ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Internet and social media uses, digital divides, and digitally mediated transnationalism in forced migration: Syrians in Turkey

Jussi S. Jauhiainen[1] | **Saime Özçürümez**[2] | **Özgün Tursun**[2]

[1] Department of Geography and Geology, University of Turku & Institute of Ecology and Earth Sciences, University of Tartu

[2] Faculty of Social Sciences, Bilkent University

Correspondence
Jussi S. Jauhiainen, Department of Geography and Geology, University of Turku, FIN-20014 Turku, Finland.
Email: jusaja@utu.fi

Abstract

This article studied Internet and social media uses, digital divides (access, use, and impact of the Internet and social media), and digitally mediated transnationalism in forced migration with the case of Syrians in Turkey. The mixed method analysis is based on surveys with 762 respondents, 52 interviews, and participant observations among Syrians in Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Izmir provinces in Turkey. Digitally mediated transnationalism became the everyday strategy, practice, and resilience of Syrians in Turkey. The first- and second-level digital divides, that is, the differences in their access to and use of the Internet and social media diminished while many third-level digital divides (impacts) remained. Syrians in Turkey used information and communication technologies, the Internet and social media for accessing basic needs and services, to enhance their challenging psycho-social well-being, to maintain transnational bonding and bridging connections to Syria, the European Union and elsewhere, and some also to implement their mobility plans.

KEYWORDS
digital divide, ICT, Internet, social media, Syrian refugees, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Global virtual connectivity has transformed the transnational interactions and mobilities of everyone, including forcibly displaced people seeking refuge outside their countries of origin. Mobile phone connections are ubiquitous, the Internet is widely spread, and social media usage grows. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), the Internet, and social media are ever more significant, impacting the lives and im/mobilities (see Schapendonk et al., 2021) of forced migrants during different stages of migration from planning and realization to the presence in the final destination and beyond. As such, ICTs connect people within and across national borders. These tools help refugees/displaced people/migrants contact family and old and new friends, receive news about the country of origin, the host country and the potential destination countries, and search for and access humanitarian assistance, employment, education, health needs, and entertainment, and at the same time they might generate risks of surveillance, lack of privacy, and impossibility to remain unnoticed (Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Dekker et al., 2018; Gillespie et al., 2016; International Organization for Migration, 2018; Kutscher & Kreß, 2016; Leung, 2009, 2010; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020a, 2020b; UNHCR, 2016; Waldinger, 2013; Wall et al., 2017).

Syrians form the world's largest internationally displaced population. Half (3.6 million) of them live in Turkey (UNHCR, 2020), but many travelled (often as asylum seekers) to the European Union (EU) and other parts of the world. For Syrians, Turkey is rather easy to access because it is a neighbouring country. The governance of migration of Syrians coincided with the government of Turkey's 'open door policy' and the geographical limitation to the 1951 Convention, that is, Turkey does not accept any legal responsibility to provide international protection to migrants outside of Europe. In 2011–2013, forcibly displaced Syrians mostly stayed in Temporary Accommodation Centres (TEC) in provinces close to the Syrian border. In 2014, Turkey introduced the regulation on Temporary Protection (TPR) as the legal and institutional framework for Syrian nationals, stateless persons, and asylum seekers from Syria who came to Turkey due to events in Syria after April 28, 2011. The TPR institutionalised a range of rights and services for Syrians including access to health, education, the labour market, and social assistance. However, the national policies and media discussions change, and many Syrians face various challenges in their often precarious everyday lives, as well as in the possibilities to become naturalized if they wish to do so (Doganay & Demiraslan, 2016; İçduygu & Diker, 2017; Akcapar & Simsek, 2018; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Baban et al., 2017; Koca, 2016; Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2017; Özçürümez & İçduygu, 2020).

Strains on Syrians' mobility are multifaceted and confirm multiple sources of what scholars call precarity (Baban et al. 2017). While legally they can return, Syria is still not safe for them. The Turkey-EU deal from 2016 actively constrains irregular migration to Europe. Turkish regulations governing temporary protection restrict also Syrians' mobility within Turkey so that they can only receive public services in the city where they registered for the first time after entry. Since March 2020, the COVID-19 public health measures include inter-city travel restrictions and continue with timed lockdowns. These further constrain Syrians' mobility even within neighbourhoods. Therefore, ICTs, the Internet, and social media constitute the only plausible channels for many to sustaining local to transnational connections in their everyday lives.

Despite the increased interest in digital migration studies (e.g., Leurs & Smets, 2018), forced migrants' Internet and social media uses are still underexplored in research, particularly about Syrians in Turkey (see Jauhiainen, 2018; Narli, 2018; Salah et al., 2019; Şanlıer Yüksel, 2020) despite the global, national, and local significance of that refugee population. Large surveys about Syrians in Turkey have not addressed their everyday uses of digital tools and resources (see Erdoğan, 2018; Tumen, 2016). There are several theoretical and empirical shortcomings in the existing literature. First, studies focusing specifically on forcibly displaced Syrians are either ethnographic studies drawing heavily on observations and/or presenting qualitative data collected from small sample groups (Şanlıer Yüksel, 2020; Smets, 2018), and remaining mostly descriptive. Some studies analyze large sets of quantitative data to compare how different legal statuses of forcibly displaced Syrians in different countries impact their digital media dependency (Melki & Kozman, 2021) with no significant conclusions offered on how the digital media uses shape everyday lives. Second, some

studies only address a utilitarian account of digital connectivity. Here having access only through digital connectivity is seen to manifest severe challenges and an 'uncomfortable imposition' on forcibly displaced people (Awad & Tossell, 2021). There is need to understand and examine how different mobilities (including when a permanent settlement may become temporary or the other way around; see Snel et al. 2021) give way to different experiences of digitally mediated transnationalism and how these narrow down or widen the existing digital divides in forced migration. This article, based on extensive survey data and in-depth interviews, analyses both the limits of digital connectivity for forcibly displaced populations (i.e. Syrians in Turkey) by examining their digital divides in host countries and how digitally mediated transnationalism (and in particular transnational ties) shapes different aspects of their everyday lives.

