

# The Impact of COVID-19 on the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands



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## *1. Summary*

In this thesis, the impact of COVID-19 on the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands is researched. With the help of a theoretical framework from existing literature, a few indicators are set up which can determine one's integration into a foreign country. With semi-structured, in-depth interviews, those indicators are asked to 4 participants, who arrived in the Netherlands in the past 5 years. At first, their lives before the pandemic started are being mapped, and after that, the changes that the participants experienced in the last year are being asked for the same indicators like the ones for their lives before the pandemic. It came forward that the pandemic did have a significant impact on their lives. Before the pandemic, the participants were learning the Dutch language, were working in bars and hotels, were going to physical classes, which are all indicators for integrating into society. In the past year, this changed dramatically, with the loss of jobs and following classes online, which resulted in seeing their colleagues and classmates less or even not at all. Learning the Dutch language was put on hold, as physical meetings with language coaches did not occur anymore. The participants felt isolated, resulting in feelings of stress and loneliness. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has harmed the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands.

## **2. Introduction**

### **2.1 Background**

In the last decade, there has been the 'Arab spring', the EU-Turkey deal, the Syrian (civil) war, the dangerous crossings of the Mediterranean Sea by boat, from Africa, but also Turkey. Leading to a flow of immigrants, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. These events in part served as precursors for the refugee crisis in the European Union which started in 2014. The Current situation in Camp Moria is degrading (Oel, 2020). The European Union is strongly divided amongst the member states, as the southern countries, such as Greece, Malta, and Italy are hit the hardest by the constant flow of refugees and asylum seekers, because of their location close to Africa, and Turkey (Eurostat, 2018).

The flow of immigrants from outside the European Union hit its peak in 2015. But from the beginning of 2017, the trend has begun to moving up again. This saw the inflow of migrants EU reaching 2,4 million in 2018 as compared to 2,6 million that arrived in 2015 (Eurostat, 2018). The European Union seems to have moved into a more protective state, than into a continent with a positive attitude towards asylum seekers (Park, 2015). At the end of 2018, there were, according to the numbers of the UNHCR, 101.837 refugees in the Netherlands (Vluchtelingenwerk, 2019). Integration is a two-way process and hosting countries might not be as welcoming towards refugees, leading to a rise in right-wing movements politically. However, studies have shown that the opinion towards refugees has been mostly positive, and people are likely to help the refugees (Onraet et al., 2019). The interaction between refugees and the host country together forms the process of integration, and this thesis analyzes the lived experiences of refugees who came to the Netherlands. The current pandemic going on puts a lot of pressure on people all over the world. For refugees, however, who often do not have the same opportunities or social interactions as non-refugees in a country, the impact of a pandemic can be much more severe (Edmonds and Flahault, 2021). For this research, the question is how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the integration process is being experienced by refugees in the Netherlands. There have been previous studies on the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands. (Paz Aléncar, Tsagkroni, 2019), for example, emphasize the importance of social bonds and linkages for refugees to actively participate in society. In 2020 however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of social contact has been heavily limited. With this thesis, the aim is to add information about how the COVID-19 pandemic might have influenced the integration process, in a way that the social bonds and linkages, thus participating in a host country society, have been hindered with a focus on the lived experiences of refugees.

### **2.2 Research problem**

This research aims to identify what the impact of COVID-19 has been on the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands. This leads to the following main research question:  
*What is the impact of COVID-19 on the integration process of refugees?*

### 2.3 Structure of the thesis

In the following section, the relevant concepts for this research will be outlined, followed by the conceptual model. The next chapter will discuss the methodology, the ethical considerations, and the positionality of the researcher. After that, the results are discussed and linked to the theory, followed by the conclusion and further recommendations.

### 3. Theoretical framework

To get a better understanding of how to conceptualize integration, Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) have differentiated three dimensions of integration. The clearest definition of integration is ‘the process of becoming an accepted part of society’. The three dimensions are: integrated in a (1) legal-political way, (political rights and statuses) a (2) socio-economic way (access to health care, education, housing, and the labor market). The Legal-political and socio-economic dimensions are more linked to the host country and terms as accommodation and incorporation come up with these two dimensions. Last, there is a (3) cultural-religious way Concepts as adaptation, acculturation, and assimilation can be linked to this dimension. In this research, the focus will be on the socio-economic and cultural-religious dimensions.

Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016) use the Heuristic model (figure 1), to visualize the different actors that take part in the integration of an immigrant in a host country.

