

Identity Navigation During Refugee Experiences: Between Human Agency and Systemic Architectures of Control

Angela M. Schöpke-Gonzalez, University of Michigan, USA
Andrea K. Thomer, University of Michigan, USA
Paul Conway, University of Michigan, USA

Abstract

In 2018 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees asserted that there are 25.4 million refugees worldwide. News media, state actors, and other bodies speak about refugees in ways that emphasize certain aspects of their experiences. We do not often hear how those identified as refugees speak about themselves and how they navigate their identities in the context of information. This article asks: How do self-identified refugee communities in Athens, Greece, and Hamburg, Germany, engage with information spaces during their refugee experiences to navigate identity in new receiving-society contexts? Drawing on Erving Goffman (1959) and Webb Keane's (1997) idea that information transmission through interaction is at the center of identity development, this research uses a mixed method of semi-structured interviews and embedded participant observation. The findings expose three challenges to identity navigation at both sites: prolonged liminality, unfamiliar information spaces within receiving societies, and misinformed information spaces within receiving societies. In addressing these challenges, participants balanced tremendous effort and agency with the effects of systems beyond their control. The implications of our findings relate to the viability of liminality theories and the need for policy modifications to encourage receiving societies to assume responsibility for aspects of identity work within their control.

Keywords: agency; information communication technologies; liminality; migration

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Introduction

The Western Balkan Route is a predominant travel route in Europe for individuals fleeing from originating countries south and east of the route's primary European entry point in Greece (UNHCR, 2015). At the crossroads of many individuals' journeys of migration to safety, Greece experiences complex manifestations of global anxieties toward the refugee experience. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) suggested that 83,000 *persons of concern* (individuals with formal refugee status, asylum seekers, or stateless persons) were in Greece by the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2017). As a result of legislation in the European Union (EU) and EU member states, refugees who have arrived in Greece over the last several years are likely to remain there for the foreseeable future rather than relocating to other European countries (International Rescue Committee, 2019a). Similarly, at the tail end of many journeys to safety, Germany experiences an equally complex but contextually different

manifestation of the same anxieties. More than 1.4 million persons of concern arrived in Germany by the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2017), which includes more than 185,000 asylum applicants in 2018 (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2020a), approximately 35% of whom have been granted asylum (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2020b).

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of general patterns of the south to north migration movement in the recent decade (Mandić, 2017). The figure is an oversimplification of a travel path that is often far less direct than that depicted, may or may not traverse all suggested countries in the figure, and may end or begin elsewhere. Individuals fleeing toward safety in Europe have vastly diverse experiences, and this map only represents a subset of possibilities.



Figure 1. The Balkan Route, pre-March 2016 (Mandić, 2017). Reprinted from “Anatomy of a Refugee Wave: Forced Migration on the Balkan Route as Two Processes,” by EuropeNow, 2017. In the public domain.

As this geographic area experiences the changing social context of migratory transit, tensions build among receiving societies and refugee populations, characterized by incidents of physical, verbal, and psychological violence, and general mistrust and fear (Strickland, 2018). Although contemporary rates of migration are often presented as a new phenomenon or crisis (CARE, 2019; International Rescue Committee, 2019b; Siegfried, 2019; World Vision, 2019), longitudinal research from 1960 to 2014 suggests that global rates have not dramatically increased (Czaika & de Haas, 2014).

The label often applied to individuals migrating from one precarious state to another—*refugee*—has been, is, and will continue to be a loaded word. It carries centuries of history, politics, and experience. Scholars have sought to make sense of complex social conceptions of the term refugee through the language of liminality. As individuals migrate from one home to another, they also must navigate relationships to existing and new identities and information spaces. Many must also navigate trauma and racism on arriving in potentially hostile receiving societies. Thus, theories of liminality—the passage of a person from one stable identity to another—tempered by perspectives on social integration, identity formation, and the concept of *information spaces*,

can offer valuable insights for understanding violent social responses to refugees and their strategies to mitigate them. By asking self-identified refugees about the challenges they face in navigating complex identities in the context of receiving societies, we explored aspects of the violent social responses to refugees with which participants contend. Our research addresses this question: How do self-identified refugees in the receiving societies of Greece and Germany engage with information spaces to navigate identity during liminal and post-liminal portions of their refugee experiences?

As will be presented in our findings, experiences of trauma and a need to cope with traumatic events were frequently brought up by participants. Therefore, we have taken trauma psychology literature into account in our theoretical framework. Even a partial answer to our research question could foster a deeper understanding of the tensions unfolding among communities along the Western Balkan Route.

Literature Review

Liminality and the Refugee Experience

Ethnographers Arnold van Gennep (1909) and Victor Turner (1967) defined liminality as a three-stage ritual process of the passage of a person from one stable identity state to another. These phases include pre-liminal rites of separation, liminal transitional rites, and post-liminal rites of incorporation. This framework is often used in scholarship about migration as a model for how individuals experience a rupture of their identities when they leave an originating society, and how they come to integrate into a new receiving society. This model is linear, portraying each phase following from the last, and focuses on the work individuals do to change their identity. Next we describe liminality theory as it relates to studies of migration and identify areas for future theoretical development in this context.

In the migration context, the first *pre-liminal* (in Turner's words) *rites of separation* (van Gennep's) phase of liminality is often associated with a person's departure from an initial home context (Chavez, 1992; Long, 1993; O'Reilly, 2018). The second phase of the liminal passage—*liminal* (Turner, 1967) or *transitional rites* (van Gennep, 1909)—describes a state of betweenness and suspension, which van Gennep and Turner imagined as absent of identity. In a migration context, this second phase of liminality has been described as a space between identity reference points, where migrants “exist in a world of ‘in-betweenness,’ negotiating cultural forms and identities at the crossroads of the nation-state and global diasporas” (Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007, p. 1735). Although this state of in-betweenness is perhaps not inherently traumatic, for individuals fleeing to a new and potentially unwelcoming receiving society, this liminal phase can be highly traumatic (as our research shows). The suspension of stability and identity can be associated with similar feelings of *stuckness*, or timelessness found in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Prager, 2006; Winnicott, 1965). Trauma psychologist Jeffrey Prager (2006) wrote that “psychological trauma is a condition of the present,” continuing: “It is a memory illness. It manifests itself in individuals, as in collectivities, as a collapse of timeliness, when remembering prior experiences or events intrude [sic] on a present-day beingness” (p. 230). Prager's work built on trauma psychologist Donald Winnicott's, in which he described how trauma destroys a feeling of omnipotence—a sense that because the social environment is benign or non-threatening one can achieve anything (Winnicott, 1965, p. 37).

The third phase of liminality—*post-liminal* (Turner, 1967) or *rites of incorporation* (van Gennep,

1909)—describes a person’s process of adopting and integrating a new identity within a new social context. Scholars have suggested that a number of factors are needed to support integration into a new receiving society, including (a) a need for basic services and orientation to the receiving society, (b) a less immediate but somewhat longer-term need for employment and health care, and (c) an even longer term need to participate in the receiving society’s civic life (Mwarigha, 2002; Papillon, 2002; Caidi & Allard, 2005). Often, integration is discussed as a linear process, though information scientists Nadia Caidi et al. (2010) complicated this linearity by suggesting that aspects of one phase actually unfold across phases (p. 500). Related work in diasporic studies further complicates a linear model of integration by introducing a generational component: certain integration processes may not happen within the lifetime of migrant persons, but rather during the lifetimes of their children and children’s children (Alba, 2005; Boyd, 2002; Boyd & Grieco, 1998; Waldinger & Feliciano, 2004; Zhou, 1997).

