terms of legal standing has not always been straightforward and has been subject to the state's rules and regulations. Moreover, refugees are defined differently by scholars. Kuhlman (1990) asserts that refugees are essentially involuntary international migrants. Marshall (2011) argues that some of the definitions in the literature have been obsolete and puts forward another definition for refugees to encompass the environmental refugees as well. Marshall, (2011) qualifies the definition of a refugee as “any person who, as a result of fear of persecution because of, but not limited to race, religion, nationality, member of a particular social group or political opinion, or any person who is forced to migrate from their area within their country, outside of their country, or their country of habitual residence and is unwilling or unable to return as a result of internal or international conflict or natural and manmade disasters.”

As updated on 02 June 2021, Syrian refugees worldwide stood at 6.6 million, the biggest refugee crisis in the 21st century. Out of those 6.6 million refugees, the highest number of registered Syrian refugees in the country, more than 3.6 million currently live in Turkey. This figure has made it crucial for scholars to investigate all the different aspects surrounding the Syrian refugees residing in Turkey. Among the plethora of studies on the Syrian refugees, most of which focus on the structural factors as perhaps the only drive or deciding factor, there is a gap in the study of the agency of the individuals taking the journey. Due to this lack of studies regarding the refugees' agency, it is pertinent to see how this issue has played out in this phenomenon.

In migration studies, the discussion of the agency has always been concerning structure. One side of the story cannot be fully understood without the other. Giddens (1984) focused on the duality of structure and agency, attempting to theorize about his social views. He asserts that “agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place, which is why agency implies power.” (p.9). The connection which has been between capability and power is a meaningful connection which is the essence of the term. Agency has the capacity to intentionally exert individual influence in shaping and carrying out a course of action. Giddens (1984) simplifies his definition as “agency refers to doing.” (p.10).

Regarding the structure through which events unfold in society, Giddens (1984) refers to it as “to the structuring properties allowing the 'binding' of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them 'systemic' form.” (p.17).

The issue of the agency of refugees in migration studies is disputed. De Jong and Fawcett (1981: 45) go as far as denying any existence of agency in forced migrations such as refugees. They believe “forced migration is, of course, a topic of considerable interest and significance, but not with respect to individual decision making” (p. 45). Bakewell (2010) also warns that refugees can only be studied through the structure that forced them out saying “we do not need to explain their arrival in terms of their exercising agency.” He argues that “ascribing any agency to such people may undermine their case for refugee status,” which seems to be a valid point. However, stripping any agency from refugees and depicting them as passive pawns pushed and pulled hither and thither does not do justice to them.

Other scholars believe that any display of agency changes the way they are perceived in the host country. “Refugees and asylum seekers who display this level of agency suddenly shed the veneer of innocence and become a threat to the order and security of the receiving state” (Mares, 2003). At the same time, Mirza (2014) argues for the existence of agency of refugees asserting that they are “not passive aid recipients, but rather people with skills, ideas, and a growing awareness of their rights.” De Haas (2021) explains that even if refugees have “no real option to remain as that would have put them in serious danger of being persecuted, injured or murdered,” this does not mean that they do not have any agency. Therefore, it would be imperative for scholars to investigate the issue of agency to uncover the actual limits and capabilities of refugees.

The media has proven to be extremely important in shaping and molding our understanding of the world around us. Media in its various forms and types have been in our daily lives so much as to have been thought to be inflectional in forming our perspective on the world. The controversial issue of refugees is reflected in the media extensively with varying effects. Esses et al. (2013) found out that the media promotes the dehumanization of refugees. Furthermore, Fryberg et al. (2011) reported that the media frame the refugees as a threat to economic and public safety in the host country. Even the volume of news reports on refugees, regardless of their content, can correlate with the rise of anti-immigration and refugees' sentiments, according to the studies conducted by Boomgaarden, H. G., & Vliegenthart, R.

(2007). Media exposure has also been found to have a psychological impact on the audience's perception regarding a specific issue (Rubaltelli, E. et al., 2020).

The study intended to answer two questions: first, is there any meaningful relationship between the consumption of media in general and social media in particular in shaping the immigration of refugees? Second, how much agency, if any, do refugees obtain concerning their movement to another country?

Methodology

This study is considered a mixed-methodology study due to the fact that it includes both qualitative and quantitative components. By using a mixed-methods approach, DeCuir-Gunby (2008) argues that "a phenomenon is best understood if it is viewed from different perspectives" (p.125). According to Greene (2007, pp 42-46), both quantitative and qualitative methods provide a comprehensive view of the phenomena studied. Refugee issues can be studied more effectively using a mixed-method approach. Researchers can create flexible evaluation designs using mixed-method tools by incorporating various ideas and methods.

