Between uncertainty and hope: A qualitative analysis of how young, highly educated Europeans perceive the acceptance of refugees into Europe

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of young and highly educated individuals on accepting refugees into their local societies. Following the mass displacement of individuals post 2015 conflicts in Syria, accepting refugees into Europe is dominating the discourse within the region. This study approaches the issue from the standpoint of the host society with the focus on the socio-demographic group made up of young and highly educated Europeans. It aims to fill the gaps in research by qualitatively investigating the complex perceptions held on this subject. It further explorers the evolution of these perceptions within the wider social discourse when actual or perceived impacts of immigration become salient. The research question leading this study is: 'how do young, highly educated Europeans perceive accepting refugees into Europe?" Fifteen participants have been interviewed for this study. The Social Identity Theory is utilized to conduct the theoretical analysis of this research. The findings unveiled three key themes – participants' individual perceptions on accepting refugees are moderately positive; they are driven by humanitarian concerns; they evolve from personal to social context in a positively inclined manner; and three subthemes – participants' perceptions on accepting refugees were largely shaped by other people; these perceptions are redefining participants' in-group membership and social identity; they are also distancing participants from the wider society.

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1. Introduction

Human beings migrate or move from one location to another mainly driven by the pursuit of a better quality of life. Though remaining a widely shared and frequently practiced phenomenon since the beginning of civilization, motivations behind immigration are as varied as the individuals who engage in it. For instance while some leave their familiar surroundings in search of better wages, others may do so to rediscover themselves in the wilderness giving up better wages on the way. Whilst immigration is a pleasant life alteration proactively sort after by some, for others it is the only alternative and perhaps even an ultimatum.

Moreover, immigration is a two part equation in which those who immigrate as well as those waiting on the receiving end play equally vital roles in sustaining the equilibrium of the process. Academia, having identified this symbiosis, contains a vast amount of multifaceted research on immigration including the discourse within host societies on the subject. A decade and a half into the 21st century, immigration has evolved into an influential subject, with the ability to drive political campaigns and economies of nations, particularly within Europe (Heath & Richards, 2016).

Cross national studies conducted over the last three decades on the public's attitudes towards immigration in Europe have underscored predominantly negative responses towards the same (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). European public's attitudes towards refugees while remaining distinct from that extended towards other immigrants have also fluctuated over the last two decades (O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006). Attitudes driven in the early days mostly through humanitarian concerns have hardened in the recent past alongside propagation of anti-immigrant sentiment within the region. In the phase of recent influx of irregular and involuntary migration into Europe, following the Syrian refugee crisis, attitudes shared by European public in particular

towards refugees appear to shape the same extended towards migrants in general. While acknowledging the data gap due to the ongoing and intricate nature of the issue, two key observations can be drawn on the present day European public's attitudes towards refugees. Firstly they are highly complex and secondly they remain sharply divided at national and socio-demographic levels (Wike et al. 2016, June). While the most significant polarization of attitudes among Europeans are political, between those on the ideological right and left, age and education follows closely. While older and less-educated individuals of the public remain more negative towards refugees, their younger and highly educated counterparts demonstrate less opposition particularly in terms of accepting refugees into Europe (Poushter 2016).

It can be deduced that the actual or perceived impacts of involuntary and irregular migration into the Europe post Syrian refugee crisis are currently dividing the European publics' attitudes and playing a key role in driving the political discourse of the region. Thus, in order to better comprehend public perceptions, their determinants and resultantly efficient mechanisms of establishing equilibrium within increasingly multicultural societies, more in depth research into the subject is needed. This study focuses on young, highly educated Europeans, their perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe and the level to which they reflect attitudes correlated with their respective socio-demographic group.

2. Past research on perception on immigration

This section of the paper critically analyses the underlining perceptions, attitudes and opinions on immigration within the region, using a range of studies from those loosely capturing the region to specific nations within the European Union (EU).

2.1. Perceptions, attitudes and opinions

The following sections explore the terms perceptions, attitudes and opinions, their relationship to each other and the viability of using the terms interchangeably.

Perception is known as the initial step of social cognition or the manner in which we process our thoughts regarding ourselves, different individuals and social circumstances. Thus, it is how we receive and interpret the information we gain through our senses. It is a swift and active process whereby the resultant sensory experience is selective, structured, consistent and meaningful. Our perception of the physical world around us remains largely accurate, even though senses are prone to illusions. However, social perception on the other hand is far more liable to error due to the effects of subjective and unreliable sources (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005).

Attitude is defined as "predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable manner with respect to a given attitude object (an individual, object, location, ideology or a situation.)" (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005, 7). Often when one encounters an attitude object it is likely to trigger a memory following a past experience inevitably influencing the perception and interpretation of information regarding the same. Moreover, attitudes are built upon perception of a particular environment as opposed to an existing, objective situation at hand. Thus, it is not unnatural to observe a gap between one's perception together with attitude towards a certain attitude object and the reality. It is particularly noteworthy that 'international attitudes' or individuals attitudes on foreign countries, foreigners and foreign affairs, often formed irrespective of having little or no direct contact with the same, demonstrated a considerably wider distance with the reality (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005).

Opinion is "a person's judgement about the likelihood of events or relationships regarding some objects, and they also may involve evaluations of an event or object on specific dimensions" (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005, 14). Unlike attitudes which require a process of evaluation, opinions can be formed regardless of one's interest or inclination to at upon the subject at matter (Shrigley et al., 1988). Whilst attitudes can take both verbal and nonverbal forms, opinions remain how an attitude is expressed verbally (Katz, 1960). Therefore, an opinion or a change in opinion does not entirely represent the accompanying attitude or perception (Rokeah, 1966).

Public opinion on the other hand takes a life of its own moving further away from unique views or judgements of individuals, and more towards becoming an instrument of power, a public demonstration or search for majority consensus. Determined by the discipline it's studied from, public opinion carries a multitude of definitions including "an aggregation of aggregation of individual opinions on a particular matter of public interest" or "the product of a public debate" (OECD, 2010, 117). The distinctive factor which separates public opinion from attitudes, perceptions or opinions itself is that once established it cannot be reversed or fragmented to identify the individual positions it was built upon. Moreover, whilst public opinion is often built within frameworks of priori propositions, as mentioned before public opinion is best described an instrument of its own as opposed to an outcome of a collaboration of individual viewpoints.

Attitudes and opinions have been studied widely by researchers of many fields, particularly in relation to the theme of immigration. Whilst the concepts of perceptions, attitudes and opinions are related, they are not synonymous, though attitudes and opinions have sometimes been utilized interchangeably (Oskamp & Schultz, 2005). Public opinion polls, surveys and other quantitative research on the theme of immigration have underlined vital findings, theories and

trends, paving the path for more in-depth qualitative research on the same. Thus, whilst acknowledging the difference between perceptions, attitudes and opinions, the following section explores literature analyzing the discourse on immigration within Europe, from the broader angle of national trends to socio-demographic standpoints of individuals.

2.2. European attitudes towards immigration

Immigration is considered as an important issue by Europeans. Over the last fifteen years whilst transforming certain nations such as Spain, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and Greece into countries of immigration, from emigration, the phenomenon continues to impact economical, political and social alterations within others (OECD, 2010). Taking into account the recent influx of involuntarily displaced individuals, together with labour migrants, immigration is mostly likely to continue dominating the political discourse of the 21st century within these nations.

Cross national studies on attitudes towards immigrants and immigration in Europe since as early as 1988 have demonstrated a predominantly negative public reaction to the same. Whilst the public reaction ranges across a spectrum from acceptance to total rejection, the average has remained consistently in favour of reducing the level of immigration and the number of immigrants (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). Thereafter, multiple international opinion surveys conducted fifteen years later in 2003 by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the World Value Survey (WVS), demonstrated the inclination to favour strictly controlled or reduced levels of immigration as the majority opinion among respondents of many EU nations, though the average position of individuals on the level of openness varied drastically from one country to another (OECD, 2010). A recent country level analysis conducted within twenty EU member states by ESS in 2014 on public attitudes towards immigration has revealed an overall decrease in lack of support for immigration. On the other

hand, the same study underlined the overall change observed in many of these nations to be statistically insignificant. Moreover, having conducted the groundwork for this analysis prior to the most recent refugee crisis in Syria, the ESS study also prevents from accounting for attitudes to refugees, and subsequently their impact on the discourse of immigration in Europe (Heath & Richards, 2016). It can be established that for decades the public in Europe, in the least as far as opinion polls reveal, have consistently favoured a reduction in immigration.

2.2.1. *National trends*

It can be concluded the majority public opinion in favour of reducing immigration in Europe is less a portrayal of specific positions held by individuals of the region, but rather a general depiction of how these attitudes are collectively distributed. Individual attitudes towards immigration differ significantly in conjunction with a number of factors.

In a survey carried out by ISSP in 1995 in twenty OECD nations, when answering the question 'should immigration be increased, kept at the same level or reduced?', respondents of all twenty nations demonstrated a desire for greater restrictions. Amongst the EU nations while Hungary and Germany showed most desire for restrictions, Ireland and Spain showed the least. Meanwhile, Czech Republic, Italy, United Kingdom (UK), Slovak Republic, Sweden, Slovenia, Poland, Netherlands and Austria in decreasing order of desire for greater restrictions remained in the middle. The same survey carried out in 2002 revealed a significant increase in desire for greater restriction on immigration, with over 70% of respondents from the UK, Germany and the Netherlands favouring the same. Whilst less than 40% of the respondents favoured of strictly controlled or reduced immigration, this proportion exceeded 50% for the other surveyed EU member states, Slovenia, Denmark, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Slovak Republic, Ireland, Sweden, Austria, France, Czech Republic and Hungary (OECD, 2010). According to another survey

carried out by ESS in 2014, covering twenty one nations in Europe, upon comparative analysis with the data from ESS Round 1 in 2002, the overall attitude of the European public had become more positive with regard to migration and its impact on their societies. The mean score from its initial negativity in 2002 moved to a slight positive in 2014, though the change observed was small and statistically insignificant for most nations. As per the data obtained in 2014 Sweden, Denmark and Finland sustained the most positive positions whilst the Czech Republic, Hungary and Portugal held the most negative (Heath & Richards, 2016).

Thus, whilst the European public maintains a prevailing negative attitude towards immigration it is evident that the level of negativity varies significantly across the region and within individual nations themselves. According to most recent data, discussed above, while Nordic countries remained more positive towards immigration eastern European countries maintained the most negative views. Furthermore, comparing the findings of ISSP surveys carried out in 1995 and 2003, discussed above, a correlation between the proportion of individuals demonstrating favourable attitudes towards immigration and the increasing proportion of migrant population can be drawn. Whereby, the increase in migration over the period appears to go hand in hand with the decrease in public support for the same (OECD, 2010). However, as per the findings of ESS surveys of 2003 and 2014, also discussed above, the slight shift in the overall European public attitude towards a more positive outlook may indicate a more complex correlation in place. For instance increasing level of migrant population may trigger competition for limited resources, as well as promote multiculturalism through co-habitation drawing both negative and positive reactions from the host community (Heath & Richards, 2016).

2.2.2. *Socio-demographic and structural-level trends*

Followed by national variations, the European public continues to remain divided in their attitudes towards immigration depending on the socio-demographic attributes of individual Europeans. There is a tendency for socioeconomically vulnerable portions of the population to demonstrate a higher level of negativity towards immigration and immigrants. However, the climate of the host society and the type of migrant or the foreign population also induces divisions of opinion. There is an array of individual-level characteristics such as gender, age, marital status, domicile, ethnic composition of neighbourhood, education, income, political orientation and employment status, along with structural-level attributes which have been used to predict opinions. However, previous research has time and time again demonstrated age, education and economic level to be key predictors of opinions in host societies (Semyonov et al., 2008). Furthermore, the European public appears to be particularly divided in their opinions on immigration depending on their own status quo (ethnic origin, citizenship) and the type of migrants in question, demonstrating a pro-leniency towards migrants who are socioeconomically similar or closer to that of the host society, and a growing negativity towards those who are not (Heath & Richards, 2016). The dominant trends and significant divisions of the European public opinion as per these socio-demographic and structural level attributes are discussed in further below.

Income

Previous research on immigration has identified 'income' as a key structural variable which predicts anti-immigration prejudice or determines one's preference towards immigration (Kunovich, 2004). A widely observed trend is the growing or more prominent levels of opposition towards immigration when moving from higher to lower levels of income (Blinder,

2011). The basic argument related to this phenomenon is that of competition. When one's income is low or a nation's economy is unstable, in other words resources are scarce, it is suggested that those belonging to the bottom income quintile are the first and mostly likely to experience insecurities and directly compete with others to sustain their status (Kunovich, 2004). Resultantly those with lower incomes are observed, and even more so expected, to hold more negative attitudes towards immigration.

According to the ESS Round 7, 2014, in twenty one European countries the willingness to allow migrants from outside Europe to enter Europe, was different between respondents of top and bottom income quintile by 15%, with the latter demonstrating the least willingness. Furthermore, according to a Polish public opinion survey conducted in September 2015 by CBOS Public Opinion Research Center, while a 61% majority of the wealthiest were in favour of allowing Middle Eastern and African migrants into Poland, only 37% of the poorest shared the same opinion, demonstrating a division of opinions according to per capita income. Moreover, following the recent event of United Kingdom's European Union membership referendum, more commonly known as Brexit, according to UK referendum exit polls from YouGov it was unveiled that while 61% of top quarter of UK earners voted to remain in the EU, 68% of the bottom fifth of earners voted leave. Since one of the key promises of the campaign was regaining charge of the borders and controlling immigration (described as being out of control at present), it can be deduced that those with lower incomes were more inclined towards enforcing policies which controlled and reduced immigration.

While a clear parallel can be observed between one's income level and his/her attitude towards immigration, it is in no way exclusive to those with lower incomes. As per the analysis of 2009-2010 citizenship survey conducted among UK born white respondents, by the Migration

Observatory at the University of Oxford, while over 59% of respondents earning less than £20,000 a year favoured 'a lot' less migration, they were joined by 39% of respondents earning £75,000 per annum (Blinder, 2011). It is evident that economic competition, threat or vulnerabilities felt by those with low income levels cannot solely be explained by economic factors alone. It is understood that when benefits are maneuvered to sustain the equilibrium of social protection systems of states, those with lower incomes appear to remain more favourable towards reducing particularly low-skills immigration. This aversion is a result of anticipated increase in labour market competition and benefit curtails. However, if the mentioned equilibrium is achieved by increasing taxes, high income earners are more likely to oppose immigration. Thus, the only conclusive observation is that irrespective of income being a key variable in determining ones attitude towards immigration, its actual causality is at best ambivalent (OECD, 2010).

Education

Education is yet another key determinant underscored in previous research for its remarkably consistent effects on determining attitudes towards immigration and immigrants (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). The higher the education, not in terms of the years spent in education but rather the level of education itself such as primary, secondary, tertiary and so on, the less opposed to immigration one is likely to be. Those with higher education whilst sustaining a superior socioeconomic status, are likely to feel less economically and culturally threatened by immigration than their lesser educated counterparts (OECD, 2010). Furthermore, education is known to cultivate a 'liberalizing effect' thus making those with higher education levels particularly more empathetic (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010) and likely to view the economical and cultural benefits immigration will bring to a host society (OECD, 2010).

According to the ESS Round 7, the highest division of opinion towards immigration was demonstrated between those with an education level of a degree or more, and those with lower secondary education or below. According to the survey data in 2014, less educated population sample in twenty one European nations demonstrated a 21% decrease from that demonstrated by their highly educated counterparts, in the willingness to allow migrants into Europe. The same survey carried out in 2002 demonstrated similar inclinations and divisions of opinions towards immigration among highly and less educated respondents. Furthermore, according to the 2009-10 citizenship survey conducted among UK born white respondents, opposition towards migration reduced significantly among respondents when moving from lower to higher education levels, with degree or equivalent holders demonstrating the least opposition (Blinder, 2011). Most recent opinion trends related to education is visible in UK referendum exit polls from Lord Ashcroft Polls, whereby 59% of UK graduates voted to remain in the EU while 63% of non-graduates voted to leave, also demonstrating latter's inclination towards policies controlling and reducing immigration.