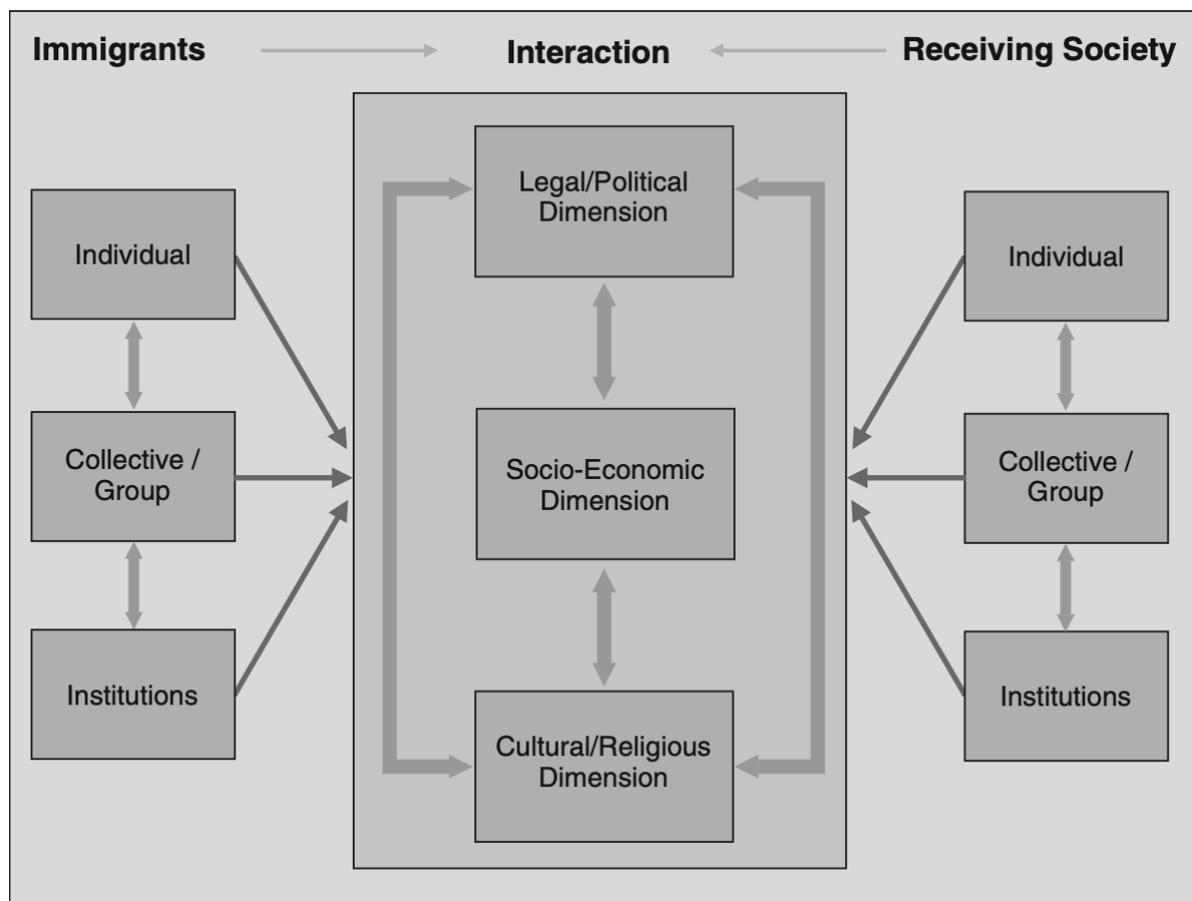


Figure 1. The Heuristic model used by Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas, (2016).

This model stresses the fact that the interaction between immigrants on the one hand, and the receiving society, on the other hand, determines the outcome of the integration process.

Ager and Strang (2008) Define different domains of integration that help to get a better understanding of different factors that can determine one's integration into a host society. They also say that '*integration is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration.*' The concept continues to be controversial and hotly debated. In a response to that, they came up with a framework that contains ten core domains reflecting normative understandings of integration.

- Employment is seen as an important factor because it provides economic independence, meeting members of the host society, improving language skills, restoring self-esteem, and encouraging self-reliance. Further education and improving language skills are seen as an important measure to improve integration, as they tend to lead to an improved position in the labor market.
- Housing is the second domain that Ager and Strang (2008) discuss. Proper housing has a positive effect on the overall physical and emotional well-being of immigrants, and their feeling of being 'at home'.
- Education is important for better chances at employment, and therefore being able to become an active member of society. Besides better chances on the job market, schools provide an important place where not only refugees' children encounter members of the host society, but also parents view schools as an, if not the most important place to build bonds which help to integrate into a hosts' society.
- The last one is Health, a core factor in integration, as it is seen as an important way for active engagement in a new society. These four areas are seen as key aspects for integrating into a new society and therefore useful to use them for defining integration.

Apart from the 'markers and means' (housing, employment, education, and health), There is also the part of social connection, which can be divided into three forms of connection: social bonds (with family, co-ethnic, co-national, co-religious, or other forms of a group) social bridges (with other communities) and social links (with the structures of state). These forms offer further clarification or help explain local integration.

- Social bonds are highly valued by refugees because it allows them to share their cultural standards, and to keep familiar patterns of relationships. This helps the refugees in feeling settled. Besides the feeling of settlement, social bonds also tend to have a positive influence on the (mental) health of refugees, where studies have found that 'refugees who do not have a like-ethnic community available to them may suffer a risk of depression three to four times as high as others who have access to this resource' (Robinson, 2016)
- Social bridges are about links/relationships between different communities. Where a positive relation between feeling 'at home' and friendliness of the hosts' society can be found. Small acts of friendship seem to have a great impact on the level of secureness and confidence of refugees. Shared activities, such as sports, college classes, or community groups helped refugees feeling 'at home'.
- *Social links* are about links between individuals and structures of the state. This is not always as optimal as it should be, due to language constraints and refugees not being familiar with their surroundings.

