

From Refugee to Resident in the Digital Age: Refugees' Strategies for Navigating in and Negotiating Beyond Uncertainty During Reception and Settlement in The Netherlands

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This article examines digital tactics adopted by refugees and asylum-seekers in the Netherlands to cope with spatial and temporal dimensions of uncertainty during different stages of their arrival. It draws attention to how particular modes of Dutch asylum and refugee reception governance, such as dispersal and housing allocation policies, give rise to spatial and temporal uncertainties. Based on participant observations and 23 qualitative interviews with recognized refugees in the cities of Utrecht and Houten, the article offers insight into how refugees used digital tactics and mobile connectivity to 'navigate in' and 'negotiate beyond uncertainty'. The article seeks to contribute to this conceptual differentiation between 'navigating in' and 'negotiating beyond' uncertainty, engaging with work on migrant agency that acknowledges their acts of resilience, reworking and resistance. Lastly, I discuss this understanding of digital tactics to cope with uncertainty in light of recent critiques in forced migration studies of essentialist understandings of uncertainty and utilitarian narratives of digitally connected migrants.

Keywords: uncertainty, forced migration, migrant agency, asylum governance, digital tactics, dispersal

Introduction

'I realise that this is not good news for you, but it is important for me to inform you honestly'.

With this sentence, the State Secretary for Security and Justice opened his letter on the 19 October 2015 to asylum-seekers staying in Dutch reception facilities ([Ministry of Security and Justice 2015](#)). The letter aimed to provide information about asylum procedures, thereby setting expectations of asylum-seeking persons

in the Netherlands. Although it offered some clarity about what not to expect, expressions such as ‘no guarantees’ or ‘it cannot be said beforehand’, are unlikely to have dispelled uncertainty altogether. If anything, it gave more clarity about the uncertainties that awaited asylum-seekers in the Netherlands, when the reception and housing allocation policies were subject to legal review and political contestation.

A month earlier, the Dutch House of Representatives had passed an amendment that restricted certain entitlements to housing for recognized refugees. By mid-June 2016, it also passed a legislative bill to change the Dutch Citizenship Act by increasing the required naturalization period from 5 years up to 7 years. The proposal to restrict the Dutch Citizenship Act eventually faltered in October 2017 when a, albeit very slim, majority in the Dutch Senate voted it down. Although the Senate had not voted down a legislative proposal since 2015, the event garnered little media attention. On social media and three Syrian-Dutch Facebook pages with over 100000 followers, the news was immediately shared widely and commented upon. This response on social media not only illustrates the *effects* of public discourse *on* refugees, but also highlights how refugees use digital tactics to collectively reflect on and respond to developments in asylum and migration governance.

Scholarly literature on refugees’ experiences with displacement and forced migration has increasingly examined individual and collective instances of migrant agency across various contexts and phases of migration. Migrant agency is often associated with the ability of migrants to shape their own life and to exploit or create possibilities during migration processes (Triandafylliadou 2019). It not only involves navigating uncertainties, risks, and restrictions, but also holds the potential to influence policies through resistance (Mainwaring 2016), to subvert structural conditions, and to create ‘new scripts that seek to overturn dominant interpretations of unauthorized migration’ (Triandafylliadou 2019, p.15).

As Schiltz *et al.* (2019, p.1) note, uncertainty in scholarship on forced migration is often portrayed as an overarching characteristic of experiences of forced displacement resulting in ‘essentialist narratives of uncertainty’. They propose to focus instead on ‘processes and dynamics that create, heighten, or maintain uncertainty’ and the ‘various ways in which uncertainty can be understood and is made sense of by refugees themselves’. This dual emphasis on examining individual coping tactics of refugees and structural factors such as asylum policies that give rise to uncertainties is interesting because it speaks directly to the broader concerns in refugee studies about incorporating structural factors, alongside individual practices (Phillimore 2020).

Research on digital media and refugee tactics has increasingly incorporated such structural factors by examining how digital resilience tactics of refugees are enmeshed within ‘arrival infrastructures’ (Udwan *et al.* 2020), even if particular modes of asylum and refugee reception governance often remain a mere backdrop. There is a growing body of work on refugees’ experiences of uncertainty in relation to the use of digital media across different contexts (Kaufmann 2018; Twigt 2018; Gough and Gough 2019) that also sheds light on digital tactics and

different forms of ‘minimal’ and ‘conditional agency’ (Chouliaraki and Stolić 2018). That said, in these investigations uncertainty is not always conceptualized as part of theoretical frameworks. Although a recurring theme, this runs the risk of perpetuating essentialist narratives of uncertainty (Biehl 2015; Hughes 2018; Schiltz *et al.* 2019). This contribution develops the aforementioned critical interrogation of essentialists understandings of uncertainty and migrant agency. It does so by examining how refugees^{1 2} in the Netherlands use digital tactics to navigate and negotiate spatial and temporal uncertainties that arose from the refugee reception and housing allocation procedures in 2015 and 2016.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the conceptual underpinnings of this paper. Subsequently, I present the methodology of this study. After analysing refugees’ experiences with spatial/temporal uncertainties arising from the Dutch asylum and housing allocation procedures, I discuss the use of digital tactics to *navigate in* and *negotiate beyond* uncertainty. I conclude by reflecting on these findings and engaging with recent criticisms of utilitarian narratives of smartphone use by refugees.