Unlike income or any other variable, effects of education has demonstrated particularly strong and unwavering trends across nations and over time, of public's take on immigration. Irrespective of its status as a powerful-prediction, education has drawn more and more criticism particularly due to the multitude of means by which it may come into play. One of the key arguments in this regard is the same 'liberalizing effect' discussed above. Education is deemed a better predictor of one's tolerance or political correctness in matters related to immigration, and a more unrefined indicator of determining attitudes towards immigration itself (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Thus, while those who are highly educated may demonstrate less opposing attitudes towards immigration, it is not a clear determinant of their support towards tangible

initiatives such as specific policies related to the same (Kunovich, 2004). As it appears while the correlation between income and support for immigration is ambivalent, that of education and the latter may be superficial.

Age

As empirical research on the subject suggests age is another attribute closely following education, utilized to predict the attitudes one holds towards immigration. It is deemed that older generations hold more negative attitudes towards the impacts of immigration (OECD, 2010). While opposition to migration is more prevalent among older populations, it is observed that prejudice towards immigrant groups are increased with age (Blinder, 2011; Kunovich, 2004). This division of opinion is observed more to be one driven by experience as opposed to the process of aging. The older European population having grown in less diverse societies may be more apprehensive towards immigration, compared to their younger counterparts who having grown up in the era of post mass migration are more susceptible to diversity (Heath & Richards, 2016).

Yet again according to the ESS Round 7, the next highest division in opinions among the European public after highly educated and less educated, is between younger people and older people. According to this 2014 survey, younger people, defined aged 34 or less, were 17% more favourable to immigration that their older counterparts aged 65 and over. Two years later a similar trend is resonated among Brexit voters, who according to UK referendum exit polls from Lord Ashcroft Polls voted remain if aged between 18-44 and leave if aged over 45, by 58% and 57% respectively.

On the contrary according to the Polish public opinion survey conducted by CBOS Public Opinion Research Center in 2015, younger respondents significantly opposed accepting refugees from the Middle East and Africa than the older population. This included 60% in the age group 18 – 24 and 56% in the age group 24 – 34, indicating majority of respondents below the age of 35 held opposing views. Furthermore according to UK government's Citizenship Education Longitudinal Survey in 2010, younger people aged 15 – 18 demonstrated more anti-immigration attitudes compared to the population in whole, including older people (Crawley et al, 2013). Thus, irrespective of research in general drawing parallels between influences of age on attitudes towards immigration, it can only be concluded that it is impossible to draw such a correlation with certain.

Ethnicity and Citizenship

Closely following the above discussed variables, ethnicity and citizenship also distinguishes the European public's opinion of those who support immigration from those who do not. Research indicates that ethnic minorities, former migrants, non-citizens and those with foreign born parents are less likely to favour reduction of immigration compared to their native born counterparts and citizens respectively. As a result of time spent abroad or strong family roots extending abroad, these groups are presumed to be more open to cultural diversity brought forth by immigration and regard cultural and economic impacts brought forth by the same as beneficial (Blinder, 2011; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006; OECD, 2010).

As per ESS Round 7 in 2014, among the respondents non-citizens favoured immigration by 10% more compared to citizens whilst migrants favoured the same by 5% more compared to their non-migrant counterparts. Furthermore, according to the 2009-10 Citizenship Survey, over 80% of UK-born whites were in favour of reducing immigration, whilst just over 50% of non-

white or foreign born respondents within UK shared similar views (Blinder 2011). The same trend is echoed yet again in the UK referendum exit polls from Lord Ashcroft Polls where by 53% of white voters opted to leave the EU, whilst 68% of black and ethnic minority voters opted to remain.

As discussed before this difference in opinion may be a reflection of the more cosmopolitan views non-citizens and former migrants are held to. On the other hand it could be a reflection of their openness to relocate along with cultural agility, subsequently leading to feeling less threatened by socio-economic impacts brought forth by immigration. However, when controlling for the endogenous nature of beliefs on the impact of immigration, findings appear to differ greatly from that discussed above. This was carried out by a two stage European Social Survey 2002-2008 whereby the first investigated the determinants of public beliefs of positive impact of immigration on economy and cultural life. The second stage investigated the same taking into account 'similar immigration', immigration similar to the ethnic origins of the majority of the population, and 'dissimilar immigration', immigration different to the ethnic origins of the majority population (OECD, 2010). When the endogenous nature of beliefs was taken into account the resulting findings indicated former immigrants and non-citizens to be more apprehensive towards immigration in comparison to their native counterparts holding similar views regarding the perks of immigration (OECD, 2010). Thus, whilst ethnicity and citizenships could speak for ones tendency to favour or oppose immigration, findings on the subject have been both contradictory and relatively minute in comparison to other variables discussed above. Therefore yet again the impact on ethnicity and citizenship on attitudes towards immigration can only be concluded as ambiguous.

Type of migrant

European publics' attitudes towards immigration remain divided not only in terms of the level of immigration but also the type of immigrants who are allowed to enter Europe. Thus, alongside opinion divisions within nations parallel to specific socio-demographic and structural level attributes of the population, research indicates a distinct hierarchy of the categories of migrants, natives prefer (Heath & Richards, 2016).

Research indicates European public demonstrating the highest preference towards immigrants who are similar to the majority populations within the respective host nations. The category of migrants preferred most appears to be those from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds at the majority. Following which are highly skilled migrants with the ability to contribute professionally and those with close family ties to the host community. Data obtained over the years on the subject discloses a clear trend of Europeans' valuing an immigrant's ability to successfully engage and adapt to the local way of life most, followed by latter's capacity to contribute positively to the economy (OECD, 2010).

According to the Spring 2016 Global Attitude Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in ten EU countries, the Roma population was least favourable followed by the Muslim population by medians of 48% and 43% respectively. A similar trend is observed in ESS Round 7 conducted in 2014, in which respondents of twenty one EU nations least favoured the admission of Roma population followed by Muslim population into Europe. Furthermore, according to ESS Round 1 conducted in 2002 and Rounds 7 in 2014, European public were least in favour of migrants from poorer countries from outside Europe. The proportion who felt none of these migrants should be admitted increasing from 11% to 20%. Moreover, according to data gathered by British Social Attitude (BSA) survey since pre 1910, the British public has demonstrated

higher negative attitudes towards immigrants from south Asia and the Caribbean, compared to that demonstrated towards immigrants from Europe and Australia, mirroring the attitude trends of the European population discussed above (Blinder, 2011).

However, to conclude the European public prefers wealthy migrants from inside Europe who are similar to the majority native populations, would be an extreme generalization of the public opinion, and a disregard of the intrinsic and complex nature of the same. For instance ESS demonstrates from 2002 to 2014, while a proportion of the European public became less favourable of allowing poorer migrants from outside of Europe, another proportion became more favourable of the same, even though it is by a mere 1%. The same contradictory trend is observed in the publics' attitudes regarding other types of immigrants from same race or ethnic group, different race or ethnic group and poorer countries in Europe. Furthermore, according to the BSA survey the public's opposition towards immigrants and immigration has decreased with each generation over the last century. Thus, what can be confirmed with certainty is European publics' higher polarization or division of opinions, as opposed to an increasing consensus towards restricting immigration.

2.3. European attitude towards refugees

The United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as "people outside their country of origin because of feared persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require international protection" (UNCHR, 2016). UNCHR also defines an asylum seeker as "someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed. Every year, around one million people seek asylum" (UNCHR, 2018). Following the 1951 convention the related to the Status of Refugees, they are specifically defined and protected in international law. However, while sharing a general

consensus, the definition of asylum seekers is dependent on the law of individual countries, and may vary from one state to another.

European public's attitude towards refugees have fluctuated over the last two decades but remained distinct from that demonstrated towards immigrants in general. As per data from the ISSP National Identity Survey 1995, the average opinion of respondents within thirteen EU nations was less negative towards refugees than immigrants. This data demonstrates an inclination of the European public to clearly distinct between those who are forced into involuntary migration or displaced, from others who migrate for more general motivations. As it appears two decades ago the public attitudes towards refugees appear to be wavered mostly by humanitarian concerns, resultantly shielding the former from scrutiny directed at other groups of immigrants. Moreover, since asylum seekers in particular (a term often used interchangeably with refugees) are not allowed to engage in employment within their host nations until they gain refugee status, 'refugees' are in general perceived not working and a burden on the welfare state, exhausting the economy as opposed to contributing to it. However, they continue to draw more favourable responses than immigrants in general, from even socio-economically vulnerable populations within host societies including low skilled workers and the unemployed. These attitudes may be a result of this phenomena being perceived as being beyond the control of refugees, which also speaks for their inability to take jobs away from the locals, coupled with the humanitarian concerns discussed above (O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006).

In the summer of 2015, precisely twenty years from when the above ISSP National Identity Survey was conducted, Europe experienced the highest influx of asylum seekers and migrants seeking refuge since World War II. Induced by the ongoing conflicts in Syria and the Middle East region, along with the economic deprivations in Africa, the UNHCR estimated there

were 14.4 million refugees globally in October 2015. Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon and Iran were front runners in hosting refugees since early 2013 accounting for 35% of the world's refugees, while a staggering 86% were being hosted in developing nations, at the time. Consequently, as the civil war brimming in Syria for over two years convulsed, not only did it generate almost half of the global refugee population, but also trigger a migration shift impacting Europe, with an estimation of over 1.5 million irregular migrants and asylum seekers entering the region by the end of 2015 (Lamb, 2016). According to Eurostat statistics those originating from Syria accounted for over half of this population, followed by citizens of Iraq and Afghanistan. By 2016 over a million asylum seekers were granted protection status within EU nations. While Germany provided protection status for over 60% of this population, Sweden, Italy, France, Austria and the Netherlands followed registering significantly more asylum seekers than in the previous year. Even though the highest number of asylum seekers was registered within Germany, the EU nation which experienced the most significant impact to its local population was Sweden accepting 7040 asylum seekers per million inhabitants, in 2016. Following the latter were Germany, Austria and Malta which all saw an influx of several thousands of asylum seekers for every million residents (Eurostat, 2017).

At this stage of the research it is vital to acknowledge the considerable data gap on the refugee crisis itself and the public's attitudes towards it, due to the relatively raw and turbulent nature of the issue. Thus, primary research on the subject has been heavily relied on data gathered and published by research companies, statistical offices and media corporations. Looking at the data available two key trends can be observed. First and foremost attitudes towards allowing refugees into Europe appear to have hardened significantly compared to that observed in 1995, also inducing an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment across the region. Irrespective of the

general opposition to receiving refugees observed within EU, public remain sharply divided in their opinions at a national and socio-demographic level (Wike et al. 2016, June).

According to a survey carried out by Ipsos (a leading global market and opinion research company) in twenty two countries worldwide, including nine EU states, on attitudes to immigration and the refugee crisis from June – July 2016, an average of 46% of the EU respondents supported closing borders for refugees. Whereas, according to the ISSP 1995 survey discussed above, negative opinions towards authorizing refugees to remain within host countries were expressed by an average of 26% of the EU respondent. Though the data from the two surveys are not directly comparable, it can be deduced that the overall average negative opinion of the EU public towards refugees has increased by a large margin during the last two decades.

Furthermore, according to the above mentioned Ipsos survey, European publics' attitudes towards refugees remain closely linked with that demonstrated towards minority groups, and Muslims in general. As discussed earlier under the 'preferred type of immigrant', the increasing negative rating in opinions demonstrated towards Muslims are now being reciprocated towards refugees. Whereby, Europeans portraying more negative opinions towards Muslims were expressing a similarly elevated concern towards refugees, compared to Europeans who showed less negativity towards Muslims (Wike et al. 2016, July). Likewise, ESS Round 7 in 2014 identified a similarity between EU public's attitudes concerning Muslims and those regarding individuals arriving from poorer nations outside Europe. Ipso facto, EU public's opinions towards refugees in the recent past appear to be linked to those demonstrated towards Muslims and individuals arriving from poorer nations outside Europe, and becoming increasing unfavourable. One obvious explanation could be that post 2015, majority of the refugees arriving in EU nations were from poorer non-European nations with Muslim majorities (Heath &

Richards, 2016). However, this merely explains a possible link between the opinions expressed towards these groups, and not the causality for the dramatic increase in negative public ratings towards refugees in specific.

In a research conducted by Bauer et al. (2000) using evidence gathered from twelve OECD countries, including eight EU nations, it was concluded that respondents of nations which hosted higher level of refugees and asylum seekers were more concerned of immigration in general than their counterparts belonging to nations with more restrictive policies. However, data gathered post Syrian refugee crisis contradicts the trends observed in the past whereby, the amount of refugees arriving in each EU nation is not particularly related to the negative rating of the residents demonstrated towards the same. For instance according to the Spring 2016 Global Attitude survey conducted by the Pew Research center, 73% of Polish respondents claimed refugees to impose a major threat, whereas only 31% of their German counterparts shared equal concerns. The same year while Germany registered 445, 210 applications of asylum seekers, Poland accepted 390. Alternatively, when revisiting the same issue from the angle of number of positive decisions on asylum applications in 2016 per million inhabitants of EU member states, Sweden, Germany and Belgium were on the lead by accommodating 7040, 5420 and 1360 new arrivals per million of existing citizens (Eurostat, 2016). Meanwhile, the public support for closing borders within these nations was measured at 47%, 49% and 42% respectively (Ipsos 2016, July). However, the same survey revealed respondents of Hungary, Poland and the United Kingdom shared similar sentiments by 62%, 48% and 34% respectively, when the latter nations had accepted 45, 10 and 260 asylum applications per million inhabitants in the same year (Ipsos 2016, July; Eurostat, 2016). Thus, as discussed before the overall negative sentiments towards refugees have increased among the EU public over the last two decades. However, citizens of EU

nations accepting far less refugees in terms of absolute terms and proportion of existing citizens, appear to demonstrate higher levels of support towards more restrictive policies.

As discussed before, prior to the recent influx of refugees, the publics' response towards the same has been more favourable than that extended towards an average immigrant. Among other variables humanitarian concerns and the perceived inability of refugees to take jobs away from locals, was underscored as a possible key determinant of these opinions. However, according to Ipsos Mori study published in August, 2016, this empathetic point of view has changed among the global public. According to the study the majority in most nations, 51% on average, believed those entering their nations as refugees were in fact economic migrants. Respondents of the nine EU nations (Poland 75%, Hungary 70%, Italy 68%, France 63%, Belgium 61%, UK 58%, Germany 57%, Sweden 37% and Spain 36%) demonstrated particularly increased levels of scepticism with 58.3% on average agreeing most refugees entering their nations were impersonators driven by economical reasons or the superior welfare system of host nations. Yet another concern shared by the EU public remains the perceived security threat brought forth by the influx of refugees into Europe. According to the same study respondents of the nine EU nations mentioned above were 68.2% on average in agreement that terrorists were pretending to be refugees in order to enter Europe to carry out violent attacks. A similar trend in opinions was unveiled in the Spring 2016 Global attitude survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre, in which a median of 59% of respondents in ten EU nations expressed concerns regarding the increased probability of terrorism within their nations induced by the arrival of refugees. Furthermore, echoing the outcomes of the Ipsos study discussed above, the Spring 2016 Global attitude survey also found a median of 50% of respondents within the ten EU nations surveyed believed refugees took jobs and other social benefits away from the locals of each nation

(Poushter, 2016). Thus, the once overtly empathetic EU publics' opinion towards refugees fueled by humanitarian concerns and perceived socio-economical vulnerabilities of the latter, appear to have changed in the face of the recent refugee crisis.

Post Syrian refugee crisis, the attitudes demonstrated by the EU public towards refugees not only share socio-demographic and structural level trends with those shown towards immigrants in general, but also reciprocally impact each other. According to the Spring 2016 Global attitude survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre within ten EU nations, older and less-educated respondents remained more negative towards refugees. Those who were 50 years and older demonstrated high levels of negativity towards refugees compared to those between ages 18 to 34 years, with respondents in Greece, Sweden, France, Italy, Spain and the UK showing significant age gaps. However, while the Polish public opinion survey conducted in June 2015 concludes negative attitude towards refugees being more common among older respondents, the outcomes of the same survey conducted thereafter in September 2015, April and September 2016, contradicts the former. The latter concludes opposition towards receiving refugees to be highest among youngest adults between the ages 18 to 34 years with particularly elevated negativity and opposition towards refugees from African and the Middle East regions. Furthermore, the Spring 2016 survey of the Pew Research Centre also indicated those with a secondary education or less demonstrating more opposition towards refugees compared to those with a postsecondary education, with respondents in Spain, Sweden, the UK, the Netherlands, Greece and France indicating significant gaps of opinion by education level. However, the most significant opinion divide among the EU public according to the same survey appears to be political whereby, those on the ideological right carry more negative opinions towards refugees compared to their ideologically left counterparts.