Lastly, there are two main ‘facilitators’ distinguished by Ager and Strang, (2008), which could benefit the ‘social connections’, as well as the ‘markers and means’ when it comes to local integration.

- The first facilitator is *Language and Cultural Knowledge*. Being able to speak the language of the host country is seen as a key factor in the integration process. When a refugee does not speak the local language, it may hinder them in social interaction, economic integration, and full participation. Cultural knowledge works for both the refugees as well as the non-refugees in understanding each other better.
- *Safety and Stability* is the second facilitator. Safety helps refugees with feeling more 'at home' in society, and the non-refugees are more tolerant when they don't have the feeling that the refugees cause unrest in their community.

These domains can be put together into an overview, as shown below (Table 1)

Means and Markers	Employment	Housing	Education	Health
Social Connections	Social bridges	Social bonds	Social links	
Facilitators	Language and cultural knowledge	Safety and stability		

Table 1. Ager and Strang’s (2008) refugee integration framework

### 3.1 Conceptual model

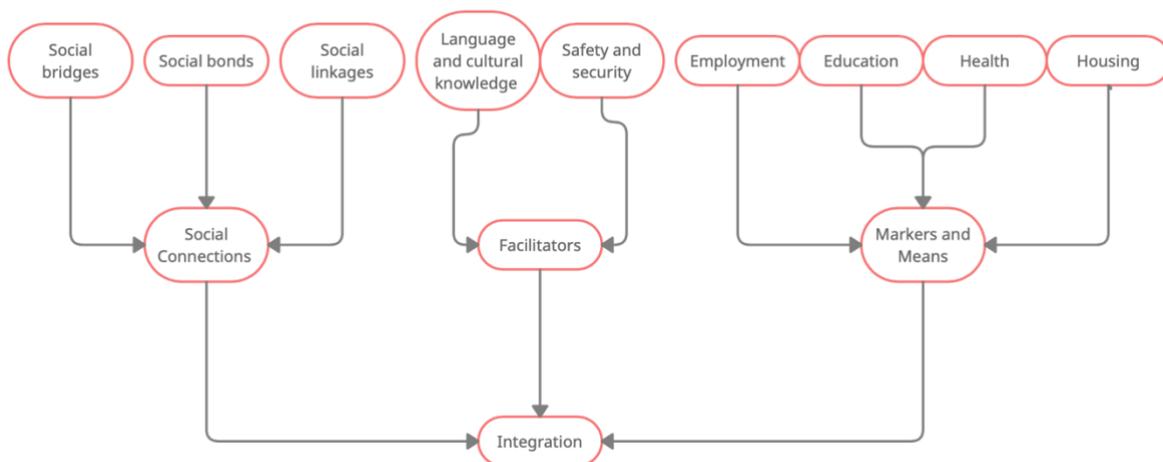


Figure 2. Conceptual model designed by author (2021).

From the theoretical framework, several concepts came forward that determine integration for refugees. This conceptual model is used in the analysis as the theoretical lens through which the results will be viewed.

### ***3.2 Expectations***

Before gathering data and analyzing it, there is an expectation for this research. Integration is linked to participation in society. The COVID-19 pandemic might have harmed one's abilities to participate in society. The expectation for this research is therefore that the integration process of refugees is negatively influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ***4. Methodology***

Integration is a non-linear concept and is hard to put into numbers. Integration is prone to people's views and impressions. Therefore, a qualitative method, with in-depth interviews seems like a better fit for this topic. By contacting NGOs like Vluchtelingenwerk and Humanitas Groningen, I gained access to refugee communities and found participants willing to have an interview, talking about their experiences so far and how the past year has been in terms of integration. By analyzing those interviews and linking them to the domains described in the theoretical framework, the aim is to get a sense of how the refugees experienced coming to the Netherlands and the impact of COVID-19 has been.

### ***4.1 Qualitative Research***

In this research, a qualitative method is used in a way of conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are the most fitting way for data collection for this research because of the descriptive nature that is needed for the data (Bernard, 2006). The information that is being shared by the participants is sensitive. By conducting the interviews one on one, the ethical hazard is kept as low as possible. With this research, the lived experiences of the participants are crucial for answering the research question(s), as it could give a better insight into what domains of integration the impact of COVID-19 is experienced the most, and in what way.

### ***4.2 Participants***

The sampling method is snowballing (Hennink et al., 2020). Starting with contacting the NGO's Humanitas and Vluchtelingenwerk, Humanitas came with a participant that was willing to answer questions about the impact of COVID-19 on his integration process in the Netherlands. Through that participant, I came in touch with several of his friends from the same ethnic community, which were also willing to have an interview. The participants all came to the Netherlands in the last 5 years, amidst the refugee crisis mentioned in the introduction. The first interview took place in a public park, as to the participant's liking. The other interviews took place online, as the participants preferred staying at home, to keep contact with other people to a minimum.

