

Entrepreneurship as a Bridge: Exploring the Acculturation and Entrepreneurial Pathways of Afghan and Syrian Refugees in Turkey *

Ayşe ŞAFAK¹, Zehra Nuray NİŞANCI², Gülcan OLÇUM SELEK³



1. Assistant Professor, Ibn Haldun University, ayse.safak@ihu.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9074-352X>

2. Professor, Izmir Katip Celebi University, zehranuray.nisanci@ikc.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1782-237X>

3. Doctoral Student, Izmir Katip Celebi University, olcumgulcan@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2226-8326>

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Abstract

This study examines the acculturation outcomes of Afghan and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in Turkey, focusing on psychological and sociocultural adaptation within entrepreneurial contexts. As refugee populations increase, understanding how entrepreneurship supports integration is essential for informing policy and support mechanisms. Based on in-depth interviews with 24 refugee entrepreneurs (11 Afghans and 13 Syrians), the study explores factors shaping psychological well-being, social integration, cultural adaptation, and life satisfaction. Findings indicate that Syrian refugees report higher levels of psychological and social adaptation, potentially linked to stronger community presence and more recent migration experiences. Afghan refugees, despite facing greater challenges related to trauma and prior displacement, demonstrate resilience through religious coping, work engagement, and stability. Across both groups, entrepreneurship facilitates economic self-sufficiency and social connection, while challenges such as legal barriers, financial strain, and work-life imbalance persist. The study highlights the need for tailored support policies addressing group-specific needs.

Keywords: *Refugee Entrepreneurship, Acculturation, Psychological Adaptation, Sociocultural Adaptation, Afghan Refugees, Syrian Refugees, Forced Migration.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Refugee entrepreneurship has emerged as a prominent strategy through which forcibly displaced individuals seek economic participation and social positioning within host societies. Unlike voluntary migrants, refugees often engage in entrepreneurship under conditions of legal uncertainty, limited labor market access, and disrupted social networks, rendering self-employment both a survival strategy and a potential pathway to integration (Shneikat & Alrawadieh, 2019; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). As global forced displacement reaches unprecedented levels, understanding how entrepreneurship shapes refugees' acculturation processes has become increasingly important for both academic inquiry and policy development (Abebe, 2023; Lång et al., 2025).

Acculturation is widely understood as a multidimensional process involving psychological, sociocultural, and economic adaptation following prolonged intercultural contact (Berry, 2005; Redfield et al., 1936). While earlier acculturation frameworks emphasized individual-level orientations and outcomes, approaches that are more recent highlight the role of contextual and relational factors in shaping acculturation experiences (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2006). In particular, psychological outcomes such as well-being and life satisfaction; sociocultural outcomes including social participation and everyday functioning as well as economic adaptation evidenced by finding effective and satisfying work are shaped not only by individual coping strategies but also by institutional conditions and social relations within the host society (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Searle & Ward, 1990; Te Lindert et al., 2008).

Within this literature, entrepreneurship is often framed as a facilitator of acculturation, as it may enhance economic self-sufficiency, expand social networks, and foster a sense of agency among refugees (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2020). However, existing research also points to ambivalent outcomes. While entrepreneurship can promote social interaction and recognition, it may simultaneously reinforce social isolation, intensify work-related stress, and reproduce inequalities, particularly among refugees with limited resources (Raijman & Tienda, 2000; Refai et al., 2024). These mixed findings suggest that entrepreneurship does not uniformly lead to positive acculturation outcomes and that its effects are contingent upon broader social and institutional contexts.

A key limitation in the current literature is the tendency to conceptualize refugee entrepreneurship primarily from the refugees' perspective, with limited attention to host-society orientations and contextual reception conditions. The Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) addresses this gap by conceptualizing acculturation as a relational process shaped by the interaction between migrants' orientations and host-society expectations, policies, and attitudes (Bourhis et al., 1997). From an IAM perspective, entrepreneurship should be understood not merely as an individual economic activity but as a socially embedded practice whose acculturation outcomes depend on the degree of alignment or misalignment between refugees' initiatives and host-society responses.

Turkey provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. As a major refugee-hosting country operating outside the traditional Western migration regime, Turkey hosts diverse refugee populations under differentiated legal statuses and reception conditions (Karadağ & Sert, 2023). Syrian refugees are granted temporary protection, whereas Afghan refugees typically experience more precarious and conditional legal arrangements. Despite these differences, both groups engage in entrepreneurial activities that shape their economic participation and social positioning within Turkish society. Yet, comparative research examining how entrepreneurship influences acculturation outcomes across different refugee groups within the same host context remains limited.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ACCULTURATION AND REFUGEE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

2.1. Acculturation as a Theoretical Lens

Acculturation is a key framework for understanding how refugees adapt to host societies after forced migration. It refers to cultural and psychological changes arising from continuous interaction between different cultural groups (Redfield et al., 1936), extending beyond cultural change to include psychological well-being, social participation, and economic integration (Berry, 1997, 2005).

Berry's model has been widely used to explain adaptation strategies based on individuals' orientations toward cultural maintenance and engagement with the host society, identifying outcomes such as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization (Berry, 1997). However, this framework has been criticized for underestimating the influence of host-society conditions. In refugee contexts, acculturation is shaped not only by individual choices but also by structural factors such as legal status, institutional access, and societal attitudes, which can either enable or constrain integration.

To address this theoretical gap, the study adopts the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) developed by Bourhis et al. (1997). IAM conceptualizes acculturation as a dynamic and relational process shaped by the interaction between migrants' orientations and those of the host society, rather than solely by individual choices (Bourhis et al., 1997). It explicitly incorporates host-society expectations, policies, and attitudes, emphasizing that acculturation outcomes are co-produced through interaction.

According to IAM, host societies may adopt integrative, assimilationist, segregationist, or exclusionary orientations, which shape the institutional and symbolic context in which migrants' activities are interpreted and regulated (Bourhis et al., 1997). As a result, acculturation outcomes depend on the alignment between migrants' efforts and host-society responses (Bourhis & Dayan, 2004; Bourhis et al., 1997).

From this perspective, Berry's acculturation outcomes—integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization—are better understood as interactional results rather than purely individual strategies. Integration requires mutual support and recognition, while assimilation may reflect host-society pressure rather than voluntary cultural abandonment. Similarly, separation and marginalization may emerge when participation is restricted despite migrants' willingness to engage (Bourhis et al., 1997).