Social issues such as refugees and their ideas are pretty complex and multifaceted, making it impossible to grasp them in their entirety through one approach. Therefore, a mixed-method would be the best option that combines the quantitative and qualitative components of a study. The researcher aims to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to create a comprehensive view of the issues presented.

The sample of Syrian university students, 306 aged between 18 and 26, were sent a questionnaire. The majority of participants were males because they were more convenient to contact. I had access to the students' dormitories for male Syrian refugees. Participants were recruited online through dormitory WhatsApp groups. A general questionnaire appropriate for Syrian refugees studying in Turkey was created using the insight collected from a focus group interview conducted previously to explore the range of issues that could be the subject of more studies. They were informed about how this questionnaire would be used in the survey. All participants were Syrian refugees, fluent in English, and college students. Before recruiting participants, we obtained ethics approval, which was done by receiving informed consent about how the information would be used in the study.

Nine informants who responded to the questionnaire were recruited to have in-depth 30 to 45-minute interviews. These interviews took place over Zoom video calls. The questions were

based on the results of the questionnaire. However, the interview was not limited to the questions written and was given the liberty to be flexible in how it unfolded.

The questionnaire containing 15 questions was prepared to get preliminary data on their migration opinions. The inventory consists of 15 Likert scale questions with subscales for the agency in the migration, the role of media, and Turkey as a destination. The participants indicated their level of agreement with statements on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” An example item is “I was in full control of my move to Turkey.” In order to ensure the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach’s alpha was applied, and the result revealed a high score (above .80) for each subscale, showing sufficient internal consistency. The Google form is used for the questionnaire and gathering the data.

The interviews were semi-structured as the questions were mainly formed as open-ended. The participants were allowed to discuss the questions in any way they deemed more relevant to their experience. However, the three constructs of the study regarding agency, media consumption, and destination choice of the participants were thoroughly investigated.

The data obtained from the questionnaire on the google form was transferred to an excel spreadsheet for statistical analysis. From 306 students to whom the questionnaire was sent, 32 responses were returned. This response rate accounts for about 10% of the population, which meets the minimum required for the study. Nine participants agreed to be interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts under investigation based on the questionnaire results.

The data produced from the interviews were examined based on thematic analysis, in which notes were taken using notes about the themes that emerged in response to the interview questions. After making notes on the records of the interviews, the researcher analyzed the responses to several questions from the thematic interview guide. The researcher then interpreted the themes and provided sample quotes for each theme. Following the analysis, the researcher developed an explanation of the pattern of results and continued to hone the thematic outline as themes were distinguished.

Syrian Refugees in Turkey and The Role of Media in Their Agency: Research Findings

The data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews revealed interesting results. These results are presented around three themes that were explored in this study.

The first question in the survey was directed to the agency for refugees. Figure 1 shows that just slightly under two-thirds of respondents believed that they had control of their movement to Turkey, manifesting a strong sense of agency. However, this does not provide any substantial evidence for the agency among the Syrian refugees. This was clearly not the case in the interviews. In more in-depth interviews, I realized that the refugees' understanding of the word control was different from what we might consider free will. In the interview, Fazel said: "I agree with the sentence because I decided when to leave and how to do it." In addition, not all of the refugees had the same line of thinking. For instance, Figure 2. demonstrates that 44% of the respondents did not make the decision of their movement on their own which goes on to show that the level of the agency is not what has been revealed in Figure 1. Abdullah said: "My father and my mom always encouraged me to leave the country."