Therefore, the perceptions on accepting refugees among the European public have appeared to harden over the recent past with older, less educated and ideologically right individuals demonstrating more opposition in general, with certain exceptions as in the case of younger adults in Poland. Furthermore, as reiterated by Ipsos survey in 2016, anti-immigration sentiments have increased across the world over the last five years. There appear to be a growing concern and discomfort with the level of migration, particularly triggered by the recent mass movement of individuals. While the overall negative shift of the European publics' perceptions on refugees maybe slight, the polarization of perceptions between groups of individuals nationally, socio-demographically and politically has been significant. Thus, the conclusion that can be confidently drawn through empirical research on European publics' perception on accepting refugees into Europe is that it is highly divided.

3. Theories on perceptions towards immigration

"By definition, attitudes on immigration are about groups of people and about challenges to group boundaries" (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014, 19). It is observed that when real or perceived impacts of immigration become salient, preexisting attitudes towards immigration could change and intensify. Thus, theories based on group-related interests are more relevant to further investigating perceptions towards immigration.

This study focuses on perceptions held by those within the socio-demographic group of young and highly educated Europeans. As discussed in the literature review, previous empirical research places this group within the liberal end of the spectrum, favouring accepting refugees and immigrants into Europe, in comparison to those who do not belong to the same group. Previous research also draws on a multitude of theories to investigate and provide explanations

for these trends. However, research on this subject has been impacted by economical benefits being weighed against cultural concerns causing a gap between attitudes of individuals and the reality (Blinder, 2011). The literature review further underscored examples of this disparity which challenged previously established trends, particularly in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis. The following section critically analyzes prevalent theories utilized in this area of scholarship to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The theories discussed are namely Economic Competition Theory, Human Capital Theory, Group Contact Theory, Integrated Threat Theory and Social Identity Theory.

3.1. Economic competition theory

Economic competition theory focuses on the competition between individuals, in this case natives and refugees, over resources (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). These resources could be in the form of jobs, wages, housing, government services, state benefits, social welfare, and so forth. This theory suggests individuals when faced with direct competition over limited resources are likely to foster more negative attitudes towards out-groups they are competing with (Barceló, 2016). Resultantly, it observes individuals within host societies who are more vulnerable, such as low skilled, low incomed and unemployed natives, to be more opposed to immigration than their wealthier and highly skilled counterparts (Blinder, 2011). Economic competition theory captures both individual and group-related interests of individuals. On one hand native workers who are more likely to compete with immigrant workers with similar capabilities, may have their perceptions towards the latter adversely affected by feelings of economic threat. On the other hand during times of high unemployment levels or economic crisis native population as a whole may develop more restrictive attitudes towards accepting immigrants to limit sharing scarce economic resources (Barceló, 2016).

Applying the economic competition theory it is possible to hypothesize young, highly educated Europeans to fall also within the highly skilled category, consequently feeling less economically vulnerable than their less-educated and low skilled counterparts (Finseraas et al., 2014). However, as discussed in the literature review evidence related to this theory, particularly following post 2015 events remain highly mixed. Firstly, the likelihood to oppose immigration does not depend on individual or national economic interest alone but also on the national concurrent policies on social benefits and taxes (OECD, 2010). Secondly, a high level of unemployment is observed to impact concerns related to immigration, mainly within societies hosting significant proportions of foreign population. Thus, the phenomenon moves away from being driven by solely economical interests to also political motivations (Finseraas et al., 2014). Thirdly, there appears to be a mismatch between individual perceptions and their actual economic situations. The subjective perceptions of immigration on individual and national economic interests demonstrate an impact on shaping attitudes towards immigration. However, these subjective perceptions remain distant from the actual economic reality of both individuals and nation. Thus, though a certain relation between individual's self and national economic interest and anti-migrants attitudes can be drawn, evidence confirming the same is ambiguous and disparate from the economic reality (Blinder et al., 2011; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).

3.2. Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory suggests highly educated individuals to be more likely to demonstrate sentiments in favour of immigration (Barceló, 2016). One branch of this theory leans on individual self-interest associated with labour competition. It is stipulated that highly educated individuals also obtain skills which give them an advantage within the labour market compared to their less-educated peers and immigrant workers in general. Thus, this lack of or reduced

competition for jobs is likely to contribute to the favourable perceptions this socio-demographic group has on accepting immigrant. The second branch of human capital theory moves away from labour competition and focuses more on cultural and symbolic elements. The theory hypothesizes higher education to increase reflexivity, open-mindedness and tolerance towards cultural diversity and people from out-groups (Barceló, 2016; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). It is presumed that those with higher levels of education maintain or perceive to maintain a higher socio-economic status within societies, resultantly feeling less threatened by outgroups (OECD, 2010).

However, research has also demonstrated highly educated individuals to support immigrants with both high and low levels of skills. There has been no significant evidence to suggest highly educated natives are more likely to oppose accepting immigrants with skills levels equal to their own. Thus, this signals the correlation between education and perceptions on accepting immigrants to be less shaped by labour competition, but more by cultural or symbolic impacts. On the other hand whilst the average education levels within developed democracies have increased significantly in the recent past, opposition towards immigration has also remained high (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Concurrently, as discussed in the literature review above the overall perceptions on accepting refugees within Europe have also become more negative. Thus, drawing causality between education and perceptions on immigration using human capital theory alone is not viable. There are many ways in which education can impact perceptions particularly taking into account its liberalizing effects. Moreover, it is considered to have more impact on tolerance or political correctness demonstrated towards concerns related to immigration, that actually addressing or mitigating the root cause of the concern (Kunovich,

2004; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Thus, it is also possible for the impact of immigration on perceptions identified through human capital theory to be superficial.

3.3. Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup contact theory captures the conditions which facilitate contact between groups, and also impact the relations between the same. It underscores four conditions, namely equal status, common objectives, authority sanction and the absence of conditions, under which optimal intergroup contact can occur, but concludes they are not necessary to foster the effects. Moreover, it dictates intergroup contact to typically reduce prejudice by means of increased knowledge, anxiety reduction and enhanced empathy (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Evidence supporting this theory particularly in relation to attitudes and perceptions towards immigration is extensive. For instance it can be deduced that the younger generations within Europe are more exposed to diversity and multiculturalism than their older counterparts. Today they live in a time where ease of mobility, information communication and media, have made exposure to people from different cultures a part of everyday life (Heath & Richards, 2016). Resultantly they are more favourable towards accepting newcomers to their societies than older native generations.

However, in the real world when different groups come into contact the four requirements mentioned above are rarely met at the same time (Barceló, 2016). Furthermore, research into intergroup contact theory have also demonstrated, for positive and significant effects to occur the interactions also need to be positive and not casual or fleeting in nature (Blinder et al., 2011). An example to further highlight this point can be drawn from the following attitude trend observed in the aftermath of the Syrian refugee crisis. As discussed in the literature review both Poland and the UK have granted low levels of asylum applications per million inhabitants compared to the EU average. Poland on one hand sustains a low ethnic diversity whilst the UK maintains a high

level of diversity fueled by a rich history of immigration. However, citizens of both nations share a high concern for immigration in general and prefer more restrictive policies towards the same, in comparison to their EU counterparts (Ipsos 2016, July; Eurostat, 2016). It is evident that exploring the conditions that lead to group contact and its effects alone is not sufficient to investigate the complexities of human interactions or the evolution of perceptions on accepting different groups.

<p style="text-align:center">3.4. Integrated Threat Theory</p>

Integrated threat theory is the negative take on intergroup contact theory. It assumes when different groups come into contact, in this case natives and immigrants, competition for limited resources may occur. Moreover, when real or perceived levels of immigration are more salient the majority group may feel threatened and the need to compete for cultural dominance. Thus, integrated threat theory focuses on conditions which lead to perceptions of threat and the impact it has on attitudes and behaviour (Barceló, 2016). Integrated threat theory of prejudice suggests four types of threats made by outgroups which can trigger prejudice, namely realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes (Stephan et al., 2000).

Schweitzer et al. (2005) investigates attitudes towards refugees in a post-September 11 Australian context, utilizing the integrated threat theory of prejudice. Using data collected through 261 undergraduate university students in Australia, the study concludes a high prevalence of prejudicial attitudes towards refugees. These attitudes are shaped by realistic and symbolic threats exerted on the economic resources and culture by refugees as perceived by the participants (Schweitzer et al., 2005). Moreover, integrated threat theory of prejudice can also be utilized to explore the attitude trends towards refugees in the European context, discussed within the literature review. This particularly sheds light on the negatively inclined attitudes

demonstrated by socio-economically vulnerable groups within the native population. They may be feeling threatened by the increase in competition for resources brought forth by the sudden influx of irregular migrants.

However, this theory falls short in accounting for the favourable attitude trends held particularly by young, highly educated Europeans. As discussed above impacts of education on perceptions towards accepting immigrants go beyond competition for materialistic resources or cultural and symbolic hegemony. Moreover, this theory also relies on the contact hypothesis which as discussed previously has its own limitations. Furthermore, integrated threat theory is an approach focused on investigating prejudice brought forth by threats experienced during intergroup contact. Whereas this study requires a more holistic approach which allows for identifying and qualitatively analysing the spectrum of perceptions held by individuals when interacting with members from outgroups.

3.5. Social identity theory (SIT)

Social identity theory (SIT) explores how individuals perceive themselves as members of specific social groups and how those perceptions in return impact the perceptions of those individuals. Individuals derive their social identity by comparing themselves to members of different groups and establishing a belief of belonging to a selected group or groups. Once established, social identity includes membership to a specific group, as well as adopting behaviour and ideologies similar to its group members. Moreover, the specific social group selected is viewed to comprise of members with similar aspects, which are different to aspects associated with members from other groups (Stets & Burke, 2000; Mangum & Block, 2018).

SIT includes three key components of which the first is 'social categorization'. It protrudes that individuals by nature involve is self-categorization placing themselves within numerous social groups. This leads to 'social identification' where individuals continue to identify with the said groups considering those they belong to as in-groups and others as outgroups. Following which, they carry out 'social comparisons' between numerous groups exploring the similarities and differences between in-groups and outgroups. Moreover, it is common for individuals to regard the in-groups they identify with in a more positive and esteemed light, than the outgroups (Mangum & Block, 2018).

SIT also develops the argument of the importance of group membership in self-definition, as well as relating to others. Each individual has a personal identity made of characteristics which distinguishes one from others and deems him/her unique. Individuals also carry a social identity comprised of characteristics they share with others through membership of the same group. While one does not precede the other, both remain vital aspects of defining self as unique. As the SIT dictates, when personal identity is prominent an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions are decided by his or her individual ideals and principles. Whereas when social identity is prominent the same is determined by an individual's ideals and principles associated with a particular group membership. Depending on the prevailing context, SIT decides which attributes of the self is visible, thus defining self, itself (Giles, 2012).

A particularly interesting branch of research which could align SIT, with young, highly educated Europeans and their perceptions on accepting refugees, is the debate on ethnic versus civic national identity. Ethnic identity is associated with ascriptive features such as ethnicity, religion, language and other cultural elements. It would dictate for one to belong to a certain nation or group they must carry strong principles of decent or share cultural links. On the other

hand civic national identity is associated with affective features such as skills, education, willingness to work, respect for political norms, institutions, and so forth. Thus, one could belong to a nation or a group which emphasizes civic aspect of identity by accepting and aligning with the fundamental values of the group (Wright et al., 2012). However, research on this take of the SIT has produces mixed evidence. Individuals prioritizing ethnic national identity appear to be more opposed to immigration since immigrants are often and naturally more different to natives by ascriptive features. On the other hand evidence relating to the impacts of prioritizing civic national identity on perceptions towards immigration remains ambiguous (Mangum & Block, 2018).

One of the main weaknesses of SIT is relying upon identity which is both difficult to establish and measure. Moreover, as described by the SIT itself an individual's identity is not static and continues to evolve depending on personal and social factors. However, this research draws on this relationship between personal and social identity, and its impacts on perceptions to explore how young, highly educated Europeans perceive accepting refugees into. This study recognizes the ability of the SIT to capture both individual and group identities, and their impacts on perceptions as its main strength. While providing the theoretical background to investigating how individuals navigate between multiple group memberships, namely age, education level and citizenship, it also provides freedom to explore any distance observed between one's perception and contextual reality. In the context of the post Syrian refugee crisis, this research adopts the SIT to critically analyse how members of this socio-demographic group perceive accepting refugees.

4. Method

As the literature review has demonstrated, there is cause to believe perceptions on accepting refugees have become increasingly negative over the last two decades among Europeans. The level of scepticism regarding the intentions of the recent "wave" of refugees entering Europe, and the perceived security concerns associated with the same have also peaked among the general public. Resultantly, once empathetic receptions extended towards refugees seem to continue to fluctuate shifting towards more restrictive ones. Moreover, perceptions on the matter within the region appear to be highly polarized with older and less-educated individuals on the ideological right carrying more negative perceptions, compared to their younger and highly educated counterparts on the ideological left.

However, irrespective of the trends observed it is both inaccurate and impossible to generalize the complexities of perceptions into either side of the spectrum according to socio-demographic factors of individuals or other means. The significant gap in data together with distinct outliers calls for more specific and in depth research into the phenomenon. In order to help fill this gap, this study aimed to answer the following research question:

RQ1) How do young, highly educated Europeans perceive accepting refugees into Europe?

The objective was to first identify the perceptions held by young, highly educated Europeans on accepting refugees into Europe and exploring sources which shaped the same. Then it focused on critically analysing how these perceptions evolved when navigating between individual and social identities, as well as multiple groups memberships. The key goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the plethora of perceptions members of the subject group harbours

towards accepting refugees. Following which the study also strived to explore if perceptions related to the issue are affected by humanitarian, economics, symbolic and/or other concerns, and how individuals navigate between self and social identities when addressing the same.

4.1. Methodology

The categories of 'young' and 'highly-educated' were defined using the same parameters used by the European Social Survey Round 7 (2014), broadly discussed in the literature review above. Thus, for the purpose of this research 'young' were defined as those aged between 18-34 years and 'highly-educated' as those carrying a graduate degree and above, respectively. Individuals in this particular socio-demographic intersection are highlighted through empirical studies to hold significantly more linear and open views towards refugees and immigration compared to the rest of the population. They are also implicated to have been affected by the liberalizing effect of education. On the other hand there are multitudes of outliers which suggest effects of education to be superficial and/or data gathered on the subject to be distant from modern day contextual reality. However, unlike other socio-demographic variables education is one that can be legitimately restructured, adapted and promoted as per its present and expected role in establishing much needed cohesion within increasingly multicultural societies.

This study focused on citizens of the European Union (EU), made up of twenty eight states. Definition of Europe itself is large abstract and attempting to capture all the states within Europe is far beyond the capacity of this study. Thus, considering the mentioned technical and practical implications this study gathered data only from citizens of EU member states. As discussed in the literature review the influx of involuntarily displaced individuals and irregular migrants into Europe following the Syrian refugee crisis have brought the subject of immigration into the forefront of the political discourse of the region. In the process of establishing immediate

and long-term solutions to ensuring the wellbeing of incoming individuals, current citizens and the society as a whole, it is vital to comprehend the perspectives of both parties on the matter. This research, approached the issue from the perspective of the host society and focused on a group of individuals placed on the most liberal end of the debate.

The data gathering was conducted through fifteen semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted both in person and remotely through digital communication tools. This form of interviewing was selected as the most effective mode of research method for the following reasons. Firstly the open ended nature of the research question enabled participants to influence the understanding and shape the discussion related to the subject of study. The semi-structured interview questions made room for flexibility and for the participants to change, add and emphasize points of key interest. Furthermore, interviewing also allowed the researcher to build a rapport with the participants encouraging them to expand on sensitive topics. Most importantly upon the mention of a new and potentially key revelation, the interviewer was able to explore deeper by prompting the participants to further elaborate on the same (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

As discussed before a plethora of public opinion polls, surveys and other quantitative research have been carried out in the past related to the subject of this study. However, this research strived to investigate further not only what perceptions individuals held but also the sources that shaped them in the context of post 2015 influx of irregular immigrants into Europe. Interviewing engaged the participants themselves in a comparative analysis reflecting on the contextual reality and their perceptions on the subject. Furthermore, each question being presented chronologically one at a time assisted in minimizing any social desirability bias and built trust between the interviewer and participants (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

4.2. Participants

Participants included individuals who were citizens of one or more EU states, aged between 18-34 years and carried a minimum of a graduate degree or equivalent and above. The individuals were all fluent in the English language. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted and the participants were recruited through three key mechanisms. Majority of the interviewees were recruited through social media postings. An appeal was made to 1st connections within the researcher's social media networks to refer individuals who fall within the research criteria but were unknown to the researcher. Following which the introductions were done by the mutual (1st) connections, and the interviews were carried out. Secondly participants were also recruited through referrals from those who had already taken part in the study, whereby creating a snowball effect. Finally few participants were recruited through word of mouth whereby a mutual friend, aware of the researcher's need for interview subjects, made the introductions following which interviews were arranged and conducted.