All forcibly displaced populations in protracted refuge (such as Syrians in Turkey) experience intersecting vulnerabilities (accommodation, work, political activities, etc.) in their everyday lives exacerbated by constraints on mobility within the country and internationally. While this immobility increases the need for digitally mediated transnational ties, it may simultaneously prevent establishing local networks and increase isolation of the forcibly displaced people (Özcürümez et al., 2020). Moreover, enhanced digitally mediated transnational ties may make on-migration more desirable (Recchi et al. 2019). Given the importance of digital transnational ties on the migration decision or impact on local integration, studying the relationship between digitally mediated transnationalism and digital divides becomes more pertinent. The article fills a gap in the literature on exploring the forced migrants' everyday Internet and social media uses, and how their digitally mediated transnational connections and daily struggle in precarious conditions shape their digital divides, as exemplified through a case study of the forcibly displaced Syrians in Turkey. The research questions are as follows: (1) who of the Syrians in Turkey have access to the Internet and social media and how this first-level digital divide developed in Turkey in regard to their initial situation in Syria; (2) what financial resources, digital skills and purposes (second-level digital divide) these Syrians have for using the Internet and social media; and (3) what is the impact of the Internet and social media uses (third-level digital divide) of these Syrians on their everyday lives as explained by themselves.

DIGITALLY MEDIATED TRANSNATIONALISM IN FORCED MIGRATION

The link between digitally mediated transnational connections and forced migration was not discussed and not really present when transnationalism was conceptually developed in the 1990s (see Dahinden, 2017; Faist & Bilecen, 2019; Portes et al., 2017; Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 1999). Transnationalism is defined as "the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (Schiller et al., 1992). However, this broad definition fails to encompass the unique situation that forcibly displaced Syrians live in Turkey. Syrians in Turkey practice their transnationalism by building links with their country of origin and their country of settlement as well as with third countries. A considerable number of Syrians in Turkey consider Turkey a 'transit country' rather their country of permanent settlement as certain number want to on-migrate to third countries or eventually return to Syria if safe return is possible. The case of forcibly displaced Syrians in Turkey offers a great crossroad to understand how transnationalism from above intersects with transnationalism from below. Transnationalism 'from above' concerns mostly how cross-border contacts and exchanges impact economic, political, and cultural structures of states. Instead, transnationalism 'from below' concerns individuals and civil society, characterized by frequent and intense formal and informal cross-border activities and practices, including communication and interaction between the diaspora and those remaining in the country of origin and elsewhere (Baldassar et al., 2016; de Jong & Dannecker, 2018; Twigt, 2018). Examples of constrains of transnationalism 'from above' are the legal and institutional context in Turkey, the EU-Turkey deal and the protracted conflict that limit Syrians' mobility in and out of Turkey, and the digitally mediated transnationalism represents the practices of transnationalism 'from below' as a response to the constraints of the structural context (see Özcçürümez et al., 2020).

As noted in the above discussion, displaced people usually receive some social and economic assistance and have access to certain rights such as labour market participation; however, their prospects to move inside the country of exile, on-migrate or return to their country of origin are constrained (Gill et al., 2011). The everyday lives of forcibly displaced people remain highly dependent on political, economic, and social practices in the receiving local contexts, thus creating particular physical and digital (im)mobilities (see Schapendonk et al., 2021). Earlier studies indicate that compared with their country of origin, forcibly displaced persons use the Internet and digital means of communication more in the country of refuge after they feel more stable in the transit or destination countries (see Borkert et al., 2018; Dekker et al., 2018; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020a). Furthermore, Internet and social media uses serve multiple helpful purposes in maintaining bonding social ties of asylum-related migrants, including refugees (Vertovec, 2009, p. 61), and bridging social capital (Dekker et al., 2018; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020b; Zijlstra & van Liempt, 2017). Their uses may facilitate migrants' resilience by maintaining economic, social, and cultural ties with the country of origin (e.g. Piper & Withers, 2018) but potentially also hinder their social integration in the host country. When forced migrants cannot move physically, many of them attempt virtual mobility through digitally mediated everyday transnational practices that constitute spaces mixed in with their ways of being and the imaginary ways of belonging (Glick Schiller, 2003). While the host state ("transnationalism from above") may become more open and generous about international protection, it may also adopt more restrictive and stringent internal provisions over time, for example due to limitations on available domestic resources. The (dis)approval levels among local communities regarding the presence of displaced people also impact the host state policies, therefore politics matters. The host state may implement comprehensive policies covering many sectors and may or may not involve local actors in policy design and implementation (Fitzgerald, 2019; Fitzgerald & Arar, 2018; Piper & Withers, 2018). For example, while introducing legislation to promote the migrants' access to the local labour market, the host state may leave matters pertaining to anti-discrimination during recruitment or working conditions to the discretion of the employers (Ruhs, 2013). Thus, there is always the possibility that even in states adopting less restrictive admission policies for those escaping conflict, the forcibly displaced may be deprived in the host country of consistent and quality access to services, opportunities, and social support. Therefore, transnational digitally mediated connections become critical for the everyday survival of forcibly displaced people for navigating through the system, accessing services to meet their needs and communicating with their transnational networks for maintaining and creating contacts and planning further mobility.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this article consist of the results of 762 survey responses and 52 semi-structured interviews with forcibly displaced Syrians, as well as field observations by the research team in Turkey's Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Izmir provinces in late March–mid May of 2018. One-third of the sample was drawn from each of the three provinces (Gaziantep 246, Istanbul 251, and Izmir 259 respondents). The selection of these three provinces was because they consist of areas in which the majority of Syrians in Turkey live and highlight three different realities in which Syrians in Turkey live (as explained below in detail). Mixed methods were used in the quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis (see Cresswell, 2014).

