

# The role of the media in the process of young refugees' integration and identity in the host country: An exploratory study of the Portuguese case

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role of digital media in the daily lives of young refugees in Portugal, aged between 11–18 years old. As an exploratory research, we drew upon a qualitative approach, focused on participants' media consumption and practices. Three key themes emerged from the data: digital media practices, integration processes, and identity negotiation.

Overall, participants showed a strong preference for platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram, mainly for entertainment, language learning, social connection, and self-expression. Such practices align with youth media trends that support hybrid identity formation across transnational and local contexts. Digital media also worked as educational tools, with AI, like ChatGPT, used for language learning. Participants also actively engaged with Portuguese culture, revealing a dual belonging. This study highlights that young refugees are active media users, suggesting further research in Portugal in terms of youth refugees mediatic uses and practices for integration policy and digital inclusion strategies.

## Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Theoretical framework](#)

[Methodology](#)

[Findings](#)

[Discussion](#)

[Conclusion](#)

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## Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between media and migration has become increasingly central to academic and public debates. For young refugees, who often find themselves navigating unfamiliar societies and

cultural landscapes, media play a crucial role, not only as a source of information but also as a space where identity, belonging, and emotional connections can be cultivated. This paper aims to explore the role of the media within the integration and identity reconstruction of young refugees living in Portugal.

The work develops in light of the context of the refugee migratory trajectories and emergency in the Mediterranean, which began in 2015 and then spread to other regions of the world (UNHCR, 2015). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (2024) there has been an unprecedented scale of displacement, with a peak record number of people in urgent need of protection and assistance in 2024. The number of forcibly displaced people, refugees and asylum-seekers has significantly increased in the last decade, surpassing 73,000 individuals, many of whom are minors. As of late 2024, and according to UNHR, nearly 18.4 million to 21.2 million people were estimated to be forcibly displaced or stateless in Europe. This exploratory study seeks to analyze the role of the media in the process of (re)constructing the identity of young refugees in Portugal aged between 11 and 18 years old.

This research draws on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which views audiences as active agents who turn to media to meet personal and social needs, and Castells' (2009) notions of a network society, which highlights how digital networks shape everyday life and social inclusion. Young people play an important role in social networks and, according to Castells (2005), these platforms function as an important dimension, by transcending borders and enabling the exchange of different cultural knowledge and different ways of living. However, little is known about the contexts and media practices used by young refugees in their integration processes in host countries. Just as it is through the media that we have access to what is happening in the world, it is also through media that young people try to integrate into new contexts, while maintaining contact with their countries and contacts of origin. While Castells (2005) already identified the redefinition of identity as a central characteristic of the network society, recent applications of the UGT to social media platforms also highlight the construction of identity through a negotiation between content production and peer reactions as one of the main uses given by young people (Li, 2022).

Alongside these perspectives, contributions from intercultural relations, particularly Berry's (1997) acculturation theory and the work of Ward and Kennedy (1999) on cultural adaptation, shed light on how individuals reconcile cultural heritage with the norms of a host society. However, there is still limited empirical research exploring how digital media help young refugees manage these complex identity negotiations, especially in countries like Portugal, where recent increases in refugee populations have brought integration challenges.

Therefore, this study seeks to understand how adolescent refugees living in Portugal use media as a tool for identity construction and social integration. By combining communication theories with intercultural adaptation models, this research offers a nuanced, interdisciplinary perspective on the lived experiences of young refugees in the Portuguese context.

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## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Media as locus for expression and reflection of identity***

Identity is understood as an ongoing and situated construction, shaped through social interaction and mediated by cultural, social and technological structures. Castells (2009) described identity as a process of meaning-making, formed within the networks of communication that structure our lives. In the network society, individuals do not belong to a single cultural frame, they navigate multiple identities, shifting across contexts and relationships. For young people, especially refugees, this process becomes even more central and complex, as they often rely on the media, in particular social media and other digital platforms, to reconstruct and express their identities. The media, in this sense, works as an arena for identity testing

and enactments, by bridging past memories with new ones (Lønning and Kohli, 2022; Michalovich, *et al.*, 2025)

Digital media platforms have become crucial sites for this ongoing negotiation of self. They provide opportunities for self-expression, experimentation and social interaction, contributing to the external performance of identity and to its internal elaboration. Social media offer a space where individuals can engage in networked self-presentation, crafting versions of themselves in dialogue with both imagined and real audiences (Papacharissi, 2010).