Table 1 - participant demographic information

Participant	Age*	Gender	Highest level of education	Country of citizenship
#1	29	female	Master's Degree	Poland
#2	26	female	Bachelor's Degrees	Finland
#3	26	female	Master's Degree	Germany
#4	27	female	Master's Degree	Germany
#5	29	female	Master's Degree	Finland
#6	25	female	Master's Degree	Netherlands
#7	34	male	Master's Degree	Finland/Russia
#8	29	male	Master's Degree	Finland/France
#9	27	male	Master's Degree	Finland
#10	28	male	Master's Degree	Austria

#11	25	male	Master's Degree	Portugal
#12	29	male	Master's Degree	Italy
#13	28	female	Bachelor's Degrees	France
#14	29	female	Bachelor's Degrees	Estonia
#15	28	male	Doctor of Philosophy	UK

*Age is indicated in years

** '#' is used prior to a number throughout the research, to indicate the unique number associated to each participant.

The participants ranged in age from 25 to 34 (M= 28, SD= 2.23). 53.3% of the population was female (N=8) and 46.6% of the population was male (N=7). The participants were citizens of ten states in the EU (Austria, Estonia, Finland (5), France (2), Germany (2), Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, United Kingdom), with two participants holding dual citizenships (Finland and France, Finland and Russia). The highest level of education the participants have received ranged from Bachelor's Degrees to Doctor of Philosophy (PHD) (Bachelor's Degrees (3), Master's Degrees (11), PHD (1)).

4.3. Procedure

The participants were interviewed using one face-to-face interview and fourteen interviews conducted remotely using the video conferencing tool of either WhatsApp or Facebook messenger apps. Each interview, conducted individually was recorded using an audio only recording device and transcribed, following which all audio recordings were permanently deleted.

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) approach, which also drives the data analysis, was used to construct the interview questions. The questions were semi-structured and prompted the participants to explore their perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe, considering their membership within the groups defined by their age, level of education and citizenship. It further

investigated the influence each of these group identities exerted on the participants' individual perceptions. The semi-structured nature of questions provided freedom to introduce new themes related to the subject of study, and also explore each participant's suggestions on how to progress towards a cohesive and successfully integrated society in the future.

Prior to the interviews each participant was provided with a general introduction, instructions and an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the study. The consent was obtained via e-mail from the participants before the interviews were conducted. The interviews were conducted in English and included four short questions on demographic information of the participants relevant to this study – age; gender; highest level of education; country of citizenship.

4.4. Analysis

The transcriptions of interviews were analysed using the three-step process of thematic analysis as defined by Owen (1984), recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Messages, key words and topics, repeated and emphasized by an interviewee during his or her interview itself, and across all interviews were first coded (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). This inductive, qualitative content analysis approach was used to determine new content categories introduced by the participants on the subject of study, based on the SIT. The narratives of transcripts were analysed to further investigate both intended and unintended meaning of every interview. This mode of data analysis enabled to underscore a plethora of key themes, however did not address why each theme was developed which is also beyond the scope of this study (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

The object of the open ended research question, 'how do young, highly educated Europeans perceive accepting refugees into Europe', was to identify and capture the complex and diverse perceptions on the subject. Furthermore, they also attempted to identify if and how perceptions evolved when the participant navigate through numerous social identities, from individual to group, and between multiple group memberships. The interview questions were semi structured under three main categories. The first six questions attempted to identify and explore participants' perception on accepting refugees into Europe in relation to their personal interest and identities. They prompted the participants to reflect upon their perceptions on refugees and immigrants from an ideological and pragmatic perspective, as well as within and outside the European context. Moreover, these questions also explored if and to what extent humanitarian concerns drive perceptions on the issue.

The next three questions investigated the sources which determine, shape and continue to drive each participant's perception on accepting refugees into Europe. The aim was not to establish a list of sources but rather explore if the participants themselves consider the socio-demographic attributes used to categorize them such as their education level, age and citizenship to have an impact on how they perceive refugees. However, the questions itself did not include these attributes but were more abstract to avoid leading the participants.

Finally, the last four questions attempted to explore how the participants' social identities or group memberships impact their perceptions on accepting refugees. The questions prompted the participants to engage in a level of self-categorization as well as revisit their individual perceptions within the wider social discourse on the Syrian refugee crisis. This in particular provided evidence which enabled a rich comparative analysis on perceptions evolve as

participants navigate between their individual and social identity, as well as multiple group memberships.

The data gathered unveiled three main themes related to perceptions of young and highly educated Europeans on accepting refugees into Europe. Firstly it demonstrated that the perceptions of participants in relation to both their personal and social identities were overall positive. Secondly it was also observed that these perceptions were largely driven by humanitarian concerns. Thirdly, a critical analysis of the data, particularly aided by interview questions raising similar inquiries from different self-categorization perspectives, unveiled an evolution of perceptions within the wider social discourse. When moving from a personal to social context participants were observed creating a higher visibility of their positively inclined perceptions. Moreover, some participants altered previously expressed moderate to slightly positively inclined perceptions, to be more positive.

Furthermore, the data also underscored three subthemes particularly related to the origin and evolution of perceptions. Firstly, it was observed that the sources which had the most impact on shaping the perceptions of the participants on refugees were their interactions with other people. However, participants who admitted to have had personal contact with a refugee did not indicate these encounters to have any significant impact on their perceptions except to create more awareness. Moreover, participants did not identify their education level, age or citizenship to have a significant impact on their perceptions. Secondly it was observed that the participants' perceptions on accepting refugees were impacting their social identity. These altered social identities were in return redefining their group boundaries and membership within the peer group. Resultantly, the individuals they identify with within the young, highly educated socio-demographic group were becoming limited, creating sub-divisions within the in-group they share

membership with. Finally it was observed that the positively inclined perceptions on accepting refugees were impacting the membership the participants had with the wider society as a whole. The participants were distancing themselves from their national identities and social membership, at times proactively, identifying more with new comers to their local societies than the natives themselves.

All in all the finding demonstrate an intricate phenomenon whereby each participant's perception on accepting refugees into Europe is influenced by their personal and social identity with respect to five key groups – refugees, immigrants, local society (determined by nationality), Europeans, peers (those who were of similar age as well as academic, professional and social status to the participant). The themes observed aligned particularly well with the SIT highlighting the complex journey of an individual defining both self and social identities, as well as its implications on perceptions. The findings supporting the mentioned three key themes and three subthemes are discussed in the next section.

5. Findings

5.1. Defining a refugee

All the interviewees used either or both incentive and intent to define a refugee, and to distinct the same from other immigrants. They used terms to indicate moving involuntarily due to adverse effects as the incentive, whilst seeking better quality of life as the intent. The better quality ranged from the fundamental conditions necessary for human life such as not to be killed to economic reasons. The most common intent stated was seeking safety. All but one participant used the same incentives and intent, together with the legal status to clearly differentiate a refugee from other immigrants.

When describing refugees entering Europe following post 2015 conflicts in Syria the definitions remained largely similar to that offered previously with the emphasis on incentives and intent of the individuals migrating. While incentive was same to that describes previously, the intents expressed varied more with participants offering economic and other reasons as opposed to emphasizing seeking safety. Moreover, none of the participants drew on the legal status when defining refugees entering the Europe.

All participants identified Syria as a country of origin together with a plethora of nations mainly capturing the Middle East, North African and East African regions. When identifying the nations currently hosting majority of the refugees most participants identified the respective neighboring countries of the states experiencing crisis, as well as Germany and states of first entry, such as Greece and Italy. Furthermore, most participants highlighted their own country of citizenship within the EU to have given refuge to a significant number of refugees. Participants did not extend any definite statistics related to the issue. Whilst most of them stated to not know or remember, the few who extended some form of statistics emphasized they were estimations or vague recollections from the information they have accumulated in the past.

5.1.1. *Incentive and intention*

Of the participants twelve used one of the terms 'escaping', 'have to leave', 'fleeing', 'forced to leave' and 'running away' to describe the movement of refugees. The other three participants used 'relocate', 'leaves a non-development country' and 'leaving' respectively. While nine of the participants indicated 'war' or 'civil war' as the trigger for the refugee movement seven indicated 'political persecution'. They also presented 'poverty', 'discrimination', 'religious' and 'other' reasons, while three indicated 'economic' reasons. One participant mentioned 'choicelessness', whilst three did not provide any reasons. While eight participants did not indicate what a refugee

was seeking, five indicated 'safety for self and family', two stated 'better support' and quality of life for self and family', while one participant also mentioned 'economic reasons'.

5.1.2. *Differentiating a refugee from an immigrant*

All the participants but one stated refugees were different to immigrants, while one participant stated the difference depends on the refugee itself. If for instance a refugee was driven by economic incentives his/her distinction to an ordinary economic migrant would be blurred. As to what separated a refugee from an immigrant eight participants indicated choice where by an immigrant chose to leave whereas a refugee did not choose to leave or hand no choice but to leave. Participants also stated the incentive and intent to be factor which differs to two groups. Four participants stated the difference in legal status and one the criteria each group requires to full-fill prior to entering a new country, while one participant stated 'wealth', whereby immigrants were wealthier than refugees. One participant did not provide a reason. To conclude ten participants defined a refugee as someone who is involuntarily and unwillingly caused to leave their current place of living due to a variety of adverse reasons, and were distinct from immigrants due to the lack of choice and difference in incentives related to their movement. The next two participants defined a refugee in a similar manner to the previous ten but also indicated legal status together with choice, and legal status together with an immigrant being comparatively wealthier respectively as facts which distinct a refugee from an immigrant. The next participant described a refugee the same as the first twelve participants but stated if the incentive was driven by economic reasons then the difference between that specific type of refugee and an average immigrant may be blurred. One participant defined a refugee as someone leaving a 'developing country' also due to a variety of adverse reasons and are seeking basic quality and better support in a 'developed country', who is different to other immigrants due to his/her legal status and

criteria required to entering the said developed country. The final participant defined a refugee from a legal perspective as an individual given a refugee status and a target destination outside his/her country to relocate. This participant went on to make clear distinctions between refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers using legal status and lack of choice respectively.

5.1.3. *Refugees entering Europe post 2015 conflicts in Syria*

When reflecting upon their knowledge on the event which triggered an influx of irregular migrants into Europe post 2015, the interviewees made a variety of statements. Seven participants used the term 'Syrian' to describe the group of people who were migrating. When describing the reasons which triggered these mass movements participants indicated 'war' (8), 'conflict' (2), 'political' (2), 'environmental' (1), 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS 3), 'severe lack of resources' (2) and 'being forced' or 'lack of choice' (1).

When describing what the individuals who were migrating were seeking the interviewees stated 'better living conditions' (4), 'economic gain' (3), 'safety' (2), 'capacity to help those left behind' (1), 'an adventure' (1) and 'other reasons' (1). Furthermore to describe the group of people or the refugees in particular who were migrating following the post 2015 events in Syria the interviewees used the terms 'families and children' (3), 'young men' (2), 'highly educated' (2) and 'people not in danger' (2). Participant #10 stated according to the Austrian media the people migrating into Europe following these events were 'terrorists'. Moreover when describing the journey of these individuals from their point of origin to final destinations participants used the terms 'boats' (3) and 'illegal ways' (1). When describing the event in general two participants indicated that the irregular influx on migrants due to these events into Europe 'have decreased but are still going on', while one participant indicated a 'severe lack of information and statistics available on the event and populations involved' to answer this question.

The interviewees were also asked if they could name one or more countries where the displaced individuals in question were originating from and the host states hosting majority of them. All participants identified 'Syria' as a country of origin for refugees entering Europe together with others naming 'Afghanistan' (4), 'Iraq' (4), 'Somalia' (3), 'Libya' (2), 'Egypt' (1), 'Congo' (1), 'Pakistan' (1), 'Sudan' (1), 'Eritrea' (1), 'Iran' (1) and 'Ethiopia' (1). Participants also identified 'North Africa' (4), 'Africa' (2), 'Middle East' (1) and the 'EU' (1) in general as points of origin. Participant #6 stated those living in 'Dubai' with Syrian passports were also migrating to Europe under the larger population identified as refugees.

Among the participants eight identified 'neighbouring countries' to host the majority of the refugees while 'Turkey' (4), 'Lebanon' (3), Kenya (2), 'Uganda' (1) and 'Jordan' (1) were identified specifically as some of the respective neighbouring countries. Other participants identified 'Germany' (7), 'Italy' (7), 'Sweden' (5), 'Finland' (5), 'Greece' (5), 'France' (4), 'UK' (3), 'Spain' (3), 'Norway' (2), 'Australia' (1), 'Austria' (1), 'Portugal' (1) and 'Switzerland' (1). Some interviewees identified the general regions 'Europe' (3), 'Southern Europe' (2), 'Western Europe' (1), 'East Africa' (1) and the 'Middle East' (1) to be hosting most of the refugees. Another participant stated since the refugees are constantly being sent back to the countries within or outside Europe where they were first registered upon their arrival to host most of them. Another participant stated the host country or destination of the refugee was decided by the refugees' point of origin and desire.

When inquired to state any specific statistical information they were aware of related to the subject in question eight participants stated they could not remember any details at the point of the interview. The others stated 'one million refugees' (2) and '0.5 million refugees' to be hosted in Europe since 2015. Participants also stated 'Finland to host 30,000 refugees in 2016'

(1), 'Austria to host 25,000 Syrians' (1), 'Germany to host one million' (1) and 'Turkey to host two million' (1). One participant also stated 'Lebanon's population to refugees hosted ration being five million to 500,000.

5.2. Interaction between refugees and the host societies

All participants identified safety, peace or a day to day life free from war as what refugees fundamentally gain from their respective host societies. However, when moving further from this basic gain interviewees appeared to be divided on what host societies offer those seeking refuge. While some listed positive physical and non-materialistic elements such as shelter and language support, others identified negativity and adverse reception. Moreover some participants also indicated what refugees gain to be dependent on and vary according to their respective host nations.

Furthermore, all participants agreed refugees contributed, impacted and/or shaped their host societies in some way. Whilst most identified positive influences some also identified negative impacts. Culture was identified as the key area in which the most significant impact was observed. Finally when describing if it was necessary for refugees to contribute to the local society most participants indicated it was not a mandatory requirement particularly since a price cannot be put for offering a safe place to live. Some participants elaborated the willingness to integrate and contribute to the host society, particularly in the long term, as preferred requirements for refugees to carry with them.

5.2.1. Elements refugees gain from their host societies

Participants identified the wider positive conditions refugees gain from the host societies they enter as 'safety' (8), 'peace' (3), 'better life' (2), 'ability to recreate self' (2), 'safety for families'

(1) and 'human rights' (1). They further identified a plethora of physical commodities and non-materialistic assistance refugees gain or are given as food, shelter and job training. While four participants stated what refugees gain to be dependent on the host nation, four participants stated that refugees often gain 'very little/bare minimum' from their host societies. Six participants also included negativity as something refugees gain from their respective host society. One participant was uncertain and sceptical as to if refugees gain a better life within their respective host societies regardless of perhaps gaining security and other basic essentials.

5.2.2. *Refugees' impact on their host societies*

All participants stated that refugees influence or contribute to the host societies they come into in some shape or form. While eight participants answered 'yes', the others elaborated further by stating 'yes, good and bad' (3), 'yes, depends on how receptive the country/society is' (2) and 'yes, inevitably' (2). Twelve participants identified 'culture' in general as a key area refugees influence within a host society. Participants also focused on the impact refugees make to the economy of the nation hosting them. One participant concluded refugees make the 'same influence and contribution as any other citizen of the host nation'.