A Framework for Studying Digital Tactics to Cope with Spatial and Temporal Uncertainties during Asylum and Settlement

To outline my approach to studying how refugees in two Dutch localities used digital tactics to navigate and negotiate spatial and temporal uncertainties arising from modes of asylum and refugee reception, I bring together insights from scholarship on uncertainty, asylum governance, and migrant agency with the insights from the emerging body of work on digital tactics of refugees (Udwan *et al.* 2020; Awad and Tossell 2019).

Conceptualizing and Contextualising Uncertainty in Relation to Asylum and Refugee Reception Governance

The first point of departure for this discussion is Horst and Grabska’s understanding of uncertainty, which distinguishes between two sources of uncertainty: ‘imperfect knowledge and the unpredictability of the future’ (Horst and Grabska 2015, p.4). The former source ‘relates to things that are knowable’ and the latter ‘is still open, subject to change or influence’ (4). The authors note that refugees often face uncertainties in transit countries and countries of destination because they can exert little influence over many life choices. This is partial because ‘to a great extent determine their ability and rights to build an alternative future’ (2015, p.5). This emphasis on lack of control over the process of building one’s future bears relevance for research on arrival and asylum because it resonates with broader

- 1 As part of a concern with reproducing dominant framings I use ‘refugee’ in the broad sense of a person who seeks or has sought asylum and to beneficiaries of international protection, including recognised refugees.
- 2 I have changed the names of interviewees; interviewees suggested their own pseudonyms.

debates on the conditional agency of refugees. It also resounds with research on uncertainty and spatial and temporal techniques of border control (McNevin and Misbach 2018).

As Biehl reminds us, uncertainty features prominently in ‘universalized refugee-ness’ and should be approached critically. This requires reflecting on which (un)certainities are allowed to have experiential relevance (Biehl 2015, p.70), to recognize that uncertainities are not always negative or uncomfortable (Hughes 2018), and to develop a systematic contextualization of uncomfortable uncertainities as linked to asylum governance.

In relation to uncertainty and asylum governance, some scholars argue that ‘uncertainty and instability are key characteristics of the asylum and immigration detention systems’ (Griffiths 2014, p.2001). Others suggest that uncertainty forms part of a ‘deliberate governance strategy that aims to discourage mobility and/or settlement in places of exile’ (Horst and Grabska 2015, p.6) and a ‘politics of discomfort’ (Darling 2011). This research on asylum and refugee governance *through* uncertainty also points towards the opaque nature of asylum and reception procedures. Some scholars suggest that this is a source of uncertainty that ‘wears people down, through a continued state of anxiety and inability to make informed choices towards a future state of stability’ (Burrige and Gill 2017, p.35).

While the contours of asylum and reception procedures are well known, the duration of procedures and the timing of important events, such as asylum hearings are unknown, which often results in constant strain (Christ *et al.* 2017). This produces uncertainty and prolonged indeterminacy, known as the ‘waiting game’ (Turnbull 2016). This research also highlights temporal techniques used in border control, asylum (Mountz 2011), and detention (Turnbull 2016) that produce temporal uncertainities.

Uncertainty may result from not knowing *where* one will be located and how this location may affect one’s asylum procedure or ability to rebuild a future because support services are unevenly distributed (Burrige and Gill 2017). Asylum-seekers and refugees often experience ‘dislocation’ (Burrige and Gill 2017) and can rarely exert control over *where* they will await the outcome of asylum procedures. This lack of control is in part because of the organization of asylum and refugee reception but it can also result from containment (Tazzioli 2018; Biehl 2015) or dispersal strategies that disperse refugees across refugee reception facilities or municipalities (Darling 2014a).