Several studies have also shown that young people use digital media not only for identity enactments, but to explore, shape and elevate it. The media practice model (Steele and Brown, 1995) highlights that identity and media use are intertwined through a cyclical process: young users select media based on personal motivations, engage with it through reflection and interpretation, and then incorporate such experiences into their self-concepts. Hence, media act as mirrors and moulds, simultaneously reflecting aspects of the self and contributing to its formation.

This is also central to uses and gratifications theory (UGT), which views audiences as active agents who engage with media content to satisfy specific psychological and social needs (Katz, *et al.*, 1974). UGT established that young people do not passively consume content, but instead use social media platforms to fulfil desires such as social connection, entertainment, identity formation and self-expression (Whiting and Williams, 2013). In the case of refugees, these gratifications may include maintaining a sense of continuity with one's past, expressing cultural affiliation, or navigating belonging to a new society. UGT explores how digital platforms become tools for meaning-making and identity negotiation through the content they offer, and also by facilitating interpersonal validation and symbolic integration.

For young refugees, this process of identity negotiation via digital media is particularly relevant. The dislocation from familiar cultural and linguistic environments often disrupts previously identity structures. Social media in particular can function as a tool for rebuilding a sense of self and continuity, but also for embracing new learnings and help integrating new cultures. Research with adolescent refugees views the use of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp as spaces to express personal interests, cultural affiliation and belonging, whether to the country of origin, the host country or diasporic communities in-between (Alencar, 2018). This identity work is often hybrid in nature. Online profiles may include references to both cultural roots and newly adopted norms. Language choices, hashtags, aesthetics, music, and emojis are part of this expressive palette. As Leurs (2015) observed in his work with young refugees' media practices in the Netherlands, these youngsters often inhabit transnational and transcultural (Appadurai, 1996) digital spaces where cultural boundaries are fluid, and identities are complex and layered. Such hybridised identity performances challenge simplistic notions of integration as a unidirectional process. Instead, they reflect a nuanced negotiation between continuity and change. In addition, social media affords a degree of control over self-presentation that may be empowering for displaced youth. The ability to choose what to share, how to be seen, and with whom to interact can help restore a sense of agency and dignity in contexts often marked by loss and disempowerment. Alencar (2018), in her study of Syrian refugees in Europe, found that participants used media to maintain emotional well-being, construct belonging, and share counter-narratives that resisted victimisation.

Moreover, peer engagement plays a decisive role in shaping how identity is expressed and refined through media. Reactions such as likes, comments and shares serve as social feedback mechanisms that validate or contest identity performances. Accordingly, networked publics constitute the new arenas for adolescent socialisation, where visibility and interaction contribute to the formation of reputation, self-image and social standing (boyd, 2014). For refugee youth, who may struggle with exclusion or marginalisation, digital spaces can offer alternative arenas where their voices and identities are more freely constructed and recognised.

However, identity expression in digital spaces is not free from pressures and contradictions. Young refugees may feel compelled to conform to dominant social norms or media trends of the host culture, while

simultaneously fearing the loss of cultural authenticity or familial expectations. These tensions can result in selective disclosure, dual profiles or the fragmentation of identity across different platforms and audiences (Kutscher and Kreß, 2016). Such practices highlight the ambivalence inherent to digital identity: it enables visibility and connection, but exposes young people to normative judgments, surveillance and exclusion.

In sum, media, particularly social media, function as expressive and reflective spaces in which identity is continually reshaped. For young people living through forced migration and cultural transition, these platforms provide not only tools for communication and information, but also symbolic environments for navigating the complex interplay between self, culture and belonging. Our study seeks to better understand how, in the Portuguese context, these young refugees are active agents in the shaping of their identities, using media to articulate who they are, who they have been and who they might become.