### ***4.3 Ethical considerations***

All participants have verbally agreed on an informed consent paper, agreeing that the interviews are being recorded, so that the interviewer could use the transcripts later for the analysis. After that, the recordings are deleted. The anonymity of the participants is also guaranteed. Also, before each interview, the interviewer informed them with a short introduction of what the research and interview will be about. The introduction also acted as a way of giving the participant time to feel at ease before starting the interview. The first few questions were more general, to let the participant come into the feeling of answering questions, and from there on, the more specific, theory-related questions were asked.

### ***4.4 Positionality***

In terms of my research, the issues of potential influences or inherent biases due to my positionality are worthy to highlight. As a researcher, one's positionality relating to gender, personal ideologies, religion, or political orientation can have implications for the validity and outcome of the research. In considering my positionality as the researcher in this study context, I started this research as an outsider from the topic of integration. As a white, Dutch, non-religious person, my preconceptions about integration in the Netherlands might have influenced the research process.

From my point of view, integration is something that is of utmost importance. Refugees from countries where they cannot be safe anymore should be welcome in the Netherlands and given the opportunity to build a new life here. As a 26-year-old, middle-class, Dutch, white, and politically left-wing voter, my interest in the topic of integration comes from a strong feeling of justice and equality. Three primary ways set up by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), in which a researcher may identify and assess their circumstances are used to get a better view of my positionality. Firstly, my perspectives on the subject. From my position, integration is something I am unfamiliar with. This might have led to preconceptions that were unjust, or biased due to the lack of unfamiliarity. Secondly, my position towards the respondents. All the respondents have a different ethnic background, compared to mine. In those terms, I can be seen as an outsider from their communities. On the other hand, in terms of age and gender, I can be seen as an insider, as I share the same gender and age with all the respondents.

By doing critical reflexivity to ascertain my own likely biases, it was vital in being more conscious about the possible influences this might have in how I probe and discuss the emerging issues on the topic of focus. Given this proactive self-reflection, the strategy during the period of data collection was to start my interviews with an informal talk about common interests or hobbies. I tried to minimize the outsider position by creating an atmosphere where the respondents would see me as someone that is, in some terms, equal to them. Thirdly, locating myself regarding the research process and context. My position as an outsider ultimately influences the research data and results. I might not be able to grasp the true urgency of the respondent's problems, as I have not experienced them myself. All data is collected, interpreted, and presented as neutral as possible. By this, I tried to get the emic perspectives from the migrants themselves in the quest to discuss the issues based on their views and lived

experiences. Whilst I may be pro-integration in my personal views, I have been conscious of not letting this cloud my judgments or allow my subject views to dictate what I exactly want to hear. However, Ormston et al. (2014) say that all research is eventually influenced by the researcher and that there is no absolute neutral or objective knowledge. Throughout the research process, I became more familiar with the stories of the respondents but stayed as objective as possible by sticking with the same interview questions as the first interview that was conducted.

#### ***4.5 Data collection***

The interview is made up out of a short introduction, where the interviewer talks about the aim of the research and lets the participants ease into the interview. The interview starts with a couple of general questions about the participants' age, about how long they have been in the Netherlands as well as where they currently live. From there on, the interview takes a more serious turn and the themes in the theoretical framework are being discussed. At first, the participant's situation in terms of integration is being examined, by asking them about their education situation, and if they are employed. After that, their social interactions within and outside their communities are asked about. After the participant has answered those questions, the interviewer asks the participants about how the last year has impacted (or not) their education, their work, and their social interactions.

#### ***4.6 Data analysis***

Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework, with at first the four 'markers and means', Employment, Housing, Education and Health. After that, the interview went on to the participants' 'Social Connections' (Ager and Strang 2008), which consist of the social bridges, the social bonds, and lastly, the social links. These are the deductive themes that all got their theme in the coding process. During the interviews, several inductive themes came up during the coding process and could be linked to the already existing deductive themes from the theoretical framework. With the help of the software Atlas.ti the codes and themes were put together into a Co-occurrence table (appendix 1) where the theme 'Impact COVID-19' is seen as co-occurring in every other code or theme, except the housing code.

## 5. Results

Through the semi-structured interviews conducted with 4 participants, which all sought refuge in the Netherlands in the past 5 years, the impact of COVID-19 has been measured by first asking the participants about their lives in the Netherlands before the COVID-19 crisis happened. Through the markers and means by Ager and Strang (2008), their experience can be divided into several categories. The participants were asked about the indicators of integration established by Ager and Strang (2008) and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is measured by asking the participants about the same indicators, but then if there were any changes in the last year.

### 5.1 Housing

All the participants were asked about where, and how they live, and what they think of the importance of having a good housing situation is and if they feel happy in their homes. This can also be linked to their social bonds and interactions with, for example, their neighbors (Ager and Strang, 2008). When they were placed in a home where they could start and build their own lives again, they felt like they had a good basis on which they could start to develop a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. Their housing situation has not been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, since they were all living in their current homes before the pandemic happened and stayed there in the past year.