Coping with Uncertainty through Digital Tactics of Social Navigation and Negotiation

Scholarship on forced migration has not only developed different conceptualizations and contextualizations of uncertainty, but it also shows how ‘migrants at highly constrained and vulnerable situations still seek to regain control and negotiate their situation, exercising agency’ (Triandafylliadou 2019, p.5). In relation to uncertainty researchers have highlighted the entanglement of agentic capacities within modes of asylum governance and emphasized how we should consider

conditional, minimal, and quotidian forms of agency, rather than only resistance (Chouliaraki and Stolić 2018). Minimal here refers to the manoeuvring within tight constraints, not to minimal effort, as this research points towards the active and affective aspects of waiting (Brun 2015; Turnbull 2016) and of holding on to hope in the face of protracted uncertainty (Chouliaraki and Stolić 2018). These forms of agency, including the use of digital tactics, have also been examined through the notion of resilience (Udwan *et al.* 2020; Robleda 2020).

Migrant agency, although often conditional and minimal during asylum and refugee reception governance, encompasses more than resilience. I agree with the suggestion of Waite *et al.* (2015) that Katz's terminological distinction between 'resilience', 'reworking', and 'resistance' offers a productive theoretical foothold to capture these different forms of migrant agency. A simple explanation of this typology is offered by Sparke (2008, p.424), who notes that 'resistance involves oppositional consciousness and achieves emancipatory change, [...] reworking alters the organization but not the polarisation of power relations' and resilience enables people to survive without really changing difficult circumstances'. Katz (2004, p.247) suggests that 'reworking' tends to be 'driven by an explicit recognition of problematic conditions and to offer focused, often pragmatic, responses to them'. This understanding enables an agency-centric approach that is power sensitive (Udwan *et al.* 2020) and not limited to acts of resilience. I also agree with Waite *et al.* (2015) that it is important to develop this differentiation with a context-specific reflection. 'Migrant agency' within the scope of this article is understood with a view to how refugees use digital media to transform the structural production of uncertainties during asylum and arrival. Instead of elaborating on Katz's differentiation, I draw on it to develop a more specific approach to studying how refugees use digital tactics to cope with uncomfortable spatial and temporal uncertainties. This approach differentiates between 'navigating in' and 'negotiating beyond uncertainty' (Horst and Grabska 2015).

In their work on uncertainty and forced migration Horst and Grabska (2015) reflect on the variation in the level of proactiveness and outcomes of different coping strategies and propose this differentiation between '*navigating in uncertainty*' and '*negotiating beyond uncertainty*' (14). 'Navigating' refers to pro-actively adopting tactics to cope with conditions marked by uncertainty. It can involve maintaining trust, preventing negative outcomes, or strategically remaining inactive (Horst and Grabska 2015). It may involve trying to gather more knowledge about one's position within a social environment to create possibilities or anticipating and coming to terms with unpredictability.

'Negotiation beyond uncertainty' refers to 'the ways in which people re-establish certainty', which involves 'constant negotiations with other individuals' (2015, p.14). Although the differences between these two notions are not explicitly spelled out by the authors, 'negotiation' seems to capture instances in which people not only collectively navigate uncertainty, but also try to contest or resist it. Negotiation emphasizes the transformative potential of uncertainty beyond coping. The authors emphasize that uncertainty 'creates spaces for negotiations between individuals and between individuals and states, ultimately leading to

social transformations' (2015, p.6). Drawing on [Katz \(2004\)](#), I suggest that we see this potential of social transformation broadly and consider how, depending on their intention and outcome, it may involve 'reworking' and/or 'resistance'. This navigating 'in' and negotiating 'beyond' uncertainty can take many forms and involve various tactics. As [Schiltz et al. \(2019, p.4\)](#) note, research on displacement and uncertainty often points towards the need for personal coping skills and social networks, such as family support structures. In this scholarship that focuses specifically on uncertainty and displacement, the use of digital media and smartphone technology to cope with uncertainties during flight, asylum, and settlement in countries of arrival is comparatively uncharted (see for instance [Coddington and Mountz 2014](#); [Twigt 2018](#)).

Scholars working in the emerging field of digital migration studies, however, have increasingly examined how smartphones and digital tactics enable refugees to cope with difficulties, including uncertainties during journeys ([Gillespie 2018](#); [Dekker et al. 2018](#)), the asylum process ([Witteborn 2011](#); [Gough and Gough 2019](#)), detention and in relation to integration ([Alencar and Tsagroni 2019](#); [Marlowe 2019](#)). Some understand these digital tactics as instances of resilience ([Udwan et al. 2020](#)) and examine how digital media and smartphones offer different affordances during periods of uncertainty ([Gough and Gough 2019](#)).

[Awad and Tossell \(2019\)](#) note that some of these inquiries perpetuate a widespread simplified belief that mobile connectivity is a utilitarian resource that refugees use at their individual discretion to resolve problems and cover needs. This 'utilitarian view', they argue, is empirically problematic because it overlooks the complexities of digital connectedness for refugees. Besides, it 'others' them within humanitarian narratives of need, at the expense of discussions about refugees' rights (2019, p.12). I agree with the need for more nuanced conceptualizations of digital tactics of refugees and have discussed this elsewhere ([Miellet and Van Liempt 2017](#)). This article, however, addresses another challenge: the need to interrogate essentialized understandings of uncertainty by examining how refugees *use* digital media to respond to and transform the structural production of spatial and temporal uncertainties during asylum and arrival.