Liminality and Social Integration into Receiving Societies

This third phase of liminality or post-liminality also involves the reception of migrants or persons experiencing liminality into new societies or contexts. We note that though much of liminality theory places the onus of the work of integration on the person experiencing liminality, many scholars have explored the role that receiving societies play in supporting integration, and the ways in which they complicate or even stymie integration of persons experiencing liminality into new contexts. For instance, prior work studying the integration of persons experiencing liminality shows that these persons are often viewed with anxiety (Douglas, 1966, p. 44), revulsion (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), or as pollutants (Turner, 1967, p. 97). Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argued that these persons become anxiety-provoking when their liminality—absence of recognizable identities—defies our existing human categorization systems. She said, “Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable” (Douglas, 1966, pp. 119-120). This danger in indefinability reflects anthropological thought which says that because humans rely on categorization to survive, things we cannot categorize are threats to our survival (Lakoff, 1987). Building on scholars’ interpretations of refugee experiences as liminal, these reflections on social contexts’ responses to persons experiencing liminality also provide a lens through which to understand why refugee-receiving societies might respond with physical, verbal, or psychological violence toward refugees (Strickland, 2018).

Trauma psychologists situate liminality as both an individual and a social experience; for individuals to engage in post-liminal integration, it is necessary that their social context recognize and support their work. Moving through the helplessness of a traumatic experience of liminality requires a social environment that empathizes with a person’s experiences. A supportive social environment can encourage restoration of a feeling of confidence, trust, and mutual interactive dependence on the person experiencing liminality’s social context (Prager, 2006; Winnicott, 1965). In a migration context, psychologist John W. Berry (1997, 2001) argued that the burden of integrating into a receiving society is disproportionately placed on refugees and other immigrants and that such a one-sided perspective fails to take into account the role of the receiving society and begins to approximate assimilation. Similarly, information scientists Olubukola Oduntan and Ian Ruthven (2019) observed that post-migration integration is a two-way process with “both the individual and host society making adaptations” but that in practice integration is “typically conceptualized as the individual’s process of incorporation into a new society” (p. 792).

Application to This Study's Contexts

The tension between placing the burden of integration on newly arrived persons versus sharing responsibility for mutual integration with receiving societies is reflected in the policy frameworks of this study's two field sites: Germany and Greece. According to Hanewinkel and Oltmer's (2018) loose German-to-English translation of Bundesministerium des Innern (2014, p. 51), German policy holds that:

Immigrants are obligated on the one hand to acquire German skills and respect the fundamental values of German society, especially the free democratic basic order. On the other hand, German society is obligated to “ensure equal opportunity and treatment access to all important aspects of society, business and politics by recognizing and removing existing obstacles.”

These policies appear to support a bidirectional model of integration in which both newcomers and receivers are responsible for participating in integration efforts. Recent media reports, however, highlight contradictory experiences among persons with refugee experiences (Hindy, 2018) and suggest that integration in Germany is unidirectional in practice.

Greece, in contrast to Germany, does not have a specific overarching policy regarding integration of migrants. Instead, the country has a collection of laws that regulate education, labor, social welfare, and health care integration processes (Skeplaris, 2018, pp. 2-6). These distributed policies make it harder to understand integration policy versus practice than in Germany. But, the absence of a specific integration policy in itself provides social context for our participants' expressed thoughts on their own post-liminal experiences.

In our study, we start with but do not necessarily endorse liminality theory's assumption that individuals with refugee experiences bear the bulk of responsibility for integrating into their new society. Our investigation focuses on understanding the refugees' experience of defining their identity while emerging into a receiving society following an intense liminal experience. Our research is an interrogation of models of integration between refugee and receiving society.

Performance of Identity and Information Spaces

Researchers have explored how persons experiencing liminality in general, and refugees specifically, experience liminality as fractured-and-then-reconciled access to information or information spaces. In their edited volume exploring social navigation of information spaces, editors and information scientists Kristina Höök, David Benyon, and Alan J. Munro assemble chapters that explore information space as an entity delimited by a fixed set of information that can be navigated and engaged substantively (2003). Building on this idea, the theoretical frameworks on identity construction that we use in this article point toward an alternative interpretation of information spaces. We define information spaces as constantly evolving bodies of information—irrespective of source, form, process, or semantics (Kalish, 2009)—which a person engages, augments, and updates to inform decisions about self-expression and interpretations of others' identities. In the refugee context, research by social scientist Annemaree Lloyd and coauthors has characterized transitional refugee experiences as *fractured landscapes*, or the result of disrupting a person's established information landscapes when they are forced to migrate (Lloyd, 2017; Lloyd et al., 2013); van Gennep's rites of separation here include separation from one's information spaces. Information scientists Danielle Allard and Nadia Caidi

(2018) used similar language to unpack how migrant persons make sense of “distinct and sometimes contradictory information spaces” during the felt in-betweenness of identity after arriving in a new receiving society (p. 1193).

Understanding migrants’ navigation of information spaces is important in understanding their identity formation because these spaces shape their performance of identity. Here, we draw on foundational work by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) on the performative nature of identity. Goffman argued that an individual person’s identity is made up of two parts: the *performer*, who manages others’ impressions of their identity through conscious or subconscious action; and the *character*, or the identity created by the performer’s actions, and named by its audience. A performer depends on an audience for recognition that the person’s “identity ... and [their] actions ... are indeed of a certain type and not some other” (Keane, 1997, p. 15). An audience’s ability to recognize a performer’s self-representation depends on both the audience’s information space and context and the performer’s assumptions about the audience’s information space and context. When performers make a choice about how to represent themselves, they have agency in deciding which part of self to represent and how they will do so. The audience has agency in how it will define the performer’s identity based on its interpretation of the performer’s representation. A sense of agency is thus fundamental to the process of interactive identity construction (Synofzik et al., 2013). Figure 2 is our original visual description of this interactive model of identity.

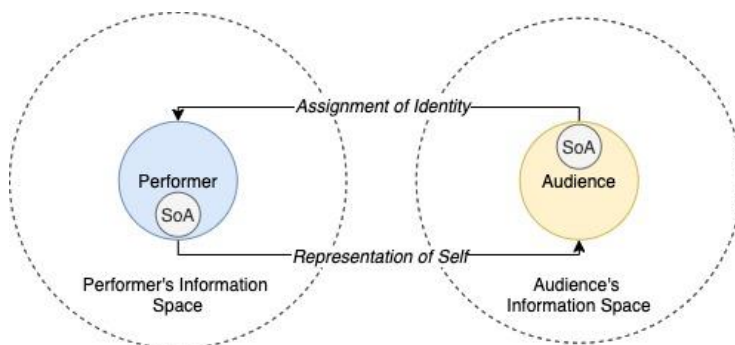


Figure 2. Interactive identity model diagram. SoA = Sense of Agency.

Importantly, several points in this process can result in a mismatch between the performer’s intended meaning and the audience’s interpretation of the performer’s representation of that meaning. Contextual noise might transform the performer’s message so much that the audience cannot interpret the performer’s meaning as intended; there might be discrepancies between the performer’s perception of the audience’s information space and the audience’s actual information space; or the audience’s information capacity might be overloaded (Weaver, 1949). Thus, viewing the person experiencing liminality’s identity formation as a process of learning about new information spaces—and how to navigate those information spaces—is important in expanding liminality theory and in understanding migrants’ experiences of liminality.

Here we turn to Reijo Savolainen’s (2008) work on the ways that individuals *self-orient* (seek), *instrumentalize* (use), and *express* (share) information, and apply this to the identity models described here. Savolainen provided a useful framework for organizing research on the processes that make up a newly arrived person’s decision-making about which aspect of self to represent

to an audience. For our study, we emphasize the self-orienting, instrumentalizing, and expressing aspects of this framework in the context of interactive identity. Applied to Goffman (1959) and Keane's (1997) interactive identity models—which suggest that an audience is necessary for an individual's performed action to be received, interpreted, and named, and reflected back as an identity—expressing is like the act of performing a representation of self for an audience. Self-orienting describes a performer's process of collecting information to make sense of a situation or solve a problem, with the aim of taking an action based on this self-orienting (Savolainen, 2008, pp. 83, 113). Finally, Savolainen's instrumentalizing describes how performers engage information about their context in order to make choices about their performative actions. In Savolainen's model, which we adapted for our study, information spaces serve to bound self-orientation and determine the scope of action. The acts of self-orienting and instrumentalizing in an information space construct self-representation that can be expressed (performed) in a given context (audience). This audience can then assign an identity based on its interpretation of the performer's expression. Figure 3 is our original visual description of Savolainen's framework that expresses information behaviors as performance in information space.

