The Construction of Diasporic Identity Through Cultural Expression: The Case of Syrians in the Netherlands

Arianna Folcia[1*]

[1]BSc. Sociology

[*]Corresponding author. Email: arianna.folcia@gmail.com

Abstract

This thesis explores how displaced Syrians in the Netherlands reconstruct their identity through cultural expression. While much of the existing literature on the Syrian diaspora limits its focus on descriptions of displacement, this study shifts attention to the creative practices, such as music, dance, visual arts, and culinary traditions that shape diasporic identity. Drawing on narrative interviews with nine Syrian participants, both artists and non-artists, the research outlines how cultural expression serves as a constitutive means to reconstruct identity in exile. The discussion is structured around three central themes: the evolving concept of home, the role of community and cultural expression in establishing a sense of belonging to the Netherlands, and how those influence the reconfiguration of Syrianness in exile. Findings show that Syrianness is not a static identity, but a contextually responsive construct achieved through artistic means.

Keywords

Syria, identity, Syrianness, diaspora, home, homeland, cultural expression

Introduction

Art has always accompanied destruction. In the case of Syria, artistic expression has not only documented revolution, but also played a significant part in the reconstruction of identity in exile (Masri Zada, 2022). The Arab Spring offers an exemplification of this relationship. Following the arrest and torture of children who scrawled "الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام" ("the people want the fall of the regime") on their school wall in Daraa, protest art and graffiti became central tools of resistance against the Assad regime, especially for Syrians in exile (Erlich & Chomsky, 2016). This historical moment showcases the connection between creative expression and identity formation, particularly in times of crisis. Art appears as a constitutive medium for Syrian identity: popular culture allowed Syrians to recognise their heritage "in a way that felt relevant to their lived experiences in exile" (Hall, 2021, p. 270). This process of cultural expression manifested into multiple forms, with different artistic practices facilitating identity reconstruction in various ways (Masri Zada, 2022).

As protests escalated into civil war, Syrians in exile turned to art practices as a means to navigate and preserve their identity (Martin, 2018). Dance, for instance, has remained an essential constituent of Syrian cultural expression throughout the Arab uprisings and the prolonged conflict that followed. In the early days of the

revolution, protestors performed the *dabke* (a traditional Levantine dance) over a defaced portrait of (now former) president Bashar al-Assad, marked with a red cross, to express their opposition to his regime. For the past fourteen years, artistic expression has functioned not only as a tool of political dissent, but also as a means of collective mourning of Syrian victims, and a reminder of national unity, especially for Syrians who left their homeland (Silverstein, 2012). Art actively contributes to the reconstruction of Syrian identity in exile, allowing Syrians to maintain cultural continuity while adapting to new socio-political contexts. Through this perspective, identity is not just reflected in cultural expressions, but rather is in part created by them (Hall, 2021).

As such, this research is especially concerned with the conceptualisation of Syrian identity by Syrians living specifically in the Netherlands. While existing literature on Syrian displacement focuses on political and economic integration, fewer studies have explored how identity is actively shaped in exile through cultural expressions (Chatzipanagiotidou & Murphy, 2021; Masri Zada, 2022). Limited studies have been conducted on Syrian diasporic communities in Germany and Turkey, but the Dutch context remains underexplored. Such a context is worth exploring further because the country has hosted a significant amount of Syrian refugees since the start of the civil war in 2011. To address this gap, this thesis considers the role of cultural practices in the process of identity formation of both artists and non-artists. The following research question will guide this research: *How do displaced Syrians construct their diasporic identity through cultural expression in the Netherlands?*

This paper is structured as follows: to begin, an overview of the theoretical considerations that informed this research is presented, followed by a thorough description of the methodology employed in the study. Ethical considerations, specifically in terms of the sensibility of this thesis' topic, are discussed. In attempting to answer the research question, the discussion is organized into three sections.

The first section analyses Syrians' feeling of belonging to the Netherlands, responding to the question: *what is home?* The cultural elements that construct such a "home" are discussed in the second portion of the discussion. Lastly, in the third segment, the process of identity reconstruction is traced along the lines of cultural expression. Ultimately, the paper finds that a unified, singular Syrian identity does not exist. Instead, identity in exile is layered, and actively constructed through art. In highlighting the dynamicity of the relationship between culture and identity formation, this research aims to offer a more nuanced account of the Syrian diaspora: one that celebrates Syrian creativity. Limitations of the study, especially surrounding generalisability of the findings, and suggestions for further research are considered in the last portion of this contribution.

Theoretical Framework

The process of identity formation is not about simply recovering a lost past that, once found, will provide a permanent sense of self. Instead, identity is formed through the ways we interpret and position ourselves within the narratives of the past (Hall, 2021). Identity is shaped by both the past and the future; in that sense, it is not a fixed essence that exists beyond time, place, history, or culture. For that reason, Hall suggests that identity should be perceived and studied as a continuous process of production. In his words as "a matter of becoming and being" (2021, p. 259).

Understanding identity as fluid and evolving is particularly relevant in examining the experiences of displaced Syrians, who must navigate the intersections of multiple cultural influences. Displacement itself is a space for

cultural transformation (Grechi, 2019). The struggle for cultural continuity is reflected in the way displaced Syrians engage with their identities, often deploying artistic expressions to express their sentiments. Masri Zada explains that displaced Syrians actively try to reclaim their identity by engaging in creative practices that allow them to redefine their Syrianness: "by choosing to survive and not go back to Syria (..) my response as an artist, scholar, and activist became reflected in my own artistic practice and scholarly work. My art practice is a response, a healing process, to the despair and guilt I feel from being distant from the crisis" (2022, p. 1).