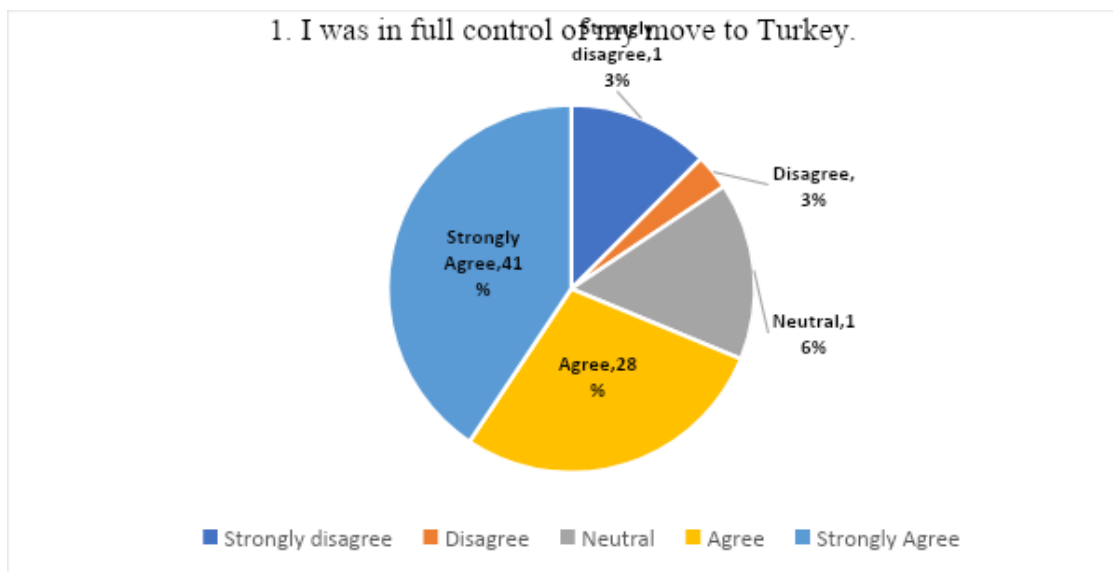


Figure 1

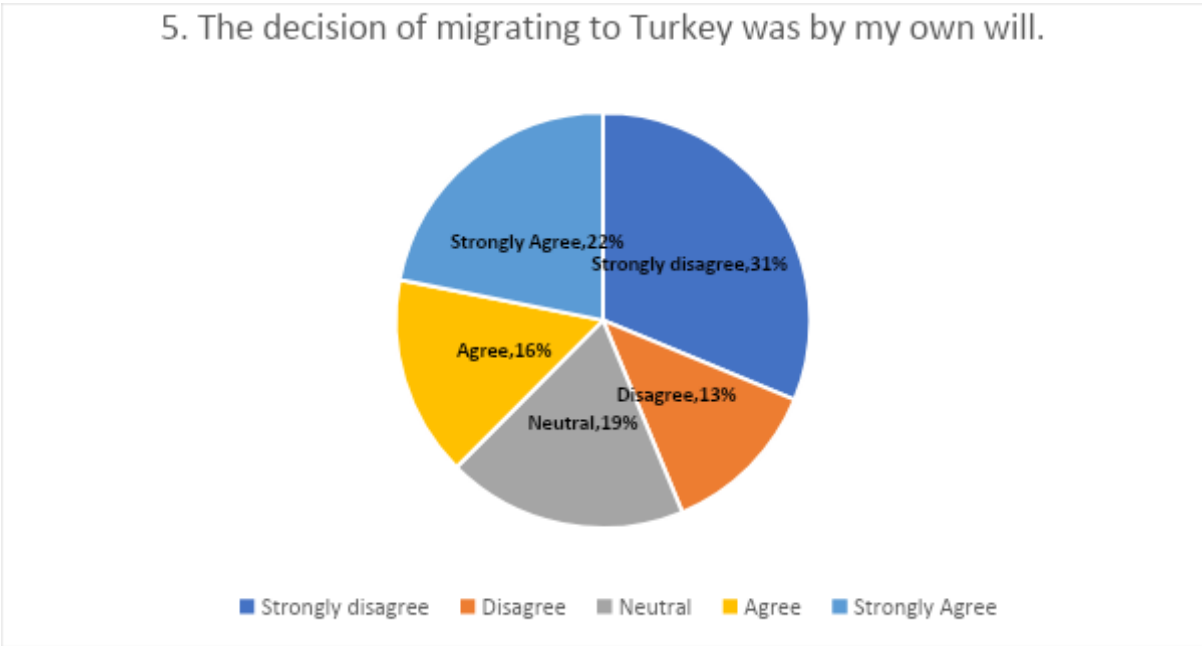


Figure 2

What has also been revealed in the interviews runs apparently counter to what you see in figures 1 and 2. In the interviews, Ayman says, “I had to leave the country, and I had no option.” This statement is presumably in stark contrast to the survey result. However, when asked and investigated more in-depth, it was found that refugees consider the fact of moving to another country to avoid further persecution part of their expression of agency. Nonetheless, there is a gap between what the author calls the perceived agency of the refugees and the reality. Due to the absence of any other terms in the literature on this phenomenon, the perceived agency is the level of capability that individuals envisaged, which does not match reality. This is an interesting finding of the study which needs to be investigated more in detail.