An important aspect was to proceed with carefully planned sampling procedures to reflect accurately the diversity of Syrians who fled to Turkey and became people with temporary protection statuses. Since 2018, the official number of Syrians in Turkey has been approximately 3.6 million (UNHCR, 2020). The sampling procedure was conducted by taking into account the official international and national statistics on the demographic characteristics of this population, as well as Syrians' distribution across the country. In addition, the sample was balanced with knowledge from local informants (Turkish and Syrian) and experts where the official statistics seemed not to reflect the reality accurately. The individual respondents were selected randomly. However, during the survey and interview data gathering, daily checks were made to guarantee the sample would follow the actual divisions of Syrians in Turkey

(concerning gender, age, and to the extent possible, their educational and occupational statuses). This also necessitated a careful selection of the survey sites inside the studied provinces and cities, as explained below.

Gaziantep province is located in southern Turkey, at the border with Syria. In 2018, in the three border provinces (Gaziantep, Hatay, and Şanlıurfa), approximately 1.5 million displaced Syrians were registered, with two out of five living in Turkey (DGMM, 2018). Historically, there has been a connection between Gaziantep and Aleppo, and many of the forcibly displaced Syrians in Gaziantep are from the near-by Aleppo area. The survey sites included the city centre of the province capital, Gaziantep, and the Islahiye, Nurdağı, and Karkamış districts. The Islahiye district is adjacent to Hatay and hosted two temporary accommodation centres until the summer of 2018. Nurdağı is at the crossroads of Hatay, Osmaniye, and Kahramanmaraş and is an important rural site for agricultural workers. Karkamış neighbours Şanlıurfa and contains one of the few functioning border points on the Syrian–Turkish border, right across from Jarabulus.

Istanbul province straddles Turkey's European–Asian border and includes its largest urban agglomeration, with approximately 18 million inhabitants. In 2018, among these were 600,000 registered as forcibly displaced Syrians (DGMM, 2018). However, according to many experts and informants, many more Syrians live in that province without formal registration, perhaps close to one million or one out of four Syrians in Turkey. The sample sites included the Istanbul neighbourhoods of Eminönü, Fatih, Sultangazi, and Esenyurt, where high numbers of Syrians live. These neighbourhoods also contain many employment opportunities for Syrians, including opportunities in restaurants, cafeterias, shops, and offices operated by Syrians themselves.

For a long time, Izmir province has been used as an irregular migration route to the nearby Greek islands in the EU. Izmir also hosts specific Syrian minorities, including the Kurdish population. In 2018, the registered number of Syrians in Izmir province was 150,000. The specific sample sites consisted of the Torbalı, Bornova, Karşıyaka, Basmane, and Buca districts, again all with high numbers of Syrians. Torbalı is a rural area, and Syrians who reside here work mainly in agriculture. The other neighbourhoods are vibrant areas in the city providing accommodation and employment opportunities for Syrians.

The gender division among the sample respondents followed that of the registered displaced Syrians in Turkey: 55% male (419 respondents) and 45% (343) female (UNHCR, 2018). Respondents were overwhelmingly young to middle-aged; 50% (377) were 18−29 years old, 41% (314) were 30−49 years old, 6% (45) were 50−59 years old, and 3% (20) were 60 years or older. In the sample, especially for Istanbul and Izmir, the total portion of respondents who were 60 years old or older was slightly smaller than the official registered number, but this was not the case in Gaziantep. However, the real share of the oldest generation in Istanbul is smaller than the official registered number because of the many younger Syrians irregularly there. In addition, the number of people who were 30−49 years old was slightly higher than the official registered number. More than 99% of the respondents considered Syria to be their country of origin, and 97% came to Turkey in 2012 or later (i.e., after the war in Syria had begun).

The fieldwork was conducted from late March to mid-May of 2018. The research was conducted by a team in each location and consisted of one or two authors of this article and two research assistants of Syrian origin (the latter fluent in Arabic and English) experienced in social scientific field research in Turkey. At least one author was present every field research day and in every field study location. Moreover, there were always one female and one male Syrian research assistants to ensure that field research complied with the cultural sensitivities of the participants. During the field research, researchers approached Syrian refugees in previously selected case study areas, explained the study's purpose, received participants' consent, guaranteed their anonymity and confidentiality, and reminded them they could interrupt and terminate the surveys or interviews at any time. It was also mentioned that the results would be published in reports and academic articles.

The survey questionnaire, originally written in English, was translated to Arabic and its accuracy checked by an Arabic-speaking independent scholar. No pilot study was considered necessary because the authors knew the context and had successfully used such a questionnaire in other countries. The questionnaire was composed of 96 questions, of which 60 were structured, 11 were semi-open, and 25 were open-ended. It also contained a short explanation about

its purpose and research ethics. There were questions about the respondents' backgrounds, travel to Turkey, housing and employment issues, future migration plans, and the ICTs, including 15 structured, semi-open, and open-ended questions about their access, use, and impact of the ICTs, the Internet, and social media. The research team collected the completed survey sheets immediately. The responses to questions were inserted into the database using an SPSS statistics program. The experienced research assistants translated open questions from Arabic to English, and an independent scholar checked the translation accuracy. The translated answers were coded in the NVivo program using theory-informed content analysis on the answers' topics (employment, migration, social media uses, etc.) with the coding. An experienced research assistant under the guidance of one author who had conducted and processed several similar surveys earlier performed the SPSS database insertions and data coding. The data were processed with descriptive statistical methods to measure central tendencies and dispersions among the respondents and multivariate frequency distributions of the studied variables with cross tables.

The interviews focused on thematic issues, such as Syrians' labour market experiences, their material well-being, and their mobility plans—issues that also were investigated in the survey, including themes regarding their Internet and social media uses. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting between 30 and 45 min, and took place in participants' houses or workplaces or in public places. The vast majority of interviewees spoke in Arabic, fewer than 20 used Turkish, and a few spoke in English. In general, these interviews were one-on-one and, when needed, via a trustworthy and known interpreter who helped the authors along the fieldwork. For this article, we utilized mostly the interviews' information about the role of the Internet and social media. The focus was on the contingency of their existence in Turkey, their plans, and how these plans intermingled with their transnational connections. The interview transcripts were analyzed with the help of the NVivo program using theory-informed content analysis (again, paying attention to the key topics). An experienced research assistant under the guidance of one author conducted the analyses. Finally, in addition to the survey and interview data, the study draws on the daily field research observations that were noted alongside discussions, debriefings, and reflections. In the end, the results from the surveys, interviews, and observations were compared and interactively reflected before writing the results.

INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA USES AND DIGITAL DIVIDES AMONG SYRIANS IN TURKEY

The following section discusses the Internet and social media uses by displaced Syrians in Turkey, as well as digital divides, namely the first-level divide (their access to the Internet and social media), the second-level divide (their resources, such as skills and money to use the Internet and social media), and the third-level divide (impact of Internet and social media use on their everyday lives, including their return, remaining, and on-migration aspirations). Where the collected data makes it possible, digital divides of the studied Syrians in Turkey were analyzed according to the main background variables, such as gender, age, and occupational status (see van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Leung, 2010; Scheerder et al., 2017). Furthermore, attention was paid to their digitally mediated transnational connections (i.e. digital transnationalism from below).

This article focuses narrowly on digital communication technologies, but obviously the studied population also use traditional communication technologies (such as telephone, postal mail, and print media) and unmediated means of information and communication (word-of-mouth and informal and formal meetings) to receive and send relevant information in their everyday lives (see also Madianou & Miller, 2012). These traditional unmediated means of communication can complement the information sources for the displaced Syrians who do not have access to the Internet and social media, but this topic falls out of the scope of this article, and anyway these are very difficult to maintain from Turkey to war areas in Syria and people on move in Europe. The access and ability to use the Internet and social media open important opportunities for displaced Syrians in Turkey to have digitally mediated contacts with their families and friends. They can acquire relevant information that suits their everyday lives and aspirations when addressing uncertainty about their future (though also being exposed to rumours and fake news).

TABLE 1 Displaced Syrian respondents' Internet use frequency in Turkey compared with that in Syria (%)

	Daily	Weekly	Less often	Never	N
Man	75 (+36)	8 (−10)	10 (−6)	7 (−20)	392
Woman	61 (+40)	12 (−4)	13 (−11)	14 (−25)	317
18−29 years	75 (+42)	8 (−13)	10 (−9)	7 (−19)	358
30−49 years	63 (+34)	14 (−4)	12 (−7)	12 (−23)	296
50−59 years	57 (+34)	5 (+4)	14 (−5)	24 (−34)	42
60 years	56 (+45)	0 (0)	22 (−5)	22 (−39)	18
Employed	74 (+35)	7 (−9)	12 (−6)	7 (−19)	326
Inactive	57 (+41)	14 (−8)	12 (−9)	16 (−24)	293
Total	68 (+38)	10 (−7)	11 (−8)	10 (−22)	720

First-level digital divides

Following the respondents' (i.e. displaced Syrians) migration from Syria to Turkey, the first digital divide (access and use of the Internet) narrowed among all their gender, age, and activity subgroups. Compared with the situation before their migration, a larger share of survey respondents became owners of a mobile phone (84% possessed a mobile phone with Internet access), users of the Internet (share of Internet non-users diminished from 32% to 10%), and more frequent users of the Internet (daily Internet users grew from 30% to 68%) in Turkey. The share of Internet non-users diminished and daily Internet-users grew among all subgroups: men and women of different ages and among employed and inactive respondents (Table 1). Being digitally connected is thus vital for Syrian refugees in Turkey (see also Narli, 2018). Through access to increasing number of Syrian owned small shops, they could purchase mobile devices and/or repair them at lower prices. During the fieldwork, we met with more than 50 owners of such shops, mostly located in the old city centres of Istanbul, Izmir, and Gaziantep. Digitally mediated transnationalism created a need to inexpensive Internet access and generated significant employment opportunities for Syrians.

The social media applications most commonly used by respondents were WhatsApp (79%), Facebook (55%), YouTube (38%), and Instagram (20%)—the first two were used more for everyday social communication (for general refugee situation, see UNHCR, 2016). Compared with the rest of respondents, far more young adults (18−29 years old) used YouTube (47% vs. 28%) and Instagram (28% vs. 11%) than respondents of other age categories. Such a 'generation-based' difference in social media platform usage has been found in earlier research about refugees and asylum-related migrants (e.g. Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020a, 2020b).

Compared with adult population in Syria and Turkey, a larger share of displaced Syrians in Turkey became Internet users or more frequent Internet users. In 2018, the share of the Internet users among the survey respondents was 90%, while it was approximately 36% among the Syrian adult population in Syria and 71% among the adult population in Turkey (International Telecommunication Union, 2019). Already before fleeing, the share of Internet users among the respondents was substantially higher (78%) than of those who remained in Syria.

However, the first-level digital divide did not disappear completely. For example, fewer women (84%) than men (93%) used the Internet. In general, this difference is small considering much wider differences in the position of Syrian male and female refugees in Turkey (see Duman, 2020). Likewise, older generations had lower shares of Internet users (77% of at least 50 years old vs. 88% of 30−49 years old and 93% of 18−29 years old). In addition, fewer inactive respondents (84%) used the Internet than employed respondents (93%) did. The share of Internet users also increased with the respondent's level of education (university level 98%; medium and high school levels 92%; and elementary level 77%). The Internet non-use was more common among female respondents who did not work or had low education levels, as well as among people with little or no English knowledge or without aspirations to migrate to a third country.

Despite the narrowing of the first digital divide, these results indicate a slightly wider divide among Syrians in Turkey than found in a broader study regarding many kinds of asylum-related migrants (Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020a). There were also particularities inside Turkey. For example, in the metropolis of Istanbul, the respondents had the smallest gender-based digital divide in the Internet use (male Internet users 97%; female Internet users 95%), but there many more men (84%) used it daily compared with women (68%). The largest gender-based difference in the Internet use was in the economically poorer and more traditional Gaziantep area (male Internet users 93%; female Internet users 83%). There, women had less physical access to ICTs, which was also due to (patriarchal) cultural issues. Particularly in rural areas, ICTs were used less often (especially by women). In addition, unemployed Syrians could not afford an extensive use of digital services and had less work-related necessity for them. In contrast, those who had been digitally well-connected in Syria remained so in Turkey. Small differences in the first-level digital divides could be found among those who aim to remain in Turkey or return to Syria or on-migrate to third countries. Comparing younger highly educated Syrians with older Syrians having low education levels it became evident that proportionally more of these younger Syrians were more frequent digital device owner and users and wished to on-migrate. However, this does not mean that the access to digital devices would be the trigger for on-migration.

