

2019-03-01

# Refugees and Media Framing During the Refugee Crisis

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Refugees and Media Framing During the Refugee Crisis

Alyssa Carol Davidson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Refugees and Media Framing During the Refugee Crisis

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At the end of 2018, more than 68.5 million people were displaced from their homes. Of these displaced persons, 22.5 million of these people were forced to leave their homes and find safety in another country. These people are known globally as refugees. Many of these refugees in recent years have fled to Western countries in Europe and North America. This immigration and the general subject of refugees and their integration into their host countries have recently been a large subject for media. Many of these refugees came from countries and cultures that may carry stigmatic backgrounds including Middle Eastern and African countries. For decades, media portrayals in entertainment, social, media, and news media have shown people from these countries in certain ways that may conflict with truthful characteristics of people from these cultures. The purpose of this study is to help better understand how refugees' personal assimilation experiences compare to information distributed by the media. Through researching existing studies of media portrayals of refugees and Muslims through the lens of framing theory readers can better understand what information is distributed in Western cultures about refugees. Then, through conducting in-depth interviews with refugees hosted in Europe and the United States, seeking understanding of refugees' personal stories, life experiences, and their perceptions of media representations of people of their same refugee status, readers may additionally better understand any differences in the portrayal of refugees and the experiences had by refugees themselves. Using grounded theory, poignant themes emerged from the interviews to explain how interviewed refugees' lives are similar or differ and are affected by Western media portrayals. Emergent themes indicated that primarily polarized news accounts may interfere with refugee acculturation by making social and cultural connections difficult, discrepancies in qualifications, and issues with misunderstanding refugees' lack of mobility. Additionally, refugee sentiments about refugee media portrayals and acculturation were evaluated to better understand how the media affects their assimilation processes.

Keywords: refugees, assimilation, acculturation, framing, media portrayals

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thanks to Scott Church, Ph.D., Christopher Wilson, Ph.D., and Kevin John Ph.D., who helped provide feedback and guidance during the research process. An additional thanks to my husband, Aaron Roth, and parents, Marcel and Janet Davidson for their unmatched support.

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## Introduction

At the end of 2018, more than 68.5 million people were displaced from their homes (UNHCR, 2018a). 22.5 million of these people are forced to leave their homes and find safety in another country (UNHCR, 2017a). These people are known globally as refugees. A refugee is defined as “any person who has fled their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (Davenport, 2017). Numbers of refugees continue to grow as political and civil unrest dominate regions in the Middle East, South East Asia, Africa, and Central America. Many people are forced to flee their homes to protect themselves and their loved ones from civil war, violent prejudice, and lack of food, water, and amenities. Research shows that nearly 20 people are forced from their homes every minute (UNHCR, 2017a). Hundreds of thousands of these refugees make their way from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and South America making treacherous crossings across the land and sea in a hopeful attempt to reach the safety of Europe or America (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; UNHCR, 2018b). Unfortunately, not all those who start the journey across the sea make it safely to the other side (UNHCR, 2017b). Some are separated from their families during their exodus, experience death, or other tragedies en route (Brunick, 1999; McArdle & Spina, 2007).

Large portions of the refugees of recent years originate from Syria as a result of their civil war (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). According to Filippo Grandi, the High Commissioner of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) “Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time, a continuing cause of suffering for millions which should be garnering a groundswell of support around the world” (UNHCR, 2017b). Those Syrians that are able to flee their home country, like other refugees, have sought refuge in Western nations, many

of which are European countries (UNHCR, 2018a). Next to Syria, the other most prominent countries refugees flee from are Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Somalia (UNHCR, 2018b). According to UNHCR, European countries house some of the largest population of refugees. Countries like Germany, Turkey, and Sweden have opened their doors to millions of refugees (UNHCR, 2017b). Many European citizens welcome these asylum seekers and see their need for immediate assistance (BizEd, 2017; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016), while many feel they are a threat to their economic and physical safety (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2015). Some feel refugees will take resources that belong to Europeans and infiltrate Western culture with Eastern traditions (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Thomas, 2015). Others feel that refugees pose a threat to public safety because of terrorism or violence (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2015; Semati, 2010). This major issue is internationally understood as the European refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2017b). It is a political and social issue that has and will continue to grow as refugees continue to flee their homes and make their way to neighboring countries in Europe (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; UNHCR, 2018a).

Although the majority of refugees are currently housed in Europe, the refugee crisis has become a global issue (UNHCR, 2017b). In 2017, the United States housed almost one million refugees or displaced persons, and Canada housed over 160,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2017c). Each continent houses millions of refugees and individuals on the run. For the purpose of this study, the numbers for Western countries is particularly important. These vast numbers of refugees pose an interesting dilemma for many citizens of western countries that see refugees as potential threats for their nations but also understand them as individuals who need immediate assistance and safety (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Thomas, 2015).

### **Refugees and Media Portrayals**

Many of the different perspectives of refugees come as a result of information media consumers ingest through social media, news media, and entertainment media portrayals of these displaced persons as threatening people to society or, on the other hand, innocent, good people in need (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Rothberg & Gajjala, 2015; Shaheen, 2000). Positive portrayals of refugees show those who are innocently seeking refuge for themselves and their families (UNHCR, 2017a; UNHCR, 2018a), working hard to contribute to society and their new communities, and other situations that paint these individuals as good neighbors and contributors (Baized, 2017). Negative portrayals of refugees in the media show these individuals in less than desirable circumstances. The media shows some as economic and cultural threats as mentioned previously (Thomas, 2015). Other media highlight terrorist incidents and project these extreme actions on innocent people (Shaheen, 2000; Shaheen, 2003; Zaman, 2009). A large margin of media outlets are outspoken when it comes to the personal beliefs of refugees (Merksin, 2004; Nurullah, 2010; Powell, 2011; Shaheen 2000).

Through the media, many Westerners see how terrorism and violence seep into their own countries by the same people they are allowing into their borders (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Zaman, 2009). Since the attacks on the World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001, terrorism is a popular subject of the media with much of the focus on Muslim extremists (Merksin, 2004; Powell, 2011). The regions of the Middle East are the highest concentration of Muslims in the world (Desilver & Masci, 2017), and Syria is no exception with 92% of its population being Muslim (The Guardian, 2009). With Syria, Afghanistan, Northern and Sub-Saharan African countries (Desilver & Masci, 2017), and other predominately Muslim areas producing vast amounts of refugees, Western citizens are often concerned with the safety of their nations and

create perceived connections between refugees and extremist Muslim terrorists (UK Daily Mail, 2015; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013). These concerns are often amplified because of what is framed by the media, causing misunderstanding of the majority of the refugees who seek only refuge and not violence (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

Media framing inform viewers of what they consider salient, causing media consumers to develop certain ideas about what is reality based on what information is given by the media (Entman, 1993; Entman, 2007). Refugees and Muslims are often targeted as threats to western civilization and portrayed, or framed, as such in these media platforms. Negative media portrayals may result in hatred and violence (Nurullah, 2010), and encourage Western cultures to separate themselves emotionally and physically from refugees they come in contact with in person or over the media (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; UNHCR, 2017b).

All of these refugees have a story behind their journey and the lives they left behind. Many are affected by the misunderstandings surrounding them. Millions of families are affected by these horrible scenes of unrest and danger, and continue to be harmed by the intolerance of the people who now surround them (Esses et al., 2013; UNHCR, 2017). Children grow up in unfavorable circumstances fleeing for their lives and then, once physically safe, fighting for a chance to fit in within the society of their new homes. Adjusting to a new life while dealing with past traumatic experiences can create difficulties for the children to acculturate into their new living situations (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, & Westoby, 2003; McArdle & Spina, 2007). Struggling children can add pressure to their also acclimatizing parents. Often times, researchers on this subject have determined that “more difficult to heal than the diseases and malnutrition . . . are the psychological and social wounds resulting from the trauma of war and displacement (Brunick, 1999; McArdle & Spina 2007). Additionally, research shows if the nuclear family

managed to escape war and stay together, the family and children were more likely to recover quicker from the effects of war (McCloskey & Southwick, 1996). For these families to heal, it is important for them to feel safety in their new homes.

Creating a space of greater understanding for these people can help parents and children more comfortably adjust to life in a different country for short-term and long-term periods of time (UNHCR, 2017b). While some existing research shows that some media portrayals of refugees and Muslims are favorable with community members welcoming them into their countries and refugees playing a progressive role in society (BizEd, 2017), much of the research available shows the overall portrayal of refugees and Muslims as negative with references to them as terrorists, extremists, and economic threats (Nurullah, 2010; Powell, 2011; Shaheen, 2000; Shaheen, 2003). Because of these differing media portrayals of refugees, the purpose of this study is to help better understand how refugees' personal assimilation experiences compare to information distributed by the media. By researching existing studies of media portrayals of refugees and Muslims through the lens of framing theory, I seek a better understanding of what information is distributed in Western cultures about refugees in the literature review. Then, through conducting in-depth interviews with refugees currently living in Europe and the United States, seeking understanding of refugees' personal stories, life experiences, and their perceptions of media representations of people of their same refugee status, I seek to better understand any differences in the portrayal of refugees and the experiences had by refugees themselves. By conducting the interviews in Europe and America, I seek to better understand the effects of the refugee crisis in locations where refugee population is high and vulnerable.

### **Literature Review**

Some experts argued that the early crusades involving Christianity and Islam are the fundamental roots of ongoing religious conflict and prejudice (Abdullah, 2005; Bilici, 2005; Trevino, Kanso, & Nelson, 2010). This embedded struggle continues discussion and media coverage of Middle Eastern affairs in the United States (Merksin, 2004). Recent terrorist attacks and the War on Terror keeps the prominence and relevance of Arabs, Muslims, and Muslim refugees in the media a steady stream (Merksin, 2004; Trevino et al., 2010). In a recent study, researchers gathered a list of words that were commonly included in media to describe Muslims/Islam. The list included these words and variations of these words: terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism, radicalism, fanaticism, bomber, kidnapping, assassin, murderers, militant, and guerilla (Trevino et al., 2010). Repeated references like these to Islam build up beliefs and perceptions of media consumers over periods of time. Islamophobia, or the fear, retaliation, and negative sentiments toward Islam and Muslims (Nurullah, 2010; Shaheen, 2000), are often reactions of Western media consumers regarding refugees. Repeated messages like these can drive wedges between cultures as Westerners develop an “others” or unrelatable mentality about Muslims and refugees (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti & De Grada, 2006; Nurullah, 2010.) Theorist, Edward Said, used the term “imaginative geography” to describe this mental state differentiating between the Orient and Western culture (Said, 1985, p. 2). When Westerners separate themselves mentally in addition to the physical, this is called Orientalism (Said, 1985). Mentalities like Orientalism and Islamophobia only further the “othering” processes creating a broader divide between the cultures (Nurullah, 2010; Said, 1985).

### **Framing Theory and Refugees**

In order to understand how the media distributes certain views and ideas, it is key to have a working knowledge of media framing. Entman (1993) defined framing as “[selecting] some aspects of a [perceived] reality and make them more salient in communication text” (p. 52). Communicators make decisions (consciously or subconsciously) about what they will communicate guided by frames organized according to their own belief systems. Frames are often exhibited within a social grouping, and as described in this study, often a byproduct of communications from the media (Esses et al., 2013; Powell, 2011). Frames work by highlighting bits of information that make them stand out in importance over other information. Framing happens when words, images, and other content suggest a particular meaning or interpretation and may persuade the consumer—consciously or subconsciously—to believe a certain way about something (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Additionally, frames may also obscure other elements of information allowing for varied responses from media consumers (Entman, 1993). Media platforms frequently use framing in order to convey messages of their viewpoints (Bryant & Oliver, 2009). This is applicable to news journalism as news media purposefully “choose images and words that have the power to influence how audiences interpret and evaluate issues and policies” (Bryant & Oliver, 2009, p. 17). Framing theory can apply to other platforms of mass communication, such as social media, where producers of messages frame content for message receivers (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012).