### ***Media as connectors between cultures***

Berry's (1997) acculturation theory offers a relevant foundation for understanding how individuals navigate between maintaining their heritage culture and engaging with a host society. His framework delineates four principal acculturation strategies based on orientations towards heritage retention versus host cultural involvement, which are assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. Complementing Berry's approach, Ward and Kennedy (1999) differentiated between psychological adaptation (referring to emotional well-being) and sociocultural adaptation (which denotes practical competence in daily life within a new cultural context). Together, these theoretical lenses view adaptation as an internal and relational negotiation.

Within this conceptual framework, media (particularly social media) emerge as vital connectors between cultures. They offer exposure to cultural narratives, language, behavioural norms and social cues from both heritage and host environments. Young migrants and refugees, specifically, leverage these platforms to learn about local culture and norms while sustaining ties to their origins. Media thus function as flexible bridges allowing these users to traverse, negotiate and potentially combine diverse cultural traits.

Young refugees often consume media from their country of origin while also engaging with host-country content. This dual engagement with, for example, music, news, influencers, trends or memes, is reflected in Leurs' (2015) concept of transnational digital spaces, which posits that migrant youth creatively blend and negotiate multiple cultural identities. Such practices reflect both psychological adaptation (maintaining cultural continuity) and sociocultural adaptation (acquiring local linguistic and social fluency). Ward and Kennedy's (1999) distinction gains empirical support when seen through media practices: psychologically, access to familiar cultural content and diaspora networks helps mitigate isolation and stress; socioculturally, observing digital norms, humour and language among peers in the host culture supports acclimatisation and belonging. The media facilitate informal social learning outside formal educational or institutional channels.

Recent research underscores the role of media in acculturation processes among young refugees and migrants. For example, Alencar (2018) demonstrated how Syrian refugee youth in Europe used social media to maintain emotional well-being, gain cultural insights and resist victimising narratives. Meanwhile, Kutscher and Kreß (2016) found that unaccompanied minors in Germany used online platforms not merely for entertainment but for practical adaptation, identity exploration and building meaningful relationships. Most recently, Akter, *et al.* (2024) conducted a review of migrant populations, and aligned with the UGT framework, found that social media effectively met five types of acculturation needs: cognitive, social integration, personal integration, affective and tension release. In addition, a recent qualitative investigation of young refugee arrivals in Norway described how adolescents balanced family expectations and peer culture through selective digital self-presentation, highlighting the emotional complexity of navigating bicultural norms (Binder, *et al.*, 2025). Another study in Iceland demonstrated that integrated refugee children exhibited better psychological well-being than their peers who followed separation or marginalisation strategies (Cardenas, *et al.*, 2023). Giles, *et al.* (2025) found that adolescent refugees' acculturation strategies were linked with resilience: those oriented toward integration generally reported

higher self-esteem and lower psychological distress, particularly when supported by family and peer networks. Language competence and meaningful peer contact were key resilience predictors, and the study demonstrated that these factors were facilitated by digital media.

Although media, especially social media, can facilitate cultural integration and identity negotiation, these processes also entail tensions and challenges. Youth who confine themselves solely to a country of origin-oriented media may risk sociocultural isolation, while those who strongly prioritise host-culture consumption may face identity fragmentation, familial conflict or even rejection and marginalization. Abdulhamed and Lonka (2024), in their work developing a compact acculturation scale, found that separation and marginalization tended to correlate with poorer adaptation and acculturative stress. Furthermore, navigating multiple personas online, tailored to different cultural audiences, could be cognitively demanding and emotionally exhausting.

Research on this topic has also revealed that often integration through media offers a form of cultural resilience. Digital platforms allow refugees to witness and participate in hybrid identities, locate role models from similar backgrounds and participate in intercultural dialogues that normalise complexity rather than enforce assimilation. Shared diasporic content, multilingual influencers and intercultural collaborations provide visible proof that cultural negotiation can be generative rather than fracturing. Akter, *et al.* (2024) emphasised that social networking use for cognitive and social integration needs has been especially beneficial to migrant populations (including refugees), supporting language acquisition, social connection and cultural understanding. Moreover, research by Abdulhamed and Lonka (2024) on youth from immigrant and refugee backgrounds demonstrated that those who displayed social media profiles with evidence of integration in their host country tended to report better self-esteem and sense of belonging, even in contexts of discrimination.