While the above impacts were observed as positive by the interviewees they also identified a set of negative influences and outcomes refugees exert or generate within the host societies. It was stated that refugees can form closed communities, bring unethical traditions (i.e. Female Genital Mutilation) and different understanding of rules and law. Participants also claimed an influx of irregular migration to develop discontent and negative behaviour in locals such as feelings of losing local culture or the increase in extreme right winged political parties. However, they also emphasized that refugees were not accountable or liable for these outcomes.

5.2.3. Expected contribution to the host society

When questioned if it were necessary for refugees to contribute in any manner to their respective host societies, seven participants replied 'no'. On the other hand, participants also replied 'yes' (3) and 'yes, if long term' (2). Finally participants also highlighted they believed it was necessary for refugees to contribute in some way because 'everyone should try to do something greater with lives' (1) and 'it's nice to give something back' (1). One participant emphasized that refugees were 'not bound more than other citizens' (1).

5.3. Refugees in Europe

All participants agreed Europe should accept and host refugees within the region. Moreover, most of them also indicated that the level of accepting refugees should be increased or be not capped at a certain number. However, all the interviewees also emphasized the necessity to drastically improve the current processes in place to accept refugees and decide their aftermath within host societies. They indicated the process itself was far more important that the level or the number of refugees accepted. Furthermore participants also made statements highlighting a disparity between Europe's willingness and capacity to accept refugees, compared to individual states' willingness and capacity for the same. It was established that whilst Europe could accept more refugees it was necessary to take individual states' capacities into consideration when distributing and relocate them. Participants also highlighted regardless the capacity some states were more unwilling than others to accept refugees causing a rift within Europe at the cost of refugees who were in desperate need of help.

When discussing the future of refugees within Europe participants provided a plethora of predictions from better to worse, as well as being dependent on either or both the host nation or the refugee. In terms of both the short and long term future within Europe, most participants

identified integration support and positive reception by the host society as what refugees required for their future.

5.3.1. *Accepting refugees into Europe*

All fifteen participants agreed by answering 'yes' to when questioned if the Europe should accept refugees. All participants emphasized the process of accepting refugees and deciding their aftermath within host societies to be far more important than the actual level or the number or quantity of refugees itself. They provided the following suggestions with regard to the same. Six participants stated the acceptance of refugees should be done in a better and more organized manner. They highlighted the need for better rules, policies, infrastructure, system and logistics to be set in place. Five participants highlighted the EU in particular should establish better coordination and consensus within the member states. They indicated some states being in favour of accepting refugees whilst others were being reluctant, affecting the entire process in an adverse manner. Furthermore, they underscored the EU being a 'whole' and each state being too small to act on its own effectively, thus requiring the EU to be the main actors. Moreover, three more participants indicated the necessity for the EU to progress in the distribution of refugees highlighting if the incoming influx of population was not well distributed it would be unfair on some host states and societies.

Participants also stated the level of refugees accepted is 'dependent on the host country and society' (5). They particularly underscored the importance of considering not just the size of a country geographically but also its economic system and the demography of the host population prior to deciding the level of refugees to be accepted. One participant stated the level of acceptance depends on the 'need' or the amount of refugees seeking refuge at the given point in time. Furthermore, another participant concluded countries 'should take people with life threats,

and prioritize families and children'. Two interviewees also stated that the ideal solution was to 'solve the issues and create better life conditions within the countries of origin of refugees respectively'.

The participants also focused on the processes which followed the phase of initial acceptance of refugees into a host society. They underscored the necessity to set up 'integration programs for refugees' (3) and 'preparing/educating host countries and societies' (1), whilst one participant stated she though she believe the current process of accepting refugees need to be improved she does not know how.

The interviewees also provided specific reasons as to why refugees should be given refuge within the EU. Three participants approached the issue from the harsh conditions refugees had to endure stating accepting them is a humanitarian necessity. Others underscored why the processes related should be improved in particular by stating 'difficultly to move within Europe once registered' and 'closing the German border was not good, it's inhumane'. Another participant stated that accepting refugees helps strengthen the EU as a unified entity. He elaborated since refugees come from different backgrounds, accepting them would raise the bar of tolerance within EU states. This in return will lead to the states and citizens within EU accepting each other more, blurring the national boundaries and creating a united and stronger region.

Furthermore, three participants concluded that Europe had the wealth and the resources to accept refugees. They emphasized it was a European value and if it is possible to assist and share what the region has it should. One participant stated compared to levels of refugees currently being hosted in Turkey, the EU in particular could take in more refugees than currently being

accepted. Another interviewee stated 'levels' or the number of refugees decided by each state or Europe in general to admit, as part of a populist agenda set up to 'calm' the local people. Finally one participant stated that as a result of accepting refugees 'Europe will be a little less rich in the future because we have to share'.

5.3.2. *Future of refugees in Europe*

The participants forecasted a number of scenarios describing the future of refugees in the Europe. Participants stated the future would be 'difficult' (3), 'difficult in the short term' (2), 'better in the long term' (2), 'better' (3), 'dependent on the host nation refugees were residing in' (3) and 'depends on the situation in the countries of their origin' (2). Furthermore, the interviewees also identified the future of refugees within Europe to be dependent on each refugee's 'residence status' (3), 'individual experience' (2) and 'individual wish (intent)' (1). Two participants indicated they did not know what the future for refugees will be like in Europe.

Among the participants ten identified 'integration support' as a key element that affects the future of refugees within Europe thus needed to be given or provided for the latter. Moreover, participants further highlighted specific forms of support that should be given to refugees both in terms of services and tangible goods. One participant also stated that what refugees require for the future within Europe is dependent on their duration of stay, short-term or long-term, within the region. Moreover, the interviewees also highlighted a number of social circumstances that the refugees need to be extended by the host society in general such as acceptance, to be welcomed, and so forth. One participant emphasized that the refugees need 'peace in their respective countries of origin and opportunity to return them'. Some interviewees also identified cultural education and integration support that need to be extended to the host society which in return will directly impact the future of refugees within the Europe. Finally participants further highlighted

requirements or qualities refugees need to bring with them to the host society, which they will need for their future within the Europe such as open mindedness and willingness to integrate.

5.4. Sources which drive perceptions on accepting refugees

Participants offered a plethora of sources through which they gained information regarding refugees in Europe and the wider issue related to the same. Interestingly whilst most of them emphasized news as their key source of information, the most scrutinized source of information was also the same. Furthermore, participants also identified other people as their key source of information on the subject. Irrespective of the source selected all participants demonstrated a level of skepticism towards the information they can obtain and emphasized critically analyzing their findings. Moreover, some participants listed out certain sources they proactively avoided due to unreliability and extreme bias when providing information.

Participants identified obtaining information from multiple sources, each presenting the same from a different angle, and critically analyzing what they have gathered as the key mechanism of interpreting information gathered on the issue. The different angles were defined as politically right or left winged, domestic and international, as well as contemporary and historical. Furthermore, participants identified people as what mostly influenced their individual processes of formulating perceptions on the issue. Only two participants referred to their university education whilst none reflected on their age. Moreover, twelve participants identified as having being immigrants in another country while five of them stated this experience to influence the development of their perceptions on refugees in Europe. Similarly, while four participants identified to come from an immigrant family, one stated his experience to impact the formulation of perceptions on the subject of research.

Most of the participants admitted to have had personal contact with a refugee, while some further claimed to done so on more than one occasion. The participants did not indicate these encounters to have any significant impact on their perceptions on the matter at hand. However, most of them highlighted the encounters creating a greater awareness of the subject of research.

5.4.1. *Key sources of information*

The participants listed a plethora of sources through which they obtain information regarding refugees in Europe and the wider issue of immigration. Some also indicated several sources they proactively avoid due to the unreliable and extremely biased presentation of information on the subject. Eight participants identified 'news (including foreign)' as a key source of obtaining information regarding the subject while three participants who stated 'news' as a source were particularly critical towards the same, regardless of obtaining majority of information on the subject through it.

Participant #10 – "There's is a saying that you can only trust your own statistics. There's always of course the possibility that someone might alter them (statistics) for their personal gain like they did in Austria politics and media. In the end the prime example was the US election."

Six participants also indicated gaining information from other 'people' including their friends, family and peers, while three stated they have gathered information on this subject through 'refugees' themselves. On the other hand five participants identified 'news' as a source of information they proactively disregard due to extreme bias. Three participants indicated they avoid using 'social media' as a source of information, with two of them specifically highlighted 'Facebook' within this category.

5.4.2.   *Process of interpreting information to formulate individual perceptions*

The interviewees were asked to describe the process of formulating their individual perceptions on the subject of accepting refugees into Europe and the wider issue of immigration. They were also inquired to identify who or what specifically influenced the same process. Of the participants eleven stated 'discussions with people' as what influenced the formulation of their perceptions. They further categorized 'people' as 'friends' (5), 'family' (3), 'acquaintances with direct contact to the subject in question' such as journalists or Syrian immigrants (2), 'refugees' (2), 'researchers who questions them on the subject' (1) and 'peers' (1). A key method of formulating perceptions described by the participants was first speaking to people on either side of the debate with contrasting opinions. Following which they placed themselves in the middle and tried to establish their own perceptions on the matter.

Participants also identified 'listening to/reading/watching news presented from different perspectives' (7) impacted formulation of their own perceptions on the wider issue related to refugees and immigration within Europe. The process explained was similar to that of speaking to people, whereby participants elaborated obtaining news depicted from multiple angles and placing themselves in the center of the debate to establish their own stand. All participants, but one, defined 'different perspectives' as politically left versus right. Whereas one participant emphasized historical versus present day perspective on the matter as what enables her to formulate own perceptions. All participants admitted to critically analyzing every piece of news as opposed to accepting the information presented as the whole truth.

Furthermore, participants also identified their own experience as 'immigrants living in another country' (5) and 'coming from an immigrant background' (1) also influenced developing their individual perceptions on the subject at hand. It was also observed that of the fifteen

participants interviewed for this study twelve stated to have been immigrants themselves, while four identified themselves as coming from an immigrant background. They also drew on these experiences explicitly to answer questions related to accepting refugees into Europe. However, as mentioned above not all of them identified these factors to have impacted their individual perceptions on the subject of study. One participant emphasized, particularly post 2015 events, how she proactively disguise her current identity as an immigrant.

Participant #6 – "I have to admit though that I always try to hide that I'm not Finnish. When I see people in the building when they know I'm a foreigner they are bit afraid and know I will make more noise so I don't talk and then just pretend I know Finnish."

Participants also indicated 'getting information on the issue from sources directly related to the issue' (3) and processing them as a key mechanism through which they form their own perceptions. While two participants indicated 'university education' to have a large impact on how their perceptions are formed on the matter, another two elaborated 'critical thinking' as the key process of formulating perceptions on the matter. Interviewees also identified their 'own moral compass' (4) as what mainly influenced the process of forming their perceptions on the matter further stating conscience, upbringing and values as the components which make up the same. Finally three participants indicated trying to understand the intent of different people and the root cause which drives them is how the interviewees create their own perceptions.

5.4.3. *Personal contact with refugees*

Among the participants thirteen stated to have had personal face to face contact with a refugee, with a further four of them having met a refugee on more than one occasion. Of the thirteen participants who stated to have had a direct interaction with a refugee they elaborated the

encounter had 'no major effect' (7), 'effected positively' (5) and 'effected negatively' (1) their perceptions on refugees respectively. The participants who identified their perceptions to have been positively impacted by their encounters with refugees further elaborated these impacts as, motivating them to volunteer; to be more open-minded and tolerant; bring joy to their lives; changed previous (negative) perception on people from war zones completely (to the positive). On the other hand the interviewee who admitted to have her perception on refugees being impacted negatively following her multiple encounters with refugees elaborated she was, catcalled by a group of young men (she identified as refugees); was frightened by the appearance of some refugees at a refugee centre she volunteers at; found young men (which again she identified as refugees) idling in large groups in local shopping malls during day time to stand out in a negative manner.

Furthermore, of the participants who stated to have had a personal encounter with a refugee, three claimed their experiences to have negatively affected their perception on 'locals' or the local society in general. The two participants, who stated their encounters with refugees occurred in public transport, were among the mentioned three, elaborating how the public's reaction towards the refugee 'reinforced their opinions on the problem or the situation' and impacted their perception on the public to the negative.

Furthermore, among these participants nine indicated their encounters with refugees to have 'created more awareness' about the wider issue related to the same. They elaborated the means, through which this awareness has affected their respected perceptions as, made more aware of borders, existence of these issues and how they affect some more than other purely based on their country of citizenship; shaped the understanding of what motivates a refugee to leave country of origin; gained a deeper understanding about civil war, destruction in created and

how those who didn't support the local government didn't stand a chance; realization that refugees were people similar to self and every other person in society; increased knowledge on the issue; motivated to break away from the (Facebook) bubble and critically analyse statistics and information related to the issue more carefully. Finally one participant who stated to not have had any personal encounters with a refugee elaborated the media coverage on the issue has made an impact at a personal level from a distance, by creating more awareness on the subject of research.

5.5. Perceptions on refugees and the wider issue of immigration in Europe

When the participants were asked to state their perception on refugees in Europe, most participants indicated a positively tilted perception. Furthermore, all of them admitted to feel empathetic towards the same, whilst two participants elaborated feeling both empathetic and frustrated/apprehensive, depending on the refugee.

Most of the participants stated their perceptions on refugees have not changed in any way post 2015 conflicts in Syria. However, it was emphasized that the participants became more aware of the issue and it also became more present in their lives since the 2015 events. Moreover, most participants also identified their overall perceptions on immigrants in Europe to be favourable and inclined positively. They further admitted to perceive refugees with empathy or a higher level of empathy, compared to how they perceive immigrants in general.

Finally, when the participants were prompted to reflect upon if their perceptions on refugees have affected their perceptions on immigrants and vice versa, the answers provided were mixed. Some of them concluded the perceptions have not impacted each other in anyway and emphasized identifying refugees and immigrants as two separate groups. Others implied the

perceptions have affected on each other negatively or positively. Furthermore, participants also emphasized becoming more aware of the differentiation between the two groups and the wider issue at hand in general.

When describing their peers' perceptions on refugees in Europe, most participants stated it to be divided. Moreover, most of them admitted to sharing similar perceptions with all or some of their peers on the subject of research. Similarly, when describing the perceptions held by their respective host societies on refugees in Europe, participants stated it to be divided. Most of them shared similar perceptions with some members of their local societies. However, some participants assigned overall perceptions to their local societies completely contradictory to own on the matter of research. Furthermore, some participants stated their own perception and that of their respective local society on accepting refugees into Europe to have evolved or not evolved in a similar manner. On the contrary an equal number of interviewees admitted their local society's perception to have evolved in a manner completely opposite to their own.

5.5.1. *Participants' perceptions on refugees in Europe*

The participants identified their perceptions on refugees in Europe as 'neutral' (9), 'positive' (4) and 'divided' (2). All fifteen interviewees further elaborated it to be empathetic as well. The two participants who stated their perceptions to be divided described it as both 'empathetic and frustrated' and 'empathetic and apprehensive' respectively, depending on the individual refugee. The terms 'positive' and 'negative' are used by both the researcher and participants to indicate perceptions 'in favour of/supportive' and 'against/opposed to' accepting refugees into the EU, respectively. Moreover, whilst 'divided' refers to both 'negative' and 'positive' perceptions, 'neutral' captures those in the range of neutral to slightly inclined towards positive, but not negative.

Among the interviewees seven stated their perceptions of refugees to be 'as people who need help', while another three stated they were 'proactively willing to help' refugees in Europe. Furthermore, participants also claimed their perception on refugees to be 'people like us' (7), or in other words regarding them as equals and no different to other people in the society. Participants further elaborated they perceived refugees as 'those looking for safety and exhausted by the journey', 'worried about life', 'human beings who went through a traumatic experience' and 'those who went through a lot'. They also stated on the other hand 'some refugees are not the nicest' and 'some of them will complain when they go through hard situation' to elaborate like all people in the society refugees too carry both positive and negative qualities. Among the participants who perceived refugees in Europe from a positive outlook two emphasized their perceptions were 'not biased towards refugees or blinded by idealism' (2). They further elaborated to know the few negative incidents that had occurred, while one stated 'everyone coming is not a parasite and few negative things should not make us skeptical'. Another participant highlighted irrespective of her positive perception she has had 'little firsthand contact with refugees'.

Moreover when describing their perception on refugees, interviews used a variety of terms to elaborate the feelings of empathy they carried. The terms were 'sadness' (2), 'understanding' (2), 'pity' (1), 'sympathy' (1) and 'empathy' (1) itself. Participants further elaborated to perceive children, women and families seeking refuge with more empathy.