Refugees’ exposure in the media is no exception to this theory. With the topic of refugees and asylum seekers being so politically charged, the media play a very large role in framing public policy and opinions (Esses et al., 2013; Nossek, 2004). According to Li and Izard (2003), the media often depends on the information offered to them by their governments, which then

creates frames of political subjects such as the refugee crisis and the portrayals of Muslims in the media (Esses et al., 2013; Fleras & Kunz, 2001; Powell, 2011). The media has the ability to portray refugees as either positive or negative depending on their desired agendas. But according to Esses et al. (2013), over the past fifteen years in many of the western countries, media are choosing to portray refugees as increasingly negative and focus on them as threats to their host countries.

Additionally, visuals have the ability to frame (Esses et al., 2013). Images found on media channels also provide media consumers with material that may sway their perceptions one way or another. Malkki (1995) said regarding photographic portrayals of refugees that “most readers have probably seen such photographs, and most of us have a strong visual sense of what ‘a refugee’ looks like” and works toward forming a stereotype of the refugee (p. 9). In their research of visual media representations of refugees, Wright (2002) claimed that the responsibility of images of refugees coming into Western homes is primarily with the media. Wright explained further that while numbers of refugees increase worldwide, media consumers will continue to witness a change in mass communications as images will play an increasingly important role in how media consumers construct their reality. An example of this is with the online explosion of the viral image of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old refugee boy found dead on a beach during his family’s flight (Newton, 2015). Images like this, although maybe not consciously framed, caused a trail of fear in its wake and a sense of “othering” between refugees and non-refugees (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2007). Pictorial portrayals of refugees and Muslims like this as well as other modes in entertainment media (movies and television), news media, and social media all play a factor in what information is available to media consumers.

## Portrayals of Muslims and Refugees in Various Media

### Entertainment Media

Entertainment media often target Islam and refugees, even since the very early stages of media development, as explained by research conducted by Shaheen (2000). Stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims as kidnappers, exploiters, terrorists, and other savage portrayals permeate Western entertainment media. Terrorism portrayed and framed in the media paves the way for Islamophobia and altered perceptions of Muslims to seep into media consumers' attitudes and beliefs (Nurullah, 2010). Terrorism is defined by Schmid (1983) as an "anxiety inspiring method of repeated violent action for . . . criminal or political reasons. . . . The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly or selectively from a target population" (p. 70). Anxiety and speculation surrounding potential targets of terrorism are a focus of media attention in the United States (Said, 1981). Because of the heavy cloud of terrorism, the diversity of refugees' identities, values, and practices are often reduced into just a few reactionary cultural characteristics (Semati, 2010; Thomas, 2015). Shaheen (2000) argue that over time, Hollywood has degraded Muslims repeatedly into these stigmatic roles.

**Movies and television shows.** Movies and television carry some heavy implications of framing of refugees and Muslims worldwide. In a study conducted by Price (2014), the author examines stereotypes of refugees from the Australian reality TV series *Go Back to Where You Came From (Go Back)*, which aired from 2011 to 2012. Refugees in Australia at this time had derogatory nicknames such as "boat people" and "queue jumpers" given them by groups of unwelcoming non-refugees. While many Australians welcomed refugees, others were outraged by the numbers of individuals fleeing their homes and making their way to Australia by boat for refuge. *Go Back* aired during this time of refugee dispute. The show depicted the reverse journey

of non-refugees simulating asylum-seekers' journey to freedom. The participants in the series represented actual refugee journeys. Each episode depicted the challenges hypothetically faced by refugees fleeing to Australia for safety. The show provided a reference to viewers of the hardships these refugees faced when fleeing their homelands. However, rather than raising total awareness of what these refugees experienced, Price (2014) argued this series and similar ones created an "others" perspective by putting refugees through an entertainment lens. Emotional space between viewers and actual refugees increased as viewers saw non-refugees in these arguably dehumanizing, hypothetical situations. This research highlights how Middle Eastern refugees like other Muslims and Arabs can be misunderstood and stereotyped by media, and particularly in this instance, through reality TV.

Since 9/11, many Americans report they receive their information about Islam and Muslims through television (Jackson, 2010). The takeaway message for many media users is that Muslims are "threatening, sinister, vengeful terrorists" (Jackson, 2010, Torres, 2016). In a study by Nurullah (2010), the author looked at the popular television show *24* about Jack Bauer, a counter-terrorism agent which began airing less than two months after September 11, 2001. Nurullah explained in each season, Bauer fights terrorism against the United States. Some Muslims on the show were accomplices and allies of the American government, but the majority of the terrorists and perpetrators were portrayed as Muslim. Nurullah additionally cites Wagge (2002) in her study of Hollywood's depictions of Muslims in sixteen movies released in 1991 that contained a story of terrorism. Wagge discovered that in some movies, Hollywood reenacted actual terrorist events. Other movies portrayed terrorists and terrorism with no basis on actual historical events. With the prevalence of shows like *24* and other products of Hollywood, viewers' perceptions of terrorism in connection with Muslims and refugees are viable to change

in accordance with the messages displayed. According to George Gerbner's theory of cultivation (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), those who consume media heavily and regularly are more prone to changing their perceptions in regards to the subject matter they consume through the media. Regular viewers of *24* and other such media may be cultivated to believe more negatively about Muslims or people originating from predominately Muslim countries and find themselves experiencing Orientalism or even Islamaphobia (Nurullah, 2010; Shaheen, 2000; Said, 1985).

### **Refugees in the News Media**

In addition to entertainment media, refugees and Muslims are a popular subject of the news media (Esses et al., 2013). In 1993, people affiliated with Islam bombed the World Trade Center. Since this attack, the US media is pressed to keep their coverage on the Middle East consistent (Merskin, 2004). With the prevalence of Middle Easterners in the affairs of the world today, scholars claim that it is difficult for the news media to retain an unbiased standpoint on news coverage of refugees and Muslims (Ibrahim, 2003; Ibrahim, 2009; Said, 1997). Ibrahim (2003) described one reason for this. He stated that journalists tend to value and frame Western practices and ways of life above any others. And with the effects of terrorism and the refugee crisis hitting so close to home, news media is compelled to cover the happenings in the Middle East. Miller (1982) expounded further on this:

Terrorism and the media are entwined in an almost inexorable, symbiotic relationship. Terrorism is capable of writing any drama—no matter how horrible—to compel the media's attention. Terrorism, like an ill-mannered enfant terrible, is the media's stepchild, a stepchild which the media unfortunately, can neither completely ignore or deny. (p. 1)

As stated by Miller, fear of terrorism tightens the relationship between the news media and the Middle East.

Additionally, refugees receive a lot of global exposure with the news media outside of terrorism. Many political leaders share their opinions regarding the refugee and immigrant crisis, which are then portrayed by the news media. For example, in a study conducted by Thomas (2015), the author quoted Canadian officials according to the news media, *The Source*, on the subject of eliminating the right for Muslim women to wear the *niqab*, or religious facial scarf, with the increase of Muslim immigration. The official told women who prefer to wear the *niqab* that “Well, maybe you chose the wrong country in the first place. [It is a] tribal custom that treats women as property rather than people full of human dignity” (The Source, 2011). Esses et al. (2013) also claimed that refugees are unwanted in Western cultures and nations. The authors explain that many of these media platforms and political figures can take advantage of the refugee situation and use them for their own political purposes, especially when those purposes are not in favor of refugee immigration. Because of these political agendas, Esses et al. (2013) explained that relatively mundane events often make the news in an attempt to push the public to think in a certain way that would estrange the refugees from the public. The researchers cited a study by Klocker and Dunn (2003) that analyzed government releases and newspaper articles in Australia, and found that 90% of the descriptions of refugees and asylum seekers framed them as illegal, threatening to their nation, and illegitimate. Other governments’ agendas about refugees have additionally made headlines in mainstream news media. In early 2017, Donald Trump captivated the media with an order of a travel ban, which barred travel from seven predominantly Muslim countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. Refugees were also banned from entering the U.S. for 120 days and barred Syrian refugees indefinitely (Parlapiano,

2017). In 2018, Swedish elections gained global news media attention as right wing and anti-refugees competed for political power causing a shockwave world-wide as onlookers witnessed changes in a country known for its historically centered political powers (Berman, 2018). These examples of refugees in mainstream news underline the wide-spread political upheaval of refugees and the potential for the potency of the content to reach media consumers world wide.

News media also captures the dichotomy between those who support refugees and those who do not. Holmes and Castañeda (2016) highlighted the difference between remarks of the Prime Minister of Hungary and Germany's chancellor. The Prime Minister of Hungary indicated that it was his duty to protect Europe from the infiltration of Muslim refugees. However, the supportive stand of Germany's chancellor, Angela Merkel, was shown at a rally in support of incoming refugees. Additionally, the *UK Guardian* (Connelly, 2015) showed images of refugees arriving by train in Germany being greeted by citizens with cheers and new clothing. Through their research, Holmes and Castañeda (2016) show how the news media may convey conflicting messages about refugees.

### **Refugee Portrayals in Social Media**

Much of the content on social media is circulating news. Headlines permeate Facebook and Twitter allowing news agencies to post as well as anyone who wishes to tell their views (Uscinski, 2017). Beyond news media, few studies have been conducted on the portrayals of refugees and in social media specifically. Researchers often refer to the media in general, but do not single out what Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. posts say in regards to Middle Easterners. However, according to Vlzicu (2017), Facebook can lead to the spreading of more rumors than actual information, and the dissemination of user content about refugees is no exception. One study examined portrayals of Middle Eastern male refugees on Twitter posts (Rettberg &

Gajjala, 2015). The research consisted of posts with the hashtag #refugeesnotwelcome and the messages sent retaliating against men fleeing war in Syria. Many of the posts included pictures of male refugees without children or women, with captions that described these men as cowards fleeing war as well as rapists and terrorists. The authors concluded that this blanketed, negative framing of male Syrians is a result of stereotypical beliefs that some Westerners have of Middle Eastern men as sexual and physical threats to the general public. This information is important to understanding negative messages portrayed by media, but only shows a sliver of a perspective based on one negatively valenced hashtag.

Another study focused on attitudes portrayed by non-Muslim and non-refugee Egyptians after an increasing emergence of Islam between 2011 and 2012 (Gazzar, 2013). Unlike than the first study discussed by Rettberg and Gajjala (2015), this study did not focus on a single hashtag or perspective, but rather the overall attitude of responses of Twitter and Facebook users during the political movement generally known as the Arab Spring. Gazzar (2013) found that initially, the perceptions towards Islam was generally positive. However, the negative minority against Islam and Muslims increased over the year of study to a negative majority. The frequency of negative posts, arguments, and support for arguments suggested the shift of social media users' perceptions. The two studies provide information that social media is a powerful tool in pushing and framing messages about refugees and Muslims. Further research in this area is needed in order to grasp the significance of social media users and the impact of their disseminated messages on others.