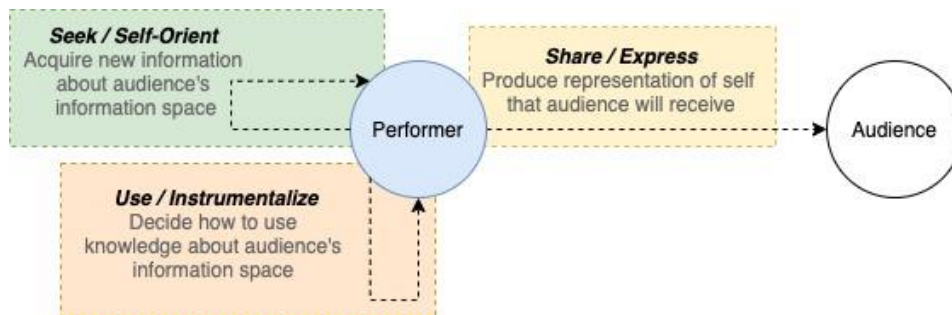


Figure 3. Savolainen's (2008) model applied to performance in an information space.

A variety of research studies address migrant persons' self-orienting practices regarding receiving societies in Internet-mediated information spaces. We use *Internet-mediated* to denote information spaces that can only be accessed through network connections to the Internet. Categories of information that migrant persons pursue online include:

- cultural context (Caidi et al., 2010; Dahya, & Adelman, 2017; Dryden-Peterson et. al., 2017; McIver & Prokosch, 2002);
- education (Caidi et al., 2010; Fisher et al., 2016; Lloyd et al., 2017; Mansour, 2018);
- employment (Caidi et al., 2010; Fisher et al., 2016; Lloyd et al., 2017; Mansour, 2018; Lloyd et al, 2017; Shankar et al., 2016; McIver & Prokosch, 2002; Xu & Maitland, 2016);
- faith and religion (Quirke, 2014, Lloyd et al., 2017);
- finances (Caidi et al., 2010);
- health (Caidi et al., 2010; Cortinois et al., 2012, Martzoukou & Burnett, 2018);
- housing (Caidi et al., 2010; Mansour, 2018);

- legal advice (Caidi et al., 2010; Mclver & Prokosch, 2002); and
- news (Caidi et al., 2010; Gillespie et al., 2016).

A diverse body of researchers has also explored how migrants self-orient using in-person information spaces. We use *in-person* to describe information spaces that can only be accessed through in-person presence. Sociologist Maggie O’Neill (2018) demonstrates the importance of in-person information spaces when studying how 10 asylum-seeking women in Northeast England experienced and expressed citizenship. Caidi et al. (2010) provide an overview of studies that have discussed how libraries act as in-person spaces for formal and informal information sharing among migrant persons. Information scientist Karen Fisher and her colleagues (2016) describe how people, organizations, spaces, or events often act as information spaces used by refugee youth. Art education scholar Michelle Bae-Dimitriadis (2016) demonstrates how embodiment was fundamental to knowledge internalization (self-orientation), production (expression), and exchange among refugee youth at a café space.

Literature also describes instrumentalizing practices among migrant persons once they have arrived in a receiving society. Approaches to migrants’ instrumentalizing practices often include the following types:

- language learning and translation (Brown & Grinter, 2016; Caidi et al., 2010; Martzoukou & Burnett, 2018; Mclver & Prokosch, 2002; Simko et al., 2018);
- navigation (Caidi et al., 2010; Simko et al., 2018);
- recreation (Caidi et al., 2010; Quirke, 2015);
- documentation of human rights violations (Gregory, 2015; Guberek et al., 2018);
- provision of emergency assistance (Stierl, 2015);
- engagement in political discourse (Duncan & Caidi, 2018; Guberek et al., 2018); and
- sharing of information with “influential figures in their social media networks—from prominent and respected activists and NGOs [non-governmental organizations] to investigative journalists, political commentators, public intellectuals and participants in controversial debates” (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 13).

Finally, research on expressing among migrant persons in a receiving society demonstrates meaningful self-performance within and across local, transnational, and native online communities. These self-representations are generally aimed at:

- maintaining connections to transnational sociocultural contexts (Harney, 2013; Williams, 2006);
- cultivating new in-person and online communities around emergent collective identities (O’Reilly, 2018; Robertson et al., 2016; Williams, 2006);
- or maintaining personal or community psychological well-being (Collyer, 2007; Gillespie et al., 2016; Harney, 2013).

These studies offer strong insights about *what* migrant persons are doing to navigate identity formation and performance in receiving-society contexts. However, they remain somewhat less clear about *how* these practices affect identity reconstruction during liminal and post-liminal integration. The research underlying this article demonstrates how these documented practices relate to our participants' experiences of defining their identities through an interactive process within the contexts of their receiving societies. Extending well beyond the validation of existing scholarship, we explore the challenges participants face in their processes of understanding their personal identities, and how participants engage information in Internet-mediated and in-person spaces to address these challenges.

Research Method

In the design and implementation of the primary research project, we adapted Ramesh Srinivasan and Ajit Pyati's (2007) Diasporic Information Environment Model (DIEM) to the context of self-identified refugee communities' information spaces at two discrete study sites. DIEM involves a three-component methodological approach, including reflexive ethnography (through direct, interpersonal interviews); social network analysis; and community-based action and information services. First, Srinivasan and Pyati's reflexive ethnography asks that a researcher "tell the story of the community from its own members' points of view, while recognizing that the data they receive will place him or herself into the community and attempt to elicit a detailed understanding of community members' networks and interactions" (p. 1740). Second, social network analysis in DIEM aims to "provide a glimpse into the details of community members' networks," and "allows researchers to identify which technologies connect members to which other individuals and institutions within the social network ... and to trace the constitution and nature of community networks and determine which are important for the provision of information services" (Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007, p. 1740). Third, DIEM's community-based action and information services component requires that researchers "work with diasporic immigrant communities in maintaining local community archives and information sources with attention to the global dimension of immigrant information sources and environments" (Srinivasan & Pyati, 2007, p. 1741).

Data Collection

We drew on data from interviews and participant observation. The institutional review board (IRB) granted approval for this human subject research through the University of Michigan, which found that our study posed minimal risk to our participants and was exempt from oversight. We have maintained the confidentiality of the participants by masking the identity of participants in reporting findings. We also did not collect specific demographic information about participants so as to reduce the risk of their re-identifiability through secondarily identifiable information (Tsai et al., 2016), and to respect their self-expressed identities (described further in subsequent sections).

The first author conducted data collection and analysis. Her motivation for engaging with each community was rooted in her personal journey to understand her own liminality—a first-generation U.S. citizen born to parents from Guatemala and Germany, at once a choreographer, political analyst, and information scientist. As she has sought to understand her own liminality, she met many people who have worked on their own versions of a similar journey. Many of them—friends, immediate and distant family, and colleagues—have been called or self-identify as refugees at some point in their lives. The first author met several of these persons as

collaborators on dance projects in 2012-2014 (Germany) and in 2016 (Greece). Data collection for this study took place over the course of two months—one month each in Athens, Greece, and Hamburg, Germany—during the summer of 2018. These are locales where people are engaged with the types of personal transitions that are at the heart of our study and are sites where the lead author has extensive community relationships.

Recruitment

The first author drew on her extensive network at each study site to begin recruitment. Selection criteria for participation included self-identification as a refugee, as an adult older than 18 years, and with an expressed desire to participate in an interview. In Athens, the bulk of interview participants were recruited (16 of 19) through direct contact at a migrant women’s support center where the first author spent several days a week conducting participant observation. In Hamburg, the bulk of interview participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Table 1 describes our data collection approaches at each site.