Participant #15 – "I read somewhere you don't put your child on a boat that's potentially going to sink unless the land is more dangerous."

It was also identified that the perceptions of sadness were triggered when reflecting upon the adverse events refugees would have faced causing them to seek refuge in the EU. Furthermore, when elaborating upon the overall positive perceptions they had on refugees in the EU, participants stated they were 'positive' (3), 'supportive' (2), 'open-minded' (2) and 'welcoming' (1) towards refugees. One participant stated that 'refugees often try hard to integrate' and it was important as locals to not lose sight of that. Another participant claimed she felt more 'respect' for a refugee who tried to make a living through engaging in a (menial) job, as opposed to a local who was unemployed.

Participants also indicated their perceptions on refugees 'depends on the refugee' (2). Participant #7 elaborated his past experience of having the Russian state taking jobs away from the locals and giving them to Ukrainian refugees during his childhood. Thus while emphasizing his weariness of the reoccurrence of a similar situation in EU, he highlighted as at the time of the interview his perceptions on the refugees in Europe were positive. Participant #6 also stated her perception on refugees varied whereby, she would perceives a mother and a child seeking refugee with more empathy, whereas perceive young men (carrying latest mobile phones and wearing branded clothes) seeking refuge with 'frustration', 'not understanding' and 'feelings of unfairness'. One participant stated to perceive refugees as 'people with psychological problems' such as depression and suicide to do what they have had to face causing them to flee their own countries and seek refuge in Europe.

5.5.2. *Evolution of perceptions post 2015 conflicts in Syria*

The interviewees further also asked to elaborate if the perceptions they held towards refugees in general have in anyway altered since 2015 events which triggered an influx of refugees and irregular migrants into Europe. While ten participants stated their perceptions have 'not changed'

since 2015 events, four participants indicated that it 'had changed'. The latter further elaborated their perceptions had changed from 'empathetic to skeptical' (1), 'frightened and apprehensive to positive' (1), 'narrow minded to more open minded and understanding' (1), and 'previous positive perceptions becoming more strong and expressing the same regularly' (1).

Participant #6 – "I think this is going to be the stereotypical answer, but now that I also have seen all these young guys (refugees) without their wives or children, that are left behind maybe, then I think my perception is a bit more skeptical about them."

Furthermore, six participants who stated their perceptions have not changed in any manner, further elaborated that they have become more aware of refugees and the wider issue since 2015. The participants highlighted; they became more aware of negative examples (related to refugees) due to media framing; the issue (related to refugees) became more present and relevant in everyday life; their perceptions became more realistic by realizing refugees too can be both good and bad; they noticed some refugees could be wealthy (concluded by observing the gold jewelry and clothes some refugees wore); people were entering Europe under the false pretense of being refugees which was wrong thus should be provided with an alternative method of migration; realized the true scale of desperation of people who were seeking refuge. Two participants stated following the events of 2015 their perceptions changed not towards refugees but the local citizens of their respective countries of citizenship. While one participant stated her perspective 'became more negative' towards locals, the other claimed to become 'more frustrated' at the public's reaction towards refugees. One participant indicated prior to 2015 he did not have a specific perception on refugees or the wider issue related to the same.

5.5.3.   *Comparing perceptions on refugees versus immigrants in Europe*

The participants were also asked to identify the perceptions they had on immigrants and compare it to that they have on refugees. Two participants stated their perceptions on each group to be different. They identified to perceive refugees with more empathy, than immigrants. The remaining thirteen participants stated they perceive refugees and immigrants in general in the same manner and with the same level of positivity and acceptance. However, among the participants who indicated to have a similar perspective towards both refugees and immigrants six admitted to perceive refugees with more empathy than an average immigrant. Moreover participants also stated 'refugees needed more support' (2) and claimed to 'perceive refugees with more understanding' (1) compared to other immigrants.

Some interviewees who stated to perceive both immigrants and refugees in the same manner also made the following statements about immigrants – 'more contribution (i.e. economic) is expected from immigrants' (1); 'immigrants have it quite easy' (1); 'level of frustration building up depending on the immigrant' (1); 'balance needs to be struck in numbers with immigrants' (1). Furthermore, some participants emphasized that the two groups were very different from each other due to 'varying incentives, reasons and (lack of) choices' (3) which brought each group to the host nation. One participant stated he could not compare his perspectives between the two groups because he found immigrants to be different from refugees and term which applied to a much wider group of people, than the latter. Yet another participant stated whilst the theoretical difference between refugees and immigrants was obvious, in reality the two groups were getting difficult to separate. On the contrary one participant admitted though the outward appearance and the country of origin of most refugees entering Europe post 2015

may differ to that of the majority of immigrants in the region, both groups were in the same situation (seeking to improve life standards).

Participant #1 – "If you probably look at the countries, I would consider economic immigrants (disguised as refugees) are coming from, which 50 years ago there were also local conflicts. That's why the boundaries are not there anymore and it's super difficult to pinpoint who is who. What's the difference and whether we can actually judge that this group of people can come in (or not)…"

5.5.4. *Effects of perceptions on refugees and immigrants on each other*

Finally the interviewees were questioned if the perceptions they have on refugees and immigrants have in any way affected each other, post 2015. Seven participants stated that the perceptions have 'not impacted each other in any way'. Among these participants three admitted to regard refugees and immigrants at two completely separate groups thus the manner in which they perceive the mentioned to be different. On the contrary one participant highlighted that the difference between the two groups have become blurred particularly due to some 'economic migrants' entering Europe under false pretense of being refugees originating from states which were former war zones (though currently not at war).

Moreover, seven participants also stated that their perceptions on refugees and immigrants have affected each other. Among them two indicated a positive impact whereby their overall positive perception on immigrants established prior to 2015 events, helping to establish the same towards refugees. One interviewee stated certain acts of violence carried out by immigrants since 2015, reported widely by the media, to have negatively affected her overall perception on refugees. Moreover, participant #6, currently an immigrant herself, stated she proactively tried to

disguise being an immigrant herself to avoid receiving any negativity from the locals which in

her opinion have increased since the influx of refugees into Europe post 2015. This in return she

identified as having negatively impacted her own perception on refugees and immigrants.

Participant #11, who is also an immigrant himself presently, admitted finding the process of some

states posing travel restrictions on immigrants from certain nations, while accepting refugees in a

more lenient manner unfair. He concluded these nations to have the capacity to accept both

immigrants and refugees equally, thus this bias demonstrated by states towards refugees to have

negatively affected his perception on the same. Participant #7 on the other hand stated to have

noticed immigrants, particularly Russian immigrants, in Finland to undermine refugees when in

his opinion both groups were facing very similar circumstances in the same nation. Resultantly

he identified this to have affected his perception on immigrants in a negative manner.

Additionally, four participants stated they have become more aware of the differentiation

between the two groups. Two participants also highlighted to have understood immigration to be

a natural process which could not be restricted by (imaginary) borders created by humans. Finally

one participant claimed to 'not know' if his perception on refugees and immigrants has affected

each other in anyway.

5.5.5. *Perceptions of peers on refugees in Europe*

The participants were asked to discuss the perceptions held by their peers on refugees and the

wider issue related to the same. Peers were defined for the purpose of this question as those who

shared similar profiles to the interviewees themselves in terms of age, education, career and

residing within the EU. Participants elaborated their peers' perception on refugees as 'divided'

(8), 'positive' (4), 'negative' (2) and 'unknown' (1). The participants who indicated their peers'

perceptions, on the subject in question, to be 'divided' further elaborated the division to be

between positive, those who were in favour of accepting refugees into Europe, and negative, those who were opposed to accepting refugees into Europe. When describing perceptions held by peers which were overall supportive towards accepting refugees into Europe the participants used the following terms, 'perception is equal/similar to own' (5); 'proactively supporting or willing to support' (3); 'positive' (1); 'see no problem/issue' (1).

Furthermore, they continued to describe the peers' (individuals) who held the mentioned supportive/positive perceptions on refugees using the following terms, 'educated' (2); 'well-travelled' (2); 'understanding' (2); 'tolerant' (2); 'young' (1); 'friends' (1); 'more aware' (1); 'empathetic' (1); 'open-minded' (1). On the other hand when describing perceptions of peers which were not supportive of accepting refugees into Europe the participants used the following terms, 'negative' (3); 'perception different/opposite to own' (2); 'feels invaded' (2); 'opposed/against refugees' (1). Moreover, the participants used the following terms to describe the peers who held these negative perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe, 'fearful' (3); 'childhood acquaintances' (1); 'older' (1); 'from small towns' (1); 'minority' compared to those who held positive perceptions (1); 'suspicious' (1); 'ignorant' (1); 'insecure' (1). One participant indicated he did not know what his peers' perceptions were on refugees they (the participants and his peers) have not discussed this subject. He elaborated refugees or accepting refugees into Europe was not a big issue, thus did not have any significant impact on his and his peers' perceptions or lives.

Some interviewees also emphasized the following points. Two participants highlighted education to have positive impact on perceptions on refugees. One of the participants elaborated (higher/university) education to provide a wider exposure to people, taking them to more cosmopolitan cities with individuals from different backgrounds. The other claimed a positive

perception on refugees to be 'ordinary' among educated peers and hoped it will be in the future seen as the 'normal' perception to have and not categorized as positive. Though some participants indicated age as a factor which influenced the perceptions of their peers, one interviewee underscored those with perceptions belonging to both ends of the spectrum (extremely positive and extremely negative) could be found within the same age group. He concluded it was impossible to generalize and identify a single overall perception among his peers on refugees in the EU. Another participant stated irrespective of the type of perception on the subject in question his peers all feel the issue related to refugees have become personal and affected them personally. Moreover one participant stated to influence her peers to adapt perceptions similar to her own, and be supportive towards refugees in Europe. Finally two participants admitted to proactively only associate peers (and people in general) who shared the same perceptions as themselves on the matter which were supportive/positive towards refugees and the wider issue of immigration. They further elaborate to 'not tolerate' and 'not associate' those with opposing views.

5.5.6.   *Perceptions of citizens of the respective nations on refugees in Europe*

The interviewees also described the perception on refugees in Europe demonstrated by their respective local societies as either 'divided' (9) or 'negative' (6). Those who identified their local societies as 'divided' were referring to Austrian, Dutch, German and Portuguese societies, while others describing as 'negative' were referring to British, Estonian and Italian societies respectively. However, among the four interviewees from Finland while three identified the local society's perception as divided, the fourth described it as negative. Similarly, in the case of the two interviewees with French citizenship while one described the local society's perception as divided the other identified the same as negative.

Similar to the description of their peers' perceptions the participants who identified their local societies' to hold divided perceptions further elaborated it to be both 'negative' or 'positive'. They continued to use the following terms to describe the local societies' perceptions which were favourable towards refugees in Europe and the society itself, 'welcoming' (3); 'positive' (2); 'helpful' (1); 'supportive' (1); 'open minded' (1); 'pro refugee' (1); 'majority' (1). The participant from Portugal who also indicated those with positive perceptions on refugees within the local society to be the majority, further elaborated Portuguese citizens as the first among Europeans wo were willing to host refugees in their own homes, post 2015 events.

Interviewees who both stated local societies' perception to be divided or negative, used the following terms to describe the unfavourable perceptions the locals had on refugees in Europe, 'negative' (1); 'opposed to refugees' (1); 'opposed to people coming in to their societies' including all refugees and immigrants (1). Furthermore, the participants highlighted 'fear' (5) as a factors driving these perceptions while further elaborating 'threat to personal life' (3), 'economic competition' (2), 'fear of losing culture' (2), 'threatened by different religions and skin colour' (1) and 'viewing refugees a invaders' (1) as the specific types of fears the locals feel which in return impact their perceptions on refugees in Europe. Participants used the following terms to describe their local societies when elaborating on the negative perceptions formed by the same on refugees, 'racist/xenophobic' (2); 'uneducated' (1); 'older generation' (1); 'ignorant' (1); 'weary' (1); 'resisting change' (1); 'lack of trust' (1); 'lack of exposure' (1); 'not understanding' (1); 'intolerant' (1); 'closed' (1); 'hateful' (1); 'terrible' (1).

Moreover, some participants continued to elaborate reasons behind these negative perceptions and identified 'news/media framing' (1) and 'isolated acts of violence carried out by refugees or individuals with refugee/immigrant backgrounds' (1). Interviewees also provided

evidence of this negative perception developed by local societies on refugees as 'the popularity of election wins, political parties or policy moves based on anti-refugee/immigrant sentiments' (3). Another participant, who identified to come from an immigrant background, admitted to have received 'negative reaction' (directed to herself, her father who is an immigrant and her non-Caucasian friends) from the local society following 2015 events which in her opinion established the perception held by the society towards refugees was unfavourable. Participants also emphasized the local societies' inability to separate refugees from other immigrants, to impact the development of negative perception on refugees through the statements, people perceive refugees not as individuals but mass groups of people (1) and they tend to perceive all immigrants as Iraqis and Syrians (1).

Furthermore, the interviewees made the following statements to describe the perception their local societies had on refugees in the EU. Some emphasized 'there was a clear division/polarization of perceptions' (4) and 'there was no middle ground' (1) with the individuals of societies forming perceptions on the extremely positive or negative ends of the debate. On the contrary some participants claimed there was in fact a 'spectrum of perceptions' (2), while another stated there were group of people with 'no specific (defined) perception' which the participant described as 'annoying'. Moreover, the same participant elaborated that those with extreme perceptions on refugees in Europe were the loudest or most prominent in the public discourse. Another participant indicated 'most people want to help refugees within their countries of origin'. Finally on the contrary to some of the statements made by participants mentioned above it was also stated that 'people in the local societies consider refugees and immigrants as different categories' (1), thus carried 'more positive perceptions on refugees than immigrants in Europe' (1).

5.5.7. Evolution of local society's perception on refugees in Europe

Of the participants six identified their respective local societies' perceptions on refugees in Europe to 'not have changed', but merely got more defined as a result of individuals being more aware on the subject. They were referring to the Austrian (1), Finnish (3), French (1) and German (1) societies respectively. On the other hand seven participants stated the local societies' perceptions on refugees to have changed negatively post 2015 events with reference to British (1), Dutch (1), Finnish (1), French (1), German (1), Italian (1) and Polish (1) societies respectively. Moreover the remaining three participants identified the perception of their local society on refugees to have changed positively, with reference to Estonian (1), Finnish (1) and Portuguese (1) societies respectively. Thus, participants from Finland, France and Germany presented contradicting accounts of how, in their opinion, the perceptions of the local societies on refugees in Europe evolved since the events of 2015.

To describe the change in the local societies' perception on refugees to the negative participants used the following phrases, 'more negative' (5); 'more nationalistic' (3); 'more racist' (3); 'more sceptical' (2); 'less enthusiastic' (1); 'less empathetic' (1); 'more hatred' (1); 'much worse' (1); 'increasingly hostile' (1). As evidence for this negative change in perceptions the interviewees stated, the rise in political parties and groups with anti-immigrant/refugee and right winged sentiments (6) and the emergence of 'street patrol' groups on countries such as Austria, Hungary, Poland and Finland (1). Moreover, some participants also identified causes which drives this change in perceptions to be, 'increasing awareness of the influx/numbers and changing demographics' (4), 'media framing' (2), 'terrorist attacks' (1), 'isolated acts of violence such as rape conducted by some refugees bring a bad reputation to immigration in general' (1),

'refugees affecting immigrants negatively' (1), 'fear of unknown' (1) and 'politicians misusing the situation for their own advantage' (1).

On the other hand participants who stated the overall perception of their local societies have changed towards the positive used the following terms to further describe the same, 'changed for better' (3); people (particularly young people) have become more open to discussion' (1); 'less racist' (1). Finally, five participants admitted as opposed to their local societies' perceptions on refugees changing towards either positive or negative what has occurred is for 'previously existing perceptions to become more defined, polarized and visible' regardless of if one had been individually affected by the issue in question. The participant from the Netherlands stated with regards to the Dutch in the recent election the party against refugees gained more votes, while on the other hand people engaging in volunteer work related to refugees also increased. Another participant stated extremes on either side were capturing more neutrals thus leading for perceptions within societies to be more defined and polarized. Finally, one participant stated the only change being it becoming acceptable to openly express racist sentiments towards refugees and immigrants.