### 5.2 Employment

The participants all had a job before the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Employment is one of the ways in which a refugee can participate in a host society, with social bonds and social bridges emerging from interaction with people from other communities, who are viewed as colleagues and contribute to a feeling of belonging (Ager and Strang, 2008) The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the loss of job opportunities, and it was experienced by the participants in ways of seeing colleagues less often, or even the complete loss of colleagues. Two participants lost their job because of the pandemic.

*“I used to have a job, but my contract was not renewed, because of the COVID-19. I certainly lost my job around December, you know. But now, I applied for a new education and my former work is willing to take me back because, you know, my study is related to my work. I feel lucky that they want me back. So yeah, I’m going to start studying again, and hopefully, start working again soon.” – Participant 3*

*“(…) yeah, I, I, didn’t do a lot of stuff. Actually, No. I could not do anything. Literally nothing. I spent a lot of time being stuck at home. My work stopped, and there was not much I could do. And on top of that, there was the lockdown of course.” – Participant 3*

The participant discusses the fact that he lost his job which was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He worked in a hotel and business was closed, so there was no work for him available anymore. The other participant, albeit because of a different reason, also lost his job because of the COVID-19 pandemic:

*“(...) hell yeah. I got an internship when the academic year started in September. When I was in for one month and a half, I got an email which said that I could not have a job outside my internship, due to the chance of getting infected.” – Participant 2*

The loss of jobs also resulted in the loss of colleagues and seeing them less than before. Seeing and working with colleagues helps with developing a sense of belonging, and with the loss of that, integration of a refugee is impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because a part of integration, as stated by Ager and Strang (2008), is social interaction with people from other communities in the workplace. Participant 4 used to go out with his colleagues, with people from outside his community. Building bonds with people from outside their community helps to integrate. The impact of COVID-19 on integration is experienced again since the participant is limited in his activities with colleagues.

*“(...) yeah, yeah, I also had some Dutch colleagues. Before corona, we would go out together in the weekends, it was fun you know.” – Participant 4*

### **5.3 Health**

Ager and Strang (2008) see health as a core indicator of one's integration. In this research, the focus is mainly on the mental health of the participants. In a previous study by Van Heelsum (2017), it became clear that refugees are vulnerable to health issues like depression, mainly caused by sudden loneliness and experienced trauma. Apart from not going out as often as before, the COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative influence on the mental health of the participants. They experienced feelings of stress, or helplessness.

*“(...) yeah, man. First you have the stress. This is abnormal. I cannot describe this. The entire year, we could not do anything. I just don't get it. All the restaurants are closed, all the public spaces are closed. I cannot do anything from 10 o'clock in the evening.” – Participant 4*

Other participants said that being alone made him feel alone and isolated, and the lack of understanding of the whole situation resulted in feelings of stress.

*“You are just on your own, you know. You think by yourself: hey, what is going on? And that certainly has an impact on my state of mind” – Participant 1*

*“(...) well, yeah, just the curfew. I just don't get it. It gives me stress. Everyone is stressed out. I like to work out, but I just can't do anything.” – Participant 4*

Feelings of stress and loneliness are being experienced by the participants, and it has been proven that refugees are vulnerable to health issues like depression. The COVID-19 pandemic influences the mental health of the participants in a way that because of not being able to go out and meet friends, colleagues, or classmates in person anymore.

#### **5.4 Education**

In the theoretical framework, Ager and Strang (2008) state education is of importance for integration. This is because, firstly, education provides better chances in the labor market. Secondly, schools are an important place for interaction between refugees and people from the host society. Due to the closing of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic one participant, who is still in school, talked about the increased difficulty of learning and understanding the course material. The research participant explained that:

*“You got a lot less explanation to help you understand things, you know. If I don’t understand things, I normally could just go up and ask the teacher. But now, you know, you just get a chapter that is being done in one or two classes, and that’s it. It had to be done during those online classes. When we had physical classes, it took us more time to deal with chapters, but since everything is done online, it goes a lot faster, you know.” – Respondent 1*

The online classes are experienced as more difficult, which could lead to a delay in his study. This leads to postponed access to the labor market, and employment is beneficial to integration.

Another participant is also in school and talked about how the form of education has changed dramatically. For him, the interaction with fellow students resulted in him establishing bonds with people from outside his community. The last year, however, almost all his classes were taught online, and he was mostly sitting at home and following the lectures. This also resulted in problems for him in terms of motivation and how he had trouble understanding the course material. He noted in his submission that:

*“It has got a lot harder. For me, the online classes. The physical classes were better. (...) I don’t like it. Physical is a lot better for me. When I am at home, I get distracted much easier, you know. I spend a lot more time doing things that are not related to school.” – Respondent 2*

Both respondents are still in school, but experienced difficulties in the past year. Not only in terms of motivation, but also in acquiring knowledge about the material that is being taught. For people struggling with the Dutch language, online classes are proven to be more difficult. The learning system is seen as more difficult, with fewer opportunities to ask questions regarding the course material. Ager and Strang, (2008) stress the importance of the social aspect of schools, and in the interview with respondent 2, he talked about not seeing his classmates anymore. This resulted, for him, in a delay in gaining knowledge about the Dutch language. Language is one of the facilitators, which comes forward in the articles by Ager and Strang (2008) and Penninx and Garcés-Mascareñas (2016). This will be viewed more thoroughly later in the result section.