Table 1. Data Collection at Each Study Site

Data Collection Approach	Athens, Greece (June, 2018)	Hamburg, Germany (July, 2018)
<i>Interviews</i>	19 participants	14 participants
<i>Participant Observation</i>	One full month at refugee support centers, community meeting spaces, and community events	One full month at refugee support centers, community meeting spaces, and community events

Given that this study addresses self-identified refugees’ process for navigating identity during the post-liminal or integration phase of their refugee experiences, and in order to respect each participant’s expressed identities, we did not collect specific demographic information. Instead, participants described their identities however they desired. To avoid identity assignments implicated in the selection of pseudonyms, the name of each participant is their interview number and either the suffix “Gr” for Greece or “Ge” for Germany as the place of the interview. Table 2 lists each interview participant and those identity labels that they used to describe themselves in the order of priority that they indicated. We refer to insights from participant observation as “participant observation” in our Findings.

Table 2. Interview Participants and Identities

Participant (Greece)	Identity	Participant (Germany)	Identity
1Gr	Iranian	1Ge	Syrian, Teacher
2Gr	Human, Iranian	2Ge	Syrian, Muslim
3Gr	Afghan	3Ge	Somalian, Muslim, Man

4Gr	Iranian	4Ge	Syrian Christian, Construction Worker
5Gr	Human, Hazara, Afghan	5Ge	Syrian, German, Musician, Music Teacher
6Gr	Human, Syrian, Muslim	6Ge	Damascan, Intellectual
7Gr	NA	7Ge	Human, Stateless
8Gr	Iraqi, Muslim	8Ge	Shia Muslim
9Gr	Iraqi, Muslim	9Ge	Father, Kurdish
10Gr	Muslim	10Ge	Syrian
11Gr	Gabonese	11Ge	Syrian, Industrious
12Gr	Syrian	12Ge	Syrian Christian, Farmer
13Gr	Law-abiding, Artist, Carpenter	13Ge	Syrian, Assad-opposer, Musician
14Gr	Kurdish	14Ge	Chef, Businessman, Open
15Gr	NA		
16Gr	Afghan, Iranian		
17Gr	Cameroonian, Running Away		
18Gr	Syrian		
19Gr	Iraqi		

Note: NA = participants with no identity descriptions

Interviews

Nineteen individuals in Greece and fourteen individuals in Germany participated in interviews. Interviews opened with a short, structured set of questions on their use of Internet-mediated information practices. Participants then responded to a set of semi-structured questions about their experiences of challenge or opportunity in relation to a sense of self in their receiving society, and how participants navigated those challenges or opportunities by engaging with Internet-mediated and in-person information spaces.¹

Participants at both research locations spoke a wide variety of languages, including Dari, Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, French, Greek, German, and English. The first author, who conducted the interviews, is natively proficient in English and German, and professionally proficient in French. In interviews requiring translation, she received translation assistance from either community-trusted translators, friends, or family members of participants. Whether translation

was necessary or not, who translated, and how comfortable a participant felt with the first author and the translator certainly affected the information that was received, recorded, and interpreted. Some participants requested to share their thoughts through group interviews, adding another layer of social complexity to the information that participants shared. These complexities offered valuable insights into participants' social dynamics, community norms and practices, and the nature of relationships in group settings, which the first author recorded when possible.

Most of these participants were not comfortable with audio recording, so the researcher took only written notes during interviews. She then drafted memos immediately following interviews, capturing as much detail as possible. Through this practice, she sought to capture as much of the nuance of the participants' comments as possible while minimizing undue discomfort. To retain consistency and comprehensibility in the way that the first author recorded participants' thoughts, she made all written notes in English. In the event that a word was spoken in a non-English language that she did not immediately feel could be translated, she would write this word in the non-English language.

Participant Observation

Participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Kawulich, 2005) took place throughout the entirety of the first author's research visit and consisted of spending time with interview participants, as well as in spaces where self-identified refugees spend time, such as public squares, cafés, community centers, refugee camps or housing facilities, and events. Observations extended for as long as the researcher was welcome in a space, for example the duration of a celebratory event, two to three mornings or afternoons per week at a women's center, or an evening's social conversation at a local café. Generally, observations focused on individuals' and small groups' engagement with information spaces, challenges they faced in so doing, and how surrounding social contexts responded to personal informational expressions of identity.

Participant observation involves the engagement of the researcher in the activities of participants. The researcher's recorded observations included mobile phone photos and two notebooks of hand-written notes which she formulated into 82 pages of typed field notes and reflexive memos after the conclusion of activities using methods proposed by Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (Emerson et al., 2011). This method allowed the researcher to be fully present and participate in ways that would have been impossible had she been simultaneously recording.

Data Analysis

We used an open coding approach in two phases to code interview transcripts and participant observation field notes and memos (Charmaz, 2014, p. 50; Saldaña, 2009, p. 78). Coding established three concept groups: information practices in which participants described engaging; challenges that participants described experiencing in recursively defining personal identity in a new social context (e.g., bureaucratic processes, psychological well-being, and cultural context); and how participants described navigating the challenges they faced to identity redefinition by engaging with information spaces (e.g., seeking information about employment, visiting an open space to self-reflect, using mobile phone apps to circumvent racism, etc.). The coding strategy supported an adaptive theory on the relationship between liminality and information practices.

Findings

We found that participants at both study sites faced challenges during liminal and post-liminal phases of their refugee experiences, including prolonged liminality, unfamiliar receiving-society information spaces, and misinformed receiving-society information spaces. This section discusses these three categories of challenges and relates them to prior literature on identity construction. We follow each challenge with a description of the participants' responses to the challenge and the ways in which they crafted and used information spaces. We tie these responses to Savolainen's model and information spaces, and note how participants self-orient, instrumentalize information, and express themselves.

Challenge One: Prolonged Liminality

Participants described how feelings of “stuckness” (similar to that previously described by Prager), helplessness, isolation or loneliness, and fear of identity loss reinforced feelings of liminal suspension and inability to engage with receiving-society audiences in integrative identity interactions. The following subsections describe each of these experiences and their relationship to identity construction in greater detail.

Stuckness

Participants described a feeling of stuckness, largely caused by depression and PTSD in relation to their refugee experiences. One participant explained that she felt unable to process the prolonged wait for asylum and the ongoing war in her home country and had attempted suicide three times (Interview 2Gr). Another participant described how language barriers limited his access to mental health services, and consequently hindered his ability to process traumatic experiences, saying:

I am currently being treated by a psychiatrist and have taken medicines for the impact of war, arrest, murder, and blood. It helps a little, but not enough. It would help me to see a psychologist, but I cannot find an Arabic-speaking psychologist. In [neighboring city], there is an Arabic-speaking doctor, but not a psychologist. (Interview 13Ge)

Still another explained that the inconsistency of daily life inherent to the experience of waiting for asylum contributed to her depression (Interview 4Gr).

For some participants, stuckness had extended for prolonged periods. In Greece, a participant group of approximately 12 men who fled their home countries in the mid-2000s as teenagers or young adults had been waiting 10-13 years for asylum in Greece (participant observation). Many had had their asylum applications rejected, up to three times in some cases. Their professional and personal lives had been shaped by the uncertainty of this protracted asylum process, inhibiting their ability to fully arrive—including experiencing the affordances of work, pursuing education, and travel. Interview participants in Germany commented that changes to the asylum process there had replaced many longer-term assurances of asylum with temporary asylum issuances for one to three years. Whereas old asylum processes offered opportunities to build a new life for the long term, new temporary asylum issuances became an ongoing (and sometimes life-threatening) limbo of hoping for extensions (Interview 5Ge).

These examples show how slow or stagnated asylum processes have resulted in protracted

feelings of suspension in fundamental parts of participants' lives, namely assurance of ongoing access to physical and psychological safety. Aspects of asylum processes therefore induce similar challenges of prolonged liminality such as PTSD or depression. Existing in a stuck protracted liminal space while awaiting asylum decisions mirrors other experiences of PTSD and compounds depression. These findings indicate that aspects of participants' identities had not yet transitioned from liminal experiences into post-liminal integration in which interactive identity construction could unfold.