5.5.8. *Comparative analysis of the perceptions of participants, peers' and the local societies*

The perceptions on refugees in Europe as described by the participants were comparatively analysed with those held by their peers and local societies in general (also as described by the participants) respectively. Furthermore, the participants' descriptions of the evolution of their perceptions since 2015 events were also compared with their descriptions of how the same evolved in their respective local societies. The analysis is presented in the Table 2.

Table 2 - comparative analysis of perceptions of self, peers and society

no	own perception	peers' perceptions	overall society's perception	own vs society's change in perceptions	how society changed perceptions
#1	neutral and empathetic	divided	negative	different	negatively
#2	positive and empathetic	divided	divided	same	more opinionated
#3	positive and empathetic	divided	divided	different	negatively
#4	neutral and empathetic	positive	divided	same	more defined
#5	neutral and empathetic	divided	divided	different	positively
#6	divided, empathetic and frustrated	divided	divided	same	negatively
#7	divided, empathetic and apprehensive	negative	negative	different	negatively
#8	neutral and empathetic	divided	divided	same	more polarized
#9	neutral and empathetic	-	divided	same	more opinionated
#10	neutral and empathetic	divided	divided	same	more opinionated
#11	positive and empathetic	divided	divided	same	positively
#12	neutral and empathetic	negative	negative	different	negatively
#13	neutral and empathetic	positive	negative	different	negatively
#14	neutral and empathetic	positive	negative	same	positively
#15	positive and empathetic	positive	negative	different	negatively

Eight participants provided descriptions which enabled to draw some level of similarity between their own perceptions and that of their peers and local society on refugees in Europe. In each case participants identified their own perception and/or that of others (peers and the local society) to be divided. Resultantly, this lead to each interviewee stating perceptions similar to those held by the whole or a selection of the groups identified by the terms 'peers' and 'local

society' respectively. Following the same pattern three interviewees presented perceptions sharing some similarity to that of their peers' only, whilst one participant indicated perceptions similar to that of his local society only.

Moreover one participant described her perception in an identical manner to that carried by both her peers and the local society. Also one participant stated perceptions identical to that of his peers only. On the contrary another participant described his perception to be completely opposite to that held by both his peers and the local society respectively. One participant indicated his perception on refugees in Europe to be completely opposite to that of his peers'. Whereas, five participants stated their perceptions to be completely opposing to that of their respective local societies.

Furthermore, when describing if and how the perceptions have changed since 2015, seven participants indicated their own perceptions to have evolved in the completely opposite manner to that of their respective local societies. Moreover, five participants stated no significant change in their own perceptions and that of their respective societies', other than perceptions held prior to 2015 events being more defined following a higher level of awareness on the issue at hand. On the other hand three participants identified their own perceptions on refugees in Europe to have evolved identically to that held by their respective local societies since 2015 events.

5.6. Perceptions within the wider discourse on accepting refugees into Europe

The previously stated perceptions of most participants on accepting refugees into Europe, inclined slightly or extremely positively when revisited in the context of the wider debate on the issue. Furthermore, most participants also stated their peers would describe the mentioned perceptions identically to participants' own descriptions. Some participants also stated their

respective local societies would also provide similar descriptions of the perceptions interviewees stated. On the other hand some participants admitted their respective local society would either grossly misinterpret or exaggerate the participants' perceptions on refugees in Europe. Finally when prompted to explore the future in Europe within this context the participants provided a variety of responses which did not identify any significant implication of the subject of research on the same.

5.6.1.   Evolution of participants' perceptions within the wider discourse

The interviewees were prompted to reflect upon their perceptions on refugees in Europe mentioned earlier in the interview, and describe it in the context of the wider discourse on the subject of research. Participants described the same as, 'inclined more to the positive/liberal/left-winged/accepting/welcoming side of the spectrum' (5); 'in the corner/side/with the refugees and immigrants' (3); 'in the middle' (2); 'neutral' (1). Moreover, some participants also used the following terms to describe their overall positive and favourable perceptions on accepting refugees into the EU, 'positive' (2), 'tolerant' (2), 'understanding' (1), 'supportive' (1), 'open minded' (1), 'favourable' (1), 'welcoming' (1), and 'accepting' (1). Interviewees further used the following terms to define their perceptions from a political standpoint, 'pro-immigration' (1), 'pro-human rights' (1), 'liberal' (1), 'left winged' (1), and 'apolitical' (1). One participant highlighted her perception was 'realistic'. Regardless of the plethora of terms used all participants identified their perceptions on the matter to be overall inclined towards to the positive and favourable side, in the context of the wider discourse on the issue.

While reflecting upon their perceptions on the matter in relation to wider discourse, the interviewees further highlighted certain factors elaborated below. Five participants emphasized importance of diversity and multiculturalism for a society to thrive in the future. They expressed

a longing for it, and stated they would proactively share their own culture with refugees (and others) coming into their societies and learn from the latter as well. Moreover, three participants attempted to define the scale or spectrum of opinions currently existing within the wider discourse on accepting refugees into Europe. One participant identified the two ends of the spectrum to be anti-refugee sentiments on the right and those who welcome everybody on the left. Another participant elaborated his perception was more on the middle of the spectrum by stating regardless of being liberal and open minded, he himself will 'not go to the train stations to welcome refugees' who are arriving to his country. One interviewee highlighted the difficulty in establishing the scale or spectrum of opinions currently existing within the wider discourse on accepting refugees into Europe. He underscored though it was clear who were on one end of the spectrum, which he identified as 'racists', who could not see nor understand who were on the other end. Moreover, two participants drew upon their own experience of being immigrants. Another highlighted the complexity of the issue in question and the perceptions related elaborating both the subject matter and perceptions were 'not black and white'. One interviewee insisted he was 'apolitical' thus would not have any perceptions or a stand on the wider discourse of accepting refugees into Europe, unless it was necessary in which case he would be 'on the side of the refugees'. Finally, one participant concluded she did not know how to answer the question as she may change the manner in which she currently perceives the issue tomorrow (in the future).

5.6.2. *Peers' descriptions and views on participants' perceptions*

Among the participants, eleven stated their peers would also describe the (participants') perceptions in the same way (the participants described their own). One participant who identified his peers to share the same opinion as his own indicated he would be considered 'not as

an outlier'. On the other hand, two participants who believed their peers to carry contrasting perceptions elaborated they would be perceived as 'weirdos' (with abnormal views) and 'carrying perceptions that goes against their own' by the peers. Moreover, three participants identified that the description of their peers will 'depend' on the peers themselves. They elaborated 'peers who were close to them' (1), 'highly educated and well-travelled' (1) and 'shared similar perceptions' (1) respectively, would describe their perceptions identically to how the participants did and as 'normal'. On the other hand, the interviewees stated 'peers who were not close to them' (1), 'less educated and have travelled less' (1) and 'have different perceptions' (1), would describe participants' perceptions as 'more left winged' (1), '(more) extremely tolerant' (1) and 'annoying' (1) respectively. Finally one participant stated he 'did not know' how his peers would identify or describe his own perception as the subject of research was not a 'big issue' in his opinion thus has not been discussed with/among his peers.

When requested to identify how the local society would describe and perceive the respective perception of each participant, six participants indicated it would be the same (to how each participant described his/her own perception). Among them three participants elaborated those who share their perceptions would 'approve of' (2) and 'agree with' the participants, while two further described this group of people as 'young and same aged' as the participants themselves respectively. The same three participants described those who carried perceptions different to their own 'would disagree' (2) and 'get defensive' (1), whilst two continued to identify this group as 'older and middle aged'. Furthermore, one participant stated the description provided by members of the local society would vary with some describing his perception on the subject similar to his own interpretations. On the other hand he claimed would present an exaggerated view, defining his perception as 'more left winged' than identified by himself.

Moreover, five participants indicated the local society would exaggerate their actual (moderate) perceptions on the subject and describe them as very/extremely/overly 'tolerant' (2), 'liberal' (2), 'empathetic' (1) and 'pro-globalization' (1). Another participant stated his actual (moderate) perception would be grossly misinterpreted by the local society to be the complete opposite and described as 'negative and racist' towards accepting refugees into Europe. Furthermore, two interviewees claimed they 'did not know' how their local society would identify or describe the participants' perceptions on the subject of research as the local society did not know them (the participants) (1) and the issue was not significant enough to generate a debate (1).

Some participants also identified the following terms which their respective societies would use to describe their perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe, namely 'betrayer of the nation' (1), 'suvakki' - a term, used offensively, to describe someone too liberal and the opposite of a racist (1), 'naive' (1), 'delusional' (1) and 'unrealistic' (1). Furthermore, participants #5 and #15 directly distanced themselves from their local societies together with their perceptions on the subject of research. They made the following statements to confirm the same.

Participant #5 – "Some refugees may hate it here and I don't blame them. Most refugees hate Finland…… I don't feel Finnish. Growing up I was an outsider."

Participant #15 – "I would place myself as more accepting and liberal than the average person or the average UK person"

Moreover, two participants who stated they would be described as 'suvakki' (1) and 'naive' (1) claimed to openly embrace these terms regardless of them intending to be offensive and derogatory. They admitted to proactively identifying themselves using these terms, provided

it captures the positive, accepting and tolerant perceptions they carry. Finally, participant #7 stated his 'higher education and established career' as the variables which prompts the local (Finnish) society to place him in the 'negative box' assuming his perception on refugees in Europe was unfavourable.

5.6.3. *Comparative analysis of the evolution and descriptions of perceptions*

Another comparative analysis was conducted using the descriptions of their own perceptions provided by the participants, alongside the descriptions extended by the same in the context of the wider debate of discourse on the subject of research. Moreover, the participants' statements on how they perceived their peers and the respective local societies to describe and view their (participants') perceptions were also included in the analysis. The findings are included in the Table 3 below.

The perceptions stated by seven participants on refugees in Europe remain the same as they were discussed for the second time within the context of the wider discourse on the subject. However, the descriptions of perceptions stated previously altered for eight participants when elaborated for the second time within the existing spectrum of perceptions on the debate of refugees in Europe. Four participants who previously identified their perceptions as 'neutral and empathetic' indicated it to be 'positive'. They did not mention nor elaborate on neutrality when describing their perceptions in this context. Furthermore, another two participants changed the descriptions of their perceptions from 'neutral and empathetic' to 'positive to extremely positive'. The final two participants altered their initial descriptions of their perceptions in refugees in Europe from 'divided – positive and negative' to 'neutral to positive'.

Among the participants twelve claimed their peers would describe their (participants) perceptions identically to how the participants' themselves described the same. Two participants elaborated whilst some of their peers would describe their perceptions in a similar manner, others would grossly exaggerate the same. Furthermore, two participants indicated their peers would disagree with or not approve of their perceptions on refugees in Europe. Participant #2 stated whilst some of her peers would agree with her perception on the subject, others would disagree with the same.

Furthermore, eight participants indicated the descriptions of their local societies would mirror their own. One participant admitted whilst some within his local society would offer an accurate description of his perception, others would grossly exaggerate the same. On the other hand four participants stated the local society would completely misrepresent their perceptions on the subject of research by either grossly exaggerating it or claiming it to be the total opposite to that described by self. Finally six participants elaborated the individuals that make up their respective local societies would completely disagree with the participants' perceptions on refugees in Europe. Another three stated the society would be divided with some agreeing with the participants' perceptions whilst the others disapprove of the same. Two participants specifically identified those who would agree with or approve of their perceptions on the matter as 'young/same aged people', and those who disagree with the same as 'older and middle aged people'.

Table 3 - comparative analysis of the evolution of perceptions, and their identification and reception by others in the public discourse

no	own perception	own perception within the wider discourse	peers' description of own perception	peers' view of own perception	society's description of own perception	society's view of own perception
#1	neutral and empathetic	neutral to positive	depends, same and exaggerated	-	exaggerated	disagree
#2	positive and empathetic	positive to extremely positive	same	agree and disagree	same	disagree
#3	positive and empathetic	positive	same	-	same	agree and disagree
#4	neutral and empathetic	positive	same	-	same	agree and disagree
#5	neutral and empathetic	positive to extremely positive	same	-	same	disagree
#6	divided, empathetic and frustrated	neutral to positive	depends, same and exaggerated	-	-	-
#7	divided, empathetic and apprehensive	neutral to positive	same	disagree	opposite	disagree
#8	neutral and empathetic	neutral to positive	same	-	same	-

#9	neutral and empathetic	positive	-	-	-	-
#10	neutral and empathetic	neutral to positive	same	-	depends, same and exaggerated	-
#11	positive and empathetic	positive to extremely positive	same	-	same	-
#12	neutral and empathetic	positive	same	disagree	same	agree and disagree
#13	neutral and empathetic	positive	same	-	same	
#14	neutral and empathetic	positive to extremely positive	same	-	exaggerated	disagree
#15	positive and empathetic	positive	same	-	exaggerated	disagree

5.6.4. *Future within Europe*

The participants used the following phrases to describe the future in general from a global perspective, 'unaffected (by the subject of research) and the same' (6) and 'better mobility between countries' (1). Furthermore, with reference to the evolvement of their local societies in particular participants described the future as, 'more multicultural' (4), 'more nationalistic/ closed/distrustful/aggressive' (2) and 'immigration to affect nation and its citizens positively' (2). The participants defined the positive affects to be reduction of unemployment (1) and bringing new cultural elements such as 'food' (1) to the society. Moreover with reference to their individual futures three participants predicted they will proactively be more involved with refugees and the wider debate related to immigration. They described these involvements as 'volunteering and helping refugees' (1), 'teaching about culture and coexisting' (1) and 'creating future company website in English so refugees can read too' (1). Whilst, two participants stated they see no problems, no fear and were trustful of their future, one participant indicated he could not answer the question.

The participants identified the following as requirements that need to be given to them by the state, society or an external party/individual in order to successfully face the future in the context of the subject of this research. The requirements are 'establishment of clear rules and educating everyone (particularly newcomers to the local society) of the same' (2), 'presence and preserve of democracy' (2), 'more interaction between locals and refugees' (2), 'equal benefits and opportunity from the state' (2), 'more information about refugees, their culture, Islam and the wider issue of immigration' (1), 'resources/assistance to carry out personal goals related to the wider issue of accepting refugees into Europe' (1), 'support from family and friends' (1),

'refugees to be treated with dignity and provided human rights' (1), 'smart and educated leaders to lead the society through these period of turmoil' (1) and 'more diversity' (1).

Furthermore participants also identified the following factors as requirements they should personally have or develop in order to face the future with success, namely 'open-mindedness' (3), 'learn Arabic' (2), 'develop more skills to compete in the job market' (1) and 'courage to express own perceptions and stand with the people (refugees, immigrants and those in favour of the same) the participant believes in' (1). Finally, two participants indicated they did not need anything for the future and they were prepared to face it.

6. Discussion

The objective of this study was to discover young, highly educated Europeans' perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe. In the wake of rise in irregular immigrants within the region a high polarization of perceptions and a growing concern regarding actual and perceived impacts of immigration among the native populations were discovered. Thus, this study attempted to revisit and investigate trends set by empirical studies focusing on young, highly educated socio-demographic group. The motivation was to firstly identify the perceptions, evaluate the extent to which they are driven by humanitarian concerns and if they evolved as individuals navigate between their personal and social identities. Finally, the research also attempted to discover the sources which shaped and drove these perceptions. The findings highlighted three key themes and three sub themes which aligned particularly well with the SIT, which are discussed in detail below.

6.1. Key theme 1 - Individual perceptions on accepting refugees are moderately positive

The research found the overall perception of the participants on accepting refugees into Europe to be positively inclined and favourable. Previous research has established the public to remain sharply divided in their opinions at a national and socio-demographic level, with highly educated individuals between ages 18 to 34 years remaining more favourable towards refugees compared to their older and less educated peers (Wike et al. 2016, June). Thus, the results of the research further confirmed the related trends established by previous studies.

Furthermore, previous research on the subject also claimed perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe to have hardened post 2015 Syrian refugee crisis along with an anti-immigrant sentiment across the region (Wike et al. 2016, June). However, this research provided no significant evidence to suggest the same. On the contrary participants insisted their perceptions on accepting refugees to not have altered in anyway in the recent past. They did continue to state the issue to have become more relevant and present in their day to day context, creating more awareness on the subject of research. Moreover, some participants identified their own perceptions on the subject to have changed positively post 2015 events.