According to research by Vlzicu (2017), positive portrayals of refugees over social media are also trending. The author states that thee positive portrayals mostly focus on the moral responsibility of people to help refugees, like the Facebook group "Welcome Refugees" which

uses slogans like “Say it loud, say it clear, refugees are welcome here.” These groups post pictures, post mantras of embracing diversity, and allow a place for individuals to get in touch with others of a common goal to support refugees.

In another account of a group of people used social media as a motivation to help refugees. A group of Finnish students took up the Facebook Global Digital Challenge and developed an app and campaign that aimed to help refugee students to feel welcome and aware of opportunities to be involved with the community. The campaign also focused on providing refugees with basic information about the town. After the campaign was complete, the students took a poll of non-refugees within the community. Eighty-eight percent of the people who took the survey agreed that more efforts need to be made to help the refugees and asylum seekers to integrate better into their communities (BizEd, 2017). Additionally, according to Holmes and Castañeda (2016), some media platforms frame refugees as deserving of help, highlighting that these individuals are involuntarily displaced due to political circumstances that are out of their control.

### **Qualitative Refugee Interviews**

Current research and studies do not have many accounts of in-depth interviews with refugees about how they personally perceive these portrayals of like refugees in the media. Many of the existing studies conducted interviews in order to gain insights about refugees and their process of assimilation into new countries (Fangen, 2006; Isfahani, 2008), however, no research surrounding the perceptions of portrayals of the media along with this assimilation process. One study by Fangen (2006) examined the relationship of Somali refugees in Norway with their Norwegian counterparts. The researcher interviewed twenty-seven refugees about their feelings of humiliation living in a new country and culture. According to the researcher, humiliation

includes experiences such as discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatization (Fangen, 2006, p. 70). The researcher wanted to know what situations triggered humiliation and what that humiliation looked like for these refugees. The researcher noted that the refugees interviewed felt humiliated by how they were portrayed in the media (Fangen, 2006, p. 70), but did not go into further detail about this subject. Further research will need to be conducted in order to better understand assimilating refugees' feelings on their media portrayals.

### **Research Questions**

Many of the studies I found in regards to media framing and portrayals of refugees and Muslims in the media focused primarily on negative framing and depictions. However, none of the existing research found actually contrasts these media portrayals with personal acculturating experiences of present-day refugees and asylum seekers. Finding information to better understand how refugees' assimilation processes may be affected by media portrayals is important to knowing how to best handle the refugee situation in places around the Western world. Because of this, I conducted this study in order to better understand what refugees in their host countries are actually experiencing alongside what is portrayed through media channels. In order to better understand this issue, I used the following research questions to guide this study:

RQ1: How do refugees' personal experiences of living in their host countries compare to negative and positive portrayals framed by media channels?

RQ2: How do refugees interpret portrayals of themselves in the media?

RQ2.1: How do these interpretations affect their assimilation process?

### **Method**

Based on my research, no previous studies were found that explore these same questions through qualitative interviews. This lack of information caused me to pursue clarification on this

subject by way of qualitative interviews and grounded theory for data analysis. This type of data collection and analysis allows for themes and codes to emerge organically for primary interpretation (Glaser, Strauss, & Struzel, 1968). Such organic culmination of data is valuable for this study as each interview helps to provide personal and case-specific information that when cross-compared with the accounts of others interviewed, can weave a groundwork of understanding about refugees and media portrayals.

According to Glaser, Strauss, and Struzel (1968), grounded theory focuses on “theory as a process” and a “process of research” (p. 363). Grounded theorists state that data collection and analyzing is not limited to observation, prediction, and measurement as with other research methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Rather, grounded theory “requires that the three operations of collection, coding and analysis of data, be carried out jointly” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 364). In practice, this means that while conducting semi-structured interviews with a list of questions specific to receiving responses applicable to the purpose of this research, each interview was also driven by the responses of the participants. This allowed for participants to share unbiased opinions and thoughts that were valuable to the results of the study. After each interview, significant responses were identified and used to create additional questions for following interviews and growing themes were identified. This process allowed for the research to grow on itself and provide increasing context with each interview. This process is called “theoretical sampling” (Glaser et al., 1968). More specifically, sampling is a process of collecting data for generating theory where the researcher collects, codes, and analyzes data jointly, and then decides what comparison group to collect data on next (Glaser et al., 1968, p. 363).

Constant comparison analysis method was used to determine which themes were most prominent. Themes grow more apparent as data collection and analyzing nears completion.

Glaser (1965), breaks the constant comparison approach into four parts. The first is identifying as many categories in the data themes as possible, and then within those codes, compare all of the different incidents that occurred (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). Second, as incidents are compared and themes emerge, it is possible to compare the incidents against larger apparent themes rather than just the incidents (Glaser, 1965, p. 440). Third, as the larger, more prominent themes emerge, it becomes possible to identify which themes are of most value and salience, and which lesser themes can be eliminated (Glaser, 1965, p. 441). Fourth, and finally, the major themes emerge and are placed into headings and orderly sections for writing. Glaser et al. (2008) would likely add that the completion of data collection and analyzing means the research has met saturation level, which is determined when comparing and analyzing groups renders the same results (Glaser et al., 2008, p. 364). Just as the process outlined suggests, specific patterns and motifs emerged with each interview. This not only provided necessary information for building the next interview but also the information that would produce the valuable themes and codes for the final results.

### **Role of Researcher and Reflexivity Bias**

As understood by grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2018), the role of the researcher is a central one. Through this theory, I have been able to derive conclusions and explanations for emerging themes based on the process described above. While this process is systematic, I recognize the struggle to include absolute presence of objectivity in information shared. Because the subject of the study chosen includes a vulnerable population experiencing current difficulties, each of the responses represented personal views of the participants. Many of the responses included emotionally charged statements that may create a presence of salience. I was impressed with their tenacity and also moved by the hardships experienced by those I interviewed, and

admittedly, through these conversations I developed a deep sympathy for these people and other refugees. These sentiments I have felt toward this certain population may have lead to the identifying of salient outcomes and results of the interviews based on my own personal feelings. While this reflexive bias may be present due to my personal investment in the study, by using grounded theory and constant comparison analysis to cumulatively process the information, the emergent themes reflect the objective common threads of the participants' responses to the best of my ability.

### **Study Design**

Approval for this study came through the Internal Review Board at Brigham Young University under the conditions of total confidentiality of the participants. In May of 2018, the European Union started enforcing the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) which mandates the confidentiality of personal information of those living in the European Union (European Commission, 2018). In order to comply with these regulations, this study was conducted through total anonymity. No personal information allowing a participant to be identified (name, detailed locations, past or current jobs, relationships, etc.) are found anywhere in this study. To help participants understand their personal safety and informational security, an informed consent sheet for participants and recruiters was also approved by the Internal Review Board. Although the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for the purpose of data collection, the recordings themselves are saved with a pseudonym on a password protected computer with anti-virus software.

### **Sample**

Participants in the study were recommended through third-party recruiters. Some of these recruiters I knew previous to the study through professional settings, while others I met while

traveling through Sweden. These recruiters knew potential participants through professionally helping refugees with the assimilation process. Others knew refugees through neighborly experiences. Some participants referred me to others they knew who were willing to also participate in the study. Individuals interviewed were required to be eighteen years old or older, speak English fluently enough to communicate with me, and be considered a refugee living in Western Europe or the United States. To be considered for the study, the participating refugee had to fit the definition according to the U.N. General Assembly of 1951 as:

Any person who has fled their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Davenport, 2017)

Fluency in speaking English was a necessary component to the participant criteria as European laws made it difficult to ensure confidentiality as more individuals were introduced to the study. Using interpreters to interview non-English speakers created a difficult scenario in which the confidentiality of the participant could be more easily breached by including more people into the interview circle. Because of this, I chose to solely include English speakers. Doing so, however, proved difficult in finding participants that met all of the necessary criteria for participation. In the end, six individuals fit the criteria and were interviewed for the study. Even with the challenges of securing participants with the necessary criteria, the participants provided enough information to provide patterns and themes among their various responses.

A breakdown of the participants' demographics can be seen in the table below (e.g. Table 1).

While not required, all refugees were connected with Islam. Whether the religion was currently practiced by the refugee or not, each came from countries predominately Muslim. Participants below are referred to as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, and R6.

Table 1

*Demographics of Participants*

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Home Country</u>	<u>Host Country and Time of Residency</u>
R1	F	Married	Eritrea	Sweden – 5 years
R2	M	Unknown	Syria	Sweden – 3 years
R3	M	Married	Syria	U.S. – 2 years
R4	M	Single	Syria	Sweden – 3 years
R5	F	Married	Iraq	U.S. – 4 years
R6	M	Cohabit	Iraq	Netherlands – 7 years

### **Data Collection**

Participating refugees were interviewed in a semi-structured format either face-to-face or online through Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, or telephone depending on their location and availability. Interviews online or over the telephone were conducted using voice option in order to maximize security and confidentiality. One interview was conducted face-to-face in the United States while the others were online using messaging and calling apps such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook Messenger. Interviews occurred at the convenience of the individual, which included locations such as at their homes, at work, or on a train commuting to work. The interviews were conducted privately besides a few young children who were present with their parents (I had no interaction with the children). Each participant received the informed consent sheet in conjunction with their interview electronically. Before the interview, the participant was briefed on the terms and agreement within the informed consent sheet, including the disclaimer

that they would be recorded, but that their personal information would be kept confidential and anonymous. Each participant was encouraged to study the document and determine if the set terms were acceptable, and each gave their agreement. All of the questions asked focused on the refugee's current status. No questions were asked about their previous life in their home country or their journey exiting that country. Participants were asked which country they fled from in order to provide necessary context. A sample of questions asked include:

Q1: What country are you from originally?

Q2: How have you felt assimilating into this country and culture? Do you feel like you are a part of the people of this country?

Q2: How have you been welcomed in this country?

Q3: Have you felt unwelcome in this country in any way?

Q4: What media do you use? (ex: Facebook, news television, WhatsApp, etc.)

Q5: How are media portrayals of refugees and the refugee crisis different from your experience?

Q6: How are media portrayals of refugees the same as your experience?

Q7: Are you learning/have you learned the language of your host country?

Q8: How are you supporting yourself in this country? (Job, donations, etc.)

Q9: Do you feel like you have a support group in this country? Why? Please provide examples of people or organizations that are supporting you.

Interviews lasted on average a half-hour depending on the verbosity of the participant. Participants that knew other potential refugees willing and able to be interviewed were sent the recruiter consent sheet for their additional participation in recruiting. Information recorded was then transcribed by listening to the recordings and repeating the conversation back to a computer,

which in turn transcribed using voice recognition software. The computer-produced transcription was then reviewed and corrected where needed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed following the grounded theory guidelines from Corbin and Strauss (2008) that open codes should be analyzed, constructed, de-constructed, and then re-constructed again. As mentioned previously in the role of the researcher, relationships between the data emerged while conducting constant comparisons. Analysis was carefully done line by line in open-coding, carefully analyzing the meaning and the context within each statement. After open-coding, axial coding was used in order to logically link open codes together to create broader themes. Doing so allows for larger themes to emerge as well as nuances in conversation that may be missed without cross-examination of data (Robson, 2015). Eventually, themes occurred and connections were made physically on paper as well as conceptually. Themes were color coded in order to keep categories and emerging relationships visible. Color codes were then assembled together into a single document allowing for the consolidation of themes and to view repeating messages. Major themes were recorded and applicable quotations were then marked for further use. Emerging themes answered questions about assimilation of refugees and their relationship with media portrayals.