Overall, media are more than communication tools, especially for displaced young people. They are cultural mediators, educators and platforms for identity negotiation. For young refugees, using social media beneficially can support both psychological well-being and functional adaptation to new environments. When youth engage reflectively and integratively with both heritage and host-cultural content, digital platforms become active agents in the formation of hybrid, resilient cultural identities that bridge worlds rather than erase them. Although research has shown evidence of these processes, the Portuguese context is still underrepresented. Therefore, our study sets out to map how these dynamics are taking place in this particular cultural context.

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## Methodology

### *Goals and research questions*

This study aims to understand how young refugees in Portugal, aged between 11 and 18 years old, use digital media as part of their integration in the host country, while also maintaining connections to their origins. It seeks to explore participants' media practices, types of content accessed most frequently, platforms they engage with and the extent to which these practices might contribute to the construction of multifaceted identities and the reinforcement of both individual and collective memory. The research questions guiding this study are:

*RQ1:* What are the most common quotidian digital media practices (platforms and types of content) of young refugees in Portugal?

*RQ2:* Do (and if yes, which and how) these digital media practices support their integration in Portugal?

*RQ3:* Do (and if yes, which and how) these digital media practices help them in maintaining ties with their original cultural and community contexts?

*RQ4:* Are (and if yes, how) young refugees building and negotiating multifaceted identities through their digital media use?

### ***Method and research design***

This is an exploratory study, with a qualitative approach as best suited to explore the subjective experiences and digital media practices of young refugees. The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to understand how participants make sense of their everyday media use within the broader context of their migration trajectories. The research design is simple and includes only one data collection stage from the young refugees (Creswell and Poth, 2018). However, it intends to collect richer data by combining two different data collection techniques — autoethnographic journals and in-depth interviews — sequentially.

### ***Sampling***

The sampling strategy used in this study is purposive (Patton, 2002), targeting young refugees residing in Portugal, aged between 11 and 18. This approach ensures the selection of participants who are directly relevant to the research questions and with experience of both forced migration and integration processes. Efforts were made to include participants from diverse national and cultural backgrounds, as well as different lengths of stay in Portugal, in order to capture a variety of perspectives and practices.

Conducting research with adolescent refugees requires rigorous ethical standards (Block, *et al.*, 2013; Deps, *et al.*, 2022). As young refugees are a vulnerable group, considerable effort was required to reach them. Recruitment was conducted through four institutions which host and support refugees. Our initial contact searching for young refugees was screened by professionals who were responsible for these youngsters — social services technicians and psychologists — who accessed our project. Upon permission, we scheduled face-to-face open sessions with young refugees, where we presented our project, explained what their participation would entail and clarified their questions. In some of these institutions, technicians accompanied these interactions acting as interpreters.

To all young refugees who agreed to participate in the project, we supplied an informed consent form, as well as to their legal guardian. Afterwards, we supplied them with a template for their autoethnographic journal, and then scheduled a face-to-face interview. During our research, young refugees were granted anonymity, and the institutions who welcome them were not disclosed to protect their privacy.

Furthermore, it was crucial to ensure that participants were emotionally protected throughout the process and that their will was always respected. A respectful and non-judgmental environment was created to promote authentic self-expression and minimise the risk of social desirability bias (Bergen and Labonté, 2020). [Table 1](#) shows general information about our sample.

<b>Table 1: Characterization of our sample (n=12).</b>				
<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Time in Portugal</b>	<b>Current studies</b>
				Technical Course in Management and

A	17	Gambia	9 months	Programming of Computer Systems — Tenth grade
B	18	Gambia	9 months	Education and Vocational Training Course for Adults
C	16	Senegal	1 year and a half	Education and Vocational Training Course for Adults
D	16	Gambia	9 months	Professional Education — Technical Course in Management and Programming of Computer Systems — Tenth grade
E	18	Afghanistan	3 years	Professional Course in Computer Science
F	17	Gambia	9 months	Education and Vocational Training Course for Adults
G	17	Gambia	9 months	Education and Vocational Training Course for Adults
H	18	Gambia	9 months	Professional Education — Technical Course in Management and Programming of Computer

				Systems — Tenth grade
I	16	Gambia	9 months	Education and Vocational Training Course for Adults
J	17	Gambia	5 months	N/A
K	17	Gambia	4 months	N/A
L	16	Senegal	1 year and 2 months	N/A

### ***Data collection***

Data collection involved two complementary techniques. First, participants were invited to keep an autoethnographic digital media journal over a period of one week, during December 2024. This autoethnographic approach (Chang, 2016) allowed for a more personal and reflective account of media use. We supplied participants with a template including space for entries every time that they interacted with digital media, including the following sections: digital media platform, type of content (*e.g.*, information, entertainment), and their motivations for media engagement. The theoretical grounding for building this template was the uses and gratifications theory (Whiting and Williams, 2013).