Figure 3 gives information on the refugees’ opinion on how the structure in Syria has shaped the direction of their movement. Not surprisingly, most refugees believe that the conditions in their country have been a driving force in their moving outside the country. According to Figure 3, approximately 80% of the participants in the survey believe what has caused their move was the circumstances surrounding the source country. This conclusion was positively correlated with the content of the conducted interviews. For example, Abdulmoti, one of the participants in the interview, mentioned that “there was no other way to have a prosperous life.” In the survey, the 14th question was whether the refugees have moved to Turkey directly at about 95%, which means the vast majority moved to Turkey directly.

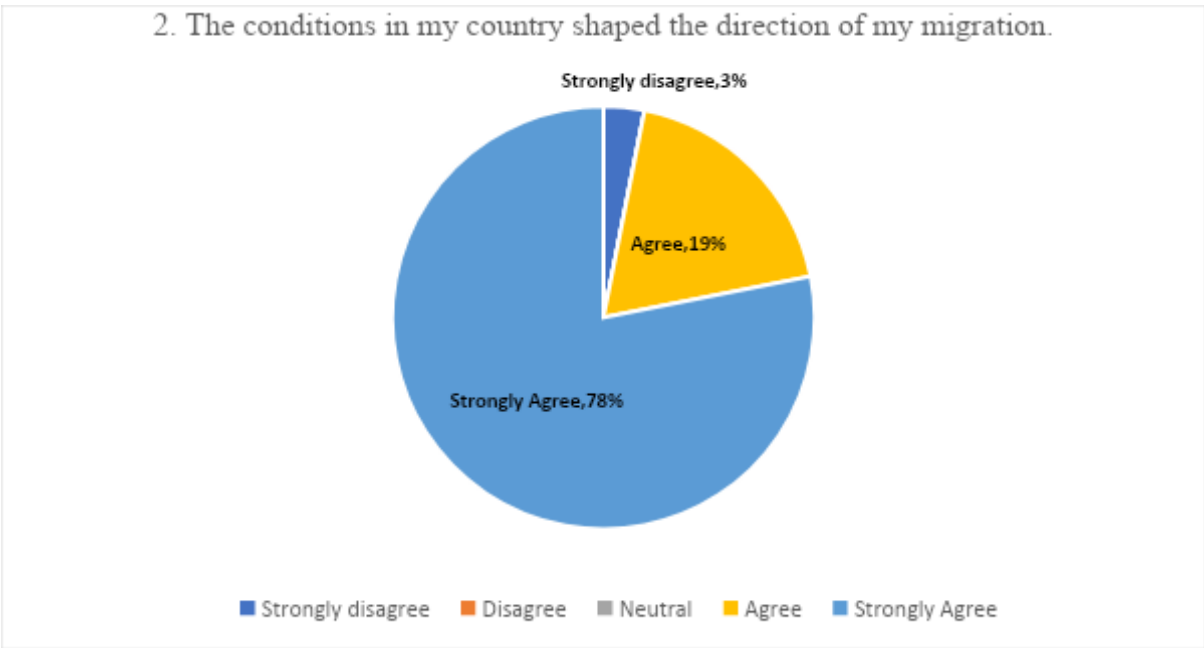


Figure 3

It can be seen in Figure 4. that the media use in Syria by respondents is quite in the middle ground giving the sense that refugees were not using social media as much as other populations. However, the comparatively lower rate of social media use was not because of lack of trying or want. It was revealed in the interviews that the infrastructure was not available to let them use social media in particular and the Internet in general. Husamedian, for instance, said that the Internet's cost had been so high that he did not have a chance to use social media. The majority could not even watch TV due to a lack of steady electricity. Even the exposure to the option of Turkey in the media was not conspicuous in the survey, which could mean the media has not been influential in persuading the refugees to move to Turkey. Questions 9-13 in the questionnaire were about the media, media exposure, and media impact on the decision of the refugees. None of these questions' mean scores was meaningfully tilted towards the influence of the media on the decision-making of the refugees toward Turkey.