### **Results**

This study reflects the relationship of refugee immigrants in western regions and their portrayals in the media. Understanding this relationship starts by looking at the common threads through the conversations with these six refugee interview participants. All six participants had experiences with media platforms and how it affected their relationships with their host countries and home countries. The main emerging themes include how refugees and non-refugees received

information through the media, struggles with assimilation, keeping connections with home country while trying to connect to host country, and personal sentiments about their personal acculturating experiences (e.g. Table 2). Media and portrayals reflect the participants' experiences with media and politics and how portrayals of refugees through these channels may influence viewers. Relationships with host countries examine the assimilation process of the refugees, how the media may affect this process, and how assimilation expectations are met or not met. Additionally, the sections review how citizens of their host countries treated refugees. Relationships with home country identifies themes refugees experienced with their home country, media and politics back home, and keeping in contact with people still living in their home country. Refugee feelings resulting from experiences highlights how refugees showed sympathy and understanding to those who may misunderstand them, justified their feelings of frustration for misrepresentations, and expressed that their experiences as refugees may vary from refugee to refugee. Each of these themes reveals how media portrayals of refugees may or may not coincide with actual experiences had by these refugees. When referencing participant refugees, their experiences, and quotations, I will continue to refer to them as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, and R6.

Table 2

*Results Categories and Subsections*

	<u>Section 1</u>	<u>Section 2</u>	<u>Section 3</u>	<u>Section 4</u>
	Getting Information From the Media	Struggles with Assimilation	Connecting to the Past and Present	Refugee Understanding of Media Portrayals
Subsection 1	Non-Refugees got information and opinions through media	Making connections with non-refugees was a point of	Refugees never intended to leave their home countries.	Some refugees felt sympathy for those who misunderstand or

	portrayals of refugees.	difficulty for refugees.		think negatively about them.
Subsection 2	Media can act as a medium for polarized and extremist views of host countries.	Some refugees experienced racism overtly while others experience it covertly	Moving back to home country or another country after refugee state poses another issue of starting over one more time.	Refugees gave plight for individuals not to stereotype.
Subsection 3	—	Learning English or the native language of the host country was important for refugee assimilation.	Some refugees kept up with home country news. This could be a source of comfort or discomfort.	Each refugee recognized that their experiences may have been subject to themselves personally.
Subsection 4	—	Cultural variants were a common source for some refugees feeling disconnected from host country.	Refugees stayed in contact with people back home when available.	—
Subsection 5	—	Assimilation expectations that were met or not met could be a source of stress.	—	—
Subsection 6	—	Qualification discrepancies could have led to economic and educational differences.	—	—

### Getting Information from the Media

All participant refugees had experiences of following the news media in their host countries. Many received news updates and learned of government and citizen positions on immigration through watching TV, while others gathered information online and through social media platforms. Participants used the news as a tool in order to know what attitudes to expect

from their host country as well as what kinds of resources are guaranteed. As noted by refugee R1, who lived in Sweden at the time of the interview, sometimes the information given by local news about resources and privileges for refugees was confusing:

We watch the news on the TV and then we feel like everything will be certain or not. We don't know, we don't know. So it's kind of confusing sometimes. We, a lot of people last week even, I talked about the social workers are reformatting . . . but still we couldn't get any help from the office. Keep calling them and asking job or road to the business and everything. But still maybe they will work out they will change ideas. I don't know. So we understand that they're going to help refugees or something like that.

Keeping up with news on immigration status was also something considered important to all participants as it was something that greatly affected them, their families, and others in similar situations. R5, currently in the United States, said:

To be honest, I'm still a stranger to the political side and all these things. I keep an eye on . . . immigration status because I have a lot of people here. That is something I do care about. Those people that are trying to find their way and to find peace and to settle somewhere . . . [and] call it home. So yeah, that is something I look at.

**Non-refugees get information and opinions through media.** Additionally, participant refugees concluded citizens of host countries also get information about refugees through news media and social media platforms. About people of host countries and their media consumption, R2 said:

People [in Sweden], they are interesting most the time in their computers and their internet they don't have social life most of the time that you're sitting at home. No people

on the streets. Most of them are sitting in front of the screen. . . . So they are taking their information from internet, media, social media.

Citizens' opinions about refugees were also shaped by what consumers saw on the news media. Much of the news concerns with matter surrounding immigrants, which in turn could have swayed consumers' views on refugees. R2 concludes that this is how society and information consumption works in Sweden when he said, "Many of us, if you look at the Swedish news, interviews with the Swedish, all of them are talking about immigrants and what they should do. Every political party . . . immigrant build on this and things."

Four of the participants openly said that media portrayals of refugees were exaggerated or extreme and played a role in swaying citizen viewers to think a certain way about immigrants.

R4 in Sweden said:

Yeah, definitely news media plays a big role in this because it's always exaggerating stuff. A lot of the stuff said about refugees are completely not true. Some of it is, pretty much everything else is not true. It's like the news media is trying to focus on people who come to other countries and don't want to do anything or want to learn. They don't want to really learn or try to work in this country that they live in, so people just want to sit and not do anything and live for free and get healthcare for free and it doesn't work like that. I think that the news media focuses on these people and the majority of people who are trying to just have a normal life. But then the situation happens, you know.

When talking about making relationships with citizens, some refugees believed that viewers were afraid to become friends with refugees because of what they saw through the media.

It's not that [Swedish people are] not open, and maybe because they see things from the internet . . . so they're not so friendly or something like that. They are some kind of afraid to be close to you so much. It's not like other nations. (R2)

In each of my interviews with those who were currently living outside of the United States, each refugee mentioned the politics or characteristics of American culture. Additionally, comments were made that those outside of the US, citizens as well as refugees, looked to the United States as a major influencer of politics and culture. R2, currently situated in Sweden, said:

Actually, I think they look at the American News most of the time. . . . Everything you find, like, they are so interested in the USA. They're impressed by it. . . . It's influencing too much. It's influencing too much. If you look at the new president, you will find most of them are stronger against immigrants whereas before you find someone . . . he doesn't like you he doesn't say he just keep quiet. But now they are talking and it's become stronger. Next elections we'll find out how much American effect. . . . And once I ask some people why are you so interesting in English because most of the time they were talking in English. They said we are, like, no much people in the world talking Swedish, so we want another language and English is close to the Americans . . . close to Europeans. . . . If you open the TV list of the channels they are showing American movies. American programs. It's new, new programs. I'm watching TV and I see showing US new programs like 2018, so they are interesting and full of everything American that is what I've noticed. Maybe they don't know what to think about this. I think it's not wrong. The wrong is to follow another nation 100%. I hope they are following the Americans for their relations [laughs]. Yeah, because here in Sweden it is at zero.

One refugee interviewed, R6, in the Netherlands also referenced a similarity to the refugee situation in his host country in comparison to the United States by directly relating it to the current American President by saying, “In the Netherlands, we have our version of Trump, I like to call him. So he has his own followers, and they are getting bigger everyday.”

R4, who also lived in Sweden at the time of the interview, determined that the media over-dramatized refugees in the media when in reality refugee immigrants were just seeking safety, peace and a normal life.

Everyone that comes from a different country before anything else are pretty much just trying to live a normal life trying to work have a good life like not needing to worry about a bomb coming to your head or any kind of thing that would make you scared. It's like a right for any person to have a life like that. A normal life to work hard. I don't really see the reason or the concept behind and the over-exaggeration of the news media.

R3, who lived in the United States at the time of the interview, believed that in order for there to be more of a positive feeling towards refugees, the media must be used as a tool to persuade for good as well as those who think positively about refugees.

We have to educate them by media and to tell them. . . . They're all over media, and I think if they want to correct the picture of refugees they can do that. But unfortunately, I am not sure who control[s] media. Sometimes it is controlled by extremists, for example. Sometimes it's controlled by people they dislike immigration or immigrants. So, I think it is our duty to improve the picture of the immigrants people.

**Media as a facilitator of extremist views.** As mentioned before, refugees commented on the extremism of media content. Many explained this extremism as resulting from polarized views. In addition to negative views of refugees, participant refugees said that there were people

of their host countries who were in favor of immigration. However, these people were also subject to extreme portrayals of refugees.

Like I said, it is very positive or it is very negative. There is no midway. . . . I don't know how you call it in English. . . it's either extremely hateful and everything goes wrong with the Netherlands because of the refugees, or it's like "They're very, very poor people. They need all the help. They can do nothing. They need all of the protection." So yeah, it's extreme, and that says something about the Dutch. They like extremes, in my way. Yeah, like everyone in the world, there is a polarization in the meaning. Some people will be overprotective and others will be, like, over hateful. (R6)

The same polarization was said of Swedish media. At the time of the interviews, Sweden was undergoing a major national election that would determine the future of refugees living in the Scandinavian country. The polarization of the media and political parties made it hard for refugees to know whom to trust:

Actually, most of the new— Swedish news—they are like opposite sides. Some represent immigrants as nice people, and there's another one that is an opposite party. They are bad people. They are seeking to destroying our country, taking our resources and so on. Most of the time you find yourself in that situation you think between . . . you are always in between. Nobody accepting you 100% and nobody rejected you 100%. You're always afraid in your heart if anyone you meet for the first time if he is from this side or the other side. Even if you want to apply for a job, you don't know if this application goes to the person who I—I don't want to use the word racist—if they like the immigrants or not. If you are applying for an apartment, It's always like this. It's always like this, and now . . . election is coming and we are like, our hands are holding our hearts. We are waiting for

these elections. This election is very important, so I hope everything well. We see there is a party here who's bigger and bigger . . . more than 50% in the last year. This party is like anti-immigrants, so we don't know actually. We are so afraid from this election. (R2)

Refugees residing in the United States also talked about media portrayals of immigrants and refugees. Their reactions to these portrayals were more sympathetic to the views of the American people. These views will be stated later on in this section.

### **The Struggles with Assimilation**

**Connecting with people.** In contrast to media portrayals of refugees, this subsection focuses on the actual experiences of refugee participants with assimilating into their host countries. Despite which country the participants resided in, all interviewed shared that assimilating into a new country is a difficult experience. However, the difficulty of acculturating varied from refugee to refugee. By far, the most difficult aspect of assimilation had to do with building relationships with citizens of their host country. One refugee commented on how looking different made it difficult to connect with other people.

It's not like it's easy to live here, no. It's like you look . . . like a black duck in a lot of white ducks. The people here aren't so easy to befriend. For example, I have now three friends [who are] Swedish people. It's not easy to make friends here. (R2)

R5, who was living in the United States at the time of the interview, became emotional when talking about the difficulty of connecting with people and starting life over again in a new country and culture.

It wasn't easy, easy to be in a new culture, trying to find your way. . . . It's challenging. It's still hard. . . . I'm sorry. . . . It's you come from a country and a culture you know everything about it and you just . . . understand what you are going through and you

know how—how do I say it—you know how when life is hard, there are people around you. They will be there for you to come here and start a new life. It's so hard. It's not easy to find people, to have friends, to find a job, to study, to learn and understand the language. It's so hard. But I guess it gets easy, possibly with the time.

R1 expressed frustration with the people in her new community being hard to read and inconsistent in their interactions.

Swedish, yes, I don't know maybe sometimes I couldn't say. My gosh, I couldn't say.

Turn again, again, again like the weather. You plan something, you discuss something with one Swedish person one day. He has been happy to help and happy to understand and solve and help so much. Then the next day, all these things are disappearing again.

R5 explained that although living in America is desirable by people outside of the country, actually living in the country is a different story. Part of making friends and connecting with people meant understanding the culture. Additionally, being in a new country and culture made it difficult to make relationships. Cultural differences made connecting difficult as customs and personality traits may not be as commonly shared.