IAM further emphasizes that economic participation alone does not guarantee positive acculturation outcomes. While entrepreneurship may enhance structural integration, broader adaptation remains shaped by social acceptance, institutional inclusion, and host-society orientations (Berry, 2005; Bourhis et al., 1997). Refugees may remain socially excluded or experience psychological strain despite being economically active when host-society responses are exclusionary or ambivalent (Searle & Ward, 1990; Te Lindert et al., 2008). Thus, acculturation outcomes remain conditional and context-dependent.

This interactional perspective is particularly relevant for refugee entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is not only a means of income generation but also a socially embedded practice through which refugees interact with institutions, markets, and social networks (Kloosterman, 2010; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006). Its integrative potential may support agency, economic participation, and social connection; however, these outcomes remain shaped by institutional opportunity structures and host-society recognition (Bizri, 2017).

IAM is especially useful in contexts characterized by differentiated reception regimes, where refugee groups experience distinct legal and institutional conditions. In Turkey, Syrian and Afghan refugees illustrate how variations in legal status and institutional visibility influence both entrepreneurial opportunities and broader acculturation outcomes (İçduygu & Millet, 2016; Karadağ & Sert, 2023). By adopting IAM, this study conceptualizes refugee entrepreneurship as a relational acculturation process shaped by the interaction between economic participation and host-society orientations (Bourhis et al., 1997).

2.2. Refugee Entrepreneurship within an Interactive Acculturation Framework

Building on the Interactive Acculturation Model outlined above, refugee entrepreneurship is conceptualized as more than a purely economic activity. Within IAM, entrepreneurship can be understood not only as a strategy for income generation but also as a socially embedded practice through which refugees interact with host-society institutions, regulatory systems, markets, and social networks (Bourhis et al., 1997; Kloosterman, 2010). As such, entrepreneurial activity constitutes an important arena through which acculturation and integration processes may unfold.

From an IAM perspective, refugee entrepreneurship may facilitate acculturation by enhancing economic participation, fostering social interaction, and strengthening symbolic recognition as contributing members of society. These mechanisms align with broader acculturation research linking economic engagement to sociocultural adaptation and psychological well-being (Berry, 1997, 2005; Searle & Ward, 1990). However, such benefits are not automatic. Their realization depends on host-society orientations and institutional conditions that shape how entrepreneurial activities are interpreted, regulated, and valued (Bourhis et al., 1997; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006).

Legal precarity, restricted regulatory access, and exclusionary host-society orientations may undermine the integrative potential of refugee entrepreneurship. In such contexts, refugees may remain socially marginalized or experience psychological strain despite active economic participation. Prior research similarly shows that refugee entrepreneurship may generate both enabling and constraining outcomes depending on access to resources, institutional support, and broader social acceptance (Harima, 2022). From an IAM perspective, these outcomes reflect the alignment or misalignment between refugees' participation efforts and host-society responses (Bourhis et al., 1997).

This interactional understanding is particularly relevant in differentiated reception regimes, where refugee groups are embedded within distinct legal and discursive environments. Host-country legal classifications, institutional visibility, and social responses may shape unequal entrepreneurial opportunities and divergent acculturation trajectories, even within the same national context (Castles et al., 2014). Refugee entrepreneurship, therefore, becomes a critical site for examining how structural conditions and host-society orientations mediate the relationship between economic participation and acculturation outcomes (Karadağ & Sert, 2023).

2.3. Theoretical Implications for the Present Study

In the Turkish context, Syrian and Afghan refugees represent two groups embedded within distinct reception environments. Syrian refugees' temporary protection status provides comparatively greater legal visibility and institutional recognition, whereas Afghan refugees often experience heightened precarity, uncertainty, and more limited access to formal rights. These differences create structural and relational conditions that shape acculturation processes beyond individual intentions or adaptive efforts (Bourhis et al., 1997; İçduygu & Millet, 2016; Karadağ & Sert, 2023).

By adopting IAM as its theoretical framework, the present study conceptualizes refugee entrepreneurship as a relational acculturation process embedded in the interaction between refugees' economic initiatives and host-society orientations. Rather than assuming entrepreneurship to be inherently integrative, the study examines how entrepreneurial engagement intersects with legal frameworks, institutional opportunity structures, and societal responses to generate differentiated

acculturation outcomes among Afghan and Syrian refugees (Bourhis et al., 1997; Harima, 2022; Kloosterman, 2010). This perspective aligns with IAM's core proposition that acculturation outcomes—such as integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization—emerge through the alignment or misalignment between migrant participation strategies and host-society expectations (Berry, 2005; Bourhis et al., 1997).

Theoretically, this framework enables a systematic and theory-driven analysis of how economic participation, social recognition, and psychological adaptation are negotiated through entrepreneurship in forced migration contexts. By situating refugee entrepreneurship within interactive acculturation dynamics, the study contributes to acculturation research by demonstrating that economic activity alone does not guarantee positive adaptation outcomes; rather, institutional recognition, legal access, and host-society orientations remain central in shaping the lived experiences of refugee entrepreneurs (Bizri, 2017; Searle & Ward, 1990; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Approach

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore the complex, firsthand experiences of refugee entrepreneurs regarding acculturation within a specific context. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the aim of capturing refugees' subjective interpretations of entrepreneurship and adaptation processes. Semi-structured in-depth interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in detail.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990) following an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). This analytic strategy allowed patterns and categories to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. While the analysis followed an inductive logic, the coding process was theoretically sensitized by the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM), particularly in distinguishing between psychological and sociocultural acculturation outcomes. MAXQDA software was used to facilitate systematic coding, comparison, and retrieval of data segments, thereby enhancing transparency and analytic rigor.

3.2. Participants

A total of 24 refugee entrepreneurs participated in the study, including 11 Afghan and 13 Syrian refugees. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling strategies, drawing on community networks, local contacts, and referrals from initial participants. These strategies were particularly suitable given the difficulties associated with accessing refugee entrepreneurs, especially among Afghan communities.

Izmir was initially selected as the primary site for data collection due to its significance as a transit and settlement city for Syrian and Afghan refugees seeking to reach Europe (Ogli, 2019). Following the closure of the Western Balkans Route by the European Union, many refugees became stranded in Izmir, making it one of Turkey's major refugee-hosting cities (Ogli, 2019). Izmir's politically liberal climate and economically dynamic structure, characterized by sectors such as manufacturing, trade, and shipping, further support entrepreneurial activity among refugees.