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews (Eppich, *et al.*, 2019) were conducted in January 2025 to explore the digital media journals in greater depth. These interviews provided additional context and allowed a deeper exploration of the motivations and outcomes of digital media practices reported, helping us to better understand the significance of certain practices and the emotional or social meanings that participants attributed to them. The interview script was divided in four parts: 1) presentations and ice-breaker activity; 2) general approach to digital media practices; 3) deeper exploration of digital media practices regarding information and entertainment, addressing the experiences reported in the autoethnographic journals; and 4) the role played by digital media in the construction and expression of a multifaceted identity, addressing the integration in the host country and the connection to the origin country.

### ***Data analysis***

The autoethnographic journals were collected by professionals that worked with the young refugees and sent to the researchers by e-mail before interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the transcription software TurboScribe and then thoroughly reviewed by the researchers.

Both datasets were inserted into MAXQDA, where we conducted an integrated narrative analysis (Syed and McLean, 2023). This allowed for the interpretation of participants' media practices within the broader frame of their life stories. This technique focused not only on what participants did, but also on how they narrated their experiences, highlighting the role of digital media in shaping personal identity, memory and a sense of belonging. Narrative analysis is particularly suitable for this study, as it provides insights into how media practices are embedded in the evolving biographical narratives of young refugees navigating integration and connection across borders.

Following the procedures outlined by Syed and McLean (2023), the analysis began with an in-depth familiarisation with the data, including multiple readings of each participant's journal and interview

transcript. Narratives were then segmented into meaningful episodes and interpreted within the broader life stories of participants. Rather than isolating discrete themes, the analysis focused on how those themes — such as belonging, integration, learning and identity — were embedded within coherent or fragmented narrative structures. Attention was given to the tone, temporal organisation and identity functions of the narratives, as well as the ways in which digital media practices were used to perform, shape and negotiate identity, maintain connections to the past and explore future possibilities. Finally, cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify both common patterns and unique narrative constructions, always grounding interpretations in the participants' own voices and contexts.

## Findings

This section outlines the key findings from the interviews with the young participants, by drawing upon thematic analysis as the main mode of analysis.

The codes were organised into themes to reflect participants' views and to address the research questions. Thus, the codes are intrinsically connected to questions about participants' media practices, types of consumption and uses and the role of the media as an apparatus for their integration in the host country. Finally, the codes also reflect the extent to which these young refugees use media to reconstruct and negotiate multifaceted identities throughout their media practices and consumptions.

An overview of the main codes and themes is presented in [Table 2](#), offering a structured summary of the key analytical dimensions explored in this study.

<b>Table 2: Coding framework.</b>	
<b>Research question/Theme</b>	<b>Main codes</b>
1. Digital media practices and consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Videogaming</li> <li>• Entertainment and information consumption</li> <li>• Football</li> <li>• General consumption</li> <li>• Media platforms and practices</li> </ul>
2. The role of media practices and consumption in refugees' integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• News information</li> <li>• Fake news</li> <li>• Information for better integration in host country</li> <li>• Contact with family and friends (integration)</li> <li>• AI (integration)</li> </ul>

<p>3. The role of the media in the reconstruction of identities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Politics</li> <li>• Identity and sense of belonging</li> <li>• Media portrayal of refugees</li> <li>• Music (identity)</li> <li>• Videogaming (community/identity)</li> <li>• Contact with family and friends (identity)</li> </ul>
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Regarding digital media practices and consumption, the findings suggest that participants have a large preference towards the use of media platforms and Web sites from which they can quickly access content matching their own interests. As part of a young cohort of people, their preference for social media and other digital platforms as opposed to other formats, such as newspapers (paper or digital versions) or other traditional media, does not differ much from other young people (Toulan and Saleh, 2025), from the same generation or cohort, globally. Hence, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, just to mention a few, are often cited as sources of information and entertainment, as opposed to other more traditional formats. The majority of these participants sought news about their countries by first looking at Facebook or the pages of newspapers on Facebook or by using Instagram.