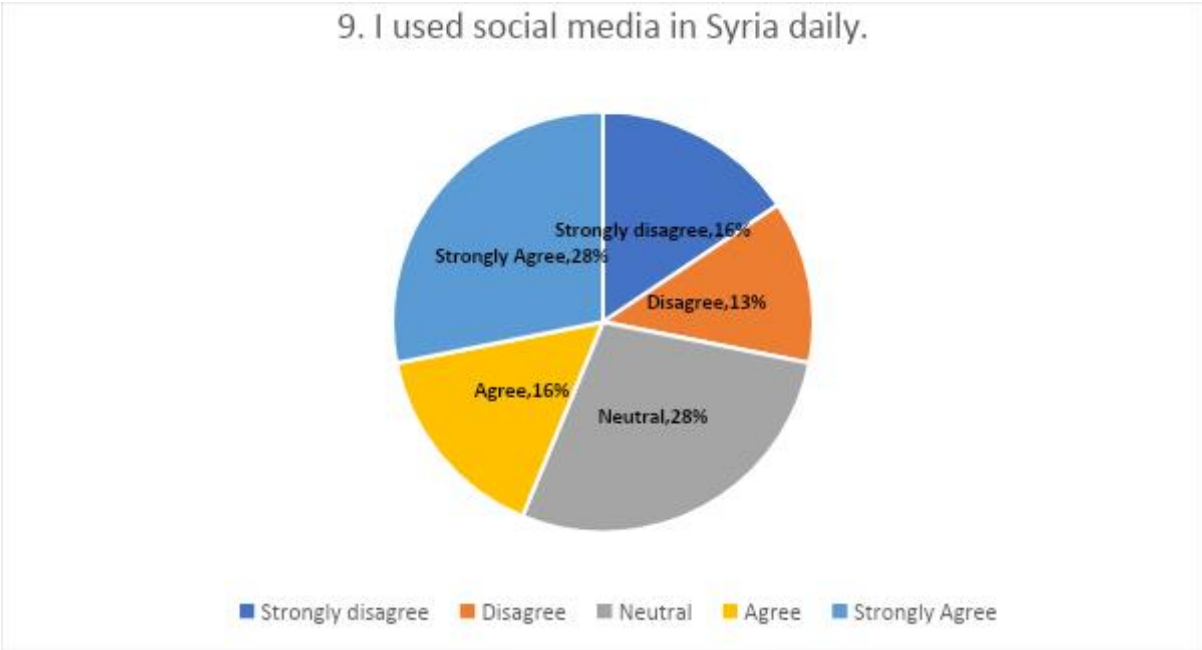


Figure 4

According to the study’s findings on the role of media, despite its substantial impact on our lives, the media played no meaningful role in influencing the migration destinations of refugees. It was also found that Syrian refugees believe they have had some sort of agency even if limited and did not see themselves as passive recipients of external forces. Perhaps, the most salient finding of the study was the fact that there is a gap between the perceived agency of the refugees and the fact-based real-life agency. This phenomenon should be investigated further using cognitive studies input or strategies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the dominant thinking in the migration study is that refugees don’t have any agency and only structure shapes their movement. This study aimed to investigate the Syrian refugees' freedom of choice and decision-making during their move to Turkey. This study revealed that first, they still possess a limited range of actual capabilities and agency while migrating to other countries; second, their subjective perception of their abilities exceeds the reality of their situation, which could be an interesting question for further studies. The media has an overarching impact on every aspect of our life and has proven to be linked to so many behaviors we exhibit in the modern world. Nonetheless, the survey and interviews showed that

the media and social media had very little to do with the direction, perception, and decision-making regarding the destination and other aspects of the refugees' trip out of troubled areas.

The study only explored the agency and perception of refugee males. This is primarily because they could be contacted easily and were relaxed about speaking about their journey and tribulations. The concept of the agency should be examined from the perspective of females and how they see their role in their own destiny. The picture we get would be more representative if we were able to explore the factor of identity in the journey of refugees. How do female refugees perceive their freedom of choice differently from their male counterparts? Moreover, this study only focused on young Syrian students classified as refugees. How does the agency fare with other refugees in the older age groups? It is expected that social scientists will address these questions and others in later studies.

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APPENDIX

Research on Syrian Refugees' Agency

Questionnaire with their average score for each statement:

Questions

1. I was in full control of my move to Turkey. 3.8125
- 1 Strongly disagree 2 disagree 3 neutral 4 agree 5 Strongly Agree
2. The conditions in my country shaped the direction of my migration. 4.6875
3. I did not intend to come to Turkey. 2.9375
4. I came to Turkey during the civil war in Syria. 4.84375
5. The decision to migrate to Turkey was made by my own will. 2.84375
6. My migration to Turkey was not actually voluntary. 3.1875
7. I came to Turkey to move to a European country. 1.580645161
8. I had other countries to choose from besides Turkey. 2
9. I used social media in Syria daily. 3.28125
10. I watched TV in Syria daily. 2.6875
11. I saw the option to go to Turkey more than other countries in the media. 2.6875
12. I had a lot of information about Turkey before migration. 2.46875
13. I had a lot of exposure to Turkey as a destination on TV and social media. 2.709677419
14. I came to Turkey directly from Syria. 4.625
15. I came to Turkey with my family. 2.65625