Methods

The empirical analysis, which informs this article, is based on participant observation as part of voluntary work for the Dutch Refugee Council, 22 qualitative interviews with recognized refugees in the city of Utrecht, and 1 interview with a refugee in the nearby city of Houten. Interviewees were between 18 and 63 years old. Of the 23 interviewees, 14 were male and 9 female. This, in part, also reflects the general characteristics of the asylum seeker population in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2016. Interviews were conducted with recognized refugees of Syrian, Eritrean, Iraqi, and Iranian origin, upon their suggestion, often in their homes between November 2015 and May 2016. As part of my voluntary work for the Dutch Refugee Council between January 2015 and May 2017, I assisted

recognized refugees during their move to Utrecht and accompanied them during meetings, such as house viewings.

The participant observations and interviews with recognized refugees in Utrecht were carried out in collaboration with the Dutch Refugee Council and three newcomers, Amer and Yassin from Syria and Finhas from Eritrea, who were involved as interpreters during interviews, the first interpretation of results and later reflections on this reworked article. Ethical considerations and practices (e.g. informed consent) were also discussed during a tutorial organized for this purpose and coordinated by a fellow researcher with experience in participatory research methods at Utrecht University. After this research project was concluded I continued to collaborate with Amer, Finhas, and Yassin in other educational and research activities, in which I often took on an assisting role. As these collaborations resulted in lasting friendships and on-going projects, we use the term ‘research team’ rather than ‘assistants’, as the latter does not capture the dynamic of our collaborations.

I conducted interviews at least six months after the move. Depending on the personal (language) preferences of interviewees, interpreters were present during these interviews. To avoid social desirability bias and to address ethical concerns, I did not conduct interviews with persons whom I assisted as part of my voluntary work. The selection of interview respondents in Utrecht was carried out in consultation with the Dutch Refugee Council. I conducted one interview in November 2017 with a refugee who had settled in Houten and stayed there in an emergency reception facility in 2015 to further examine instances of negotiating beyond uncertainty. All interviews, notes from participant observation, and where relevant, newspaper articles were imported, summarized, and/or coded in QSR NVivo.

This study extends earlier research on place-making practices of refugees in Utrecht (Miellet and Van Liempt 2017). As the focus on digital media emerged gradually due to a grounded theory approach, I mostly relied on interview data to analyse digital tactics. For this reason and ethical concerns, given my participant observation and voluntary work for the Dutch Refugee Council, I decided not to use digital methods, such as social media diaries or digital ethnographies of social media sites. This combination of data collection methods interviews therefore required constant reflections on positionality. To avoid ethical problems such as ‘captive contexts’ (Darling 2014b) for instance, I not only systematically reiterated my position as a researcher as well as volunteer in conversations before and after interviews, but also used information leaflets and a website to give this information, which was translated in Tigrinya, Arabic, Farsi, and English.

Understanding Uncertainty in the Context of Dutch Reception and Settlement Policies

Experiences with uncertainty during asylum in the Netherlands Upon arrival in the Netherlands asylum-seekers stay for a few days in the central reception location in Ter Apel after which they transfer to a ‘process reception location’ (COA

2017). After arranging administrative matters and depending on prospects, they move to an asylum-seeker centre. Here, they await the outcome of the asylum application, and housing allocation, or in the case of refusal, voluntary or forced return. To complete the asylum procedure, a person needs to move on at least three occasions between these different facilities. These general contours of the asylum procedure became familiar to the interviewees soon after arriving in asylum-seeker reception facilities and these ‘standard’ relocations fell within what could be expected. In practice asylum-seekers, including interviewees, transferred more often to centres across the country during this period. Interviewees stayed on average in five centres during the completion of their asylum procedure.

The often-remote location, the uneven geographical distribution of reception facilities across the country, and frequent transfers are sometimes portrayed in public debates, and by civil society actors, as part of a deliberate strategy that prevents attachments to places and people. Reception authorities explain these transfers of asylum-seekers by reference to the temporary nature of reception facilities (COA 2017) the organization of the asylum procedure and state it is not intended to uproot asylum-seekers. Whatever the rationale behind these relocations, this study found that they constitute an important source of uncertainty for asylum-seekers. Some interviewees spoke, not without irony, of the ‘great tour of the Netherlands’ they experienced because of these transfers. The effect of these transfers was captured by Hadi (30) from Palmyra, Syria:

It is a very strange feeling when you move from place to place. You feel tired and something unknown is waiting for you. The first impression was fear, of this AZC because it is located away from the centre of town. It really is tough. But I have to live my life and get used to it, so I started. . . walking to the closest villages, almost every day around 20 kilometers. To explore the area, the shops, trying to meet people, to start with Dutch language. I would meet people, but I hesitated to talk or to make friends, because I knew I will stay there for a short while. I could have made friends. But I was focusing only on how to manage my life in the AZC and to get to the next step, because the next AZC was about the interviews.