To better grasp Masri Zada's description of displacement, this thesis employs Safran's (1991) interpretation of "diaspora" throughout this research. Safran defines a diasporic community as one composed of people who "have been dispersed from a specific original centre to peripheral places" and who "retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" (p. 86–87). Such a definition can be applied to Syrians who sought refuge from the revolution in the Netherlands. The existence of a diasporic community is highly dependent on the relationship between its members and their homeland (Stock, 2021).

Involved in the process of identity construction is a sense of "unhomeliness", an estrangement from both the place of origin and the host country (Nyman, 2009). The diaspora inherently questions the fixed nature of identity by showing that "home" and "homeland" are not stable entities for any diasporic subject (Nyman, 2009, p. 24). In other words, notions of "home" are inherently fluid across space and time within diasporic communities (Stock, 2021). In such settings, the fabrication of "home" can be directed towards multiple physical localities or remembered through symbolism. The layeredness of the notion of "home" makes such a concept the appropriate tool to study diasporic experiences. For instance, Syrian scholar Oudai Tozan, when reflecting on his personal experience with forced migration suggests that he cannot depict Syria as home because its unpredictability and precarious political conditions do not allow him to imagine a future for himself in the country. In his analysis, Syria is interpreted as a "home that doesn't feel like home" (Tozan, 2025, p. 9). The political, social and economic stability of one's home are identified in this research as indicators of safety, which in turn influence one's definition of "home".

Researchers have argued that diasporic identity is constructed through the physical and emotional dislocation that results from being "here" but feeling "there" (Chiu, 2003). To counter the common binary view of diaspora as belonging either "here" or "there". Chiu introduced the concept of transexperience as an explanatory model and applied it to Chinese artists living outside of the mainland. Transexperience is a method of "artistic creation" that describes the process of transforming one's cultural identity by engaging with the homeland as both a residual and evolving influence on cultural identity. In sum, this concept avoids the limitation of traditional understandings of the diaspora, which posit the homeland in the past and the new place of settlement in the present. In doing so, it takes equal account of both cultures' influences on the formation of identity in exile. As this approach takes equal account of both culture's influence on the formation of identity in exile, it will be useful to analyse the Syrians' diasporic experiences in the Netherlands.

This negotiation between past and present, between here and there, is evident in how cultural products, especially dance, music and art, become tools for identity reconstruction among diasporic communities. Cultural products function as a connecting site, as an object of relief from the pain that accompanies forced migration and its consequent detachment from national identities (Nititham, 2016, p. 105). As Hall (2021) notes, identities have their histories, which shape the process of redefining identity. Artists like Bob Marley or Burning Spear employed

reggae music to construct a new identity, one rooted in the old African past, but inherently intertwined with contemporary Caribbean struggles (p. 264). If we extend such thought to Syrians living abroad, we can explore how the history of Syrian identity manifested into art practices. To do so, we need to define art's cultural meaning. A cultural meaning is the shared interpretation of an object or event that is evoked in people as a result of their similar life experiences (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). This categorisation implies that a different interpretation of such an object or event would be evoked in people situated in different social contexts. Following this definition, we can assume that Syrian music, dance and art all have a shared cultural meaning recognisable by Syrians in the Netherlands, which might differ from the cultural meaning art holds in Syria.

Moreover, Dimaggio and Fernandez-Kelly (2015) suggest that creative behaviour is actively shaped by external societal elements, rather than being driven simply by personal interest. Immigrants use art to assert their identity and claim their spot in the host community, which inevitably entails the pressure felt by the migrant to conform to their host society. This raises important questions, such as: How do Dutch or international spectators influence how Syrians perform their identity? Does context create a pressure to conform to certain representations of Syrianness? To answer such questions, we can draw parallels from other cases where cultural classifications have been actively challenged and reshaped. For instance, Burdsey (2006) describes the experiences of young British-Indians with the concepts of home and identity through sport. On the one hand, supporting the English football team allows British-Asian kids to connect with mainstream British culture, and assert their social belonging within the United Kingdom. On the other hand, their loyalty to India's cricket teams signals a connection to their cultural background. According to Burdsey, supporting a national team is not simply a personal preference but rather is a choice embedded in social contexts that impose pressures to conform to specific representations of identity — either as British or as Indian. The children's participation in these cultural practices exemplifies how external societal influences shape their ways of performing their identities. In Burdsey's example, diasporic identity is presented as fluid in nature (p. 24). Consistent with this case, this research assumes that Syrians perform their identities through cultural expression under the influence of Dutch society and Syrian traditions.