Second-level digital divides

The second-level digital divide (resources and skills to use the Internet and social media) of Syrians in Turkey became narrower. Of the respondents 84% (men 87%; women 80%) had the crucial device (i.e., a mobile phone with Internet access). The oldest respondents in İzmir and women in Gaziantep were the groups who most often did not own a mobile phone with Internet access, thus indicating perhaps challenges in obtaining resources and digital skills. A mobile phone is often needed when employed or actively searching for a job because often employment issues are settled over the phone. However, as discussed, those without a mobile phone can borrow such devices for Internet access in certain situations. The device can be used for many purposes but it is fundamental for maintaining transnational ties. Even when in difficult financial situations, most displaced Syrians (need to) find enough financial resources to possess a mobile phone with Internet access.

Our interview data reveal many instances in which some forcibly displaced Syrians highlighted their need for and use of digitally mediated technologies for maintaining transnational ties. In response to the increasing turmoil within Syria and a call for conscription from regime forces in 2015, Ahmad and his brother, Mustafa, crossed the Turkish border with their wives and nine children and migrated to Gaziantep. They moved into a two-room house in an old shantytown in the city. Ahmad started to collect recyclable waste for a living, and yet he had a smartphone with Internet access. Even though his family lived off the support of their neighbours, he said that he would buy credit for his smartphone to use WhatsApp to be in contact with his father, who remained in Syria to protect their village house from intruders. Ahmad was in contact with him every night to plan the family's return to Syria, waiting for the situation to settle down. In Ahmad's case, despite his precarious conditions concerning access to food and accommodation, he specifically stated that his main motivation to have mobile device and the Internet service was to be in contact with his father and in particular to have news of possibility to return. The Internet access is significant for maintaining digitally mediated social interaction and maintaining transnational ties more so than a mere utility of the device for facilitating access to local services and support to meet basic needs and/or seek employment.

Ahmad's case is one of many examples of how displaced Syrians in Turkey found new ways to utilize the Internet and social media in their precarious contexts. However, they needed financial and skill-related resources for it. As the daily Internet and social media use became more common, many Syrians became active and avid Internet users, thus demonstrating enough skills to use the Internet and at least simple ICT-facilitated social media channels, such as WhatsApp. While some used the Internet to interact with the culture, 26-year-old Muhammed from Gaziantep said, "I use Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp to keep in contact with friends living in Syria or somewhere else and kill some time after work. I use Twitter to follow the current situation in Syria."

TABLE 2 Views by displaced Syrian Internet user respondents in Turkey

I search from the Internet Information about…	Agree %	Don't Know %	Disagree %	N
The current situation in Syria	66	20	14	584
My rights in Europe	28	31	41	559
Places where I could live in Europe	31	30	39	564
Work opportunities in Europe	28	32	40	553
My future travel routes in Europe	30	31	39	550
My rights in Turkey	59	24	16	564
Places where I could live in Turkey	51	27	22	566

Part of the second-level digital divide relates to how the Internet and social media are used, indicating what the users are interested in doing and are able to do when they have enough skills and resources. Displaced Syrians use the Internet in Turkey for various purposes: to be connected to the past by reading about Syria, to know about relevant current issues in Turkey, and to look for resources pertaining to their futures, either in Turkey or elsewhere. Therefore, some aspects in their digital uses are transnational whereas others are not.

Despite having very important contacts and intentions that reach beyond Turkey, it becomes evident in the Internet uses of displaced Syrians that they are stuck in Turkey. The differences for what the devices, the Internet, and social media are used is also due to the different purposes of social interaction. Many want to be connected to their former homeland that is significant dimension of transnationalism. Of the survey respondents, 66% agreed that they used the Internet to learn the current situation in Syria. Of those who only started to use the Internet in Turkey, slightly more of them (73%) used it for that purpose. On the contrary, users who did not follow the current situation in Syria were typically young or middle-aged adults (18−49 year old) who had been in Turkey for more than 4 years, had good or moderate knowledge of Turkish, and saw their futures in a positive light. Many of them wanted to remain in Turkey, but others desired to move to a third country and not to return to Syria. They had skills and financial resources to use the Internet and social media, but their digitally uses did not direct anymore to their former country of origin.

Another aspect of digitally mediated transnationalism is the connection to third countries. This is to search relevant information for potential on-migration from Turkey, to be connected to other Syrians there or for other purposes. Many displaced Syrians aspire to migrate farther from Turkey, namely to the EU, Canada, or other welfare countries. Of the respondents, 31% considered migration to the EU. Almost the same proportion (28−31%) searched the Internet for practical information about Europe: how to reach Europe, what rights one would have there, and where to live and work there (Table 2). Of those who searched the Internet for possible future travel routes to Europe, a majority (69%) were keen to move to the EU, a minority (36%) considered staying in Turkey for the rest of their lives, and few preferred Syria as a future residence. Information and interaction through social media facilitates forced migrants' mobility decisions during their journeys but location-specific differences exist.

Survey data collected confirm that forcibly displaced Syrians in Turkey use the Internet to access services to negotiate their everyday survival. Those aiming to stay in Turkey mean that in their Internet use are less have less transnational topics. Of the respondents who considered living in Turkey for the rest of their lives, many more (69%) searched the Internet for information about their rights in Turkey compared with those who did not think about staying in Turkey for the rest of their lives (42%). In addition, of those who only started to use the Internet in Turkey, fewer searched for information about their rights in that country (49%). The latter suggests a shortage of skills to search and understand this complex information—an indication of the second-level digital divide between experienced and more recent Internet users. There were also geographical differences in the second-level digital divide among Syrians in Turkey.

Respondents from Gaziantep had the widest second-level digital divides in ability and affordability to use ICTs. Earlier studies indicate that also differences in contexts matter in digital divides.