Hadi’s quote shows his reflections on the complex interplay between ‘known’ and ‘unknown uncertainties’ and between uncertainty and unfamiliarity. On the one hand, he speaks of the effect of uncertainty and unfamiliarity, the ‘something unknown’ that confronted him when he transferred to another reception centre. On the other hand, he describes how his knowledge of the asylum procedure ‘the next step’, for which he will need to move again, shaped his expectations and mindset at the time. The unfamiliarity experienced in and around these often-remote reception locations and the uncertainty about transfers to other reception facilities were recurring motifs in interviewees’ accounts of reception experiences. However, many interviewees explained that after gaining formal status they were above all anxious and uncertain about when and where they would be allocated a house or apartment.

Experiences with Uncertainty during the Housing Allocation Procedure

The Dutch Housing Act (2014) states that Dutch municipalities are responsible for providing housing to recognized refugees. As part of this housing policy recognized refugees are dispersed across the country. Housing is offered by municipalities based on a ‘no choice option’ in which refugees receive a one-time housing offer. Within this framework someone can choose to accept the accommodation offered or decline. There are very few grounds for rejection recognized by the Central Agency for Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA), such as first-degree relatives in another region, or the need for a specialized medical treatment in a specific hospital (Razenberg *et al.* 2014, p.96). If the COA decides that a rejection was unfounded, entitlement to reception will be terminated. In 2018, COA slowly started considering ‘soft’ criteria such as second- and third-degree relatives, but a recent study suggests that nation-wide implementation of this matching approach is partial and marked by differences between locations (Sax *et al.* 2019).

Most interviewees were only asked about ‘hard criteria’. A few could exercise influence over to which municipality they were ‘matched’. COA gave them a list of different cities within a region and asked for preferences. Others tried to exert influence to no avail. Sometimes even ‘hard’ criteria such as first-degree relatives were not considered. These different experiences with the dispersal procedure suggest a discrepancy between the official guidelines and practices on the ground. It points towards the role of street-level bureaucrats in shaping settlement outcomes and shows that their involvement is also linked to experiences of uncertainty. This resonates with the work of Biehl (2015) who found that a multiplicity of actors and discretionary practices can create uncertainties for asylum seekers. While some interviewees were not aware of the extent of this discretion, others explained they knew there was more space for agency in some reception centres and they struggled with this unpredictability.

Interviewees described the allocation of housing as an important milestone in their settlement and of crucial importance for shaping their prospects in the Netherlands. Because interviewees adhered such importance to the location and qualities of housing, they described the process of awaiting and receiving a housing offer as a stressful and important period filled with uncertainties. Feven and Mebrahtu, a young couple from Eritrea, illustrated this perception:

‘When you are living in the reception centre, you don’t make any plans. You feel like you just continue. But when you have a house you feel like you start living again’,
Feven, Eritrea

‘When we first came here to our house and got used to the place, we feel like we can think about our plans and ambitions again. We felt then that we have reached Europe. When you have your house and start with school you feel like you have finally finished the journey and start a new life’. *Mebrahtu, Eritrea*

Feven describes her life in the asylum-seeker centre as revolving around the absence of plans and ‘just continuing’. Their description of their life before the

move resonates with work on ‘the waiting game’ and the active, affective, and strenuous aspects of waiting (Turnbull 2016; McNevin and Misbach 2018). Many persons stated that the housing allocation signified an important positive turn in a long and uncertain period. Still, the transition to an *unfamiliar* surrounding caused stress and made people feel not being in control. Between 2015 and 2016, many refugees that were allocated housing by the municipality of Utrecht stayed in asylum-seeker centres in the northeast of the country. The travel time between Utrecht and these reception facilities was two to three hours. Refugees received limited financial compensation (travel card) as part of the housing allocation procedures, for their first two or three visits. This often made it impossible to explore the neighbourhood and city before their move.

Two-thirds of the interviewees stated that unpredictability overshadowed their move and that unfamiliarity with the new environment and local policies hampered processes through which they could develop a sense of belonging. Fehrid and Marah, a young Syrian couple from Aleppo, described their relocation to Utrecht as a missed opportunity to gain from the experience of Marah’s brother and his Dutch partner in the north of the country. These comments resonate with findings in Patricia Hynes’s work on dispersal in the United Kingdom, who remarks that ‘integration’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘belonging’ occur despite asylum policies and not because of them’ (2006, p.88).