Ultimately, this thesis assumes that identity in exile is not uniform. This is because any diasporic location is a "liminal space of identity, a space where various transnational forces, both local and global, remould identity" (Nyman, 2009, p. 22). The Netherlands becomes the arena in which the diasporic subject reconstructs itself and their "Syrianness". The diaspora challenges conceptualisations of a uniform national identity by breaking down monocultural assumptions of what it means to be a Syrian in exile. In other words, Syrians in the Netherlands are not simply preserving an unaltered Syrian identity but actively reshaping it in response to their new environment. Through the presented literature, I will investigate the reconstruction of Syrian identity in exile as an active process of negotiation.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to identify the role played by cultural expression in reconstructing Syrian identity in the Netherlands. However, the concept of identity is inherently fluid. How can one attempt to describe the phenomena of identity construction, when the very concept of identity is contested and lacks a clear definition? In the everyday experiences of my interviewees, the notion of Syrianness and its characteristics are contested and

redefined continuously. For the sake of answering the research question in a coherent manner, I opted to operationalise "identity" as the perception of one's self through their relation to the homeland and cultural expression. The latter refers to all artistic and creative expressions undertaken by Syrians, which can include dance, music, visual art, etc. These are considered tools of identity reconstruction.

This research was conducted through a narrative method. As such, I approached conversations about identity construction through interviews in which "the researcher should not steer the conversation, but instead let the participants tell their stories in their own words, at their own pace" (Thunberg, 2022, p. 713). Narrative interviews rely on the participants' willingness to discuss their experiences with the researcher. The reason I opted for such a method was the hope that it would allow interviewees to detail their experiences with the diaspora without being nudged in one direction or the other. Each of the nine interviews was prefaced by a short introduction to the methodology; at this time, the participants were also notified of their right to decline any question that made them uncomfortable, or withdraw consent altogether at any point during the research. The participants were thoroughly informed about their ability to refrain from answering questions. This served to avoid re-traumatisation when recounting past traumatic events related to the Syrian war (Silverio et al., 2022). All nine interviews lasted approximately forty minutes, and were recorded and stored on my personal iCloud for protection and privacy reasons. I utilized thematic analysis to examine the data retrieved, aiming to highlight convergence or divergence in the respondents' experiences. Thematic analysis was chosen as it is a descriptive method of "reporting patterns within data" that simultaneously allows for flexibility and academic rigor (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808). My coding strategy mirrored the scholars' suggestions: I compiled, disassembled, reassembled, interpreted and drew conclusions from the nine interview transcripts with the assistance of Atlas.ti. This software proved to be especially helpful in generating maps of code clusters. By mapping my data as such, I was able to observe connections among codes that were not readily apparent (p. 812). Only one round of coding was performed, due to the limited number of interviews conducted for this research. The total number of codes amounted to sixty-one; out of the latter, I formed four themes, namely "definitions and depictions of home", "the role of community", "the role of cultural expression" and "reconstructed Syrian identity", which loosely correspond to the outline of this research's finding section. The questions I repeatedly posed myself through this process are inspired by Castleberry and Nolen's suggestions: what is the quality of the data included in this theme? What are the limits of this theme (what does it include and exclude)? Is there enough reliable data within the transcripts to support this theme and my consequent claim? Do my themes, altogether, lack or show abundance of coherence? (p. 810). Altogether, these reflections allowed me to demonstrate the consistency between the raw data and the conclusions I deducted from the above-mentioned themes.

Furthermore, the emotional and political character of my research topic informed every step of the data collection process. When dealing with sensitive matters, it is important the researcher adopts a reflexive standpoint on the methodology chosen (Thunberg, 2022). For that reason, I paid particular attention to the initial reactions of my interviewees to the questions I posed. In the early stages of this research, I had prepared a set of twenty questions that delved deep into the effects of the Syrian crisis onto the participant. I mistakenly assumed that by inquiring about the emotional distress caused by the war, I would be able to draw a clearer picture of the factors influencing the process of identity for displaced Syrians. Although respondents were willing to discuss their experiences with the civil war, I soon realised that such questions would redirect the scope of my research away from a description of identity construction, and towards one of violent trauma. That is not what I intended to narrate

with this research. Thereafter, I reformulated my questions to match my original objective: contribute to the analysis of the Syrian diaspora through a celebration of its creativity, its cultural richness, rather than another depiction of violence and horror.

As noted by Wadams and Park (2018), Western bias can significantly distort the authentic representation of non-Western experiences in qualitative research. Researchers who apply Western paradigms in their analyses, without a contextual understanding of the research topic, risk misrepresenting the participants' lived experiences. Therefore, my intention before conducting this research was to fully immerse myself in the subject, as I was faced with the challenge of accurately and objectively reporting accounts of a reality – that of the Syrian civil war – I had never personally experienced before. In preparation for this research, I attended celebrations for the liberation of Syria from dictatorship. I briefly attended a commemoration for the start of the Syrian revolution, which took place in Amsterdam's Dam Square. I partook in the film screening *For Sama*, Waad al-Kateab's tribute to her daughter and home country. The movie captured the raw human experience of war, love, and survival in Aleppo. The screening created a space for Syrians living in the Netherlands to reimagine a future for Syria, and to openly share stories of resilience. Lastly, I engaged in countless conversations — outside of the interviews conducted for the purpose of this research — with Syrians online to truly understand their experience with displacement. The purpose of these exchanges was to delve deeper into the implications of forced migration, and especially to outline the role played by art in relieving the pain caused by such a process. By no means do I believe to be capable of comprehending the Syrian struggle through my presence at these events. Nonetheless, I found it crucial to attend these celebrations, in order to begin grasping the severity and emotional toll of my research topic.