#### **5.5 Social bonds**

The most important domains that came out during the interviews were the social interactions within or outside the participants’ communities. The social interactions were stressed as very important and impactful on their lives and their well-being. Ager and Strang (2008) call social bonds (interactions within one's community) important because of the shared cultural standards and familiar patterns of relationships. This is seen in one of the interviews, where participant 3 talks about the difficulties with the Dutch language.

*“Sometimes it is hard if you talk a lot in Dutch, I sometimes get a headache when I must talk a lot in Dutch. I have to think a lot before I say something in Dutch before I say it out loud.”*  
– Participant 3

This adds up to the theory by Ager and Strang (2008) where a shared language makes interaction with other people easier. The participants were asked about their friendships with people who share the same ethnicity and have the same native language. Participant 3 was first asked about his friends:

*“(…) yes, yes, of course. I have my best friends here and we together form a small group of close friends.”* – Participant 3

After that, the participant was asked about how it has changed in the past year:

*“(…) and I think it really has become less. My best friends, we didn’t, no, we didn’t do very much together. We spent most of our time at home”* – Participant 3

Other participants also mentioned how their social bonds over the past year have changed:

*“Absolutely a lot less, you know. A year ago, I could just meet up with friends, you know, but yeah, we don’t see each other that much anymore. It’s difficult.”* – Participant 4

*“Actually, we would just go to a hookah bar sometimes, just to be together, you know.”* – Participant 1

Both participants experienced a decline over the last year regarding the social bonds that they have established in their time in the Netherlands. The closing of bars and restaurants negatively impacted the options on how they were able to hang out with their friends. This is also described in a previous study by Paz Aléncar and Tsagkroni (2019), where they state that social bonds are key to establishing further social connections.

### **5.6 Social linkages**

Ager and Strang (2008) describe social linkages as the interaction between an individual and structures of the state. None of the participants mentioned how the interaction between them and the structures of the state have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **5.7 Social bridges**

Besides the social bonds, the social bridges from an important factor in the integration process of refugees. Ager and Strang (2008) define social bridges as interactions between a refugee and people from outside their community, in this case, people from the Netherlands. For example, one respondent started at a football club in Hoogkerk, and his team in which he played was, outside of himself, made up out of people of Dutch nationality. This resulted in him building bonds with people from the Netherlands and helped him with feeling more 'at home' in the Netherlands.

*"(...) but yeah, I was in a football team and yeah, we saw each other almost every week. We were hanging out or something like that. The football club is the place where we met, but nowadays you cannot do that anymore. I got used to seeing my friends from football every week, and we were hanging out every weekend or so, or with classmates or other friends. You see a lot of different people, you know. But at a certain moment, it just stopped. Everything was canceled." – Participant 1*

The respondents all said that the amount of time that they spent at home has dramatically increased. They felt isolated and alone. In the article by Van Liempt and Millet (2021), the feeling of isolation and loneliness hinders refugees in their process of homemaking. The participant is experiencing the impact of COVID-19 on his social bridges in ways that he spends most of his time on his own, resulting in a feeling of isolation and loneliness. As highlighted in the interview below, the participant intimated that:

*"(...) yeah. but you just get kind of depressed, you know. You are just sitting at home all the time, everything is closed. Because of that, you cannot go anywhere, you know. I don't see my friends as often as I would like, yeah, sometimes, but not every week or so." – Participant 1*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic happened, he was outgoing, seeing friends, and going to work and school, but the past year was a serious setback. Another participant described the setback as follows:

*"Mainly the social interactions. Before corona, I also was in touch with Dutch people around the neighborhood, friends that sometimes invited me over to their place. That was once a week or something, you know. Just for a cup of coffee or something because it was just around the corner." – Participant 2*

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social bridges becomes clear in ways that the shared activities that refugees have, such as sports or college classes (Ager and Strang, 2008) have become limited. The loss of these shared activities hindered the respondents in further building bridges with people outside their community.

### **5.8 Safety and stability**

Ager and Strang (2008) name Safety and stability as one of the facilitators for the further markers and means for integration into a foreign country. During the interviews, the issue of safety and stability was not mentioned by any of the participants, and thus it has not been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic for them. All the participants have been in the Netherlands for a longer period and established a safe and stable environment for themselves.

### **5.9 Language and cultural knowledge**

Understanding of the (in this case) Dutch language is seen by both Ager and Strang (2008) and Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016) as key for refugees for integration into the Netherlands. For the participants, language is also seen as a key facilitator for participating in a new society. The shared language with other refugees in the Netherlands is given as a reason why those bonds were from early on very accessible and how those bonds helped them with integrating within their host' country society. Understanding and knowledge of the Dutch language is something that all the participants actively pursued and especially participant 2 talked about his experienced difficulties with gaining understanding about the Dutch language

and how the COVID-19 pandemic hindered him in this process. The omittance of physical classes limited him in his opportunities for interaction with his Dutch classmates and learning the Dutch language.