But people wish to come to [the United States]. But the problem is what we don't understand. It's not easy to be here. A lot of people come to here and they cannot survive here. It's not easy to be here. You have to understand the culture. You have to . . . understand the business. You have to understand what you need to do. But yeah, I can tell you there are some people who are scared. Some people are not. It depends on who you are. The difference in culture . . . it's like in Iraq, we don't tell someone we're going to visit them, we just show up. We expect people to come to our home, and we don't invite someone say, "Hey, come for lunch or dinner." People just show up. We love that. It's

exciting time when the doorbell rings. We're excited to see who comes to visit us. It's not the same here. People are very focused on their job and their family and life. They are more—how we say it—more inward.

Two of the refugees interviewed lived in refugee camps before relocating to their current country of residence. These refugees felt a difference between the help and attention they received in the camps and the reactions they received outside of the camps. One refugee talked about the publicity they received while in the camp.

When you're in the camp, in the beginning you sit in a place and people are coming to you. People want to talk to you. But outside of the camp, it's like real community. Nobody wants to be so close to you even if they say hi or how are you. Nothing more.  
(R2)

However, some refugees were [fortunate] to find people who have welcomed them into their host countries. Some of these people were welcomed by organizations while others found personal connections and friends on a small, interpersonal basis.

Actually, I find a priest [in Sweden] even though I'm Muslim. Very nice person. He was helping immigrants and I have a good relationship with him. I know his family and he knows my family. He's a really good person. There's some people that are so good. People that take an interest in you coming into our camp and introduce themselves to us.  
(R2)

R3 was helped by the organization that he now works for upon his arrival to the United States. He made American friends with more easily with people both inside and outside of their work. About this he stated, "I cannot find a word to describe them. They are very helpful people,

very cooperative people here. And I have many friends here nowadays—either inside [place of work] or outside [place of work].”

**Racism.** Several refugees stated that racism is a big factor in why they feel ostracized from their host societies. However, even though many of the refugees interviewed mentioned feeling some social injustice, not all accounts were attributed to racism. R4 talked about racism openly when discussing experiences had while traveling through Egypt, Turkey, and Germany to get to his final host country, Sweden, where he now resides:

Other countries that happened a lot. Just a lot of hate for no reason. It's really frustrating but there's nothing we can do about it. You're going to get that anywhere. . . . It usually doesn't come from a reason or a sensical reason because I encountered a lot of people who have racism or hate and it's not really something that you can explain why. They just do. They just hate anything that's not from the same country or culture. . . . I feel like each negative experience from people of the Middle East is accentuated by the next event. It just builds on each other, if that makes sense.

R2 stated as a refugee, they did not feel the same as the citizens of the host country and often felt like people do not want to hold conversations with refugees. This situation proved difficult as refugees tried to navigate between people who liked and would help refugees and people who were opposite.

You always feel like you—even if you are standing between so many people they're talking—always afraid to talk to you conversations. You don't know if they like immigrants or not, and it happened to us when we're studying the language. They take us to the town go ask people on the street ask them about the places they like to go and no one wanted to talk to us. We're having a group [of] three persons. Nobody . . . wanted to

talk to us. . . . I mean I feel some injustice here, yes because I don't see that I'm the same as everyone.

However, according to R4, racism was not something that he considered to have overtly encountered on a personal level in Sweden. Rather than blatant methods, subtle racism was more of a form that is more experienced.

In Sweden, it's rare to see a lot of racism. Pretty much the racism of the people in Sweden is not the kind that would say it right to your face. Maybe some people stare at you or something like that. It's not really that direct encounter, it's more indirect type of hate. I personally haven't really encountered much hardly.”

**Language.** Each refugee spoke of the great advantage of speaking English or the native language of his or her host country. They mentioned that those who do not speak these languages, or do not speak them well, could have a harder time adjusting to their new place of residence and may be more subject to racism.

I have a friend of mine that doesn't speak English at all. He doesn't understand what they are saying pretty much and their making fun of their language and him not being able to understand so he was just ignored or was quiet and didn't say anything. (R4)

R4 additionally talked about the advantages of speaking English fluently when trying to adapt to living in his host country. According to him and other refugees, learning the language was key for living successfully a new country.

I'm not going to say I'm a special case, but a lot of people who come from Syria don't know English that well. I don't know why. It's not because the education is not that bad in my country. At least they talk very good English, and some places they don't speak fluently. So it may have been harder for other people to adapt quickly but for me it wasn't

that bad. . . . It's something you must do if you are going to another country. There's really no other way you need to have at least two years in order to master the language. Without that you can't really proceed in your life.

Learning the Dutch language helped R6 in securing a job in the Netherlands and utilize his previous qualifications.

I keep learning Dutch every day, that's for sure, but I got the highest level of Dutch after a year. . . . I had to because that was the beginning. That was the beginning to start life here. I work as a [occupation] here, and you have to speak the language perfectly. So that was the first step to be able to start reapplying for my degree.

When asked about the difficulty of living in their country of current residence, R6 talked about the importance for refugees living outside countries that speak English as the national language to understand the dialect of their host country. Doing so helps refugees to assimilate better into the culture.

I'm afraid yes. I think they do because it's very difficult to here. It's because [of the] language. Most of the time because it's not the most known language in the world, if you come to the Netherlands, it's not English. You have to learn Dutch. So if you don't speak the language of the Netherlands, you won't be able to communicate. It's very difficult. Although, everyone speaks English here, and they are happy to speak English to you. But you won't be able to live here as a part of the society if you don't speak the language. And you don't understand the jokes and the sayings and all those things. So yeah, it's very difficult. It varies a lot if you understand the language or not. . . . So, they face a lot of problems if they decide to not speak the language.

**Cultural differences.** Besides speaking the language, enduring forms of racism, and experiencing difficulties connecting with citizens of host countries, the participants faced many struggles with cultural differences. These differences included language and understanding how to connect with the people but may have also included how one behaves in public, gender interactions, food, religion, and work expectations. With refugees crossing waters, country borders, and religious thresholds, refugees may find themselves in cultures that are unfamiliar and difficult to navigate. R4 experienced many cultures in his exodus from their home country. He admitted that adapting to cultures is difficult, but after many times of trying to acclimatize, assimilating into cultures became more manageable.

Well, it's pretty hard to adapt to any culture to be honest. The Swedish one is not anything different because I didn't come straight here from Syria. I travelled to a lot of countries. Seven of them, and I learned every language of that country. So when I came to Sweden and it was pretty much not that hard. I already dealt with it before. (R4)

Another refugee expressed the difficulties of learning to think like citizens of their host country.

I never had an opinion. I used to study I used to memorize and go take the test. You want me to think? You want me to have an opinion? It's hard for me to do that. . . . So I'm still learning. I'm just learning how to have an opinion and how to think and say, "Oh no, yeah, that's correct, that's not." I'm still in the process. (R5)

R6 has lived in the Netherlands for seven years and felt he had adapted decently well into the host country culture. Although it may be difficult to totally acclimatize into a foreign culture, R6 believed he had acclimatized well and believed adaption is possible for refugees.

I'd like to say yes. I fully function in the society. I have my job, I have my family—I mean, my girlfriend. We are living together. She's Dutch. I think I embrace the culture here, so I'm trying to make the Netherlands my home. I mean, I succeeded a bit, but you can't change yourself 100%. In very rare occasions now I still feel like an Iraqi, but those have become more of a rarity than more normal situations.

**Refugee assimilation expectations.** Refugees interviewed also expressed the difficulties in aligning personal expectations for life in a new country with realities. When fleeing their home countries in pursuit of safety, each hoped for a life with better opportunities than the futures they would have faced had they stayed in their home countries. Many arrived in their new countries with the understanding that life would be better and offer more opportunities than those that they felt they were actually experiencing.

Yeah, that's hard because I was like, I was expecting good things. And [I've been] telling all my people until now that Sweden is a very nice country. You have a good opportunity because we feel. So I speak a lot of things to my people and my friends my friend's family from Ethiopia is here. I said, tell these people that Sweden is a very nice country. But when I go and ask a lot of people permission, everyone say I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. . . . For that matter I struggle much. I'm really struggling like Africa.

(R1)

When R2 was asked what was expected upon first finding out he was being located to Sweden, he felt that the social circumstances would be more favorable than what he actually experienced. He said, “I expected myself to find a lot of friends in this country to make relationships, to study, to have a good job with my certificate. But I can't say it's bad, but it's not as I had hoped.”

On the opposite side, R3 felt that his expectations had been exceeded upon arrival in the new country.

I cannot describe, I cannot find the convenient words to describe how much I was helped by the people here. I am so happy. Believe me, I could not imagine I would be welcomed in America here. I cannot imagine to such people.

R4, however, was of the opinion that it was up to the refugee to fulfill expectations, not the government or citizens of host countries. Those who are unhappy with their situation need to work harder in order to make their experiences more positive. According to them, refugees need to have a more realistic outlook and expectation when it comes to receiving help and opportunities from the government and citizens of the host country.

I mean, for my personal experience, to be honest, any of us left Syria because of the war or for other reasons. Someone would think that you're getting a luxury life and getting help will be so easy, and it's going to be a normal life. But it's never like that. I mean, here you leave everything that you have in your country, and you come here and you have to work really hard in order to adapt or try to adapt. . . . It's hard to—how can I explain this—but you got all the help from Sweden they can help you with is provided. But until you are able to work and study and all of that, in order to help a lot, still in order for going to give you up you have to work hard. You can't expect them to just give you everything, and for you to be set. It doesn't really work like that. So, I think that's primarily the difference why some people's expectations are coming here.

R5 agreed that even if expectations are not met, then it is up to the refugee to make up the difference in their new life—even in America.

It's up to us to be someone or not be. It's who we are. So I always say to refugees, 'So yeah, we are refugees. We can be different rather than being labeled as refugees all the time, but be part of the country and contribute and grow.' And I sometimes get mad at people when they're here for 20 years and still don't did something. And I look at that when I say, 'You are in America. Do you know what American means? It means the greatest country. The country that we all look for. And you can be whatever you want to, but you still need to knock.' So the problem is not in the society. The problem is the person. That's my take on it that. Whoever you are, it's who we are. Even in your own country. You can be someone or not. It's up to you.

**Qualification discrepancies.** Each of the refugees interviewed experienced problems in their qualifications being honored in their new countries of residence. While some of these discrepancies were solved more easily, all experienced the inconvenience of their education or qualifications not being honored to the same level as in their home country. After three years of working with the Swedish government to honor his credentials, R2 felt very frustrated and saddened.

I'm so frustrated because I sent to them and it was translated into English in Swedish, but now they are saying it's not qualified as it they have in Sweden. I studied four years in University. It makes me feel like lower than them, even if I have higher education. They always make you feel you're lower than you are . . . they said they are right, and I say they are wrong. I never get a real evaluation of my certificate.

Because of years of unrest and travel, R4 is behind in school. Even though he had years of experience and can speak multiple languages fluently, R4 was held back from his grade year in order to fulfill language requirements in his host country.

I should be going to college, but because of language and all that, I had to give up a year to fully understand the language in order to study correctly. . . . I should be last year or in college according to my age. I'm two years older than anyone in my class. . . . It really doesn't matter how old you are. It's more frustrating that you had to give up these years of studying and redo it all again.

R5's bachelor's degree was not honored in the United States, so she enrolled in school to obtain a master's degree. Doing so, she hoped to be proactive in moving forward with her life in America.