I came into contact with most of my interlocutors through these events. I approached as many attendees as possible, introducing myself, the research, and inquiring about their willingness to contribute to the project. Other participants are artists active in the Netherlands, found through their exhibitions at contemporary art museums in Amsterdam, or their webpages. The sample used was thus a snowball sample, as I recruited participants primarily based on geographical convenience. I interviewed six men and three women born in different regions of Syria, whose ages ranged from 25 to 35 years, and who had settled in the Netherlands after the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Out of the nine interviewees, only two were not artists. One was a Master's student in Amsterdam, and the other was a researcher for the city's municipality; both had left Syria within the last ten years and reconstructed their lives within the colourful streets of the Dutch capital. To ensure anonymity and protect the privacy of my participants, I will refer to them through fictitious names in the following sections.

Findings

The following segment of this research is divided into three thematic sections, each addressing a distinct yet interconnected aspect of identity formation in exile. The first section, titled "What is home?", examines participants' relationships to both Syria and the Netherlands. It proposes a conceptualisation of home as a fluid, contested space shaped by past and present notions of belonging. The analysis draws from Stock's (2021) symbolic and physical realms of diaspora, and incorporates the framework of transexperience (Chiu, 2003) to illustrate the tension between "here" (the Netherlands) and "there" (Syria).

The second section investigates the role of community and cultural expression in constructing one's sense of belonging to the host society. Cultural expression is identified as a means to "deal with the trauma of the past" and the challenges of the Dutch present, especially when language barriers obstructed integration in the host society.

The final section addresses the evolving nature of Syrian identity in exile. Drawing on Hall's (2021) conceptualisation of identity as a process of becoming, and Chiu's (2003) transexperience framework, this portion of the discussion delineates how Syrians living in the Netherlands reconstruct "Syrianness" through daily practices and cultural expression. Together, these sections reveal how identity in exile is neither linear nor unified.

1. What is home?

To understand how Syrians in the Netherlands reconstruct their diasporic identity, I began by investigating the relationship between Syrians in exile and Syria itself. This is because, at the core of the notion of diaspora, lies the "image of a remembered home that stands at a distance both temporally and spatially" (Stock, 2021, p. 24). It is therefore crucial to identify Syrian conceptualisations of such a "remembered home". In this section, I ask: what does "home" mean for Syrians in exile? Is it a geographic location, an emotional state? Or is it a fluid concept shaped by displacement? Understanding how displaced Syrians perceive and reimagine their "home" reveals which elements of the past are emotionally and symbolically carried to the present. In turn, this clarification helps analyse the process of identity reconstruction. As interviewees reinterpret what "home" means to them, they simultaneously redefine what it means to be Syrian by detaching their identity from locality.

When I asked the participants to describe their relationship with Syria, the image of "homeland" came back repeatedly. Herein, the "homeland" is interpreted as the place where one's identity is formed. Two respondents drew a picture of Syria as their mother. Hassan, a Syrian dancer that recently acquired Dutch citizenship, posited that "Syria, to me, is my mother. Even the land itself feels like my mother. I miss Syria deeply, and I can't wait to visit [..]. We may live far away from our mothers, but we always love and cherish them". Similarly, Ali, a percussionist and oud-player residing in Amsterdam, referred back to this image of Syria as a mother which you never choose and always long for, while comparing the Netherlands to a wife or lover, which one picks intentionally. He then associated the relationship between Syrians and their homeland as a scar, or open wound, by asserting that you "learn how to live with it; the scar is always going to be there, but you have to go on... and that's what Syria feels like to us". This imagery is quite powerful. A wound may heal, but a scar is a continuous reminder of the past. The scar of Syria is a memory embodied in the participants. Hence, Ali and Hassan's perspectives reveal how memory informs diasporic identity, in terms of what is preserved, what is idealised and what is redefined in exile.

Yet, a few moments later, when interviewees were asked to define their connection to Syria in terms of "home", rather than of "home*land*", they all recoiled with "what is home?". While "homeland" was described in symbolic or emotional terms, the notion of "home" generated uncertainty. This distinction is key to understanding how identity becomes fragmented after displacement. The general consensus among participants appears to be that home was "stolen from them", therefore they do not "really know what it means to feel at home". Instead of identifying one or the other country as home, Jasmine, contemporary Syrian artist, mentioned that she has "many homes, because we are strangers anywhere now [...]. I feel like I am a nomad person, and then my travel is my home". She concluded that most Syrians have developed an ideal version of home in their minds, that does not

reflect the reality of Syria after the revolution started. Similarly, Ali defines himself as being "from everywhere". Ilyas, a Syrian percussionist, talked of home in accordance with these perspectives. He identified home as "the beautiful image of Syria that [he has] in his memories", but he is not sure he will ever find it again. Hassan, Ali, and Samir also agreed that both Syria and the Netherlands equally do not resemble their ideal of home. Samir argued that "the Netherlands is home but not like home, and home is not how it was".