Helplessness

Several participants, particularly in Greece, also felt helpless or powerless. One participant described how her inability to travel back to her home country or outside of Greece because of war and asylum processes contributed to her feeling of helplessness and lack of agency (Interview 6Gr). Another explained a feeling of helplessness after having exercised all of the effort that she thought possible to change her situation—from fleeing her home country to requesting asylum to set up a new life (Interview 2Gr)—and nevertheless remaining in limbo. A third participant expressed how financial and linguistic barriers played a significant role in her feeling of powerlessness to change her situation (Interview 14Gr). Asylum and migration processes, financial and linguistic barriers, and inability to change life circumstances despite significant effort contributed to these participants' feelings of helplessness or powerlessness to find a new satisfactory state of being. These testimonies support existing theories that feelings of helplessness indicate a lack of the sense of agency necessary for an interactive model of identity construction to transpire during post-liminality (Goffman, 1959; Keane, 1997; Synofzik et al., 2013; Tapal et al., 2017). Experiences of helplessness limit a person's ability to engage in post-liminal identity construction.

Isolation or Loneliness

In Germany, several participants felt isolated and lonely. Three participants described their perception of a German culture of individualism that affords few opportunities for social engagement with German community members and values separation from one's family (Interviews 2Ge, 6Ge, and 10Ge). For example, one participant explained:

For me, my family is more important than anything. Here at age 18 you are a man, you move out, and you only see your family once a month or once a year ... In Syria, if I was sick, everyone came to visit and asked if I needed anything. Here if I am sick, only my parents call and ask from Stuttgart. Four or five months ago we lived somewhere [with current roommate], and a woman died in her apartment [down the hall]. They didn't find until two or three days later when you could smell the stink in the hallway. (Interview 10Ge)

Absence of familiar social contacts and lack of new social networks in his receiving society contributed to this participant's feelings of isolation and loneliness. Participant insights amplified the interaction model of identity (Goffman, 1959; Keane, 1997). Without an audience, it is impossible for a person to engage in post-liminal identity construction. In these ways, isolation or loneliness can pose a challenge to participants' identity construction post-liminality.

Fear of Identity Loss

In Germany, some participants also felt sadness, fear, or worry because they felt like parts of their identities or cultures were at risk in their receiving society. One participant explained: “I see people go to marijuana and beer and leave their religion. I find it sad that this is happening” (Interview 12Ge). Another participant said: “Syrian people are afraid that their children will become too German. They want them to keep Syrian identity” (Interview 1Ge). Two participants described the sadness they felt at seeing small family sizes in Germany compared to larger family sizes they had experienced in their country of origin, and their fear that they would not have a large family (Interviews 8Ge and 11Ge).

Each of these fears of change or loss reflects language similar to that of Weaver’s (1949) overfull audience capacity concept, which suggested that audiences experience a tremendous challenge in making sense of information spaces when they are overfull. When overwhelmed by too much information, the audience must choose some information to interpret and disregard the rest. This phenomenon contributes to audiences’ challenging experience of making sense of performers’ expressions. If we imagine participants as the audience of their receiving society’s expressions in this case, it is possible that participants experienced an information overload from their receiving society’s performances. If so, it would follow that participants were only able to process certain pieces of information, and this incomplete picture might contribute to fears of identity loss. However, it is also possible that participants were hindered by *lack* of sufficient contextualizing information with which to situate their identities. Regardless of causal mechanism, however, the fear component of participants’ experiences, echoed in Weaver’s theoretical framework, prevented participants from desiring to engage with receiving-society audiences, potentially inhibiting post-liminal identity construction processes.

Response: Craft Safe Information Spaces and, Therefore, Safe Audiences

Experiences of prolonged liminality made it challenging and even unsafe to engage with the audience of participants’ receiving societies. In response, participants drew on an ecosystem of information spaces to craft their own safe audiences. Next we discuss participants’ self-orienting and instrumentalizing practices within information spaces to find and craft safe audiences.

Participants addressed feelings of prolonged liminality and helplessness by orienting themselves in spaces (both private and social) that felt emotionally safe and through interactively processing emotional hardship. As Winnicott (1965) and Prager (2006) remind us, these self-orienting practices are necessary processes for exiting a liminal space and entering into post-liminal identity construction.

Participants discussed how they found open or natural spaces, such as parks and the ocean shore, as safe audiences for expressing themselves (Interviews 9Gr, 5Ge, 6Ge, 12Ge). One participant described spending time in nature when he felt sad because, “When you are sad, all of nature is sad too; nature cries with you” (Interview 12Ge). This participant experienced emotional empathy and solace with natural audiences. In Germany, one participant commented on how open spaces allowed him to think and cultivate ideas about the future. He explained: “You can dream in those places. I think about my memories for what I would like to have in my life here” (Interview 5Ge). One participant in Greece related how the openness and privacy of the ocean supported her wellbeing in some situations, but not in others: “I also love the sea and to speak with the sea ... To shout angry things at the sea, and to cry. I go alone. I want to do it now but

I'm nervous about there being people there" (Interview 9Gr). The openness of the sea provided this participant with opportunity to safely express emotions when she was alone, but on other occasions the space became non-safe with the presence of other people. She found that certain audiences (the sea) felt safer and more conducive than others (people) to processing those emotions associated with her liminal experiences (self-orienting). This contradiction helps us to understand that open or natural spaces may not be inherently safe audiences, but rather that they can be when combined with the absence of unsafe human audiences. Participant 9Gr showed how she discerningly sought those spaces that provided the type of audience that felt safe to her.

Some participants discussed the importance of music listening and search applications as supporting safe audience spaces (Interviews 6Gr, 12Gr, 5Ge, and 8Ge). One participant described: "I love to hear music from my city in Syria, to forget a lot of bad things that I saw, with memories from me as a child. Also, I love songs in English, Turkish, and Spanish" (Interview 6Gr). Listening to music was a way to feel part of her identity reflected back to her, in this case through Syrian music as audience assigning Syrian identity to an aspect of herself, creating an emotionally safe internal space and acting as a way to address hurtful memories that she hoped to forget. At the same time, other cultures' music forms provided reflections back to her of additional identities that she held through their identity assignments. By using a music listening and search application, this participant was able to express herself through her search for particular kinds of music, create a safe emotional space for herself (receiving known identity assignments), and explore new identity assignments (different music types with which she felt affinity). Internet-mediated music acted as a safe audience.

In addition to information spaces without people, participants sought safe social spaces with which to engage in self-expression. Some of these safe social audiences included existing or new friends, family, or a mental health professional (Interviews 3Gr, 15Gr, and 17Gr). One participant explained that, "I prefer to come to [a women's center] when I feel sad, because otherwise I don't have anyone to communicate with" (Interview 15Gr). She indicated that expressing sadness to a safe human audience is important to her psychological well-being. Another said that she visited the women's center for distraction from the stresses of life and that the organization "gave us [she and her friends] the love of life" (Interview 17Gr). A third participant commented that the women's center "helped me like a mother," adding, "Now I have the passion and safety to change, like a baby" (Interview 3Gr). For some participants, social spaces felt safe for engaging in self-orienting practices which support them in exiting challenging psychological states associated with prolonged liminality and helplessness. Each of these participants sought safe social audiences by engaging with the services that the women's center provided.

Finally, one participant described using a mobile phone app designed for communication (WhatsApp) to find a private safe space for her own self-orientation and to provide a safe audience for a friend's self-orientation.