So I told them I got my degree I got my bachelor's degree in chemistry from Baghdad University, but no one takes it here seriously. I hope someday in 2020 when I get my MBA so I can say, "Oh what is your education?" and I can say, "MBA from University." They will say, "Oh my gosh, you know something, and you're smart!" and I can say, "Yeah, kind of!" So yeah, hopefully it will be that.

For some refugees, professional success in their host country comes more quickly and readily. After some more training and qualifications, R3 and R6 were working in their respective fields from before they arrived in their host countries. But for others, professional prosperity and recognition continued to be a struggle. R1 owned a small business in Sweden and was looking to expand, however, the path to success had been rocky and continued to be difficult as she looked to solidify credentials.

The first time when I think about my business, I was expecting more power from office to my social worker. . . . They are not helping at all they say okay, okay, okay with nothing and I throw you out somewhere in the [practice] course, somewhere without

knowledge. Then you go there and sit down and you sit down with the computers and write some words, and then back home with nothing.

Each participant had a strong desire to work. Some were able to work and study in their desired fields while others had to struggle for adaptations to their original life plan they had before fleeing their homes.

### **Connecting to the Past and Present**

Each participant described their relationship with their home country and how it played a role in their new living situations. According to these refugees, leaving home is never easy, but some agreed that it is possible to still live successfully and happily in a new country despite the past. Some refugees had active relationships with friends and family back home, while others expressed it was difficult to keep in contact due to the war-torn nature of their homelands.

Although participants came from various countries and different experiences that drove them away from their homes, each acknowledged that home had a significant impact on their current situations.

**Never intended to leave home.** Before their home countries became too dangerous to live in, many refugees never wanted to leave their homes. Participants wanted citizens of host countries to understand their intentions as innocent victims only fleeing for their lives and the lives of loved ones. Several refugees verbally affirmed that they and other refugees in their situation never intended to move away from their home countries.

I love traveling and go back home and it was always to visit. I never wanted to live anywhere else but Iraq. I would love to travel to see the world, but come back home. And I guess most of us is this way. (R5)

R2 agreed that leaving home before the war was never his plan. He stated, "All my life I was in Syria. Believe me Syrians in general, they're having their life, they're hoping to not go out of Syria. But things happen."

R3 stayed in his home country until the war became too dangerous, and then had to flee for safety.

Actually, before I left my country Syria because of violence which is still happening today, there's a kind of War there, and I stayed there for the first four years of the war. Nowadays it's more than seven years and half. I spent four years in Aleppo, where the war is actually . . . until I felt very dangerous to live there, so I decided to leave with my wife our country.

Additionally, R3 concluded that his personal experience was similar to others' fleeing their homelands.

They left their country not by their own will because it was very dangerous for them and for their children and they seek help from Americans. For example, to live the kind of life that is much better than in their country.

When R5 was asked why she remained in America by citizens of her host country, she responded with an explanation that refugees are only where they are because they have to be. Not because they want to be.

Yeah, there was people who are like, "Why are you here? Why don't you go back?" and I always respond, I said, "I am grateful to be [in America]." I said something that . . . you do have to understand when the people or politics decide to come to our country, it doesn't matter what the reasons are. And these reasons are . . . we have all kinds of reasons for people to not go back to their country. And expect these people to do

[something]. It's not because they want to, they have to. Because I'm only here because I have to be here. But I said now I am in a process to be a citizen and now this is my country as well as it is yours.

**Issues with restarting again.** Because of the extreme measures that evicted refugees from their homes and the intensity of acclimatizing into a new culture, five of the six interview participants stated that they would not be returning to their home countries. Having already restarted their lives, going home would be another difficult transition despite experiencing the hardships of acculturating to a new country. R2 explains his thoughts about returning home after the war is over.

Actually, I thought about this many times. I find it so hard to start my life a third time. You grow up, you study, you work, you start to save some money and stuff so you start to build your future. When you find everything went destroyed [and] start again from zero point in another country. After four years I have . . . home, I have family, so it's hard for me to . . . go back to Syria and start from zero point again. So it's not easy at all, even though I really feel like lonely. Because I went there my job is gone and there's nothing. Only if I went to Syria, I have nothing left, and I started my life here. It was not easy to start my life here. So, I don't think I have too much my life to start again a third time.

When asked about looking to settle somewhere other than his host country, R4 stated that traveling from country to country to find safety drained the appeal for returning home.

No, I'm planning on staying in Sweden. I'm really tired of traveling to other countries. I'm just trying to have a good life in Sweden. Maybe visit somewhere on vacation, but other than that I'm planning to stay here. I don't want to go anywhere else.

With many refugees not returning home to their native countries, R6 expressed frustrations with other refugees that decide to not integrate their home culture with their new culture. He believed doing so makes fitting into their new life situations difficult as refugees try to be in two places at once. When asked if he believed that this lack of integration is causing more assimilation problems for refugees R6 responded:

Yeah, for sure because even the Iraqi society here, and I think in a way, and I know from my family in America, they are trying to build small Iraq in the Netherlands or small Iraq in America. And they tried to have their own parties and their own shops and their own clubs and you name it. . . . So they are trying to stay in two countries. Like they are here and there.

**Keeping up with home country news.** Despite the distance from home, three refugees reported keeping up with the news of their home country. When asked if she kept up with the news back home, R5 stated she did and that keeping up with the news back home is important to her personally. She said, “Yeah, I do. It’s not in your hands . . . it’s something that draws you . . . Watch the news and things to make sure everything is okay and what’s going on there. Yeah, I still keep in touch with everything.

R4 stated that keeping up with news back home is frustrating and difficult to decipher. As he expressed earlier, to him, news media is greatly exaggerated. For him, news from his home country was no different. Not being present at home, it is unclear what news is correct and what news is not.

Well, I’m not really sure what is correct anymore to be honest, because you can’t trust anything anymore, like, based on what they’re saying unless you’re in that country seeing what happens in front of your eyes. Both sides—either the good side or the bad side can’t

really tell me. There's just full-on war for no reason. So, it's just not trustworthy what anyone would say, unless I hear from my from the people I know in that country . . . in Syria. I hear from them what's happening. It's not really something that trusted—so many stuff are changed or exaggerated in either good or bad way.

R6 decided to not follow news from home in an effort to better acclimatize to his new home and culture.

“No, no. I decided to block everything about Iraq. I mean, I don't have family there anymore. Most of my family is living in the U.S., and I live here. I do call some friends who are in Iraq, but we keep it way far from the politics. . . . I mean, I needed to embrace the life here or otherwise I would . . . I wanted to be fully here. I didn't want to be half here and half there. I wouldn't be able to be happy here and sad there, so I decided to block that out and start all over from the beginning here.

**Staying in contact with people.** Even though all of the refugees do not keep in touch with news and politics back home, each refugee interviewed said that they tried to keep in contact with loved ones still in their home countries. Staying in contact with people was not always easy as war-torn countries make consistent conversations difficult. R4 stated:

I still have a lot friends, and some of my relatives there, so it's always a good thing to keep contact with them. It's not always available in case they get caught or something else happens. They have to live on batteries and stuff and, like, a generator, so it always isn't that much available. It's a certain amount of times that I can contact them.

Refugees like R1 still have loved ones that are trying to escape the war back home.

Mobile phones were helpful in keeping track of those who may be on the run.

Especially in Eritrea, no constant life. Nobody will [go] back home because of the government situation and everything. My nephews . . . most of my relatives are coming out at the age of twelve. So you see that coming out there on their way there on the road... sending them a message when someone's going out when they feel like they're on the border. Understand that your nephew is there, and give us information, give us a call. We contact them. . . . Even my family are going from Eritrea. No one will ever to go back to Eritrea.

R5 had many friends and family members still living in her home country. Facebook became an effective tool in helping her stay connected and maintain a relationship with loved ones.

I still have a lot of friends, I still have a lot of family, like my aunts and cousins, I still have them there. I still call them and talk to them, follow them on Facebook, which sometimes people say Facebook is not the best thing, but I guess for people like us it's kind of a blessing. It's bad, but it's good at the same time. It's good because we can keep in contact with the people that we love. We can see their kids pictures and see how they are, how their life is, give us a little bit of comfort to keep that connection.

### **Refugee Understanding of Their Media Portrayals**

**Sympathy for misunderstandings.** As demonstrated through participants' quotations, interviewing refugees generated emotionally charged responses. Emotions varied from frustration and sadness to hopefulness and gratitude. One emotion that was expressed from more than one participant was empathy and understanding for the negative sentiments of citizens of their host countries. When talking about terrorism and the effects of media portrayals of guilty

terrorists on innocent refugees, R3 expressed his personal understanding of the pessimism non-refugees may feel towards refugees and those who come from the Middle East.

I understand them. We should not ignore this kind of behavior because we have to ask ourselves a question. Because we have to ask ourselves a very simple question: who did September 11th? For example, all of them from the Middle East. All of them. This means that we have to understand the people. Some of the people even the majority of the people who will not accept immigration from mainly from the Middle East because they believe that they are behind many problems here in the United States. I think that I understand those people well.

Additionally, R5 expressed understanding for those who may think negatively of people who come from her home country of Iraq. Rather than considering it as hate for her native people, R5 believed that negative feelings from non-refugees resulted from misunderstandings.

I don't get it as a negative. I don't hold it for every people. I understand there's a lot of people who lost their loved ones in Iraq. They lost their kids, they lost their husbands.

These people, I understand where they come from. So I don't take it as a hatred.

Sometimes I understand why they are this way.

R3 also believed that making assumptions about a group of people based on single or few experiences is normal human behavior. Because of that, he believed it was easier to sympathize with people who have grievances against refugees and others from his native country.

We have sometimes to understand that the situation in other ways. For example, suppose that you have 1,000 people as an immigrant from Syria. Only one of them he committed the problem, a crime, for example. Suppose that I think that our mentality as a human being it is establish something you can. . . . It's very easy to generate your judge or

judgment about all the people. And many people they say, "Oh, Syrians are like this. All refugees are like this. It is just committed by 1,000, one of the thousands of people." I think it's a normal thing, this phenomenon is widespread in all cultures. So, by this we have to understand those people who have some kind of hostility against immigrants, especially if one of the thousands committed something they will say that. First of all, we have to understand those people.

**Refugee plights against stereotyping.** In addition to participants understanding why non-refugees may have negative sentiments toward refugees, participants also expressed that non-refugees do need to understand that because one person may have done something wrong, it does not make the rest of the population bad. Refugees asked citizens of host countries to consider this plight.

Not everyone is as bad as if someone is bad, it does not mean that everyone is bad. Just try to contact with them, contact the immigrants. And I hope peace for the whole country and for the whole world. (R2)

Even with this plight, R3, as quoted previously, understood the threat non-refugees feel as results of terrorist attacks like September 11<sup>th</sup>. However, R3 called into question the current relationships with Americans and those from countries that were banned from entering the United States during the time of the interview. The strains of these relationships, according to him, were unjust and confusing.

But on the other hand, sometimes I ask myself: why only these six nations? And none of them committed September 11<sup>th</sup>. You know that, too. Many of them, 15 of them were from Saudi Arabia. And now it is the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia is very, very

good and the people from Saudi Arabia can come very easily to America. And this is just the kind of question. (R3)

Additionally, R5 believed that it takes a community to make people who they are.

Knowing this, it is how a society cares for people that may make them good or bad.

Communities where refugees now live have the responsibility to make a positive influence in the lives of those that may be living on the edge of extremity. She said, “So the problem is . . . who we are and how we shape people. And how we care about these people that makes them not do that.”