Taking into consideration the interviewee's conceptions of "home", it becomes clear that it is not solely defined as one's place of origin. For Samir, home is also where one can continue their everyday practices safely, which does not align with Syria's current political landscape. This distinction between a romantic idea of home and the importance of safety was discussed extensively by multiple respondents. Wahid, a student in hotel management, emphasized that "if home is where you're fed, safe... and maybe respected, then I would say I feel at home [in the Netherlands]". Amira, a researcher for the *Gemeente* (Municipality), immediately identified the Netherlands as her home because she "feels safe and respected here". Similarly, Jasmine said she defined home as the place in which she could continue her career, her art, and where her studio was. For all interviewees, the Netherlands is identified as the ground for the cultivation of a new, Syrian-Dutch life; one of stability, of continuous growth. From these insights, one can conclude that the idea of home for Syrians in exile is strictly connected to the notion of security, which corresponds with Tozan's (2025) findings. The negotiation between safety in the Netherlands and memory in Syria shapes how Syrianness is adapted and expressed in the interviewees' lives in the host country.

What emerged from most interviews is that participants perceive their heart as being split into two, as "[they] are kind of here, but also there". Other respondents, such as Laila, a Syrian painter and musician, described that she feels "not really here or there" instead.

Both of these perspectives showcase two important findings: First, Syrian perceptions of belonging are fuelled by memories of the past, or of "there". Second, the connection to the Netherlands results from the creation of "new" memories, from "here". The constant dialogue between the "here" and "there" exemplifies the diverging nature of the notion of home. Here, the framework of transexperience becomes useful to analyse the diasporic construction of home. In the case of Syrians, the spatial delineation between Syria and the Netherlands accounts for a sense of physical distance from the homeland, as well as an emotional tie to it, and simultaneously a growing attachment to the place of settlement (Chiu, 2003).

For that reason, this thesis categorizes Syrian diasporic experiences through Stock's (2021) physical and symbolic realms. The realm of locality entails the physical space in which everyday life takes place, hence it is embodied by the Netherlands, while the symbolic realm of Syria is used as a point of reference – although "home", as interpreted by my interviewees, entails both. Samir himself described his relationship with travel on these terms. He argued that rather than envisioning himself as passively changing, he was actively interacting with the change. He said such an approach to change transformed "the way in which he connected to his reality", and made it easier for him to integrate into Dutch society. The symbolic realm, in his experience, is embodied by his Syrian background, which unintentionally, but consistently, brings into his life. The Syrian background discussed here encompasses all the habits and aspects of his personality, including his way of thinking, that he developed in Syria prior to the start of his journey to the Netherlands. Although Samir arguably interacted with the changing nature of his locality, he also acknowledged that Syrian culture "is him" and will inadvertently be reflected in such a

process. The tension between these two realms is argued to be characteristic to all diasporic experiences (Chiu, 2003; Tozan, 2025).

In sum, while Syria is repeatedly identified as "homeland", a place of origin and source of identity, all participants struggled with reconciling an idealised version of Syria with the notion of "home". Their memories of home are not accurate reproductions of the past, but rather reimagined, remembered in the present through diasporic conceptualisations (Stock, 2021). Home became to them a contested space, as Syrians' nostalgic image of home corresponds to the same place in which they struggled, were oppressed and were forced to abandon (Tozan, 2025).

This analysis shows that the hesitance towards the concept of "home" is an ongoing condition for Syrians in exile. Syria was depicted as a nurturing mother and a continuous wound, and not necessarily as the embodiment of one's home. Similarly, when asked to relate such a concept to the Netherlands, participants expressed discomfort and reluctancy. For many, safety is an essential characteristic to their definition of home, which increasingly aligns with life in the Netherlands. Yet, emotional ties to Syria remain strong, resulting in feelings of being "split" or "in between". These evolving ideas of home form the emotional and conceptual space in which diasporic identity is negotiated. In other words, home is the lens through which identity is felt, questioned and reconstructed in the diaspora.

Although this first analysis recognises the evolving nature of the notion of "home" in exile, it fails to describe the ways in which the relationship between Syrians and such "home" evolves. In the following section, I will investigate what factors are involved in this process.

2. The role of community and cultural expression in the construction of home

During the process of integration into Dutch society, Syrians' connection to their homeland is not replaced by their growing attachment to the Netherlands, but rather evolves due to various factors (Tozan, 2025). This segment of the discussion identifies two factors that influenced Syrians' sense of belonging to the Netherlands: 1) the presence of a Syrian community in close proximity and 2) the role of artistic expression as a way to cope with the trauma of the past.

Firstly, what emerged from the findings of this research is that the desires for a "home" in the Netherlands are partially fulfilled by the familiarity, comfort and closeness of Syrian diasporic communities. As Nititham (2016) suggested, diasporic communities help "deal with the pain and loss associated with forced migration" (p. 105). Indeed, connecting with other Syrians in exile is one of the strategies developed by forced migrants to remain connected to their previous homes. That is because "our connection to each other helps us to feel at home, to remember home, and dream about home" (Tozan, 2025, p. 7).