However, due to challenges in recruiting Afghan refugee entrepreneurs in Izmir and the need to ensure balanced representation across national groups, additional interviews were conducted in Istanbul and Manisa. Manisa, where a substantial number of Afghan refugees reside in camps, provided an important supplementary recruitment site (Ogli, 2019). Consequently, Syrian participants were recruited exclusively from Izmir, whereas Afghan participants were distributed across Izmir (4), Istanbul (4), and Manisa (3). The comparatively lower number of Afghan participants in Manisa reflects the city's smaller refugee population relative to Izmir and Istanbul.

Among the 24 participants, only three were women, all of whom were Syrian refugees. This gender imbalance reflects the gendered nature of refugee entrepreneurship in the field, particularly among Afghan refugees, rather than a deliberate sampling bias. At the time of the interviews, Afghan participants ranged in age from 18 to 50, with an average age of 32 and an average length of stay in Turkey of 9.8 years. Syrian participants ranged in age from 25 to 47, with an average age of 37 and an average stay of 8.8 years. Nearly half of the Afghan participants held graduate-level degrees, while seven Syrian participants had completed undergraduate education. All participants identified as practicing Muslims. Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and the study was conducted in accordance with relevant institutional ethical guidelines. To protect confidentiality, participants were anonymized using pseudonyms.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Nationality	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Length of Stay	Type of Self-employed Work	City
AA	Afghan	25-30	Male	Single	5	Restaurant owner	Izmir
AB	Afghan	45-50	Male	Married	10	Shop owner	Manisa
AC	Afghan	25-30	Male	Married	11	Shop owner	Manisa
AD	Afghan	15-20	Male	Single	11	Shop owner	Manisa
AE	Afghan	35-40	Male	Married	5	Shop owner	Izmir
AF	Afghan	25-30	Male	Married	11	Restaurant owner	Istanbul
AG	Afghan	30-35	Male	Married	13	Restaurant owner	Istanbul
AH	Afghan	35-40	Male	Single	12	Shop owner	Istanbul
AJ	Afghan	25-30	Male	Single	7	Shop owner	Istanbul
AK	Afghan	20-25	Male	Single	2	Shop owner	Izmir
AL	Afghan	25-30	Male	Married	9	Money transfer business	Izmir
SA	Syrian	35-40	Male	Married	10	Shop owner	Izmir
SB	Syrian	25-30	Male	Married	7	Textile business	Izmir

SC	Syrian	20-25	Male	Single	9	Textile business	İzmir
SD	Syrian	45-50	Male	Married	8	Shop owner	İzmir
SE	Syrian	35-40	Male	Married	8	Shop owner	İzmir
SF	Syrian	30-35	Male	Married	9	Restaurant owner	İzmir
SG	Syrian	35-40	Male	Married	11	Building materials business	İzmir
SH	Syrian	30-35	Male	Married	7	Furniture and ceramics business	İzmir
SJ	Syrian	35-40	Female	Married	9	Health services business	İzmir
SK	Syrian	35-40	Male	Married	10	Hygiene products business	İzmir
SL	Syrian	40-45	Female	Single	8	Hair and beauty business	İzmir
SM	Syrian	35-40	Male	Married	11	Shop owner	İzmir
SN	Syrian	35-40	Female	Married	8	Cooperative founder	İzmir

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

A two-step snowball–purposive sampling method was used to recruit refugee participants who were either self-employed or in the process of starting a business in Turkey. Initial contacts were made through university international offices and NGOs, and subsequent participants were reached via referrals. Due to difficulties in accessing Afghan refugee entrepreneurs, data collection was extended to nearby cities, including Izmir and Istanbul, to ensure diversity and balanced ethnic representation.

Participants provided informed consent and took part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews covering two main themes: acculturation (psychological and sociocultural well-being) and entrepreneurship (motivations, challenges, and policy needs). Interviews lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours and continued until data saturation was reached. Of the 24 participants, 22 were sufficiently proficient in Turkish, and their interviews were conducted in Turkish. One Syrian participant with limited Turkish proficiency was interviewed in English, while an acquaintance at the participant's workplace who was able to communicate in both languages assisted in clarifying meanings when necessary. In the case of one Afghan participant with limited Turkish proficiency, a Turkish-speaking Afghan entrepreneur who had facilitated the initial contact provided language assistance during the interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language in which they were conducted. The interview transcripts were coded in their original language, and the quotations included in the manuscript were subsequently translated into English by the English-proficient authors and cross-checked by the author team to preserve their contextual and semantic meaning. Most interviews took place at participants' workplaces in quiet settings. All data were securely stored, and anonymity was ensured through the removal of identifying information.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

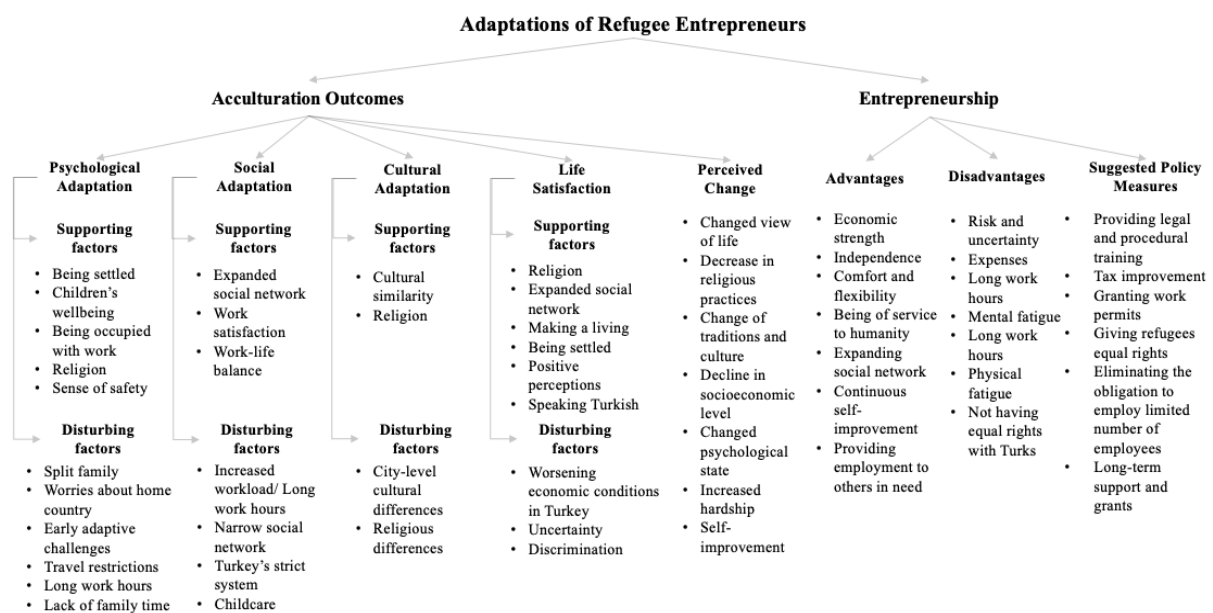
The interview data were analyzed using inductive content analysis supported by MAXQDA, aiming to develop an empirically grounded understanding of the relationship between refugee entrepreneurship and acculturation outcomes rather than testing predefined hypotheses (Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). All interviews were transcribed, anonymized, and compiled into a single dataset; when audio recording was not possible, detailed anonymized field notes were included.