A particularly interesting trend observed was when reflecting upon their personal perceptions on accepting refugees many participants identified it to be 'neutral'. However, the statements and terms which were used to further elaborate these neutral perceptions were positive in nature with the absence of any negative statements. It could be deduced that the term neutrality was utilized to emphasize their impartiality towards refugees, which some participants openly highlighted. Thus, the perceptions of individuals at this micro level on accepting refugees though positively inclines, appear moderate as opposed to highly polarized or extreme.

6.2. Key theme 2 - Perceptions are driven by humanitarian concerns

Aligned with the findings of O'Rourke & Sinnott (2006), this study established all participants' perceptions on refugees to be driven by humanitarian concerns. Each participant provided statements or used words which demonstrated high levels of empathy towards refugees. They particularly focused on the devastating circumstances which forced refugees to leave, together with the dangerous journey the latter makes to reach Europe. On the contrary to the findings of Ipsos Mori study published in August, 2016, economic and security concerns did not appear to significantly affect the participants' perception on accepting refugees. Moreover, Schweitzer et al. (2005) observed high prevalence of prejudicial attitudes towards refugees among undergraduate university students in Australia. These attitudes were observed to be shaped by perceived realistic and symbolic threats on economic resources and culture as perceived by the participants of the same study. However, this research did not find evidence to corroborate the same within the European context among young, highly educated Europeans.

On the other hand, few participants also emphasized the demarcation between refugees and immigrants to have become increasingly blurred. This was due to the belief of some refugees being driven by economical incentives as opposed to humanitarian factors such as a threat to life. Some participants admitted this to have caused their previously positive and empathetic perceptions to divide, triggering apprehensiveness, frustration and skepticism towards certain refugees. On the other hand some participants indicated the blending on the two groups did not particularly affect their perceptions in any manner. While participants were significantly more empathetic towards refugees, they also had equally favourable and positive perceptions on immigrants.

Finally participants of this study placed particular value on a refugee's willingness to work, follow the rule of law and contribute to the betterment of the host society, over any cultural differences or integrity of the latter's incentives. In line with findings from Wright et al. (2012) this could be interpreted as the civic aspect of the identity being more dominant in young and highly educated Europeans. Resultantly they were more in favour of accepting refugees irrespective of the ethnic and cultural distance the latter may demonstrate as an outgroup, compared to the more restrictive views help by other native groups.

6.3. Key theme 3 – Perceptions evolve from personal to social context

There was a significant evolution of participants' personal perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe, when the same was revisited from a social perspective. Participants, who particularly emphasized on their neutrality or division of perceptions, redefined the same in a positively inclined manner. Moreover, this research also observed participants to make the positive attributes of their respective perceptions more visible when their social identities were more dominant.

Hainmueller & Hopkins (2014) defined attitudes on immigration to be largely about group boundaries and challenges to the same. It was also observed that when real or perceived impacts of immigration were salient, it often intensified or overturned previously held perceptions on immigration. It could for instance, during times of sudden immigration influx, incline past moderate perceptions to become more polarized or change completely from positive to negative. However, Hainmueller & Hopkins (2014) concluded this trend to not capture in particular the effects of education.

Though this study cannot draw a direct causality between education and the trend observed, the findings underscored that the perceptions of young, highly educated Europeans during this time of mass irregular immigrant influx to have polarized to a certain extent. Empirical research predominantly dictates the polarization in such instances to be more negatively inclined due to perceived threat and increase in competition brought by the out-group (Blinder, 2011; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Barceló, 2016; Schweitzer et al., 2005). However, this study unveiled the said polarization to be positively inclined instead.

6.4. Subtheme 1 - Perceptions on accepting refugees are largely shaped by other people While focusing on the key research question this study also attempted to further explore the sources which significantly impacted to shape and drive perceptions on accepting refugees. The participants themselves did not consider their education level or age category to have a significant impact on their perceptions. What was most emphasized was the direct and indirect impact of other people, namely friends, family, peers, refugees, researchers and acquaintances with stronger links to the issue at hand, on the formulation of participants' own perceptions. Whilst some admitted to gaining their information directly from the mentioned groups others implicated their interactions, relationships and experiences with the same to influence their perception on the issue. Most of the participants also admitted to have had personal contact with a refugee, of which some even on more than one occasion. However, the impact of these specific encounters on their overall perceptions was ambivalent, whilst most participants continued to describe it as not significant. This trend aligns well with the extension of the intergroup contact theory discussed by Blinder et al. (2011). It was presumed that for contact with an outgroup to evoke significant effects on perceptions the interaction needed to be both positive and not fleeting in nature. Thus, it can be deduced that the interactions participants had with individuals

they came into regular contact with on everyday life had a significant impact on their perceptions on accepting refugees, than the fleeting interactions participants had with the refugees themselves.

Moreover, another interesting source worth discussing is the emphasis participants placed on the impact their own experience of being immigrants themselves or coming from an immigrant background, had on shaping their perceptions. Aligning with the SIT, by redefining themselves with the social group 'immigrants', these participants related on a more personal level to refugees and the experiences the latter were facing when entering a new country. However, though all the interviewees had been immigrants themselves previously and/or come from an immigrant background, not all of them emphasized this factor when discussing sources which shaped their perceptions. All in all participants' group membership and identity as former or current immigrants to the subject of research was mostly ambivalent, and requires more in depth study.

6.5. Subtheme 2 – Perceptions on accepting refugees are redefining in-group membership and social identity

Participants acknowledged the overall perceptions on accepting refugees within their peer groups to be divided. However, they continued to elaborate their own perceptions were shared only by certain subgroups within the wider in-group of young, highly educated Europeans. Moreover, participants proactively reached out to and associated peers who had perceptions similar to their own regarding the subject at hand. Furthermore, participants also described their peers who held perceptions different to their own as childhood acquaintances, family members and so forth, indicating a lack of proactive self-involvement in selecting the same to be a part of their in-group. Thus, applying the SIT in this context, participants appear to redefine their group

memberships within their peer groups and the local society with respect to their individual perceptions on the subject of research. Their perceptions appear to have a direct impact on how they relate to those around them. This trend also supports Mangum & Block (2018) demonstrating how the participants were regarding the subgroup of peers they identify closely with in a more positive and esteemed light.

An interesting paradox observed under this subtheme that is worthy of further investigation is the relationship between participants' positively polarized perceptions and its influence on their membership with their peer group. Participants claimed their peers would accurately describe their (redefined) perception on accepting refugees which were as discussed slightly different (more positively inclined) compared to the initial personal perceptions described. However, the participants were content and pleased to have their (redefined) perceptions to be acknowledged, accurately described and even appreciated by their peers. However, participants also specified that these (redefined) perceptions were yet again shared only by a sub-group within the wider peer group. It is then possible to presume that the initially stated moderately positive personal perceptions could have been more prevalent within the wider in-group compared to the redefined more positively inclined perceptions. This unveils a particularly complex instance in which SIT comes into play. It is a situation whereby on one hand individuals are subduing their perceptions related to individual identity. On the other hand they are using the altered perceptions to redefine the boundaries of their peer group membership, both changing and strengthening their social identity within the same. It is in a sense a tug of war between individual identity and in-group membership, of which the end result is the hybrid of a sub-in-group membership.

6.6. Subtheme 3 – Perceptions on accepting refugees are distancing participants from the wider society

Participants indicated a significant difference between the perceptions they have on accepting refugees compared to the overall perception of their respective local society on the matter. Some of them further elaborated not only on the difference but also how those in the society would both disagree and disapprove of the perceptions held by the participants on the matter. Moreover, several participants proactively distanced themselves from their local societies or indicated phrases and terms which inferred the same. In this context most participants described their respective local societies to lack knowledge and exposure to new cultures and be less receptive to change, compared to themselves.

Yet again mirroring the same paradox observed in subtheme 2, participants emphasized a level of discontent at how their local societies would misidentify and/or disapprove of their (redefined) perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe. It can be concluded that by subduing their individual perceptions and redefining new ones, the participants were pulling away from their national group membership. Moreover in doing so they were also using the reactions from the wider society to further strengthen their redefined perceptions. This aligns well with the three components of SIT namely social categorization, social identification and social comparison (Mangum & Block, 2018). It is possible to derive that with the Syrian refugee crisis making the issue of immigration more salient within Europe, the challenges young, highly educated individuals feel to their social identity also come from within their native societies. Resultantly, the evolution of their perceptions are influenced more by their interactions with multiple in-groups (peers and local society) than the outgroup (refugees). This in return is impacting their perceptions on accepting refugees as well as their social identification with numerous in-groups.

7. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to answer the question how young, highly educated Europeans perceive accepting refugees into Europe. The key goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the plethora of perceptions this group harbours on accepting refugees. It did so through a qualitative research based upon the framework of the Social Identity Theory. Whilst taking into account the significant data gap on the subject following the post 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, an extensive literature review was conducted referring past cross national studies on perceptions on immigration and accepting refugees. Moreover, this study also explored sources which shaped the same.

The findings of this study concluded the overall perceptions of young and highly educated Europeans on accepting refugees into Europe to be moderately positive and driven by humanitarian concerns. However, each individual's perception was observed to be complex, variable and unique depending on their interactions with other people. When shifting from a personal to a social context, perceptions became redefined, unified and more positively inclined. Thus, individuals within this socio-demographic sample were making positive aspects of their perceptions more visible, whilst subduing other dimensions of the same. Resultantly, they redefined the boundaries of their socio-demographic group membership, identifying more with those who shared perceptions similar to their own within the peer group. Moreover, following the redefinition of both perception and in-group membership, the latter appeared to take precedence over their membership within the respective native societies. Thus, individuals within this sample of young, highly educated Europeans were distancing themselves from their societies due to their perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe.

The same individuals expressed particular concern over polarization of perceptions on the subject at hand. They also demonstrated discontent at losing the middle ground and having insufficient reliable sources to assist them with forming perceptions on accepting refugees into Europe. However, when entering the wider social debate the individual perceptions of this group also appear to have polarized from slight to a significant level. Interestingly some participants admitted to being self-aware of this polarization, and then continue to embrace and redefine self, according to the same.

7.1.Limitations

This study was able to unveil intrinsic themes and explore perceptions on accepting refugees in depth aided by the extensive individual interviews conducted. Due to the conceptual nature of the research it was not possible to establish precise measurements. Thus, the data gathering was carried out to capture broad and detailed insight into the research question, together with the SIT attached. In terms of the methodological power of the research there were some limitations on how closely the data was representative of the population (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). Firstly the interview candidates were from ten countries of the EU which may fall short of holistically capturing Europe as a whole. More than one participant from some countries were interviewed. However, only a single participant from certain other countries was interviewed. Thus, whilst in some cases the division of perceptions between citizens of the same country were captured, in other cases the research was reliant on a single general opinion for the whole country. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in English limiting the research to participants who are conversant in English. Resultantly this study excluded participants who fit the research candidate requirements but could not speak in English. Furthermore, though the age criteria spanned from 18-34 the compulsory tertiary requirement eliminated most who fell within

18-22 years. This was due a basic degree requiring around four years of tertiary education, following secondary education which many engaged in until the age of 18 years. Furthermore, individuals who were unwilling to have their interviews recorded were also left out. However, the in-depth analysis of the data gathered provided a comprehensive insight into the plethora of perceptions individuals have on accepting refugees, together with dominant trends on how they are shaped and evolved.

After the data was analyzed and the key themes were established through thematic analysis, all the findings were revisited twice to correct and minimize any errors in initial data entry. Another limitation to the reliability of the study was the varying interpretation of the interview questions and the social desirability bias. Particularly with English not being the native language for most interviewees, further explaining some interview questions without generating any leading sentiments was difficult. However, these threats to reliability were minimized by asking multiple questions to measure the same variability, revisiting the question on multiple occasions and focusing on the consistent patterns emerging from the responses of participants (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

The findings of this study are explained in great detail supported by multiple tables highlighting commonly occurring key words and phrases, as well as direct quotes from participants themselves. This study strived to obtain in depth data related to the subject of research from a plethora of individuals. Two tables of comparative analysis of perceptions and evolution of perceptions respectively are provided, highlighting the accuracy with which this study answers the research question. The first half of the analysis followed a predominantly social scientific approach attempting to detach and underscore individual perceptions on accepting refugees. The second half approached it from a more critical angle investigating the

subject of the research from a social context. Thus, the study was able to identify the unique manner in which overall findings, in this case perceptions, evolved throughout the research (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

The topic of this thesis is one leading the contemporary discourse within nations across the globe facing actual or perceived impacts of irregular migration. However, academic research and data available on the impacts of post 2015 Syrian refugee crisis on European perceptions are sparse. On the other hand, the migration of irregular immigrants into Europe continues, together with the wider debate associated. Thus, this study contributes to scholarship in multiple ways. First and foremost it builds upon the SIT and further explains how individual perceptions evolve when navigating between individual and social identities, and multiple group memberships. Secondly it highlights the importance of qualitative study in identifying the intrinsic perceptions on issues similar to accepting refugees and the wider debate of immigration. This implores academic and other studies to resort to both or a combination of qualitative and quantitative data when investigating similar research subjects in the future. Finally, it calls for future research focusing on specific socio demographic groups in the context of the real or perceived impacts of irregular immigration. Moreover, it highlights the tendency of individuals to distance themselves from their wider societies and other in-groups they share memberships with, calling for more in-depth research on the same (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015).

Young, highly educated Europeans consider having perceptions on accepting refugees well aligned with the contextual reality very important. They strive to do so by proactively seeking information from multiple sources, critically analysing everything they obtain and drawing on their own experiences. They are optimistic about the future and eager to embrace new cultures and change. They are also particularly devoted towards creating a dialog between

newcomers to their societies and the natives. However, in the contextual reality of the Syrian refugee crisis which has made immigration salient, the perceptions of these individuals have been affected by intergroup relations. It is at the moment curtailing their social identities by disconnecting them from their peer groups and the society. This calls for future research to investigate the evolution of individual perceptions within personal and social contexts in-depth, to understand how the discourse on immigration is driven. Moreover, developing integration policies which simply focus on bringing outgroups closer to in-groups, are no longer sufficient. It is equally important to adapt processes which also unite existing in-groups with each other.

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9. Appendixes

9.1. Interview Questions

Background information

Age, highest level of education, country of citizenship

Questions

1. Who is a refugee? Are they different from other immigrants? How?
2. What do you know about refugees entering Europe post 2015 conflicts in Syria? Where do they come from? Where do they go to? Why are they here? Any quantitative/statistics you know?
3. What do refugees gain from the host societies? What and how?
4. Do refugees influence, shape or bring anything to the host societies? How and what? Must they bring anything/contribute?
5. Do you think Europe should accept refugees? If yes should the levels be more or less?
6. What is the future for refugees in Europe? What will they require?
7. How do you get your information regarding refugees and the wider issue of immigration? What or who helps you to interpret this information and form your perceptions?
8. What is your perception on these refugees? Has it changed since 2015 and how? Is it different from your perception of other immigrants and how? Has it affected your perception on other immigrant and how?
9. Have you had any personal contact with refugees? How have they impacted your personal everyday life?
10. How do you think your peers perceive refugees and the wider issue? How do you think citizens of your country perceive refugees and the wider issue? Has it changed since 2015?
11. Where would you place yourself on the migration (refugee) debate?
12. What perceptions do you think your peers hold you to on the matter? What about others in your society?
13. What will be the future like for you under these circumstances? What do you require?

9.2. Informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT
TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

Project Title

How Europeans perceive accepting refugees into Europe

Principal Investigator

Geethika Harshani Rodrigo, Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä

Supervisor

Marko Siitonen, Senior Lecturer, PhD

Purpose of the Research Study

The purpose of this study is to study in depth how Europeans perceive accepting refugees into Europe.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked a few open-ended interview questions. The entire interview process should take approximately 30-45 minutes. The interviews will be recorded, and the records transcribed into anonymized text. After the study has been concluded, the original recordings will be deleted.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

The benefits to participation are: you will be participating in a research project that aims to better understand the perception of host societies on refugees. Your participation will help further research on immigration.

Anonymity

Your participation in this study is confidential. The only person who will know your identity is the interviewer, who will not share it with any other individual.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not result in penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study can be contacted at geethika.h.rodrigo@student.jyu.fi
You are encouraged to contact the researcher if you have any questions.

Please provide your consent to be interviewed by reading the following statement and replying to this email clearly stating your consent

I have read the attached document explaining the study and I agree to participate. I acknowledge that my participation in this study is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time. This interview will be recorded using a tape recording device. By replying to this email I clearly state my consent to being tape-recorded.

Thank you for your participation,
Geethika Harshani Rodrigo
Master's Degree Student at JYU