Coping with Uncertainty: ‘Navigating In’ and ‘Negotiating beyond uncertainty’

Interviewees also spoke about navigating and negotiating situations marked by uncertainty and unfamiliarity during their stay in asylum reception centres and their move to private accommodation. The following discussion zooms in on these responses and draws on interviews and participant observations.

Navigating uncertainty during the move to a house as part of the housing allocation procedure Drawing on these observations during first house visits with refugees in Utrecht, this study found that most refugees looked up their house on *Google Street View* after receiving a notification letter from the Dutch Refugee Council that stated their housing offer in the municipality of Utrecht. Some people recognised ‘their street’ from *Google Street View* photos during their first visit to the city. The importance of these digital explorations was emphasized by interviewees but also became clear when, on several occasions, the lack of satellite images of it on Google Earth caused considerable stress and concern. On one occasion, a Syrian couple asked a social worker at the Refugee Council if they could give visual ‘proof’ of their house. The house was newly built and there were no satellite images. This caused uncertainty and stress, which is why, as the couple explained, they asked for pictures from the housing company.

As the opening anecdote of this article illustrated, Syrian-Dutch Facebook pages constitute active online communities. At the time I conducted interviews for this study these pages and groups altogether had over 100000 followers. Posts, in which Dutch news items are translated or practical tips about living in the

Netherlands are shared are daily occurrences. It is not uncommon to see questions such as ‘I am matched to municipality X, does it take long to get a house there?’ or ‘I got a house in municipality X’... is ‘is this a good city or municipality?’ Given that many refugees are allocated housing in localities they never visited, these requests are practical ways of coping with unfamiliarity and the spatial and temporal aspects of uncertainty that result from the Dutch dispersal policy. Because of the linking of specific reception centres to specific regions and municipalities, detailed information regarding the housing allocation procedures of different municipalities also circulates ‘offline’ within the asylum seeker centres. In some Dutch cities, there are ‘local’ Facebook communities that are administered by local volunteers and refugees. This study also found that for many interviewees these social networks offered useful resources to cope with uncertainties and to become more familiar with local policies and services.

That said, a few interviewees shared their reflections on ‘information-precarity’ (Wall 2019) as they spoke about the difficulties of accessing local information and the importance of validating and assessing the trustworthiness of this information. In many cases, interviewees relied on social media platforms and smartphone applications such as instant messaging apps (WhatsApp) alongside ‘offline’ practices to resolve difficulties, including uncertainties encountered during their move or stay in asylum reception facilities. Some explained they asked for tips and information about housing policies and the moving process in WhatsApp groups with acquaintances and friends made in reception centres. They also mentioned using social media platforms, such as Facebook, for general information about local events and initiatives organised for and by refugees. At the time I conducted the interviews, there were several c Facebook initiatives, such as various Syrian–Dutch Facebook groups (main language Arabic). There were also ‘welcoming’ groups, such as ‘Welcome in Utrecht’ (main language Dutch/English) organised by local volunteers and residents and more mixed groups, such as the ‘Utrecht New Neighbours Group’.

As part of this study, I also spoke to the administrators of some of these Facebook groups, such as the ‘Utrecht New Neighbours’ initiative. One of the administrators emphasized that this was not a group *for* refugees but organized jointly *by* residents and refugees. Besides sharing local tips and organizing social support, digital conversations about culture, and translocal feelings of belonging in Utrecht and beyond, this group also organized offline activities, such as music and dance events (e.g. Dreaming of Syria festival). This initiative not only highlights how utilitarian tactics occur parallel to affective uses, it also points towards the entanglement of online and offline activities.

Negotiating beyond uncertainty during the stay in asylum-seeker centres In August 2015, because of a sudden increase in asylum applications, the Dutch government requested the cooperation of municipalities in the organization of 72-hour emergency facilities. In October and November 2015, local, regional, and national press documented the often-short-lived protests of asylum-seekers against the living conditions in these temporary reception facilities. In a few cases,

mobilizations were not short-lived and involved digital tactics to re-establish and negotiate ‘certainty’ collectively.