The research team first conducted repeated readings of the data and prepared analytic memos to identify initial patterns. Open coding was then applied inductively, generating codes directly from the data to capture key themes related to entrepreneurship and acculturation. An initial coding framework was developed from the open codes generated during the first cycle of analysis. This coding framework was subsequently refined through an iterative process as additional categories and themes emerged from the data. Through iterative refinement and team consensus, codes were grouped into broader categories and synthesized into themes. A comparative analysis was conducted to explore similarities and differences between Afghan and Syrian participants, and the final themes were presented in alignment with the research questions.

4. RESULTS

The data analysis identified two primary themes, as illustrated in Figure 1: acculturation outcomes and entrepreneurship. Acculturation outcomes were assessed through five key categories: psychological adaptation, social integration, cultural adaptation, life satisfaction, and perceived changes post-migration in Turkey. The analysis also highlighted factors that positively and negatively impacted these areas, detailed in the subcategories. The most frequently occurring codes within these subcategories are shown in Figure 1 and will be discussed to provide a comprehensive understanding of refugee entrepreneurs' acculturation outcomes. In the second major theme, entrepreneurship, three main categories were found: the advantages, disadvantages, and suggested policy improvements for refugee entrepreneurship.

Figure 1: Overarching Themes within the Study



4.1. Acculturation outcomes

The first category of acculturation outcomes, psychological adaptation, was evaluated through questions about participants' self-perceptions, overall life satisfaction, and mental health. When analyzed collectively, participants reported roughly equal levels of high, moderate, and low psychological adaptation. However, a comparison between national groups revealed that Syrians generally reported higher levels of psychological adaptation than Afghans.

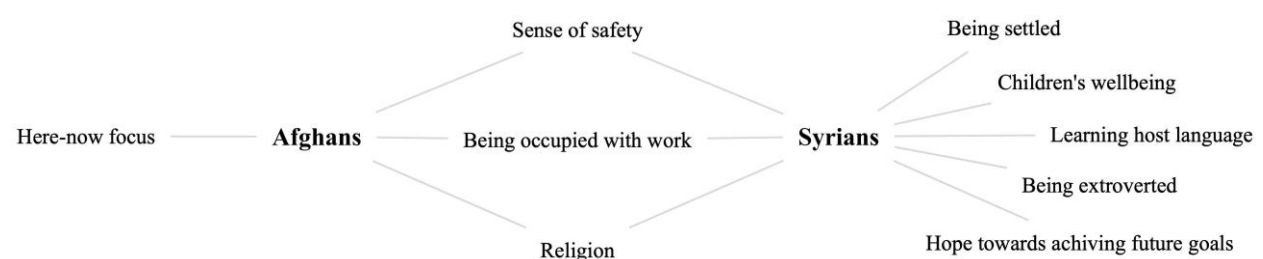
The factors that contributed positively to psychological adaptation the most were reported to be (1) “being settled”, (2) “well-being of children”, (3) “being occupied with work”, (4) “religion”, (5) “sense of safety”, and in descending order of frequency. The first quote shows the positive effects of the well-being of children and being settled, which, according to participants, refers to “establishing a consistent and orderly lifestyle, a work routine and sending children to school”, on the psychological state of the participants. The second quote shows the impact of religious coping on the psychological well-being of the Afghan and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs.

When I first came here, I was having a bit of a hard time. I was suffering mentally because of the problems I experienced due to war, but now I'm fine. I don't think I will return (to Syria) in the future; I feel like a Turk now. My children are 13-14 years old and studying, so I am very happy here. I got my life in order. (SL)

Our faith keeps us alive. We had difficulties, but thankfully our lives are going well now. We only think about our family and our work. We are generally fine. God willing. (SM)

Similar to the levels of psychological adaptation, factors supporting psychological adaptation of Afghan and Syrian refugees seemed to be differentiated. The Syrian participants expressed a significantly greater number of supportive factors and with higher frequency than the Afghan participants. The first two most common codes ‘being settled down’ and ‘well-being of children’ under this subcategory were mentioned merely by the Syrian participants while the last three were shared between the two groups, as displayed in Figure 2, which also includes less commonly mentioned factors.

Figure 2: A Comparison of Afghan and Syrian Refugee Groups on Factors Supporting Psychological Adaptation



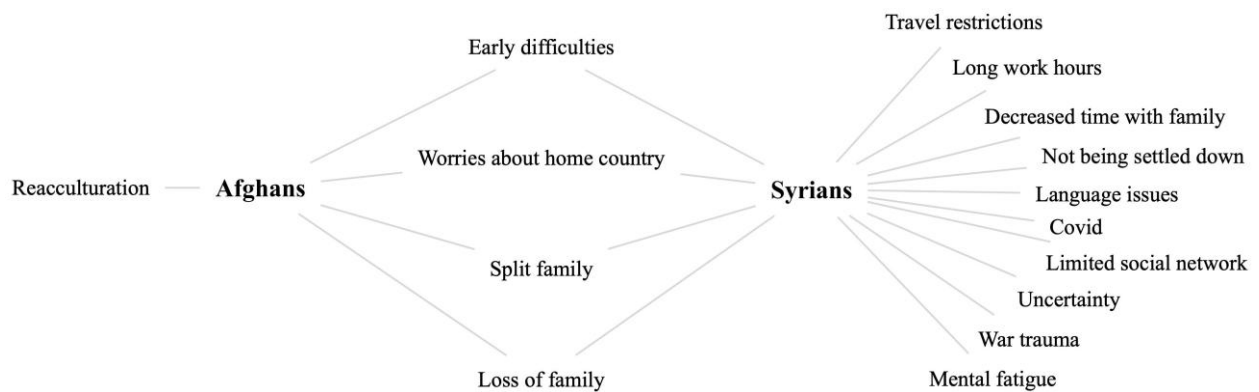
The factors that disturbed psychological adaptation varied, with “split family” , “worries about the adverse conditions in the home country”, “early adaptive challenges” such as housing and language learning, “travel restrictions between cities”, “long work hours”, and “lack of family time” being the most common, in descending order of frequency. All the identified factors disturbing psychological adaptation center around the damage to the sense of family or home including the “travel restrictions between cities” and “long work hours”, as indicated in the quotes. The first quote shows the effect of travel restrictions within Turkey, accentuating the sense of loss of family for people who value a highly collective lifestyle. The second quote below demonstrates the detrimental impact of the split family experience and worries about the home country on the participants’ psychology and the positive impact of work as a coping strategy.