Third-level digital divides

The impacts of the Internet and social media use on displaced Syrians in Turkey and the differences among them (i.e. the third-level digital divide) require extensive data and analysis. This is not fully achievable in this article because it would require larger data, but a few illustrative examples can be shown here. Concerning social media use, regardless of their background variables, the majority (73%) of respondents noted that social media made their lives in Turkey easier. Such a general impact cannot be reached, obviously, if many refugees do not have access or resources to use the Internet and social media (i.e. prevailing wide first- and second-level digital divides). However, this is not general among Syrians in Turkey as evidenced in the previous sections. However, varying impacts indicate the existence of a third-level digital divide.

In Turkey, the use of social media is essential for forcibly displaced Syrians to stay in contact with family and friends (see also Jauhiainen, 2018; Leung, 2009). These migrants can develop and maintain long-distance transnational (bonding and bridging) communication and ties and search for salient information in circumstances. When one's mobility is restricted, it is important to support one's identity formation in such constrained contexts of places (see Easthope, 2009). Forced migrants use social media to expand their social networks and access more diversified and trustworthy information from migration networks, governments, and NGOs (see Dekker et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential that the Internet access and resources to use social media are broadly available among the wide spectrum of the refugee population.

During our interviews and observations, many details appeared in terms of how social media and Internet use impacts Syrians in Turkey. For example, local public helpers use WhatsApp to disseminate information via the Syrian community leader in each neighbourhood: "When we tell them that there is an aid truck coming in couple of hours, they organize thousands of people in no time using their WhatsApp." Therefore, a social media posting can instantly mobilize thousands of Syrians in Turkey—for good or not so good. Social media is also well known as a source of continuous rumours and disinformation that produce controversial impacts. For example, in 2019, hundreds of Syrians suddenly rushed into government institutions because of a Facebook posting claiming, "Syrian refugees will be resettled in Canada" (Turk, 2019). Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees try to verify information on social media by reflecting on the content and their personal experiences, using trusted social ties and comparing various information sources, as our interviews revealed. Aware of the widespread usage of smart phones and social media, the Turkish government also uses these channels to issue warnings for Syrians. For example, in 2018, the Turkish migration authorities (DGMM) sent several text messages to displaced Syrians in Turkey warning about human smugglers (Government of Turkey, 2018).

Many Syrians in Turkey continue to think about migration opportunities to third countries and use the Internet and social media for these purposes (see Jauhiainen, 2018). In their precarious contexts, mobility plans (including plans to migrate to other countries) remain important for many displaced Syrians who live in Turkey, at least as aspiration and imagination, even though realizing these goals is challenging. Of the respondents who planned to move to Europe, 92% used the Internet (69% daily), 87% used WhatsApp, and 70% used Facebook—a higher rate than among the respondents in general. Digitally mediated transnationalism is thus also about imagined travels to return and to continue forward while being forced to remain physically immobile (see Hillmann et al., 2018; Koikkalainen & Kyle, 2016).

Respondents who did not use the Internet and/or social media but who planned to move to Europe generally had little or no knowledge of English and could not afford to travel. Being unable to use the Internet and social media properly (i.e., having a wider second-level digital divide) thus creates a third-level divide about migration aspirations and eventually how on-migration proceeds. The capacity to use the Internet and social media and their actual use facilitate the on-migration aspirations and eventually also the on-migration, thus digitally mediated transnationalism is connected

to mobilities of Syrians in Turkey. In general, the gathered information and interactions through social media facilitate asylum-related migrants' mobility decisions during their journeys (Dekker et al., 2018; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020a; 2020b). Half (51%) of the respondents agreed that gaining information and interacting on social media helped them make decisions. The impact of the Internet and social media was through their focused use to consider whether migration aspirations could result in actual on-migration. More than two-thirds (69%) of those who aspired to migrate to Europe searched the Internet to learn about their rights in European countries (compared to 9% among those who did not plan to move to Europe). In addition, almost three-quarters (72%) of on-migration aspirants searched the Internet to learn about places in Europe (compared to 11% among those who did not plan to migrate to Europe). Furthermore, the majority (61%) agreed that the information and interactions on social media facilitated their decisions about where they planned to live in Europe. The Internet and social media uses are means to becoming more informed about the potential migration destinations and help to prepare for such a migration. Digital divides matter as well, especially in terms of the English skills of displaced Syrians. However, the Internet and social media also lure Syrians into risky irregular migration. Some Syrians have started to use social media actively to warn fellow refugees and provide other options in Turkey. The 28-year-old interviewed Yara in Izmir said, "I found the Facebook pages where traffickers contact Syrian people, and I warned all those people and told them the story of my brother [who drowned off the Greek coast]. I have started up Facebook pages with thousands of followers in which I share information with those in need. I have created groups for job opportunities in Izmir, for accommodation opportunities in Izmir, and women's groups in social media."

CONCLUSIONS

The worldwide number of forcibly displaced people increases. These people exercise their agency by being able to move across borders despite dire conditions and develop survival skills despite precarious living conditions wherever they arrive. Such agency is contingent on the conditions and constraints in their countries of origin and of refuge by various global, international, national, and local actors. General and particular conditions of uncertainty shape the everyday lives of these forcibly displaced and spatially immobilized people. Some challenges can be overcome by digitally mediated (transnational) connections that are increasingly present in the everyday lives of these people (see also UNHCR, 2016).

This study focused on digital divides and digitally mediated transnationalism by forcibly displaced Syrians in Turkey. These temporarily protected people of Syrian origin represent a globally significant case of international protection due to their large numbers (in the millions), and the precarious nature of their prolonged stay in Turkey, and the aspirations and attempts of many to move to the EU, as well as their wishes and obligations to return to Syria. Most live in uncertain conditions that simultaneously protect and constrain them in their everyday lives.