To illustrate, participant A used YouTube to follow news from *France 24* (<https://www.france24.com/en/>) and also Facebook to follow the Fatu Network, a digital news platform reporting from Africa but more concretely, in this case, with news from Gambia, where this participant's country of origin.

Whatsapp, on the other hand, was often used for contacts with family and friends. It was through many of these digital media platforms that they accessed entertainment matching their own interests. This can be anything from music to football, and in this context the use of Instagram or YouTube was predominant.

Artificial Intelligence was also key to these young people's lives, particularly in supporting their study of language (Portuguese) and also helping to understand or translate certain content, such as for homework.

One of the participants claimed that he recurrently used ChatGPT to help with homework from school:

“So every day I'm given homework to do at home. So whenever I get home, I use ChatGPT. The things I don't know, I use ChatGPT to help me. That's how I solve things. I use ChatGPT every day.” (Participant H)

One interesting element that emerged was the importance of sports and music to these young people, but especially football. Football appeared in almost every conversation as a means to justify the consumption and use of certain digital media platforms, be it YouTube, Instagram or Tiktok. Although these young people used these media platforms mainly for entertainment, the search for football content was probably at the top. This led us to the next point, which was the role of the media for the integration of these young people and the types of content, like sports, that assist integration.

Given that most of the respondents played football either in a club or for leisure, in Portugal, they were fans of certain football celebrities, like Fabrizio Romano or Cristiano Ronaldo. As a result, many referred to Instagram or TikTok as the main platforms to access and follow sports news.

Although sports, especially football, is a global phenomena, it is also an important element for integration and learning a new language.

Participant I, for example, noted that he loves football and back home he followed Eleven Sports' broadcasting of the Gambia Football Federation (GFF). In Portugal he plays and supports the Sporting Club de Portugal. For this young participant, the dispute between local clubs, like Benfica and Sporting in Lisbon, was also common.

However there was an important aspect of sports beyond digital media, when these young people play in the streets or public arenas, with opportunities to develop language and social skills.

Language is paramount for refugee integration. Language is their contact with Portuguese reality, literally in schools or outside playing football. In this context, digital solutions for translation were often used to help individuals understand and learn Portuguese. These digital lessons enhanced their opportunities in the real world, accelerating their competencies in everyday activities.

Their opinion about the way that media in general portrayed refugees was another aspect that was addressed during interviews and came up as an important point for their integration. For many of these young people, the media failed to represent accurately the reality of the refugee crisis and routine situations. However, it was also through media that they discovered possibilities and opportunities to improve their integration in society:

“They use whatever angle they want — whether for good or bad. But sometimes there's an idea about refugees, constructed by the media or by politicians, that doesn't reflect reality. Because we're all different.

Here, we're different — even those of us from the same country. We're different people, from different countries. I had people from Afghanistan with me, so we're not the same. That doesn't mean we have the same wishes, or the same tastes, or the same identity.

But sometimes it feels like we're all treated the same. Like, in general, it's just one image — when really, it's not.”  
(Participant D)

“When I came to Portugal I searched on the Internet and the first thing I found was the image of Marquês de Pombal and it just showed the population of Portugal — 10.4 million people — and that was basically it. Then I looked more and found out about the language, how to learn the language, and most of what came up was Brazilian Portuguese — more than from Portugal. At the time, I didn't know that, so I started studying all of that material. Then, when I got here, I started speaking a bit with a teacher, and she told me that what I was using was all Brazilian Portuguese, not Portuguese from Portugal. So then I stopped watching those videos and switched to ones from Portugal.” (Participant E)

Finally, the codes and themes related to the role of the media in the reconstruction of multiple identities for these young refugees demonstrated that although they had only arrived in Portugal less than a year ago, there were signs that they had already started to adapt to the new reality and culture of their host country. The majority referred to the politics in their country as a theme that they were not interested in and

preferred not to discuss. In terms of citizenship and identity, this finding demonstrates a slight distance from the country of origin. It is the acquisition of a new language and the practice of new things, like cooking and learning the habits of a new culture, that revealed a sense of multifaceted identity, simultaneously from the country of origin and Portuguese. For many of these young people, digital platforms offered them a world of connection, with the families and friends from the country of origin, but also an opportunity to learn more about Portuguese culture.