The thing that upsets me the most right now is that I can't go to my family living in Bursa. They don't give travel permits and I can't change cities. I haven't been able to see my family for a long time. (SN)

After 2020, I was a little shaken psychologically. I was very disturbed when the Taliban attacked my family. Then I gave myself completely to my work to recuperate. I just feel sorry for the people in Afghanistan. Thinking about them makes me depressed. I have four brothers and one sister in Afghanistan, all of their families are there. (AA)

A comparison between the two refugee groups regarding factors disturbing psychological adaptation revealed some similarities and differences, as shown below in Figure 3. The four major codes that emerged under this subcategory: “split family”, “worries about the adverse conditions in the home country”, ‘early adaptive challenges’ and “loss of family” were shared by both refugee groups. However, the groups were differentiated by the number of other factors expressed only by the Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, such as travel restrictions, long work hours, decreased time with family, war trauma, and uncertainty. Reacculturation was mentioned by one Afghan participant, which was attributed to the difficulties of undergoing the acculturation process for the second time as they had arrived in Turkey from a previous host country, unlike the Syrian participants who came directly from their home country. Overall, Syrian participants underlined increasingly more factors as disturbing psychological adaptation than the Afghan participants.

Figure 3: A Comparison of Afghan and Syrian Refugee Groups on Factors Disturbing Psychological Adaptation



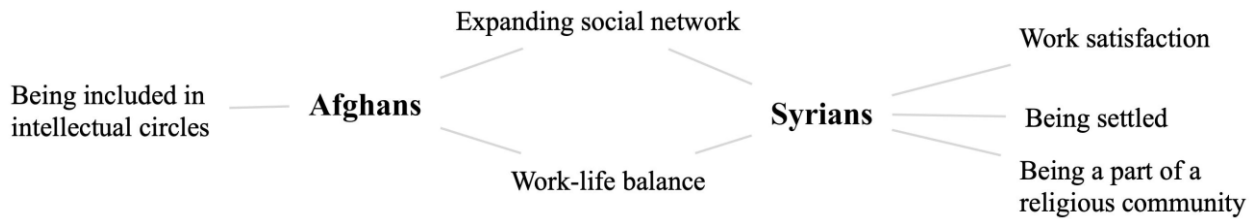
The participants' social adaptation was evaluated by inquiring about their satisfaction with their social lives in Turkey. Similar to their responses regarding psychological adaptation, the participants were nearly evenly split between high and low levels of social adaptation. The primary factors contributing to high social adaptation included an “expanded social network in Turkey,” “work satisfaction,” and “work-life balance.” This finding supports the notion that social and economic adaptation are interconnected, as highlighted by existing literature (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2008; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008). Entrepreneurship appears to enhance refugees' social networks in Turkey, fostering a sense of acceptance, belonging, and improved integration. Additionally, it helps bridge the social gap between their home and host societies, evoking a sense of familiarity and collective belonging in the new environment.

I see a lot of people; I do a lot of work during the day. My life is very beautiful, sometimes I get tired, but I don't like sitting idle anyway. (SN)

I go back and forth between home, work and friends. I've been in the same neighborhood for nine years, and people now know and love me. (SJ)

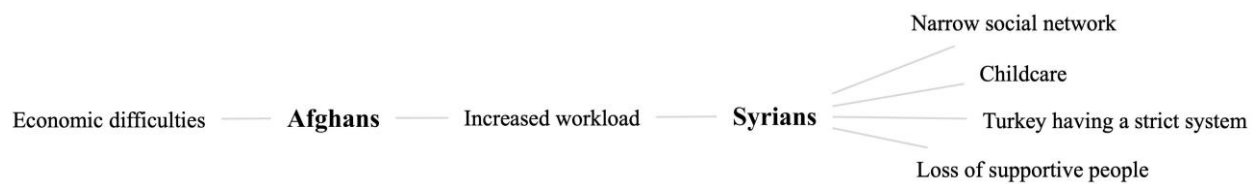
A comparison of the refugee groups under this category, as revealed in Figure 4, shows that two of the most common factors supporting social adaptation are shared between the Afghan and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs, while work satisfaction, being settled and being a part of a religious community were adopted only by Syrian participants.

Figure 4: A Comparison of Afghan and Syrian Refugee Groups on Factors Supporting Social Adaptation



In contrast, “increased workload and long work hours” was expressed by more than half of the research participants to be the main factor that disturbed the social adaptation of the participants, followed by “narrow social network”, “Turkey having a strict system”, and “childcare (reported by the female participants).” The rest of the codes emerging under this category, all of which are displayed in Figure 5, were mentioned by a relatively much smaller number of participants.

Figure 5: A Comparison of Afghan and Syrian Refugee Groups on Factors Disturbing Social Adaptation



The first quote below exemplifies the impact of long work hours on participants’ social adaptation. The second quote below signifies the negative impact of the narrow social network and perceived strict system in Turkey on the participants’ social adaptation. Similar to the findings of previous research (Nijhoff, 2021), the analysis indicates that the loss of a highly collective lifestyle, as in the home country, is an important factor negatively affecting social adaptation, as implied in the second and third quotes.