*“(...) I could just make a lot of contact with fellow classmates because they were Dutch and that is a lot better for my process of learning the Dutch language.” – Participant 2*

Besides not having physical contact with his classmates anymore, participant 2 also had help from a language coach who helped him learn the Dutch language. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he has not seen him for almost a year and therefore has had less help with learning the Dutch language

*“I also had a language coach who helped me with my assignments that I got from school, and we would look at them together to figure out the meaning of certain Dutch words. But now I have not seen him for almost a year” – Participant 2*

Before the pandemic, the meetings were physical, and the language coach helped him with their physical meetings where he would gain knowledge about the Dutch language.

### 5.10 Adjusted conceptual model

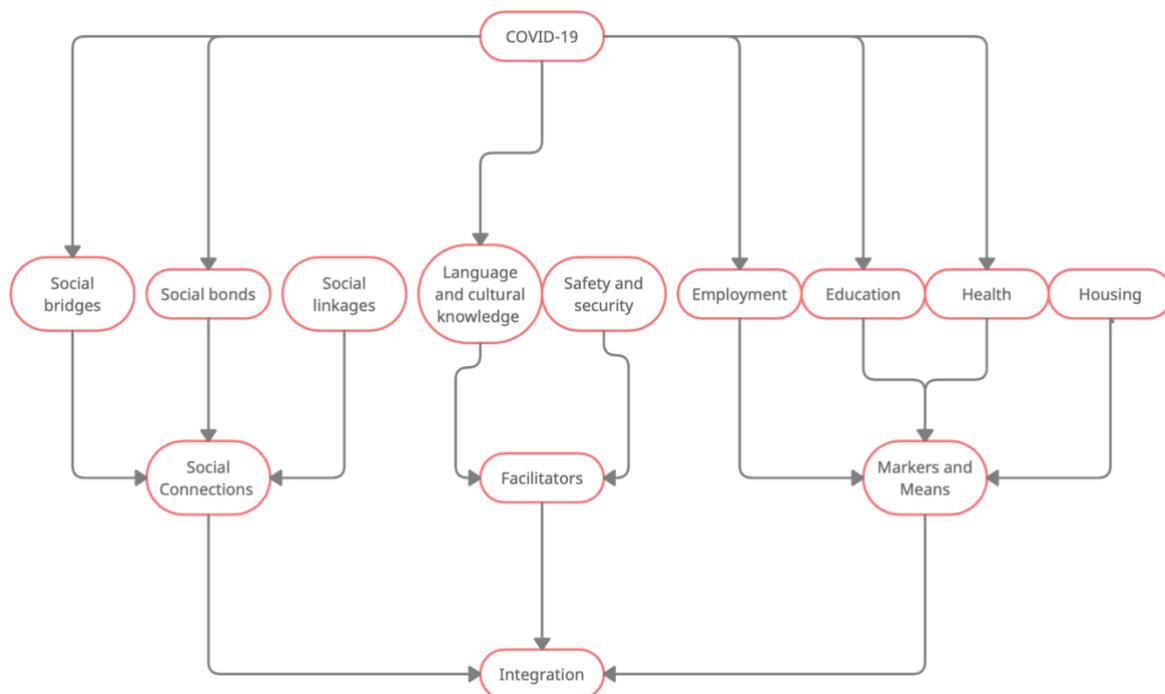


Figure 3. Adjusted conceptual model designed by author (2021).

In the adjusted conceptual model, it can be seen what the impact of COVID-19 has been on the integration process. In both the social connections, the facilitators, and the markers and means, COVID-19 has had a negative influence on the integration. From the results, it did not occur that the participants experienced a negative impact on their housing situation, their safety and stability, or their social linkages. Therefore, in this research, the impact of COVID-19 is not proven, and those factors are excluded from the COVID-19 factor.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this thesis, the impact of COVID-19 on the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands is researched. Through the framework by Ager and Strang (2008), multiple indicators of one's integration are set up, and by conducting in-depth interviews with several participants that have settled in the Netherlands over the past few years, where at first their lives before the pandemic started are ought to be captured, and after that, how their lives have changed in the last year during the pandemic. To answer the research question '*What is the impact of COVID-19 on the integration process of refugees?*' 4 participants, all with their own lives, whether they are working or are still in class, experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as an event that hindered them in their process of integration. The Co-occurrence table (appendix 1) shows that almost all factors, being deductive or inductive derived, have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. In both the socio-economic and the cultural-religious dimensions by Penninx and Garcés-Masareñas (2016) the impact of COVID-19 can be seen. In the socio-economic dimension where work and education are the two most occurring themes, the pandemic had a negative impact in a way that participants had to quit their job due to the closing of the bars and restaurants, or where they had to follow classes online. Both work and school are factors that help with the integration process because it gives refugees the opportunities to build social bridges with people from outside their (co-ethnic) community. The loss of these opportunities leads to a setback in their integration process. In the cultural-religious dimension, the pandemic influenced the participants in a way that they cannot follow Dutch classes anymore. Therefore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is that the participants in this research experienced difficulties with their education, their employment, their mental health, social interactions, and learning the Dutch language.