In my first conversation with Wahid, he remarked in several instances that "Syrians kind of stick together" and they "take care of each other". He discussed the emotional challenge derived by the lack of support offered to Syrian refugees by the Dutch government, and expressed the need for a structured community that would cater to the needs of Syrians in the country. Luckily, Wahid found his way through the first stages of his stay in the Netherlands through a Syrian-led initiative known as "Syrians volunteers in The Netherlands" (SYVNL), an organisation focused on raising awareness for the Syrian crisis. In his years alongside SYVNL, he was slowly able to integrate into Dutch society by relying on the emotional and practical help offered by the Syrian community he

had found. Today, he sees a future for himself in Amsterdam, and partly attributes this to "having the Syrian community around, [his] family [..] which help [him] feel close to home". Ilyas's story resembles Wahid's. In his words, when he is "mentally tired, the best thing to do is hang around some Syrians, and just be together". In these instances, Ilyas and his Syrian friends often book an Airbnb for a few nights, and spend their time inside the room talking, listening to music, and telling jokes. He warmly asserted that simply having this community, and going on little get-aways, allows him to "bring a little bit of how [he] used to live in Syria in Holland, that life where [he] didn't have so many things to worry about". Hassan, too, suggested that when one arrives in an unfamiliar environment, they inevitably search for "people who can make [them] feel at home" — and that is why, when he had found a stable group of Syrian friends, he finally felt at home in Amsterdam. Similarly, Jalal explained his choice to move from Rotterdam to Utrecht was made to be physically closer to the Syrian community he was a part of. He added that he "really needed this community so [he] could feel [his] Syrianness". The significance of this community is better explained through its absence. Amira recalled struggling with severe depression when living in Turkey, as her circle of friends was limited to her brother-in-law and husband. She said "you cannot have just one friend". She described her experience with Turkish society as harsh, because although Turks physically resembled her people (as compared to the Dutch), the language barrier and the lack of support for Syrians did not allow her to adjust to the country. Once she moved to Almere, and established a larger community of Syrians, she "felt like [she] belonged".

The reported conversations add onto Grechi's (2019) argument that shared histories of displacement result in tight connections between Syrians. Within these communities, cultural exchanges take place. For instance, Laila and Amira spoke about gatherings revolving around Syrian food, while Jasmine and Samir shared stories of the art exhibitions and concerts they had attended together. This brings us to the second factor that influences Syrians' sense of belonging in the Netherlands: cultural expression. Although I will not go as far as arguing that enactments of belonging are universal to all Syrians, the use of cultural expressions was frequently identified by participants as a tool to navigate the feeling of being both (or neither) "here" and "there".

When asked what role artistic expression played into their lives, all participants gave similar answers. Ilyas explained that music "was really the key that solved all of [his] life problems", and that there is nothing else that "makes [him] feel like home more than smells and music". He described his first days in the Netherlands as lonely and challenging, due to the inability to communicate with neighbours and colleagues — and recalled how the clarinet was his only method of communication. Playing the clarinet not only allowed him to express his emotions, but also connect with other artists and audiences, forming bonds that transcended language. Music, in itself, became a language: a way to be understood without speaking. The problem of language came up with other interviewees too. Ali explained that he lacked proficiency in both English and Dutch, which did not allow him to properly express his feelings. Ali surpassed this problem by playing music instead. He said: "I had been in the Netherlands for two days and everything was different and unfamiliar… but then I went to the theatre, and I thought: *okay this I know*." While navigating the unfamiliarity of the Netherlands, "when [he] played music.. [he] knew how to do it. [He] could read the music, and [he] felt at home".

In Ilyas's and Ali's examples, forms of artistic expression made trauma tangible. Once transformed into a song or painting, such trauma can be dealt with and shared with others, thereby "facilitating understanding and social support, which can, in turn, reduce stigma, isolation, and loneliness" (Sajnani, 2019, p. 5). For Syrians living

in the Netherlands, forms of artistic expression became a reparative force. Ali explained this concept in his interview: "music connects people together. Politics separate people, so then you connect them with art, with music, with dance, with food, with sports".

Jasmine further suggested that "art is the tool to deal with pain. Because, of course, [being away from Syria] is painful". Art is therefore defined to be a therapeutic tool towards the horrors of Syria, a means to heal the open wound left by death and violence. Keeping up with Syrian cultural events, whether that be concerts or food festivals, became her way of "reactivating herself every couple of months, a way to feel at home". Laila, too, confessed that "talking about Syria" was not enough for her after some time in the Netherlands. She explained how she "started with paintings, to express [her] emotions during all this travel". Shortly after that, she became a musician, and eventually switched to storytelling. She now organises storytelling nights around Amsterdam, open to the public, in which she performs alongside a Brazilian and English artist on the topic of belonging. In her experience, various art forms became tools to navigate the feeling of being neither completely "here" or "there", and never fully at home. Similarly, Hassan explained that "dance made [him] face the situation in Syria" and argued that "we need to keep dancing, because if we stop dancing and we stop creating art and culture, then when we will die as a country and as people" because under his perspective, what makes Syrians beautiful is their culture. What all of these insights tell us is that Syrians in exile, as a result of their similar life experiences, attribute the same cultural meaning to artistic expressions (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). Art is interpreted as a means to overcome the pain of the Syrian past, and the struggles of the Dutch present.

Surprisingly, one participant reported avoiding engaging with Syrian visual art altogether. Amira does not follow any Syrian artists on Instagram, because paintings make her "a bit depressed". She recollects a time in which she consumed a lot of Syrian art, especially by a Syrian artist based in Germany. However, the melancholy evoked in her by such art has become too unbearable. Instead, she relies on music and food to share herself with Dutch society. She acknowledges that music "plays a huge role" in her life, and warmly recounted several instances in which Arab singers, such as Fairouz, and their songs accompanied the most significant moments of her life. Furthermore, she claims that what "makes her happy" is Syrian food. Her husband is a former political writer, now turned chef, and together they enjoy preparing meals for their two children and extended family. Although Amira does not produce art, or engage with the work of Syrian visual artists, she still relies on other forms of cultural expression to preserve her Syrian heritage.