I stay in the shop 14 hours a day. When I get home, I think about work again. Then, I sleep. My life literally passes between home and work. In the first years, I was at the shop 17 hours a day, never taking any days off. Now, I usually take one day off a week, but then my mind is either on work or I take care of outside work related to work. (SF)

But, in general, the social life in Izmir is a bit less, we would be closer to people in Syria and we would meet more often, but this is not very possible in Izmir, we can only meet with people we are close to once every few months. While living here, it is necessary to be very careful in terms of both business and life. Everything has a legal procedure and you have to follow them. (SK)

There was always a crowd in our homes, or our elders lived with us, but we do not continue these traditions in Turkey in order not to disturb our neighbors. Here we are adapting to Turkish customs. (SE)

The cultural adaptation category pertains to participants' ability to adjust to the culture and social system of the host country, which is a key aspect of the acculturation process. Although this category was not directly addressed in the interviews, insights were derived from participants' responses. The analysis identified “cultural similarity” and “religion” as crucial factors in facilitating cultural adaptation in Turkey. While culture broadly encompasses various elements, it is closely linked with religion, which influences traditions, social norms, lifestyles, and attitudes in both home and host contexts. Participants often used “culture” and “religion” interchangeably, reflecting their intertwined nature. Nearly all participants emphasized the significance of religion in their lives, with many citing it as a primary reason for choosing to live in Turkey. Sharing the same religion and cultural background fosters a sense of familiarity and unity with Turkish society, leading to an immediate sense of belonging in Turkey. Furthermore, this cultural and religious similarity provides relief from Islamophobia found in other potential host countries, which could hinder their ability to practice their religion freely, as indicated in the following quote.

I don't think Turkey and Syria have two different cultures. It's actually the same because our religion is the same. It was as if I went to a different city in Syria. I did not feel like a foreigner here based on the culture. For example, my wife, a hijabi, is walking around comfortably here. Our acquaintances living in the Netherlands have difficulties in this regard. There are instances of people staring at hijabi women on the street and discriminating against them. We do not experience that here. (SG)

In contrast to the positive impact of cultural and religious similarities on cultural adaptation, perceived differences in religious sensitivities between their home country and certain areas in Turkey appeared to create significant challenges. As illustrated in the first quote below, one participant highlighted the particular difficulty of navigating religious differences compared to other cultural variations. They noted that these religious differences were especially pronounced in the city of Izmir, underscoring the city-specific variations within Turkey, as referenced in the second quote.

Our food, clothing, music, and the way we live religiously are a little different, but it is not very difficult to adapt apart from religion. (AJ)

There is a level of apathy in the religious sense, especially in Izmir, which seemed a little different to us. (SC)

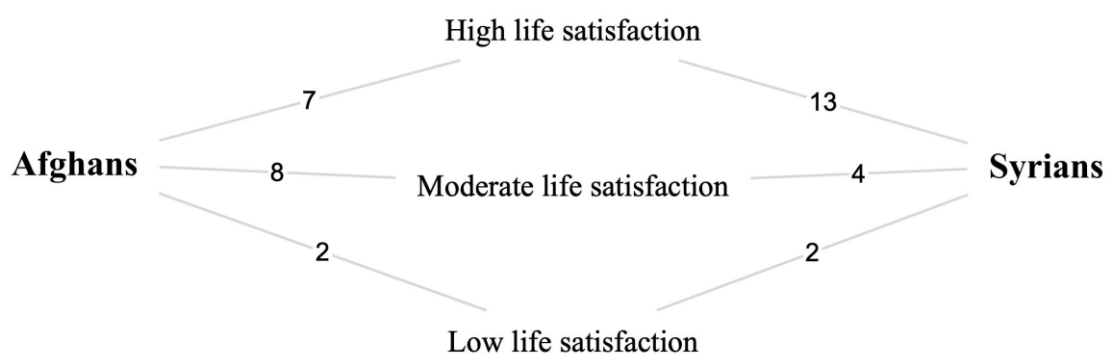
The declining importance of collective values, particularly when coupled with religious differences, was identified as the second most significant factor negatively affecting cultural adaptation.

We used to go to worship with our friends in Syria, but now I can't do that.

Unlike us, relatives used to gather in houses, for example, we would all gather together in one house during the holidays, but we cannot do this here because our relatives are not here. I do not see that Turks do this too much. This seems like a difference to me. (SE)

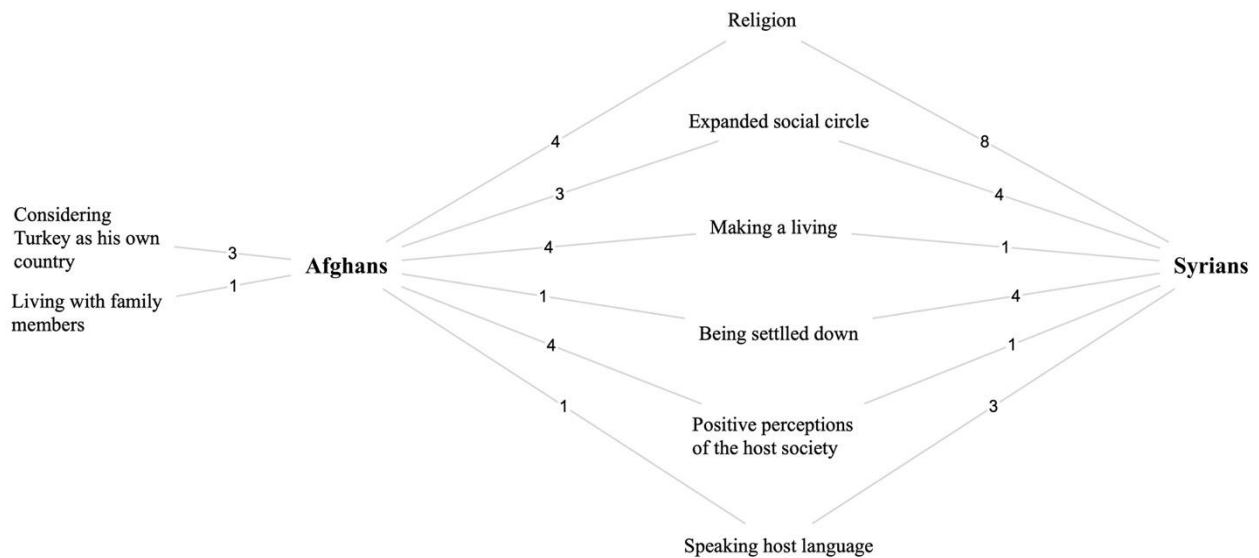
Lastly, life satisfaction was explored by asking the research participants about their level of contentment with their lives in Turkey. In contrast to the equal division of responses on different levels of psychological and social adaptation, the majority of the informants (15) expressed high levels of life satisfaction, followed by moderate (7) and low levels of life satisfaction (2). Although the categorization of responses helps to see participants' level of life satisfaction, it was clear from the analysis that each participant cannot be attached to a single category, considering the frequency of the participants' responses in Figure 6. Participants expressed high satisfaction in some aspects, moderate and low satisfaction in other domains. Similar to domain specificity as explained by van de Vijver and Leung (1997), degrees of life satisfaction seem to vary. Therefore, it is more reflective of participants' reality to view life satisfaction as a continuum rather than a categorical variable. As apparent from the frequency of their response on the Figure 6, there appeared some differences between the two refugee groups with Syrians being on the higher end of the continuum and Afghans in the middle indicating lower life satisfaction for the Afghan refugee entrepreneurs.