### **6.1 Further research**

Despite the research being done with a small group of participants, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic became clear in different indicators that determine integration. The pandemic is currently still going on, and the results in this research are therefore mainly short-term. For further research, it could be both interesting as well as necessary to find out what these short-term effects could mean for the long-term effects on the integration process of refugees in the Netherlands.

## ***6.2 Reflection***

During the research process, I encountered multiple difficulties. In the beginning, I was struggling with the abstractness of the research, and how I could find and conceptualize my topic. Later, after developing my theoretical framework, the road ahead became clearer, and this became even better after conducting the first two interviews. I became more familiar with how to conduct an interview and the interaction with the participants was rewarding and I got the feeling that the participants were happy to share their personal stories with me. The coding process was again a bit abstract in the beginning, but eventually, as the codes emerged, it went smoother. The limited number of participants worried me, but there are some interesting results that makes me feel like the research mattered.

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## 8. Appendices

### 8.1 Appendix 1 – Co-occurrence table

	education Gr=10	family Gr=4	friends Gr=7	going out Gr=10	health Gr=4	housing Gr=5	Impact COVID Gr=40	language Gr=9	missing Gr=6	Social bonds Gr=13	social bridges Gr=18	Social Linkages Gr=9	sports Gr=3	work Gr=9
education Gr=10	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	2	0	0	1	1	0	2
family Gr=4	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
friends Gr=7	0	0	0	2	0	0	5	1	2	4	1	0	0	0
going out Gr=10	0	1	2	0	2	0	9	0	2	2	2	0	0	0
health Gr=4	0	0	0	2	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
housing Gr=5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Impact COVID Gr=40	6	2	5	9	4	0	0	2	6	5	11	0	2	4
language Gr=9	2	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	3	1	0	0
missing Gr=6	0	1	2	2	1	0	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social bonds Gr=13	0	0	4	2	0	0	5	2	0	0	7	0	0	0
social bridges Gr=18	1	0	1	2	0	0	11	3	0	7	0	0	2	0
Social Linkages Gr=9	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
sports Gr=3	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
work Gr=9	2	0	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Co-occurrence table, from atlas.ti

## *8.2 Appendix 2 - Interview Guide*

Interview will be done online, due to the COVID-19 regulations. So, before starting the interview, start with a short introduction about who I am, what my thesis is about, and inform the interviewee about the fact that the interview will be recorded, so that I can later analyze and transcribe the interview that has been conducted. Tell the participant that he/she always has the option to quit the interview when they don't feel comfortable, or don't feel like answering the questions anymore, and that that's perfectly okay. I will also tell them that I will not use their real names, and that the recordings of the interviews are solely for me and will not be shared with anyone else. I will guarantee their anonymity, and that the answers they give might be used for later analysis.

The technique will be semi-structured, so that I, the interviewer, can stick to the themes described in my theoretical framework, and make the data eligible for analysis. However, Integration is not a closed concept and is open to people's experiences. With a semi-structured interview, there is room for the participants to express their lived experiences.

### *Starting Questions:*

How are you doing?

What city do you live?

How old are you?

What is your current housing situation? Do you live alone? Or do you live with other people

How did you end up at your current situation?

What help did you receive from the Dutch government, or other organizations?

### *Main Themes:*

Are you employed?

Do you go to school?

How much time do you spend at home?

Can you name examples of social interactions that you have with other people?

How often do you see your friends?

### *Follow-up questions*

Did this change during the past year?

How did that make you feel?

### 8.3 Appendix 3 – Informed consent

#### TOESTEMMINGSFORMULIER

Betreft: onderzoek naar invloed corona op integratie

Ik verklaar hierbij op voor mij duidelijke wijze te zijn ingelicht over de aard, methode en doel van het onderzoek.

Ik begrijp dat:

O ik mijn medewerking aan dit onderzoek kan stoppen op ieder moment en zonder opgave van reden

O gegevens anoniem worden verwerkt, zonder herleidbaar te zijn tot de persoon

O de opname vernietigd wordt na uitwerking van het interview

Ik verklaar dat ik:

O geheel vrijwillig bereid ben aan dit onderzoek mee te doen

O de uitkomsten van dit interview verwerkt mogen worden in een verslag of wetenschappelijke publicatie

O toestemming geef om het interview op te laten nemen door middel van een voice-recorder

Handtekening: .....

Naam: .....

Datum: .....

Onderzoeker Ik heb mondeling toelichting verstrekt over de aard, methode en doel van het onderzoek. Ik verklaar mij bereid nog opkomende vragen over het onderzoek naar vermogen te

beantwoorden.

Handtekening: .....

Naam: .....

Datum: .....