However, ultimately, R5 believed that no matter how others may perceive them or other refugees, it is possible to live an unaffected life. Creating a safe emotional space allows for rumors and false beliefs to circulate but not permeate personal emotions.

At the same time, it doesn't affect me because I won't let it affect me. So . . . I will run not away. I'm not going to hide. I'll be a citizen in the next year, the same as you, and I will have responsibilities like you. The same as you. I will to be a good [citizen] as you are.

**Individual experiences.** Even with all of the similarities between refugee views on host countries, home countries, and media, each refugee interviewed acknowledged that their personal experiences may be different than other refugees. Each was careful to claim that their experiences were their own. And while assumptions could be made about how other refugees in similar situations may feel, ultimately, each they expressed that experience with its own ups and downs may differ from each other. Although R2 had many negative things to say about his experience acclimatizing in Sweden, he recognized that his own experience may have been better than other refugees living in other countries.

I give you positive thoughts. I think this country is better than other countries, than Denmark right now. It was so good before. Denmark was number one country for immigrants. Now it's the worst. In Norway, they were good now they are bad. Sweden is better than two of them in Scandinavian countries. And I think Sweden is now is good. It's not as good as it was before. It's not as good, and I hope it not become worse after the elections.

Similarly, R3 believed that his assimilation experience may have been more positive than other refugees because of the religious nature of the citizens of the host community.

I began to realize that this is the most important reason why the people are more cooperative because they belong to Mormon [Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints]. I think these people like, not only accept, they like refugees to help them. They have a kind of eagerness because it is something that is rooted in their religion to help the other people—especially the oppressed people. So this is the most important reason why. . . . I can't say there are other states in the United States that deal well with refugees people because there is something originated from the culture of the people here.

However, R1 felt that other refugees from the same country experience more positive circumstances within the host country than other refugees.

There are a lot of Eritreans and Ethiopians here with big nice position. They go to school, and have education, and already good place of course. But most of the Africans like Eritreans, especially women, have a little problem with, you know, to be able to understand everything.

But R1 also recognized that her situation and the help she received from the Swedish government was relatively good compared to those who were still living in her native country.

I'm not blaming them because this is the world of life. Of course, but they give us a lot of chance house and food and of course everything. There's no one in my country with this kind of to help.

According to R6, assimilation came easier to him than to other refugees. Because of that, he felt that there was a discrepancy between what his refugee life was like and what other refugees may experience. He stated about his experience, "But this is not like every story for a refugee here as much as . . . I like it, but I also hate it. I think I'm one of the only ones that has everything coming so easy for them."

### **Discussion**

While several of the participants stated an understanding that their experiences may differ from other refugees, broader themes emerged that tied the experiences of the participants together for valuable insights and answers to this study's research questions. The findings of these six refugee interviews are significant because it helps readers to understand how framed media content from host countries can affect the lives of assimilating refugees. Media portrayals may influence the actual process of some refugees as they seek to establish their new lives. The results of this study help readers to understand the similarities and differences between media depictions of refugee assimilation and what refugee assimilation may actually be for refugees. Polarization of media content, success and failures of refugees connecting to the culture and people of host countries, and misunderstandings about refugee economic and cultural struggles are some of the key concepts recognized through data analysis. By understanding the effect of media portrayals on refugees and non-refugees, organizations and citizens of host countries can

better understand how to help refugees in their communities and how to discern media content about refugees.

In order to better understand the individual assimilation process for each participating refugee, I have integrated the research of Berry and Hou's (2016) study about refugee acculturation in Canada into the discussion portion of this study. The authors determined that refugee assimilation process is actually broken into different levels. One level, integration, stated the refugees in this category felt a high sense of belonging to their host country and their home country—suggesting balance. Another level, separation, felt a low sense of belonging to the host country and a high level of belonging to their native country—suggesting imbalance. Seeing these levels can help organize the sentiments felt by the refugees interviewed and their respective feelings toward the media and their assimilation.

In addition to clarifying the role of integration and separation, it is helpful to better understanding the role of Gerbner's cultivation theory (Gerbner, et al., 2002), as briefly mentioned in the literature review. Deeper knowledge of this theory can help clarify the role of the media in actually affecting viewers' beliefs and how these beliefs may in turn affect the assimilation experiences of interviewed refugees and their personal views on media portrayals.

As stated previously, cultivation theory states that those who consume media heavily and regularly are more prone to changing their perceptions in regards to the media subject matter they consume (Gerbner, et al., 2002). Going further, Gerbner's research states that there are different forms of cultivation—resonance and mainstreaming (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). Resonance suggests that when media viewers' personal experiences are more like the situations represented through the media, they are more likely to believe what is portrayed. Mainstreaming suggests the opposite. Those media consumers whose life experiences

are different from that being shown through the media are more likely to believe what is portrayed. Resonance and mainstreaming are valuable to understand as those who consume media may believe what they are viewing for different reasons. We can then better understand that perhaps those who currently live in places where they have seen or interact with refugees may be more predisposed to believe what media-framed content may be showing them about refugees. Additionally, those who do not have as many relevant experiences with refugees may also believe what they are consuming with no point of personal reference (Entman, 2002; Shrum & Bishak, 2001).

### **Media Portrayals**

RQ1 asks how interviewed refugees' personal assimilation experiences compare to both negative and positive portrayals framed by media channels. Every participant replied that they believed their experiences living in their host country were affected by the portrayals of refugees in the media and the influence of non-refugees on the media. According to them, information framed through the media contained polarized messages that in turn caused a variety of beliefs and sentiments among the non-refugees of the three countries represented in this study. In turn, these beliefs of host country citizens caused the participants and, according to those interviewed, other refugees to receive treatment from non-refugees based on what beliefs were accepted because of the media. Some refugees have separation experiences such as qualification discrepancies and distrust for those around them, while others experience more integration and acceptance with qualification recognition and social connections. This polarization of media ideas will be discussed later on.

While much content referred to in the literature review reflected on Hollywood portrayals of refugees, immigrants, and Muslims, the majority of the media relevant to the participant

refugees was mainly found in the news. While Hollywood and other entertainment sources may continue to frame refugees and Muslims in stigmatic ways, the main concern of interviewees had to do with their current experiences due to political differences within their host countries. Refugees interviewed stated that immigration is something consistently shown in the news media. This is important to note because news media can be disseminated over various platforms—including television, social media, and news channels—making the availability of information extremely accessible to anybody (Jackson, 2010; Uscinski, 2017; Vlaicu, 2017). As R2 stated, many of the citizens of his host country are constantly connected to their media devices. Because of this constant connectivity, he believed that this leads to consumers being susceptible to media framing and cultivation. In his experience, because of this susceptibility of host citizens to media framing and resonance, he explained that citizens of his host country, Sweden, have treated him unfairly with the difficulties in obtaining validation for previous education and securing a qualified job. R1 also agreed that it is difficult to know what to believe is truth because of the polarization of the news media when talking about refugees. R3 and R4 agreed that it is through the news media that everyone gets their information and opinions about other people and cultures. However, both of these refugees experienced more integration than others because of the connections they have created in their current countries despite what messages are shared by the media about refugees.

With the constant stream of information regarding the continuous connectivity of consumers, it is reasonable to consider the prevalence of media framing in the beliefs and actions of non-refugees regarding refugee assimilation (Entman, 2007; Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Based on how refugees are treated by citizens of host countries may in turn determine if refugees feel a

real connection to their host country (integration) or a disconnect (separation) (Berry & Hou, 2016).

**Media polarization effects.** According to participants, all countries where they currently reside (Sweden, Netherlands, and America) have right and left wing political systems that seek to persuade others through sharing their views through communication channels (Berman, 2018; Parlapiano, 2017). R6 emphasized how political parties are constantly fighting for their views to be broadcasted to anyone that will hear them. He also stated that the polarization of politics in the media either frame the beliefs of non-refugees as “either extremely hateful and everything goes wrong with the Netherlands because of the refugees,” or the opposing side saying, "They're very, very poor people. They need all the help. They can do nothing, they need all of the protection." This coincides with research conducted by Blitz (2017), that examined results from the Pew Global Attitudes Survey conducted in 2016. In the survey results, the author concluded that about half of Western civilization non-refugees were sympathetic with the plight of refugees and believed that their governments should take more action to welcome them into their countries facilitating integration (Berry & Hou, 2016). However, the other half leaned more towards the anti-immigration sentiment—fueling separation (Berry & Hou, 2016)—and were concerned how refugees may affect their economy as well as their culture with the ability to assimilate. Extreme views and frames like this may make it difficult for non-refugees to know what to think. As a result, refugees like R2 and R1 found it difficult to know who is a friend and who is a foe when interacting with others in their communities as they have felt people change their opinions about immigrants constantly. This fluctuation of opinion understandably created feelings of separation rather than integration (Berry & Hou, 2016), and was particularly difficult with the impending major Swedish election mentioned by R2. This election would determine the

fate of millions of refugees living in the Scandinavian country. By the time R4 was interviewed, the election had come to a close with the moderate party remaining in power (Valmyndigheten, 2018). However, R2, nervous about the impending election results, understood the role of the media in persuading voters to believe one thing or another according to their agendas.

**Connecting.** Acclimatizing to a completely new environment has proved difficult for many refugees beyond the scope of this study (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Isfahani, 2008). As stated by this study's refugee participants, these challenges often stem from connecting with the people and the culture. It is difficult to say whether these challenges stem primarily from the effects of media framing and cultivation or from each social system. But through the principles of these communication theories, we can understand that these behaviors may be enhanced due to the influence of the media (Entman, 2007; Shrum & Bishak, 2001).

Blatant or violent racism was not something experienced by interviewees, four of the six refugees openly stated that they had received some form of racism or felt others around them saw refugees as less than equal. The absence of current language barriers for the interviewed refugees proved for some success, however, R4 and R6 specifically said that those who don't speak the language of their host country struggle more than those who are able to speak. Additionally, getting used to the culture is also a difficult challenge coming from a different culture, religion, or geographic customs. So when refugees struggle with speaking and fitting into the predominant culture, it may be difficult for them to integrate, connect, make relationships with non-refugees. The lack of connection can also perpetuate feelings of "otherism" and separation that non-refugees feel towards refugees (Berry & Hou, 2016; Nurullah, 2010). While some of these opinions may result from personal encounters between non-refugees and refugees, these opinions may be accentuated by what is being shared over the media (Entman, 2007; Vlaicu, 2017).

According to R4, negative experiences connected to people from a Middle-Eastern background could snowball into increasingly negative beliefs and actions of non-refugees.

The same influencing process can also be true for the positive. As mentioned previously in the Pew Global Attitudes Survey 2016 (Blitz, 2017), half of those surveyed believed that refugees deserve to be helped. Refugees such as R3 and R6 both received help and recognition from their current countries of residence, and have healthy connections with citizens of their home country. According to Berry & Hou (2016), this is integration. And just as framing and cultivation has the ability to negatively influence the opinions of viewers, the opposite is true of the positive when content shown is in favor of helping refugees (Vlaicu, 2017). An example of this was mentioned previously about the college students in Finland determined to establish a program to help refugees assimilate better (BizEd, 2017). The results were affective in the community where they were able to assist many refugees feel welcome into their new home.