I use WhatsApp to communicate with people in Germany, Syria, Canada—with my friends and family ... WhatsApp, I use for one friend from Pakistan who is alone here for two years with no family. The Greek government doesn't give asylum. He writes every day saying it's really bad. He's in the [name of detention camp] on [name of island]. I talk to him every day. I learn Urdu with him. Sometimes I teach him Arabic. He asks for help, but I say that the only thing I can do is pray ... Also, on WhatsApp I talk to myself when I'm sad and I can't talk with anyone. I talk with myself and delete the messages

immediately so people don't see. (Interview 6Gr)

This participant creatively repurposed WhatsApp to craft a safe, private Internet-mediated space for self-orientation in the absence of other safe social audiences or spaces, in addition to using it as a place to provide others with the type of safe social space that they needed to feel supported in navigating prolonged liminality through self-orientation.

Participants instrumentalized information spaces to resolve their specific challenges with feelings of isolation or loneliness that contributed to their inability to engage in social interactions necessary for identity construction. In particular, participants instrumentalized mobile applications to meet new people, helping to address feelings of loneliness or isolation (Interviews 6Ge, 13Ge, 4Gr, 6Gr). For example, one participant used the Badoo and MeetMe apps "to make contact with Germans and to learn the language" (Interview 13Ge). Participants also described using translation and language learning applications such as Google Translate to facilitate interactions and communication with receiving-society community members. Whereas participants in Germany tended to foster new in-person connections via mobile apps, participants in Greece used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to develop both in-person and Internet-mediated social networks by connecting with people with similar interests. One participant said:

I use [Facebook] for group connection, to find people that I like that have nice cooking or interesting fashion and clothes. I use Facebook to connect with everyone, not just my close friends. I use it to find new people. (Interview 4Gr)

These instrumentalization practices served to mitigate feelings of isolation or loneliness for participants and allowed them to find or craft audiences with which they felt comfortable expressing aspects of self in new contexts.

Participants also instrumentalized Internet-mediated technologies to circumvent racism and to avoid audiences that might assign them harmful identities. One participant in Germany used Google Maps to get from place to place instead of asking for directions in order to avoid his experience of unkindness toward refugees by receiving-society community members (Interview 2Ge). Similarly, in Greece one participant used Google Maps to travel from place to place in order to circumvent linguistic barriers between her and her receiving-society community that came up when she would ask for directions (Interview 12Gr). In these ways, instrumentalizing navigation apps supported participants' feelings of self-sufficiency and agency while helping them to avoid the immediate harm of racism. A potential challenge to consider with these uses is that in their important efforts to avoid harmful racist acts, participants experienced reduced opportunities for positive interactions with receiving-society communities which can support post-liminal integration. This phenomenon might be of particular concern in the German receiving-society context, where isolation and loneliness already posed significant challenges (Interviews 2Ge, 14Ge).

Challenge Two: Navigating Social Norms and Unfamiliar Information Space

Participants described how unfamiliarity with new information spaces—as manifest by implicit and explicit social norms—rendered moments of tension and confusion, and inhibited self-expression when they engaged with their receiving society. The following subsections describe these challenges in greater detail.

Social Norms

Many interviewees described the complexity of navigating new social norms—a component of new information spaces—in their respective receiving societies, particularly those norms associated with the logistics of daily life. For example, some participants faced challenges in learning about a receiving society’s sense of time, including social norms about punctuality and keeping appointments (Interview 14Ge) or the cadence of when shops are open (Interview 16Gr). Another participant described differences in norms surrounding household tasks:

Here [in Germany], when you wash dishes, you fill the sink full, and then wash. It’s to save water, I understand now. In Syria you don’t wash that way. I was invited to eat one time and wanted to help by washing dishes, and I started to do how we do in Syria, and the hostess said we don’t do that way, it wastes too much water. (Interview 4Ge)

Participants were not familiar with receiving-society social norms. This lack of familiarity with the receiving society as audience’s self-expressions contributes to moments of simultaneous learning and tension.

Other participants described challenges of navigating new legal and professional norms associated with their receiving-society social contexts. One participant found that he was not able to transfer his professional knowledge as a music teacher to his receiving society (Germany), because in Germany a formal accreditation is required (Interview 5Ge). In effect, he was unable to represent his knowledge to receiving-society audiences because of differences in social norms—or information spaces—around the measurement of a person’s knowledge. Another interviewee described more generally:

Here in Germany you need papers to work. In Syria you don’t need anything to work. There’s no black or white work, like here in Germany there’s Schwarzarbeit [unreported work], or work that isn’t legal, and then normal work, which is. In Syria, there’s only normal work. It’s all the same. (Interview 1Ge)

This participant described differences in social norms surrounding the valuation of different types of labor. He experienced a challenge in trying to represent the value of his labor according to those terms that the audience understood based on its own information space (e.g., specific documentation).

In Greece one participant explained a related experience, stating: “For eight months, I paid 5,000 euros in taxes, but the asylum services don’t see this. I don’t want to go sell drugs and things. I want to work legally. But here, the asylum services don’t see that” (Interview 13Gr). Although interviewee 13Gr wanted to participate in the labor norms of his receiving society and thought that he had learned how to do so by familiarizing himself with what he understood to be his receiving-society’s information space, he learned that he may be missing information about another set of implicit social norms. This lack of knowledge and discrepancy between explicit and implicit social norms or information spaces, resulted in significant frustration and confusion, and a feeling of helplessness for this participant in his ability to realize his goals. Social norms embedded in notions of rightness and wrongness (i.e. legality or illegality) were referenced frequently during interviews as determinant of a sense of self-worth, safety, and ability to participate in professional systems in receiving-society contexts. Lack of familiarity with

receiving-society information spaces made it difficult for participants to feel comfortable representing themselves to receiving audiences.

Inhibited Expression

In contrast, familiarity with codified social norms can also inhibit expression necessary for identity construction. One participant in Greece described engaging in self-censorship (e.g. not expressing) in the hopes of supporting the approval of his third asylum application after 10 years of waiting (participant observation). This person actively worked for large humanitarian agencies to support the provision of health care services to new refugee arrivals in camps. He also advocated for improved conditions in camps and ran a language school for newly arrived families. His asylum lawyer suggested that he limit posting about his human rights advocacy work on Facebook, including via Facebook Messenger, to avoid hurting his chances of receiving asylum. He took his lawyer's advice, and at the time that the first author spoke with him, he had already self-censored his advocacy work for a month. In effect, knowledge about how his receiving society would respond to his expression prevented him from being able to express at all for fear of potentially life-threatening consequences stemming from the assignment of a harmful identity: not an asylee.

Response: Participants Prepare for Audiences with Unknown Information Spaces

At the same time that participants worked to craft an audience that felt safe, they also worked to prepare themselves for engagement with audiences with less-known information spaces (receiving societies). As participants became more familiar with their new information spaces, they become more prepared to engage with riskier receiving society audiences in identity interactions. Participants described engaging in self-orienting and instrumentalizing practices to acquire more information about receiving-society norms so as to actively reshape receiving-society information spaces about refugee identities.

Participants described how books (Interviews 6Ge and 4Gr), dance (Interviews 5Gr and 9Gr), music (Interviews 5Ge, 8Ge, and 12Gr), restaurants (Interview 7Ge), school (Interviews 5Gr, 11Gr, and 13Gr), and theater acting (Interview 5Gr) provided important opportunities for them to actively self-orient around receiving society norms in environments that felt emotionally safe, or without the risk of extreme social tension. For example, one participant witnessed a Greek dance at a festival happening in a public square and gained a greater understanding of Greek traditions and norms around celebration (Interview 7Gr). Importantly, she was able to observe and participate in the dance on her own terms, to the degree that she felt comfortable. Another described instrumentalizing organizations' educational programming in order to obtain a professional certificate in three-dimensional design computer programming with a view to obtaining employment that required verification of three-dimensional design skills (Interview 13Gr). This participant self-oriented to learn that a particular kind of employment in his receiving society required his expression of self through a certificate, in order that the employer audience would assign him the identity of potential hire.