The Syrians' first-level digital divide (access to and use of the Internet and social media) narrowed substantially when they fled to Turkey and settled there. Not all had used the Internet and social media before their travel to Turkey, but in Turkey, the vast majority used the Internet and many used social media applications. Mobile phones became essential investment in the everyday lives of Syrian refugees in Turkey though the poorest and some females did not have a mobile phone with Internet access. Nevertheless, the Syrians' second-level digital divide (skills and resources of use) also diminished as found in other studies of protracted refugees (see Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2020a), so limits of digital connectivity narrowed. While being forced to remain (immobile) in precarious conditions of daily struggles, earlier more accentuated digital divides diminished as digitally mediated transnational ties became Syrians' everyday practice. Their third-level digital divide (the impact) varied more. The higher one's level of education, the more complex information one was motivated and able to search for and process using the Internet and social media, thus having a different impact compared with those without critical social media skills. Those who aim to be more mobile (including travel to a third country) search different topic from the Internet and social media. Good and not-so-good information shaped their decisions on routes, destinations, and modes of travel, or to remain immobile as many structural factors

imposed on them. On the dark side, the ICT, the Internet and social media are also of surveillance, fake news, rumours and not allowing leave the traumatic past behind. Digitally mediated transnationalism allowing digital mobility is also to overcome the top-down structural constrains that make Syrians physically immobile in Turkey.

The Internet and social media facilitate communication over long distances to maintain the bonding ties and generate new bridging ties of forcibly displaced people. An issue for forthcoming research is to analyze the balance between transnational relations and local integration (see Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). The narrowing first- and second-level digital divides facilitate Syrians to maintain their local and distant intra-ethnic relations in their mother tongue with implications on their needs and skills to learn the local language and to become more integrated to the host society. Nevertheless, digitally mediated transnationalism is a lifeline in their challenging everyday realities.

REFERENCES

Akcapar, S., & Simsek, D. (2018). The politics of Syrian refugees in Turkey: A question of inclusion and exclusion through citizenship. *Cogitatio*, 6(1), 176–187.

Atasü-Topçuoğlu, R. (2019). Media discussion on the naturalization policy for Syrians in Turkey. *International Migration*, 57(2), 283–287.

Awad, I., & Tossell, J. (2021). Is the smartphone always a smart choice? Against the utilitarian view of the 'connected migrant'. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(4), 611–626.

Baban, F., Ilcan, S., & Rygiel, K. (2017). Syrian refugees iCn Turkey: Pathways to precarity, differential inclusion, and negotiated citizenship rights. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(1), 41–57.

Baldassar, L., Nedelsu, M., Merla, L., & Wilding, R. (2016). ICT-based co-presence in transnational families and communities: Challenging the premise of face-to-face proximity in sustaining relationships. *Global Networks*, 16(2), 133–144.

Borkert, M., Fisher, K., & Yafi, E. (2018). The best, the worst, and the hardest to find: How people, mobiles, and social media connect migrants in(to) Europe. *Social Media and Society*, 4(1).

Cresswell, J. (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. SAGE.

Dahinden, J. (2017). Transnationalism reloaded: The historical trajectory of a concept. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(9), 1474–1485.

de Jong, S., & Dannecker, P. (2018). Connecting and confronting transnationalism: Bridging concepts and moving critique. *Identities*, 25(5), 493–506.

Dekker, R., & Engbersen, G. (2014). How social media transforms migrant networks and facilitates migration. *Global Networks*, 14(4), 401–418.

Dekker, R., Engbersen, G., Klaver, J., & Vonk, H. (2018). Smart refugees: How Syrian asylum migrants use social media information in migration decision-making. *Social Media and Society*, 4(1), 1–11.

DGMM (2018). Temporary protection. Statistics by the Directorate General of Migration Management. https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27.

Doganay, M., & Demiraslan, H. (2016). Refugees of the Syrian civil war: Impact on reemerging infections, health services, and biosecurity in Turkey. *Health Security*, 14(4), 220–225.

Duman, T. (2020). The situation of Syrian women in Turkey. In E. Carlson and N. Williams (Eds.), *Comparative demography of the Syrian diaspora: European and Middle Eastern destinations* (pp. 93–107). Springer.

Easthope, H. (2009). Fixed identities in a mobile world? The relationship between mobility, place, and identity. *Identities*, 16(1), 61–82.

Erdal, M., & Oeppen, C. (2013). Migrant balancing acts: Understanding the inter-actions between integration and transnationalism. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(6), 867–884.

Erdoğan, M. (2018). *Suriyeliler Barometresi: Suriyelilerle Uyum İçinde Yaşamın Çerçevesi*. İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları.

Faist, T., & Bilecen, B. (2019). Transnationalism. In S. Gold, & S. Nawyn (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook on Migration Studies*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge.

FitzGerald, S. (2019). *Refuge beyond reach: How rich democracies repel asylum seekers*. Oxford University Press.

FitzGerald, S., & Arar, R. (2018). The sociology of refugee migration. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 44, 387–406.

Gill, N., Caletrio, J., & Mason, V. (2011). Introduction: Mobilities and forced migration. *Mobilities*, 6(3), 301–316.

Gillespie, M., Ampofo, L., Cheesman, M., Faith, B., Iliadou, E., Issa, A., Osseiran, S., & Skleparis, D. (2016). Mapping refugee media journeys: Smartphones and social media networks. https://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/sites/www.open.ac.uk.ccig/files/Mapping%20Refugee%20Media%20Journeys%2016%20May%20FIN%20MG_0.pdf.

Glick Schiller, N. (2003). The centrality of ethnography in the study of transnational migration: Seeing the wetland instead of the swamp. In N. Foner (Ed.), *American arrivals* (pp. 99–128). School of American Research.

Government of Turkey (2018, 2 February). Suriyeli mültecilere göçmen kaçakçılığı uyarısı. *T.C. Altınözü Kaymagamliği*. https://www.altinozu.gov.tr/suriyeli-multecilere-gocmen-kacakciligi-uyarisi.

Hargittai, E., & Hinnant, A. (2008). Digital inequality. Differences in young adults use of the Internet. *Communication Research*, *35*, 602–621.

Hillmann, F., Van Naerssen, T., & Spaan, E. (Eds.). (2018). *Trajectories and imaginaries in migration: The migrant actor in transnational space.* Routledge.

İçduygu, A., & Diker, E. (2017). Labor market integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey: From refugees to settlers. *The Journal of Migration Studies*, *3*(1), 12–35.