In conclusion, Syrians living in exile define their sense of belonging in creative ways. They refute simplistic answers – such as associating home with geographic origin – regarding the connection between land and identity (Braakman & Schlenkhoff, 2007). In Ilyas's words, "all the music, smells, a chat with a friend, for me that's more what home is".

3. What, then, is made of their Syrian identity?

As demonstrated above, Syrians engage in various forms of artistic expression to navigate the physical dislocation from Syria, and the process of integration in the Netherlands. Naturally, the following question arises: what is then made of their Syrianness, of their identity? Cultural expressions are inevitably employed to reconfigure a notion of "new" Syrianness. The emotional divide between feeling both "here" and "there", or not

having a home at all, manifests in the creation of a hybrid identity: a Syrianness that encompasses both elements of Syria and of the new place of settlement.

When asked about the existence of one unified, distinct Syrian identity, Ali shook his head and firmly replied "it doesn't exist". All other participants seemed to reiterate this idea. Samir went so far as arguing that the Syrian identity is "the diversity in Syria". When urged to clarify, he asserted that "every city [in Syria] has its own character. Although we share a lot of things, there is not one singular identity. The real Syrianness [lies] in the differences between people and cities, which is present in culture and land". Notably, none of the participants contextualized their answers to my question about the existence of a "unified" Syrian identity in relation to Dutch society, or their experiences in exile. Instead, their responses maintained the homeland as a point of departure. This absence of a reference to the Netherlands suggests that the question of identity, for them, is not as strictly shaped by the pressure to integrate within the host country as it is by the characteristics of Syrian society. Samir's definition of Syrianness in particular was not framed in contrast to Dutchness or shaped as a response to displacement, but was rooted in the internal diversity of Syria. This perspective highlights the plural character of Syrian identity, which is not confined to one specific definition but rather is layered in nature.

While participants framed their understanding of Syrianness primarily through the lens of Syria's pluralism, their accounts of everyday life revealed a different picture. The interaction between Dutch society and the participants, although apparently subtle, is especially significant in the process of identity reconstruction. The new, transformed notion of Syrianness to which Syrians living in the Netherlands relate emerges from the interaction between the homeland and the new society (Chiu, 2003). In an attempt to analyse the reconfiguration of Syrianness in the diaspora, the theoretical framework of transexperience as an explanatory structure is again deployed to understand how Syrians navigate their identity. The relevance of the transexperience framework to this case is its emphasis on the location of settlement as a significant factor in the reconstruction of Syrian identity in exile.

Despite the multiple years having passed since the participants of this research left Syria, their cultural reference points identify with those of Syria. Jalal explained how his music does not have much in common with Syrian music in terms of composition or sounds, but it more broadly reflects him "coming from a certain place in Syria". Once more, his origin point is Syria, rather than the Netherlands. Similarly, Samir described his paintings as being personal, and a reflection of his Syrian background. Adding onto her partner's answer to my inquiry, Jasmine pointed out that she "wishes to have a personal experience not related to Syria, but [she] doesn't have this privilege [..] Sometimes [she] even asked [herself]: "What if I don't have Syrian in my brain, would I even be an artist?", reinforcing that her homeland is the benchmark for all her experiences. As theorised by Hall (2021), the participants' (transnational) identity is formed through the ways they interpret and position themselves within the past).

Furthermore, when describing their daily routines or morals, all participants referred back to the "Syrian way of living", which relates to Safran's definition of diasporic identity. Ilyas explained that life in Syria has a slower pace compared to its Dutch counterpart, and is more family-oriented. Jalal said that "Syrians have a different way of dealing with family, [..] it plays such an important role in each of our lives". Similarly, Amira fondly describes her family gatherings, which she cared to emphasize have at least fifteen attendees each time. Such portrayals of the Syrian lifestyle are crucial in the construction of a coherent Syrian identity. In other words, these transnational activities allow Syrians to maintain symbolic relations with Syria and sustain a shared notion of "Syrianness"

(Nititham, 2017). Nonetheless, many of them nowadays confidently resonate with Dutch culture. Jalal "feels like one of them" because he fits into the Dutch stereotype of an Amsterdammer. According to him, he has become extremely punctual, and will not remember his schedule unless he makes use of his phone's calendar app. Hassan thinks of himself as very direct, a characteristic that he attributes to his Dutch friends. When he applied for Dutch citizenship and obtained it, he even adopted a Dutch name alongside his Syrian birth name, to commemorate the start of a new life, and bring homage to his new family. Through the conceptual tool of transexperience, we can simultaneously consider the Syrian past and the Dutch present as markers of Syrianness. Transexperience's emphasis on change, rather than on the staticity of Syrian identity, is reflected in all of these experiences. As Jasmine cleverly explained: "We changed. We moved. Our pain changed. Our hope changed. Our joy changed. Life changed. So, our identity changed with it". This further resonates with Hall's (2021) conceptualisation of identity as a process of becoming and being. These examples showcase that Syrians living in the Netherlands are not simply preserving an unaltered Syrian cultural identity, but rather they are actively reshaping it in response to Dutch society.