This discussion zooms in on one such story, that of the medium-sized town of Houten where a group of 170 asylum seekers stayed in a temporary emergency facility for two weeks in September 2015. In Houten, ‘negotiations beyond uncertainty’ did not take the form of a protest, nor did they focus on emancipatory change, although power dynamics were indirectly contested. According to Sam, a Syrian lawyer from Latakia, who was interviewed in this study and involved as an interpreter while staying in the shelter, their actions were more problem oriented. Initially, their primary concern was to find out when the COA was going to take their fingerprints. This, he explained, was an important first step in starting the asylum procedure:

When we arrived in our third place, 20 days after coming to the Netherlands. We immediately asked the sport hall manager all sorts of questions. We told him we wanted to ask the municipality and the COA until when are staying here. Because it is not comfortable. And why did we not have our fingerprints taken? This is supposed to be done when we arrived at the first reception centre in Ter Apel, so during the first three days after our arrival. All this time, this means that other people have the possibility to go before us. Every day means months of delay.

The group contacted the municipality, which was only indirectly involved, to find out more about their social position as asylum-seeking persons in the Netherlands. They knew, in part through information accessed digitally and circulating offline, that this registration would mean that they entered the regular asylum procedure. Faced with an unpredictable future and without any insight into the duration of their asylum procedures or the location of future shelters, refugees and volunteers asked the mayor to investigate the possibility of return on the last day of their stay in Houten. They collected information on the professional and educational backgrounds, hobbies, and skills of the refugees. Networks and friendships started in Houten but mediated digitally subsequently were cited by refugees and volunteers as evidence of this unfolding integration.

When their group was transferred by the COA to another emergency facility many of them stayed in touch with residents and volunteers, through Facebook and WhatsApp groups created for this purpose. A few of them also visited their former ‘temporary neighbours’. Refugees, residents, and civil society groups issued a joint request to the municipality in which they asked the mayor and city council to negotiate a return to Houten. In doing so, they challenged the dispersal policy by pressuring COA to give the ‘Houten refugees’ a possibility to choose between housing allocated by the municipality of Houten or to opt for dispersal to another municipality. This request was taken up by the municipal executive, which eventually reached an agreement with the Dutch reception authority (COA) that all the refugees with a protection status who had previously stayed in Houten would be allocated housing there if they wanted to.

The story of this collaboration received considerable media attention and in a few other localities, similar initiatives emerged (Vriesema 2016). Media reports

depicted the developments in Houten and other towns as situations in which the city ‘wants its refugees back’ (Vriesema 2016) not as one in which refugees wanted to go back to their localities of ‘first arrival’. These reports also involved humanitarian tropes that contributed to what Chouliaraki and Stolić (2018, p.319) describe as the ‘effacement of migrant agency’ by emphasizing ‘actions *on* migrants’ instead of ‘actions *by* migrants’. Or, as the Houten example illustrates, joint mobilization by refugees *and* residents. When I asked Sam about this effacement he stated that the idea to return to Houten came from a series of talks between refugees and volunteers. He also explained that unlike residents, he, and the other refugees had ‘no say in this debate in the council, nor felt that they had a legal right to address the city council’ whose vote was decisive for their return. This reflection was not meant to justify humanitarian tropes, but a reflection on the complex interplay of power hierarchies involved in these negotiations. Returning to Horst and Grabska’s understanding of ‘negotiation beyond uncertainty’, this story highlights how uncertainties arising from a lack of control and information were challenged in a process mediated and enabled by digital media (Facebook), instant messaging apps (WhatsApp) resulting in a collective (re)negotiation and establishing of certainty. Certainty in this context, meant that information precarity was resolved, albeit partially and momentarily, and that they successfully exerted influence over their settlement process.

Although the Dutch dispersal policy has been in place since the mid-1990s instances like these, where refugees and residents successfully challenged asylum and dispersal procedures are rare. Even if this collective mobilization was not premised on a principled critique of governmental rationalities and power asymmetries, it made these governmentalities, including the otherwise ‘post-political’ nature of dispersal (also see Darling 2014a, 2014b), subject to political contestation. It is therefore tempting to read this story as an instance of resistance to the structural production of spatial and temporal uncertainties during asylum. However, such an interpretation ignores how those involved, such as Sam, understood this negotiation. Sam emphasized how the process involved a shared recognition of problems that cause uncomfortable uncertainties and a pragmatic response. Therefore, I suggest that we see this instance as an example of negotiation beyond uncertainty that involves ‘reworking’.

Discussion

One of the implications of understanding these processes of negotiation in Houten as instances of reworking is that this emphasis on their pragmatic orientation may perpetuate ‘humanitarian narratives of need’ and by extension, ‘the othering of refugees’ (Awad and Tossell 2019). In my account of these events in Houten, I have therefore been careful not to present digital tactics and digital media as a purely utilitarian resource and highlighted effective aspects, such as the unfolding of new friendships and the imagining of shared futures.

This analysis discussed various instances of individual and collective agency focused on relieving uncomfortable uncertainties via navigation and negotiation.