International Organization for Migration. (2018).World migration report 2018. https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/docs/china/r5_world_migration_report_2018_en.pdf.

International Telecommunication Union. (2019). Global and regional ICT data 2019. https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx.

Jauhiainen, J. (2018). Refugees and migrants in Turkey, 2018. *Publications of the Department of Geography and Geology at the University of Turku 11*, Turku.

Koca, B. (2016). Syrian refugees in Turkey: From "guests" to "enemies"? *New Perspectives on Turkey*, *54*, 55–75.

Koikkalainen, S., & Kyle, D. (2016). Imagining mobility: The prospective cognition question in migration research. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *42*(5), 759–776.

Kutscher, N., & Kreß, L. (2016). Internet is the same like food: An empirical study on the use of digital media by unaccompanied minor refugees in Germany. *Transnational Social Review*, *6*(1), 200–203.

Leung, L. (2009). *Technology's refuge: The use of technology by asylum seekers and refugees.* UTSPress.

Leung, L. (2010). Telecommunications across borders: Refugees' technology use during displacement. *Monash University e-Press*, *60*(4), 1–13.

Leurs, K., & Smets, K. (2018). Five questions for digital migration studies: Learning from digital connectivity and forced migration in(to) Europe. *Social Media + Society*, *4*(1), 1–18.

Madianou, M., & Miller, M. (2012). *Migration and new media. Transnational families and polymedia*. Routledge.

Melki, J., & Kozman, C. (2021). Media dependency, selective exposure and trust during war: Media sources and information needs of displaced and non-displaced Syrians. *Media, War & Conflict*, *14*(1), 93–113.

Memisoglu, F., & Ilgit, A. (2017). Syrian refugees in Turkey: Multifaceted challenges, diverse players and ambiguous policies. *Mediterranean Politics*, *22*(3), 317–338.

Merisalo, M., & Jauhiainen, J. (2020a). Digital divides and the Internet use among asylum-related migrants: Comparing Internet use and smartphone ownership. *Tijdschift voor Economishce en Sociale Geografie*, *111*(5), 689–704.

Merisalo, M., & Jauhiainen, J. (2020b). Asylum-related migrants' social-media use, mobility decisions, and resilience. *Journal of Immigrants and Refugee Studies*, *19*(2), 184–198.

Narli, N. (2018). Life, connectivity and integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey: Surviving through a smartphone. *Questions de Communication*, *33*(1), 269–286.

Özçürümez, S., Hoxha, J., & İçduygu, A. (2020). Does social cohesion solve forced migration riddles? Troubled concepts and constrained practices in Turkey. *Migration Studies*, mnaa011. https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaa011.

Piper, N., & Withers, M. (2018). Forced transnationalism and temporary labour migration: Implications for understanding migrant rights. *Identities*, *25*(5), 558–575.

Portes, A., Guarnizo, L., & Landolt, P. (1999). The study of transnationalism: Pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *22*(2), 217–237.

Portes, A., Guarnizo, L., & Landolt, P. (2017). Commentary on the study of transnationalism: Pitfalls and promise of an emergent research field. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *40*(9), 1486–1491.

Recchi, E. et al., (2019). *Everyday Europe: Social Transformation in an Unsettled Continent.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Ruhs, M. (2013). *The price of rights: Regulating international labor migration.* Princeton University Press.

Salah, A., Pentland, A., Lepri, B., & Letouzeé, E. (Eds.). (2019). *Guide to mobile data analytics in refugee scenarios.* Springer.

Şanlıer Yüksel, İ. (2020). Empowering experiences of digitally mediated flows of information for connected migrants on the move. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

Schapendonk, J., Bolay, M., & Dahinden, J. (2021). The conceptual limits of the 'migration journey'. De-exceptionalising mobility in the context of West African trajectories. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *47*(14), 3243–3259.

Scheerder, A., van Deursen, A., & van Dijk, J. (2017). Determinants of Internet skills, uses and outcomes. A systematic review of the second and third-level digital divide. *Telematics and Informatics*, *34*, 1607–1624.

Smets, K. (2018). The way Syrian refugees in Turkey use media: Understanding "connected refugees" through a non-media-centric and local approach. *Communications*, *43*(1), 113–123.

Snel, E., Bilgili, Ö., & Staring, R. (2021). Migration trajectories and transnational support within and beyond Europe. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *47*(14), 3209–3225.

Tumen, S. (2016). The economic impact of Syrian refugees on host countries: Quasi-experimental evidence from Turkey. *American Economic Review*, *106*(5), 456–460.

Turk, H. (2019, 4 September). Kanada'ya mülteci alınacak" yalanı, Suriyelileri valilik binasına akın ettirdi. *Haber Turk*. https://www.haberturk.com/kanadaya-multeci-alinacak-yalani-suriyelileri-valilik-binasina-akin-ettirdi-2519153.

Twigt, M. (2018). The mediation of hope: Digital technologies and affective affordances within Iraqi refugee households in Jordan. *Social Media + Society*, *4*(1), 1–14.

UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Turkey Registered Syrian Refugees. (2020). https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113.

UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2016). *Connecting refugees. How Internet and mobile connectivity can improve refugee well-being and transform humanitarian action*. UNHCR.

UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2018). Turkey fact sheet August 2018. https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/unhcr-turkey-factsheet-august-2018.

van Deursen, A., & van Dijk, J. (2010). Internet skills and digital divide. *New Media and Society*, *13*(6), 893–911.

Vertovec, S. (1999). Conceiving and researching transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *22*(2), 447–462.

Vertovec, S. (2009). *Transnationalism*. London: Routledge.

Waldinger, R. (2013) Immigrant transnationalism. *Current Sociology*, *61*(5–6), 756–777.

Wall, M., Campbell, M., & Janbek, D. (2017). Syrian refugees and information precarity. *New Media and Society*, *19*(2), 240–254.

Zijlstra, J. J., & Van Liempt, I. (2017). Smart (phone) travelling: Understanding the use and impact of mobile technology on irregular migration journeys. *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*, *3*, 174–191.