Thus far, we have discussed the intersection of Syrian heritage and Dutch society in the reconstruction of Syrian identity. In such a process, the role of cultural expression is once again particularly significant.

Several interviewees reflected on the struggle of confronting and dismantling reductive stereotypes of Syria and its people within Dutch society. Wahid opened up about the hassle of breaking such stereotypes. He found that his Dutch classmates perceived Syria "as a desert in which people just ride camels", a view that denies the richness and complexity of Syrian heritage. Similarly, Ilyas faced the consequences of harmful Arab stereotypes "about Allah-u-Akbar and riding camels and beating women". These negative stereotypes distort the Syrian image, while also causing Syrians to internalize feelings of self-doubt and inferiority (Najm, 2019). Hassan echoed this sentiment, explaining that political discourse around the Middle East led him to pause and reconsider how he wished to represent himself as a Syrian. These stereotypes made it harder for Syrians to integrate in the Netherlands. Faced with a linguistic barrier, Ilyas turned to music as a form of resistance to such stereotypes. "It was very good for them," he said, "to see that Syrians are also playing the clarinet", because it showed the Dutch audience the depth of Syrian culture. This moment challenged narrow preconceptions of Syrians through art. Confronted with the same problem of language, at the early stages of her career Laila chose to only write and perform Arabic music without translating the lyrics. This challenges her Dutch audience to engage emotionally with her, beyond verbal understanding. Her refusal to translate songs from Arabic is not a limitation, but a deliberate artistic strategy: it re-affirms the emotional depth of her native language. Laila's relationship with art supports the argument that migrants often use cultural expression as a means of affirming their identity and engaging with the host society (Dimaggio & Fernandez-Kelly, 2015). She explained: "art changed me. I now feel the most close to my heart". She continued by arguing that without music or art, she "can't connect with who [she] is here. To share [herself] without it, it's really hard. Art always helps to share yourself with other cultures". This assertion did not refer merely to music and paintings. She also regularly attends the events of a women's group, where she proudly shares Syrian traditional food and poetry with her Italian, Argentinian, and Dutch friends. The act of sharing her Syrian culture with others, whether through art or social gatherings, reflects Laila's conscious negotiation of her identity. Through this approach, her connection to Syria is preserved, while simultaneously opening space for interaction with other cultures.

In light of the presented narratives, it becomes evident that identity in exile is not a fixed identity, but rather a fluid and evolving one. Syrianness is continuously reconstructed through the interplay of a Syrian past and the lived realities of life in the Netherlands. Whether through music, art, family customs, or food, Syrians creatively adapt and express their identity in ways that reflect both continuity with their past and openness to transformation. The framework of transexperience was useful in capturing this duality by emphasizing identity as a space of negotiation. In this context, Syrianness is no longer defined solely by the country of Syria, but by a layered notion constructed through cultural expression.

Discussion and Conclusion

To provide a coherent answer to the research question "*How do displaced Syrians construct their diasporic identity through cultural expression?"* this thesis has positioned cultural expression as a mediator in the process of identity reconstruction.

I have shown that Syrianness in exile is not a fixed entity, but rather it is a relational process shaped by the everyday interactions with Dutch society. Such a process is enriched by the deployment of various forms of cultural expressions. My findings complicate reductive views of diaspora identity as mere nostalgia for a distant past. Answers to the question "what is home?" were essential to understanding how Syrians express and perform their identity while confined to exile. The fluidity of Syrians' notion of home highlighted the experience of being "in between". Such feelings translated into hybrid identity performances: Syrians maintained emotional ties to the homeland, while adapting their everyday practices to their lives in the Netherlands. The presence of an external audience, that is, Dutch society, is argued to shape how Syrians present themselves. Participants reflected on having to both counter negative stereotypes about their homeland and find creative ways to preserve their cultural heritage. Though participants seemed to associate their identity with Syria, their performance of Syrianness reflected adaptations to Dutch societal norms. The "original" Syrianness was not discarded, but rather adapted to the opportunities and constraints of the Dutch environment. Syrianness, expressed through music, dance, food, and storytelling, is shown to be continually negotiated in response to the influences of the present. Ultimately, I argued that cultural expression, in the process of identity reconstruction, is a constitutive tool. Diasporic identity is not reducible to nostalgia: through artistic expression, Syrians continuously reformulate what it means to be Syrian - not in opposition to Dutch society, but through an interaction with it. In other words, cultural expression enables and mediates the process of identity reconstruction.

Overall, this thesis contributes to studies of the diaspora by positing artistic practices as central elements of identity formation. In light of the tendency to examine diasporic experiences in terms of loss, death, and destruction, I offered an analysis of the Syrian diaspora through a celebration of its creative aspects. This study comes with its limitations. Unexpectedly, I discovered that most of my interviewees knew each other personally, as the Syrian art scene in the Netherlands is quite limited and connected in scope. Such interconnectedness might have contributed to a certain degree of homogeneity in their perspectives, as individuals belonging to a close social network often share similar viewpoints (Speight, 1968). It is noted that this aspect might partially limit the generalisability of my findings, as group homogeneity can lead to narrow discussion (Cunico et al., 2024). Moreover, the context of the Netherlands and its socio-political implications may not be fully representative of the

broader Syrian diasporic experience. As such, generalisations about the construction of identity "in exile" beyond this national setting should be approached with caution. I encourage future researchers to explore similar questions in other host countries.

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