It also highlighted an unusual story of negotiation beyond uncertainty in Houten that involved ‘reworking’. Still, it did not divulge how refugees use digital tactics to mobilize for human rights. I discussed these findings with the three other research team members on several occasions. In particular, the question: what about digital tactics to respond to uncertainty that involve resistance, instead of reworking or resilience?

A first explanation for the absence of strategies of resistance is that dispersal is a depoliticized and convoluted element of Dutch asylum governance, which makes it difficult to contest politically. Access to housing, as part of the regular Dutch housing allocation procedure for refugees, is conditional on the decision to accept the dispersal location (Darling 2011). As asylum is increasingly framed as a ‘gift’ to be grateful for rather than a right, it may become even more challenging for refugees to protest the systematic production of uncertainty during asylum through the language of rights (Ignatieff 2017).

Still, as Amer, one of the three co-researchers explained, there have been several instances in the Netherlands where refugees used digital tactics to ‘negotiate beyond uncertainty’ that involved resistance. To illustrate, he referred to the summer of 2020 when asylum seekers protested prolonged indeterminacy and chronic waiting as a result of severely delayed procedures. Some of the organizers of these protests asked administrators of Dutch-Syrian Facebook groups and pages to amplify their voices by sharing pictures of protests staged in reception centres on their sites. Amer was involved in the creation and management of several Syrian-Dutch Facebook groups between 2015 and 2017 and currently manages a Facebook page with over 20000 followers, next to a full-time job for the municipality. During weekly live streams and Q&A sessions, he discusses current developments, such as the pandemic and social distancing measures. As a result of these digital activities, Amer was one of the people whom the organizers of these protests contacted. A suggestion for future research is to further examine these digital tactics with the use of digital ethnography.

Digital migration studies researchers suggest that ‘with each of these smartphone affordances comes a dialectical tension between possibilities for benefit and harm for refugees’ (Gillespie *et al.* 2018, p.9). It is important to examine how this dialectical tension plays out for the different forms of migrant agency and digital forms of navigating and negotiating beyond uncertainty. In relation to ‘navigating in uncertainty’, I explained that some interviewees were sceptical about the reliability and validity of information accessed online and by extension, about digital tactics to cope with uncertainty. As discussed elsewhere in relation to the burdens and benefits of digital connectedness (Miellet and Van Liempt 2017) two Eritrean interviewees also explained they were not actively and publicly taking part in social media (e.g. Facebook) because they are afraid of digital surveillance. I also discussed this concern with the other members of the research team. Amer explained that some Syrian newcomers shared similar concerns and that this is also why he switched from using (closed) Facebook groups that required membership to Facebook pages. This observation therefore also points toward the need for longitudinal digital ethnography and participatory research methods

that foreground refugees' own reflections and resolutions on digital ways of coping with uncertainty during asylum and settlement, as well as the potential risks of digital tactics.

Conclusion

This article examined how refugees arriving in Utrecht and Houten in 2015 and 2016 experienced and responded to uncertainties that were produced by modes of asylum and refugee reception governance. It analysed how refugees in both localities perceived and responded to uncertainties that emerged as a result of Dutch asylum and housing allocation procedures. In relation to asylum, the respondents in this study spoke about dealing with uncertainties because of not knowing *where* one might be transferred to, *for how long*, or *when*. For many interviewees, the safety, stability, and familiarity of their own house offered a 'window' to gaze on an otherwise still unfamiliar world and uncertain future. They explained that the move was stressful because they could exert little influence over dispersal and housing allocation procedures. The dispersal and move to private accommodation upon completion of asylum procedures thus signalled the end of these spatial and temporal uncertainties related to asylum procedures but also created other forms of uncertainties.

After contextualizing these individual experiences within an analysis of asylum and refugee reception governance, this paper examined how refugees in Utrecht and Houten used digital tactics to navigate and negotiate these uncertainties. This article took [Horst and Grabska's \(2015\)](#) differentiation between 'navigating in' and 'negotiating beyond' uncertainty as a point of departure and further developed this differentiation drawing on literature on migrant agency, resilience, and resistance. Conceptually this paper also sought to develop and empirically ground critiques of essentialist understandings of uncertainty ([Biehl 2015](#); [Hughes 2018](#); [Schiltz et al. 2019](#)). It sought to contribute to the emerging field of digital migration studies by drawing more attention to context—governmentalities of asylum and refugee reception ([Biehl 2015](#); [Phillimore 2020](#)) that shape, condition, and restrict digital tactics to resolve uncomfortable uncertainties. In terms of its empirical contribution, this article offers insights on migrant agency and uncertainty by examining instances of conditional and minimal agency beyond 'agency in waiting' ([Brun 2015](#)) or 'affective waiting' ([Turnbull 2016](#)) that involve digital tactics of 'navigating in' and 'negotiating beyond' uncomfortable uncertainties.

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