**Qualifications.** Another important difficulty refugees experience with acculturation is discrepancies with their certifications and qualifications. Every refugee interviewed lacked certain approvals and qualifications at some point in their assimilation process to get them to the same work or education level they were at in their home countries prior to fleeing. Again, these challenges may result from the social system, but these struggles may be enhanced due to portrayals framed by the media and the beliefs of those consuming the media. Refugees like R3 and R6 were fortunately able to work out their qualification differences and work in fields of expertise pertaining to their previous qualifications leading to greater integration (Berry & Hou, 2016). This may be a valid reason why the assimilation of these two refugees seemed more positive and relatively more economically advantageous than other refugees interviewed. Blitz (2017), again gave a reason for how the qualifications of refugees may be reasons for their

welcome from non-refugees. According to the Pew survey, those who came from more educated and more economically advanced countries were more welcomed than those who came from countries with less prosperous reputations (Blitz, 2017). In turn, these welcoming or non-welcoming sentiments are shared through media channels. Both R3 and R6 came from prestigious backgrounds that could have propelled them forward and gave them more positive recognition than others. R1, for example, fled from Eritrea, Africa, where the reputation is more of poverty and less education. With this dichotomy, political polarization in media portrayals may use the general economical benefit or detriment to their advantage (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

**Lack of mobility.** R5 stated that when she was asked about why she remains in the United States as a refugee, she always stated her gratitude to be living where she does and that there are numerous reasons why she and people like her reside where they do. Refugees flee their homes because of political unrest, personal danger, family danger, and the need for a better future (Davenport, 2017). Because of these reasons, it is not possible to pin-point generally why refugees stay where they do. Additionally, R5 said that whatever those reasons are for staying in host countries, refugees are not there just because they want to be. They are where they are because they have to be. For her personally, R5 still had loved ones in Iraq. She missed her home country very much, and it is very difficult to be away despite living in the United States for several years. R2 also stated that he never wanted to leave Syria in the first place. But because of the impossibility of returning to the home he knew, returning to Syria after the war is out of the question. While many may have the opportunity to return back to their native home someday, the reality for many refugees is that they will not return home (Chulov, 2018). When non-refugees understand in what circumstances refugees reside in their countries, more sympathy may be

generated and displayed (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Vlaicu, 2017). Non-refugees who do not want refugees to stay may not completely understand that many refugees cannot return to their home countries because of the danger. These beliefs again may be accentuated when non-refugees see on the news or social media negative content about refugees including economic strain on host countries or the violent acts of a handful of terrorists (Esses et al., 2013, Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Powell, 2011).

### **Refugee Sentiments**

RQ2 asks how refugees interviewed interpret portrayals of themselves in the media. Gaining a greater understanding of how participating refugees feel about these portrayals and in turn how they and people like them are treated provides some great insight into how these media portrayals affect them. Perhaps the most insightful finding of this study came from the responses of participants when explaining their sentiments about the portrayals of refugees in the media. Although feelings expressed covered all kinds of emotions including frustration, sadness, nostalgia, gratitude, and resoluteness, the overall lack of vengeful anger was strikingly apparent. This is significant as it demonstrated that those refugees interviewed, despite anti-immigrant citizens and media portrayals around them, commonly do not share the same sentiment for those who are against them. This may not be as surprising for refugees like R3 and R6 that may had an economical and integration advantage over other refugees, however, for refugees like R1 and R2 who struggled to fully feel connected and esteemed by the people and government of their new homes, the absence of anger is especially poignant. While many of their assimilation experiences may point them in a direction of separation (Berry & Hou, 2016), the absence of vengeance indicate a degree of integration as both of these refugees acknowledged that their experiences could also be worse than they currently are. Additionally, the lack of anger indicates that despite

any negativity portrayed by the media, these refugees are able to not harbor feelings of vengeance. While this may not be true of every refugee worldwide, this truth brought by these six refugees shows valuable insight on this international sample from various backgrounds and experiences.

Going hand in hand with the interpretation of RQ1 and looking further at refugees' interpretations of media portrayals, RQ2.1 asks how these interpretations affect their assimilation processes. This can be understood by looking at ways refugees may feel unjustly treated by host country citizens and governments. A very common feeling among participant refugees was frustration, although in varying degrees and for different reasons. Oftentimes, refugees expressed frustration with the various situations that hindered their progress. R1, who watched the news on the TV, was frustrated with the government and the unmet expectations of assistance she had interpreted from the media. R2 was frustrated for similar reasons, showing that these refugees had expectations of their host government based on media framing and resonance. On the other hand, R4, R5, and R6 expressed frustration with refugees themselves. While many refugees experienced the short-handedness of governments and citizens of host countries, R4, R5, and R6 felt that it is up to the refugee to make progression and integration (Berry & Hou, 2016) happen in their lives despite what obstacles come their way. It may not be the type of progression refugees envisioned for themselves or once experienced in their home country, however, in order to progress, as stated by R5, it is up to "the refugees if [they] want to stay a refugee or . . . be part of this country. It's up to [refugees] . . . to excel or if [they] want to stay a refugee. . . . It's up to [refugees] to be someone or not be." This difference of frustrations reflects the individuality of how refugees frame their own experiences. These experiences may be subject to personal

situations that are then accentuated by how they are treated by citizens of their host countries and portrayed in the media.

Another notable emotion of interviewees was that of gratitude and cheerfulness. This is notable as refugees who may feel injustice from their host countries and negative framing from the media are able to recognize the good in their current situations. The presence of this emotion may be an explanation for the lack of vengeful anger of the participants. Most outwardly shown by R3, this refugee framed his own experience with words showing unmatched gratitude for the current living and work situation—indicating a level of integration (Berry & Hou, 2016). Had his story been different, and he had the economic stresses of R1, perhaps the feeling of gratitude would be swapped to look more like R1's frustrations. R5 and R6 also expressed recognition for the favorable circumstances they now live in. Although both of these refugees stated feeling at times out of place, assimilation has been helped by the accompaniment of relationships they have both been able to form in their host countries. Being able to connect and have economic stability has been a source of positivity for three of the six refugees. This is valuable to note that refugees who make career and relationship connections are more able to integrate positively into a new culture despite any negative experiences or media framing. This also takes non-refugees to recognize their value and reciprocate the connection.

In addition to gratitude, every refugee expressed that his or her personal situation could be worse. This expression can come from what refugees may see through media channels, but it can also come from deeper personal experience. Coming from war-torn countries themselves, many refugees know what other people in similar situations are experiencing. R1 mentioned this sentiment casually. Despite her frustrations with her current living situation, she recognized people from her home country of Eritrea do not receive “this kind of help.” Others recognized

that their current living situation could be worse if they had been sent to another country. R2 stated that despite his frustrations with his situation in Sweden, he felt it could be a lot worse had he been sent to another country. And although R5 missed her home country very much and admittedly continued to struggle integrating into America, she stated that she recognized she lived in a land of opportunity. The participant who expressed this emotion the most was R6, who lived a fairly integrated lifestyle in the Netherlands. Repeatedly, he stated that he recognized that his situation was much better than a lot of other refugees. At one point, he stated that he hated that difference sometimes. This statement may be explained as feeling “survivor guilt,” which, according to Berger’s (1977) study of Nazi Holocaust survivors, is a common feeling of guilt for surviving something tragic when many in similar circumstances do not (Tobin & Friedman, 1983). While this phenomenon may not have been acutely felt by everyone interviewed, it is reasonable to suggest that participants who recognized their personal circumstances as better than other refugees may have felt survivor guilt to some degree as shown with the personal experience framed by R6.

The last notable sentiment was particularly surprising. Both R3 and R5 expressed feelings of sympathy for those who may misunderstand refugees and immigrants because of terrorism and other harmful acts conducted by those from the Middle East or happen to be Muslim. This was unexpected as going into the study, I believed the common feeling to be incredulity for non-refugees to blame large populations of innocent people on the account of a handful of bad people. Although perhaps difficult, these refugees were able to sympathize with even the most extreme of their host non-refugees and the media portrayals that may paint them as terrorists and threats. These participants’ own perspectives were framed because of their understanding of media misrepresentation. They understood the power of the media in

cultivating convincing messages to those personally familiar with refugees (resonance) and those having little experience with immigrants and refugees (mainstreaming). Because these refugees sought to create a culture of understanding, it may have helped them personally to assimilate and integrate into a culture when seeking to better understand those who may misunderstand or misrepresent them (Berry & Hou, 2016; BizEd, 2017). The plight of R2 at the end of the interview was for non-refugees to seek out and connect with refugees, which it turn could help refugees to integrate rather than separate (Berry & Hou, 2016). By having sympathy for those who think negatively about refugees and people of their home countries, these refugees were applying the same principle in order to connect with their non-refugee affiliates. Also importantly, R3 highlighted the importance for non-refugees to understand that even though it is a normal phenomenon to judge someone by the actions of those who appear to be similar, it is equally important to remember to be fair. R2 and also agreed that although one person may be bad, it does not make everyone else bad. Actually believing this concept may be difficult for non-refugees who have believed the opposite due to personal experience or media framing. However, with the always-present and available messages massively communicated through global media, sharing—and even framing (Entman, 2007)—positive and honest messages may help non-refugees to better understand and connect with refugees in their communities.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights the differences of media portrayals of refugees and the effects of these media portrayals of assimilating refugees and citizens of host countries where refugees currently live. In this study, I have reviewed media phenomena and theory that provide background and explanation for the research findings. Through the framing theory, readers can better understand how chosen media portrayed can influence opinions and beliefs of viewers

which in turn influences the environment and experiences of refugees and those fleeing from predominantly Islamic countries worldwide (Entman, 2007). Through interviewing refugees living in Western civilizations, society can better understand how refugees are impacted by the media and learn from first-hand accounts of refugees assimilating into host countries.

Through these interviews and examining them through the continuous process, grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, & Strutzel, 1968), readers can better understand that through media framing theory and cultivation theory, host country citizens are influenced by what they consume from the media—especially news media. Extreme and polarized political beliefs are common in western civilizations due to opposite and often exaggerate views demonstrated in the news, social media, and characterized by host citizens and politicians. We understand better that often times, refugees have difficulties connecting with non-refugees because of language barriers, racism, and qualification discrepancies. We learn that this separation of refugee from the host country is a less-desirable level of assimilation from Berry & Hou (2016), and that a greater sense of belonging to the host country leads to a greater level of integration. We also understand that common sentiment among refugees is that they never wanted to leave their home countries and assimilation into a new country is only a difficult result of fleeing for safety. We learn that although many refugees are aware of stigmas surrounding them, people like them, and their beliefs, rather than feeling angry, refugees feel frustration, but also sympathy, for those who feel negatively or misunderstand them. Refugees seek to be better understood. Because one of their kind committed something bad, it does not make all of them bad people. And many refugees understand that it is up to them to make the most of their current situations. However, with this knowledge, communities with resident refugees can better know how to help refugees more effectively connect to their host country and people.

A limitation of this study is the small sample size of interview participants. While the sample size was adequate for this study, a larger sample would provide more insights into shared views with discussed findings of this study. More participants could provide even more explanations and portrayal similarities and differences refugees may experience in their host countries. Additionally, including refugees in the study who may not fluently speak English could provide valuable insights on refugees who may not as easily communicate with non-refugees. More data with this sample could suggest how this linguistic difference may affect refugees' personal experiences as well as their interpretations of refugee media portrayals. Future researchers may consider increasing the sample size to include more non-English speaks for additional insights or conduct the same study with refugees currently residing in a single country for a more concentrated understanding of a specific area and demographic.

The intended outcome for readers of this study is to see the possible errors of the media in incorrectly portraying the assimilation process of refugees and how these errors could influence refugees' personal acculturation experiences. Enlightenment from this research and its findings could provide a basis for a needed societal change in order for refugees to experience as unbiased a situation as possible as they navigate through a difficult and often lonely restart of their lives.

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