Participants used general search (Interviews 18Ge, 5Gr, and 11Gr), music listening and search (Interviews 9Ge, 5Ge, and 6Gr), and video sharing and search (Interviews 7Ge, 13Gr, and 5Gr) applications to learn about cultural norms in a chosen information space facilitated by a mobile phone. These information spaces were especially useful in navigating asylum and migration processes, and educational attainment processes (degrees, certificates, language skills, and

professional development), identifying and obtaining jobs, and receiving health care. Importantly, Internet-mediated spaces were often further mediated by a friend or family member who was perceived to have greater ability to find, read, and interpret bureaucratic websites, whether because of linguistic ability, greater digital search literacy, perception of access to trustworthy information, or having navigated a similar process before—effectively, greater familiarity with these websites’ information spaces (participant observation). Information received and internalized from each of these forms of information supported participants in understanding their audience (receiving society) and supported their ability to make choices around self-representation in the future with those understandings in mind (instrumentalizing).

Being able to instrumentalize information is not equivalent to being able to exit the prolonged liminality induced by bureaucratic processes. Nor does the instrumentalization of information support participants’ abilities to self-express in light of the self-censorship that asylum and immigration inspire. For example, one participant and her family had recently migrated to Germany from Greece because, in Greece, the health services necessary to treat serious health conditions of two of her family members were inaccessible given their legal and financial statuses (participant observation). After an emergency health incident; three months of back-and-forth via WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Skype; and with the support of local and transnational connections, it turned out there was no legal way for one family member to receive the care in Germany that he needed to survive. This example characterizes both the profound utility of information spaces (Internet-facilitated communication applications, and local and transnational personal connections), and at the same time, how despite instrumentalizing these spaces to change his situation to survive, the participant’s family member was unable to affect any meaningful change because of infrastructures beyond his control. These infrastructures as audience do not have the capacity to receive this participant’s expressions of need for medical assistance. Participants remained unable to affect certain changes in their situations because of infrastructures beyond their control.

Challenge Three: Misinformed Information Spaces

Participants described instances of being the target of racism, and consequently feeling unwelcome, unsafe, and frightened. The following sections describe these experiences.

Assignment of Harmful Identities

Several participants experienced overt racism. Two participants described experiences in Greece in which they observed people beginning to pray or cross themselves when they noticed a person with a hijab pass by them. They had experienced this behavior in relation to themselves as hijabis and felt frightened (Interview 8Gr), unwelcome, or unsafe (Interview 9Gr). In Germany, a participant described trying to connect with receiving society community members:

One time I said to a few people at the café here at [name of township], May I sit next to you? I am a foreigner and I would like to practice my German, but I don’t know any German speakers. But understand, I am married! “You are Muslim?” they asked. I didn’t like that. I’m not, but I said yes just to spite them. Since then, I haven’t tried meeting people like that again. (Interview 9Ge)

Assumptions or biases from receiving-society community members made the participant feel

unwelcome and uninterested in further engagement with community members, effectively enforcing segregation through prejudice. These expressions of racism characterize incidents in which audiences (receiving-society) assigned harmful identities to participants that were not reflective of who participants understand themselves to be.

Prevalence of Negative News Reports

Related to this assignment of harmful identities, several participants explained how the prevalence of negative news about refugees contributed to their experiences of racism. These experiences created an additional barrier to their efforts to establish a seen and respected identity in their receiving society, especially in Germany. In particular, participants cited harmful tropes in news media representing refugees as lazy and there to take money from the receiving state (Interview 11Ge); as economic migrants there to take jobs from earlier receiving-society inhabitants (Interview 6Ge); as violent religious extremists there to perpetrate terrorism against the receiving society (Interview 4Ge); or as rapists there to perpetrate sexual violence against receiving-society persons (participant observation). One participant said, “I asked a German person what they used to talk about on the news before refugees being a problem, but they just laughed and couldn’t remember” (Interview 1Ge). Interviewees described how this negative news contributed directly to their feeling unwelcome and unsafe in their receiving society, and to the information space that members of receiving societies use to formulate their assignment of harmful identity labels to persons with refugee experiences. Information circulated by institutions about refugees conflicts with refugee persons’ representations of themselves and shapes the information space from where receiving societies draw their ideas about refugees’ identities. The predominance of institutional expressions recreates barriers to participants trying to establish a seen identity by their receiving society.

Response: Reshape Receiving-Society Information Space

Participants expressed themselves in receiving-society information spaces with a view toward reshaping their receiving society’s information spaces wherefrom these societies draw their harmful and racist identity assignments. For example, participant 14Ge and others opened a café that encourages multicultural information exchange (bi-directional, from self-identified refugee community members to receiving-society community members and vice versa) through arts and community events (Interview 14Ge). One self-identified refugee community member and one Greek national co-founded a multilingual library and café space as an expression of collective self, and as a site for cultural exchange (participant observation). Another participant reported taking advantage of a similar opportunity in the form of a weekly coffee and cake exchange among self-identified refugee community members and receiving-society community members to express self and self-orient about receiving society information spaces, while forging social connections (Interview 5Ge). Each of these initiatives describe participants’ work to express through cultural exchanges in in-person information spaces in order to either consciously or unconsciously reshape receiving-society perspectives of refugee identity.

Discussion

Participants exercised tremendous effort and agency in navigating the liminality and post-liminality phases of their refugee experiences by engaging with Internet-mediated and in-person information spaces. We again draw on our integration of Goffman (1959) and Savolainen’s (2008) frameworks in describing this work (Figures 2 and 3). When experiencing challenges associated

with existing in a liminal state (e.g., suspension or a collapsed sense of time, helplessness, isolation, or loneliness), expressing themselves to an audience that has an unknown information space (like their receiving society) can feel risky or dangerous to participants. In instances in which participants did engage with audiences with unknown information spaces, they often experienced identity assignments that were unexpected or harmful and that did not align with who participants understood themselves to be (e.g., racism, negative responses to asylum applications, non-transfer of professional credentials).

To avoid risky interactions with audiences, participants focused on either finding or crafting audiences with familiar information spaces (non-human or human) and avoiding audiences with unfamiliar information spaces (e.g., circumventing certain interactions, self-censorship). Participants often optimized information spaces in terms of the degree of physical and psychological safety that each space affords. Although participants appeared to indicate a preference for in-person information spaces and audiences, in their absence participants were prepared to self-orient, instrumentalize, and express via Internet-mediated information spaces to realize their aims to the best of their ability while avoiding risky audiences.

Participants simultaneously engaged in self-orienting practices to understand the risky audience's information space by learning about its social norms, both implicit and explicit (e.g., unspoken social norms and codified legal norms). Participants indicated that both in-person and Internet-mediated information spaces are important to these practices, provided that they afford participants the opportunity to engage on their own terms and without risk of judgment or harmful identity assignment. Finally, when participants felt emotionally supported by their audiences with familiar information spaces *and* they perceived themselves to have enough information about risky audiences' information spaces, they instrumentalized their knowledge to express representations of themselves to those risky audiences. They spoke about doing so in order to actively change the information space of those audiences, which they often perceived to have inaccurate information that contributes to harmful identity assignments. In-person information spaces appeared most useful to participants in these efforts.

Despite tremendous efforts to navigate and address challenges that they faced to identity construction, participants' receiving societies' hostile information spaces contributed to receiving societies' propensity to execute harmful behaviors toward refugees. These misinformed information spaces manifested in explicit racist comments or actions by receiving societies, as well as implicit racism or exclusionary practices codified in receiving societies' legal norms related to asylum, employment, and the provision of health care, for example. Although participants exercised significant effort to contribute to and reshape these misinformed information spaces, their entrenched infrastructural nature made changing significant aspects of these information spaces largely outside of participants' control.

Theoretical Considerations

Our work with participants leads us to two important considerations for liminality as a theoretical framework in migration-related studies. First, the liminality journey is often multi-linear. The testimony of self-identified refugee persons in the study demonstrates that different aspects of self may experience liminality and post-liminality in overlapping or iterative phases of their passage. This multi-linearity plays out in participants' experiences of one aspect of self-engaging in post-liminal expression practices with a receiving-society audience, for example, while another aspect of self remains in liminal suspension orienting itself among safe audiences while

waiting or actively working toward exiting liminality. This multi-linearity offers important considerations for how to conceive of persons' information needs in identity construction in a new receiving-society context. This finding complements Caidi et al.'s (2010) work on multi-phase integration.