Figure 6: A Comparison of Afghan and Syrian Refugee Groups on Life Satisfaction



As displayed in Figure 7, the most significant factors contributing to life satisfaction were reported to be “religion”, “expanded social network”, “making a living”, “being settled down”, “positive perception of the host society”, and “speaking the Turkish language”.

Figure 7: A Comparison of Afghan and Syrian Refugee Groups on Factors Contributing to Life Satisfaction



The following quote highlights how social support from an expanding network in the host country enhances life satisfaction by recreating a sense of belonging and acceptance. This support helps participants feel integrated into a cohesive community, compensating for the sense of connection they lost in their home country and providing a valuable resource during challenging times.

We are very good now, we have always met good people, our neighbors love us very much and take care of our children. If I don't open the market for a day, they will call and ask. Even when everything was closed during the Covid period, my neighbors continued to shop from me. (AE)

It is noteworthy that Syrian participants placed more emphasis on overcoming early acculturation challenges—such as settling in and learning the host language—compared to Afghan participants when discussing life satisfaction, as evidenced by the frequency of their responses. In contrast, only Afghan participants mentioned that considering Turkey as a home country contributed to their life satisfaction and reported more positive perceptions of Turkish people than Syrian participants. These differences may be attributed to the longer duration of stay for Afghan participants, who felt more acclimated to the language, culture, and society, whereas Syrian participants were relatively earlier in their adaptation process.

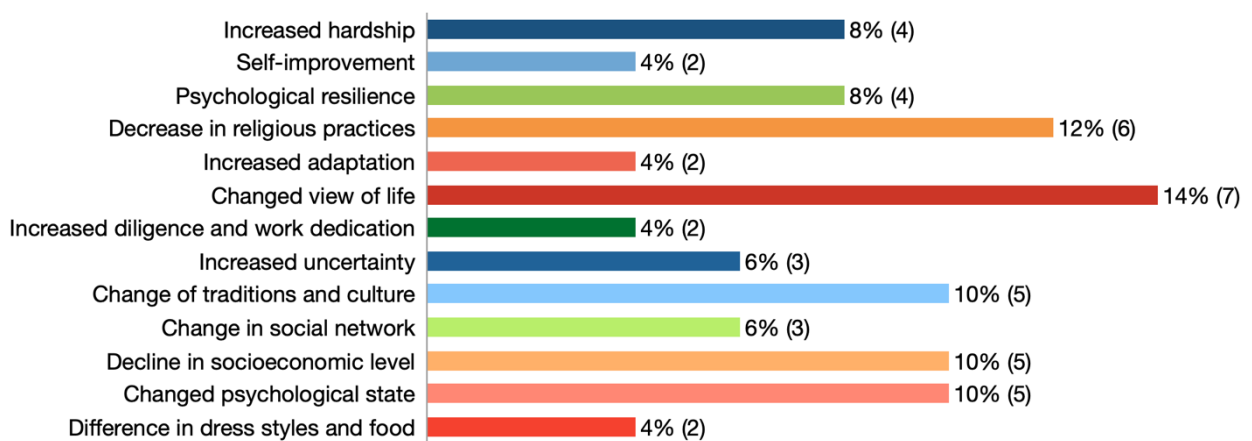
The investigation into factors adversely affecting life satisfaction revealed that the “worsening economic conditions in Turkey” was the most frequently cited issue by participants, followed by “a sense of uncertainty” and “discrimination.” Economic conditions impact life satisfaction in several ways: (1) monetarily, affecting the ability to maintain a business, cover home and work expenses, and

sustain a decent quality of life; (2) by increasing future uncertainties, especially for younger refugees aiming for employment, business sustainability, or higher education; (3) by extending work hours and reducing time with family and friends; and (4) indirectly, by heightening resentment and scapegoating of refugees, which harms their psychological and social adaptation. The following quote illustrates the connection between worsening economic conditions, uncertainties, and the negative reactions from the host community.

I'm glad I'm here, I'm glad I didn't go to America. It is just that the economy in Turkey is bad right now. What will happen tomorrow is unknown. Turks have also started to be reactive towards immigrants, which makes me think a bit. But the people of this country are actually very good, so I am happy to be in Turkey. (AA)

To gain a deeper understanding of the acculturation outcomes for participants, we examined their perceptions of personal change following migration to Turkey. Their responses generated thirteen distinct codes, as illustrated in Figure 8. The most frequently mentioned codes included “changed view of life,” “decrease in religious practices,” “change of traditions and culture,” “decline in socioeconomic level,” “changed psychological state,” “increased hardship,” and “self-improvement.” A “changed view of life” primarily reflected shifts in political perspectives related to both home and host countries. “Changed psychological state” described feelings of fear, diminished morale, and reduced enthusiasm, largely due to the heightened emotional, social, and economic challenges experienced post-war and during the early stages of acculturation.

Figure 8: Frequency of Participants’ Responses for Perceived Post-migration Change



There appears to be a connection between the two major codes: “decrease in religious practices”, “change of traditions and culture”. The participants’ responses indicate that coming to a more individualistic culture challenges the practice of their collectivistic traditions. Loss of such traditions