Language is a crucial element for feeling Portuguese, but there were difficulties distinguishing between European and Brazilian Portuguese, with learning it one of their priorities.

As one participant put it:

“I’m starting to feel a little bit Portuguese.

The first and most important thing for me is the language. I already speak Portuguese. We’re getting used to the Portuguese language, and when I arrived here in Portugal, I didn’t know anything — or almost nothing — about Portuguese or Portuguese culture.

To find out more about the culture, sometimes I search on Google, or I talk to people, or I invite friends to ask them something about Portugal — that too.” (Participant E)

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## Discussion

This study explored the role of digital media in young refugees’ daily lives, as an important element for their integration and identity reconstruction. The empirical work pointed to three main topics that were connected to the research questions: 1. Digital media practices and consumptions; 2. The role of digital media in participants’ integration in the host country; and 3. The role of digital media as an important element for identity reconstruction.

Regarding the importance of digital media practices and consumptions, participants demonstrated a preference for digital platforms like YouTube and Facebook over traditional media, with no mention of newspaper use (digital or print). This revealed, to a certain degree, the same preferences as other young people from the same generation cohort mapped by the UGT (Whiting and Williams, 2013), reflecting an active use of social media for fulfilling personal and social needs of entertainment, information and identity expression.

The consumption and use of such digital platforms was used for both information consumption and entertainment, with a transnational approach in how they sought and used digital content. In terms of entertainment, both football and music were key preferences, showing that their interests could also function as a vehicle for national and local integration. Most participants played football and it is through digital platforms that they displayed videos of themselves or consumed content matching their interests, by connecting to peers, nationally and internationally. These practices reflect ongoing redefinitions of identity in digital networks as noted by Castells (2009), supporting glocalization and multiculturalism. Hence, the use of digital media works as repositories of stories but also as transnational places for expressions of youth culture. Such practices provided both linguistic and social entry points into Portuguese society, consistent with Leurs’ (2015) work on migrants building and expressing hybrid identities in transnational digital spaces.

Regarding the use of the media in processes of integration, this exploratory research corroborated with some existing literature, adding in this case that one of the most advantageous parts of using social media aids in learning a new language. Ward and Kennedy (1999) proposed that acquiring a new language is a sociocultural adaptation process, implying learning social norms and favoring integration. Many of the participants used artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT for homework as well as helping to understand and learn Portuguese. Thus, AI and other digital technologies function here as important aids for social integration, supporting many learning processes, for language or basic details about Portuguese society. There is, in this case, a potential transformative aspect inherent to AI, helpful in an educational context but, equally, aiding these youngsters in learning a new language. Some of the examples provided by this study were a reflection of the ways that ChatGPT was often used to make things more clear and understandable for them, not only in learning a new language but also in their integration as newcomers in classrooms. This corroborates with the notion that digital media was not only used for identity negotiation but also for learning and integrating into a new culture (Alencar, 2018).

Social media also allowed for continuity of connections with families and friends abroad, particularly through WhatsApp and Instagram, suggesting that integration was not a one-way process. Instead, participants maintained transnational ties while adapting to their new environment, a fact that aligns with the concept of translocality (Appadurai, 1996), suggesting that they were able to hold multiple cultural and geographical orientations simultaneously. In his acculturation model, Berry (1997) stressed that adaptation to a new culture did not imply distancing from an original heritage, but rather developing a dual belonging.

Some of the participants revealed a critical sense of the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of refugees. While they recognised the importance of media in keeping them informed and connected to the world, many expressed skepticism with the ways that refugees were depicted in the media.