Second, the findings strongly suggest that pursuing a bidirectional integration model in practice requires engaging with receiving societies to understand the work they are doing to navigate identity and integration in relation to newly arrived persons. Expanding the range of perspectives to encompass both the migrant person and the agents of the associated receiving society points to an important limitation of liminality as a framework. Liminality theory tends to offload the onus and challenge of re-integration onto persons experiencing liminality, *not* onto the societies with which they wish to integrate. We see this narrative reflected in participants' experiences of integration. Future research in this area must begin to grapple with this practical unequal distribution of work implied by integration narratives, particularly by rethinking aspects of theoretical approaches like liminality that can risk exacerbating this inequality.

Policy Considerations

The research for this study has shown that self-identified refugees in Germany and Greece are already working to reshape receiving-society information spaces to foster less harmful interactions during identity construction. There are forces beyond participants' control that exacerbate challenges to identity navigation that require attention at the policy level. Participants experienced deeply complex and entrenched issues of prolonged liminality associated with long wait times for asylum, temporary asylum processes, and generally opaque asylum processes that represent a web of systemic failures to address and consider the human impacts of the policies that support this limbo.

Study participants in Germany validated existing media reports that in practice, integration experiences are unidirectional in their assignment of identity labor predominantly to refugees. The disparity between existing bidirectional policy statements and the practical unidirectional integration approach provides an opportunity for future advocacy practices to recognize and then address the disconnect between stated policies and the actual experiences of persons undergoing liminality and post-liminality associated with refugee challenges.

Study participants in Greece faced prevalent and, in some cases, dangerous challenges to well-being fostered by dehumanizing aspects of their refugee experiences. These challenges have manifested in suicide attempts, depression, and helplessness. Similar experiences have been reported by international news media describing deeply dehumanizing conditions in detention camps and treatment of newly arrived persons in Greece (Bird & Beattie, 2019; DeutscheWelle, 2018; Nye & Sands, 2018). Because Greece does not have a specific overarching integration policy, advocates for bidirectional integration at a policy level may face severe barriers to altering the dehumanizing experience of being a refugee. Alternatively, it may be that the absence of a unifying integration policy in Greece offers an opportunity for policymakers to build on lessons learned over the last decade from refugees, advocates, other receiving societies, and the growing body of scholarly research on refugee liminality referenced in this article. Although the implementation of any policy could take years to manifest, the process of developing such a policy through incorporating voices of individuals who live these realities every day—self-identified Greek persons, refugee persons, migrant persons, human persons, and others—could in itself act as a valuable healing and growth opportunity for the Greek nation at large.

Future Research Concerning Information Spaces

Future research on the liminal and post-liminal experience of refugees as they work through identity construction should focus on two obstacles associated with Internet-mediated information spaces: (a) privacy and security risks to self-expression in digital platforms and (b) the gap between agency fostered in Internet-mediated information spaces and positive engagements with receiving-society communities. Research that engages with these obstacles should focus on those privacy and security risks to mobile technology use that are particularly threatening during refugee experiences as highlighted by one participant's experience with self-censorship, and possibilities for risk mitigation. Future research should also draw on existing scholarship on online communities to investigate how to support the agency-cultivating capacity of Internet-mediated information spaces highlighted by participants' instrumentalization of navigation apps to circumvent racism, while at the same time supporting opportunities for constructive interactive identity construction experiences with receiving-society communities. Addressing these research questions might guide relevant actions to improve individuals' ability to engage even more effectively in online information spaces integral to interactive identity construction.

Additionally, future research that focuses on in-person information spaces where persons with refugee experiences are most exposed in their liminality would be useful. Of particular relevance based on the findings of our research are (a) isolation fostered by travel distances to in-person information spaces and (b) feelings of helplessness that result from the inability of persons experiencing liminality to self-orient around receiving-society legal norms. Travel distances to in-person information spaces like professional psychological support in the instance of the participant who expressed experiencing PTSD, for example, exacerbated participants' experience of isolation. Research on this topic may consider investigating receiving society housing-allocation policies' implications on travel distance to important information spaces, and mechanisms supporting safe and efficient transportation opportunities. Related, in the absence of necessary policy frameworks and action at state levels, Internet-mediated informal information often acted as the primary self-orienting information space about how to seek asylum, navigate legal procedures and resource provisions in receiving societies, and find the safest travel routes, among other logistical information. Research on these issues could include mechanisms for determining accurate and helpful information regarding policies and bureaucratic processes. These complex questions contribute to opportunities for important research in information service provision that works to ensure that pathways to asylum, at a minimum, do not become more unsafe, and ideally become safer.

Participants in this research study made clear that they are acting as agents to reshape misinformed receiving society information spaces by creating opportunities for bidirectional exchanges among self-identifying refugees and receiving society community members. As researchers, we should consider how we can participate in or advocate for spaces that support similar kinds of bidirectional exchanges that participants in our study highlighted. Research in this capacity would consider engaging participatory action principles (Lewin, 1946) to ensure that research reflects needs and interests of these initiatives' communities.

Conclusion

This article has described how individuals engage in self-orienting, instrumentalizing, and expressing practices in Internet-mediated and in-person information spaces to navigate identity

construction during liminal and post-liminal phases of their refugee experiences, and the challenges that they face in so doing. Our findings demonstrate that participants exercise agency in addressing these challenges by engaging in a rich mix of information spaces, but that some of these challenges are grounded in the policies and perceptions of the receiving society and the logics of integration are outside of newly arrived refugees' control. Directions for future work should support these persons' existing agency and address those challenges outside their control. In spite of its genuine insights for research motivation, liminality theory is limited as a framework for understanding identity construction in migration contexts because it offloads the onus of identity work onto the person experiencing liminality (in this case a person navigating migration experiences) and deemphasizes the identity work that a receiving society must do. To understand what work receiving societies must do to realize integration with newly arrived persons, future research must engage with methods that recognize and emphasize the responsibility of receiving societies in integration.

Endnote

¹ Our interview protocol, including structured and semi-structured prompts, is available at <https://doi.org/10.7302/nw92-zt29> (Schöpke-Gonzalez et al. 2020).

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Angela M. Schöpke-Gonzalez (aschopke@umich.edu) is a researcher, choreographer, and educator pursuing a PhD at the University of Michigan School of Information. Her work draws inspiration from deep investigations of history, civic engagement, policy perspectives, and emotional narratives. Prior to beginning her doctoral studies, she founded project Dance Afghanistan (2016-present, Greece / Germany / U.S.); worked as a Natural Language Processing and Machine Learning Research Assistant to support research about social, political, and cultural information networks (2018-2019, University of Michigan); and choreographed and performed *Two Women, One Map* (2017, New York / Philadelphia) and assistant choreographed work for opera *Mata Hari* (2017, New York). Schöpke-Gonzalez holds an M.S. in Information and B.A. in Dance and International Affairs.

Andrea Thomer (athomer@umich.edu) is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Information. She studies how people use and create data and metadata; the impact of information organization on information use; issues of data provenance, reproducibility, and integration; and long-term data curation and infrastructure sustainability. She is studying a number of these issues through the "Migrating Research Data Collections" project—a recently awarded Laura Bush 21st Century Librarianship Early Career Research Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Dr. Thomer received her doctorate in Library and Information Science from the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2017.

Paul Conway (pconway@umich.edu) is associate professor at the University of Michigan School of Information. His research and teaching focus is on archival studies, the ethics of new technologies, and the digitization and preservation of cultural heritage resources, particularly audio-visual materials. Prior to joining the University of Michigan faculty in 2006, he was an archivist at the National Archives and Records Administration, Preservation Program Officer for the Society of American Archivists, and a senior administrator for the libraries at Yale University and Duke University. He holds a PhD from the University of Michigan (1991) and is a Distinguished Fellow of the Society of American Archivists (1997).