The role of digital media in identity formation and reconstruction appeared as a complex and dynamic process, suggesting that further research is necessary, particularly in the Portuguese context. While all of the participants were still in contact with family or friends in their countries of origin, many refrain from discussing politics, stating that this was one of the topics that they were not interested in, or because they had negative emotional ties with the past and therefore refrained from talking about politics. Other cultural ties to their countries of origin, such as music, food and language, were discussed openly. This shows a deep sense of hybrid ties, often blending cultural aspects of their country with their host country. Such selective engagement with cultural heritage reinforces Berry's (1997) idea that identity preservation and integration are not mutually exclusive, but strategically managed based on emotional comfort and contextual demands.

The media also served as a key facilitator in this hybridisation, such as the use of YouTube or TikTok to follow artists from around the world, including Portugal. Thus, although language acquisition is key for integration in the host country, some content consumed by the young participants enabled interaction and social dynamics beyond linguistic constraints. In general the participants revealed themselves as active users and producers of media. They engaged with platforms in a selective fashion, and accessed content that was chosen specifically to support their adaptation goals. This reinforces the idea that identity among young refugees is an evolving process, dynamic and shaped by intersecting forces of media exposure, cultural interaction and personal agency.

This study yielded several theoretical and practical contributions, suggesting further research, especially in the context of Portugal. The findings are aligned with the theoretical contributions of the uses and gratifications theory in refugee contexts, suggesting that young people turn to media not just for entertainment but for learning, integration and self-expression. The results also resonated with intercultural adaptation models (Berry, 1997; Ward and Kennedy, 1999), particularly in how media mediate cultural learning and identity negotiation.

The use and applicability of AI tools, like ChatGPT, in the context of refugee education initiatives may provide an open and unexplored arena for more accessible, informal learning solutions.

Recognising some global and elements present in young people's lives, like football or music, can be a cultural anchor for improved integration. In this sense, youth policy and cultural work may benefit from looking into the role of social media and other elements in developing more proactive programs.

Finally, this exploratory study stressed the importance of examining young refugees not as passive consumers of media but rather as critical and active citizens, able to navigate complex social environments. Their digital media use should be perceived as both a survival strategy as well as a tool for developing their own sense of identity in unfamiliar milieus.


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## Conclusion

In this paper we provided an exploratory approach to understand the role of digital media within different processes of integration and identity reconstruction of young refugees living in Portugal. Based on a qualitative approach extrapolated from interviews with young refugees living in Portugal, we concluded that media, in particular digital media, played a key role for young people and without it their integration would be more difficult. The key findings suggest that participants in this study were keen users of digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Tiktok among others, which they depended on heavily for different purposes on a daily basis. Either to maintain connections with their countries of origin, for easy communication with families and friends or simply for entertainment or news consumption, the use of these platforms represented more than sources of entertainment. They were perceived and framed as important apparatuses for identity reconstruction, to learn a new language and for social connections and reconstructions of their identities. In addition, their digital uses and practices, in line with uses and gratifications theory, are seen in constant negotiation between their past, present and future, in the construction of a new identities. It is through digital media that they keep in contact with their heritage and learn cultural insights about the host country.

This exploratory research suggests that digital media and platforms play an important role in the integration of young refugees, particularly in helping them learn the language of a host country, crucial for integration, as well as to understand the culture and build new connections. In relation to entertainment, football appeared as an important element for integration, both in the digital and offline spheres, suggesting that their interests in football celebrities and sports was only possible due to some of the affordances of digital technologies. Artificial intelligence appeared as an another important element for participants in this study, especially for resolving issues with homework and in understanding a new language.

Although the participants in this study depended heavily on digital media to make new connections and adapt to a new country, they were also critical of the way in which media portrayed the refugee humanitarian situation in general. These observations demonstrated that they were active users of media. While they used platforms for information and entertainment, they were aware of debates about refugees.

Despite being an exploratory study, this research points to the need to further explore the role of digital media in the lives of young refugees living in Portugal. Further research not only can contribute to deconstructing some myths associated with the integration of these refugees, but it also provides a rich overview of how media can function as a support for a better integration of young refugees. In the context of Portugal, this approach is still underrepresented in refugee and media studies, which makes this research more relevant for future studies, both at national and European levels. 

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### **Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing**

During the preparation of this work the authors used Google Translator and TurboScribe in order to translate and transcribe interviews. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the paper.

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