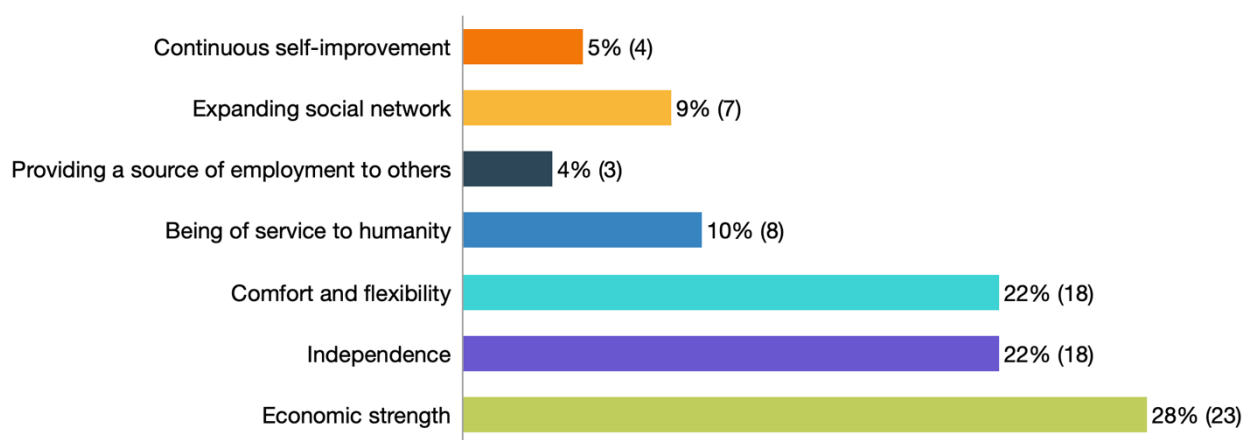
seems to be a reminder of loss of a country, a sense of home and family. Connected with the decreased levels of collectivistic culture is the declining levels of religious practices, which are either performed in a group or facilitated in a more collectivistic context. Declining levels of religiosity do not appear to be based on personal choice as in the case of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, who abandon religious practices as an acculturation strategy to feel more accepted in a non-Muslim country (Şafak-Ayvazoglu et al., 2021) but rather lack of a collective that adopts similar religious practices and a context that motivates collective practice, as indicated in the quote below.

I do not see myself as religious, I am a Muslim, but I think that I cannot fully fulfill all the requirements of religion. If I were in Afghanistan, this would not happen. I was a person who prayed and attended the congregation in Afghanistan, but this has decreased a little in Turkey. I think it's also due to the environment. Everyone would act the same way there, but it's not possible here. (AK)

4.2. Entrepreneurship

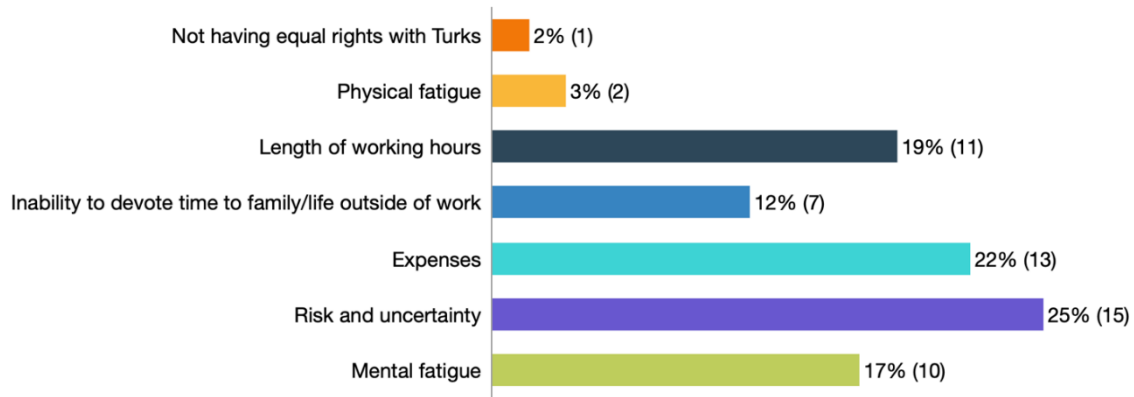
Based on participant narratives, entrepreneurship presents several benefits that improve acculturation conditions. The key advantages frequently cited include the comfort and flexibility of being self-employed, enhanced independence, and economic strength, as illustrated in Figure 9. Additionally, entrepreneurship facilitates ongoing self-improvement, helps build a social network in the host country to offset losses from the home country, and rebuilds self-confidence. By wielding economic power, creating job opportunities, and contributing to society, many participants also seek to challenge negative stereotypes, foster a positive image of their ethnic group, and restore their group's integrity in the host nation.

Figure 9: Frequency of Responses for the Advantages of Entrepreneurship



In contrast, the most common disadvantages of entrepreneurship, as shown in Figure 10, include the risky and uncertain nature of business, the expenses, the mental fatigue, and work-life imbalance that disturbs people's ability to spend time with family.

Figure 10: Frequency of Responses for the Disadvantages of Entrepreneurship



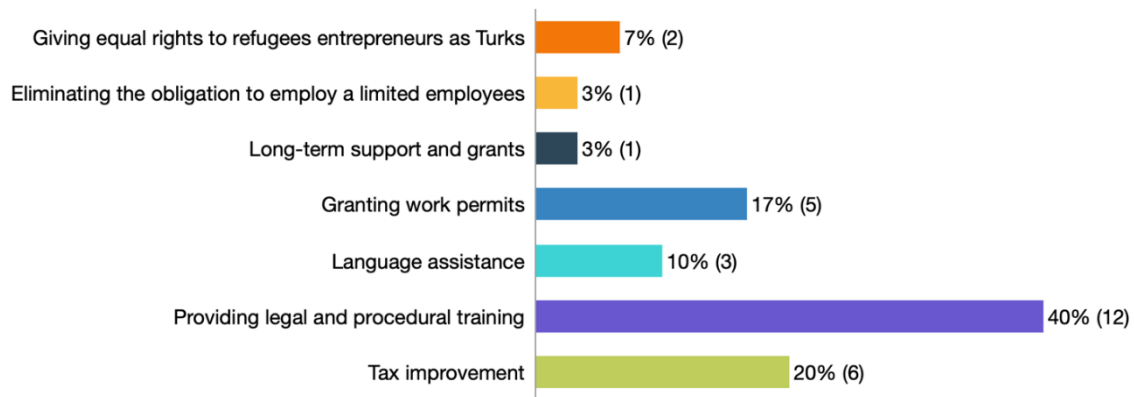
The study also explored the future plans of the refugee entrepreneurs in order to assess the acculturation outcomes. The most common codes under this category include business related goals such as expanding business in Turkey and abroad, as indicated in the first quote, developing different business plans, as well as societal goals such as being of service to their home and host countries, as expressed in the second quote.

In the future, I want to buy and sell goods from abroad and develop and advance my business. I want to expand my business. (SA)

I want my Afghan brothers to work with me; I want to pay them for their efforts. I always wanted to communicate with people in need and do business together. Not just Afghans, Turkish, Syrian, Iranian, it doesn't matter what nationality they are. (AE)

Participants were asked to make policy suggestions to improve the conditions of refugee entrepreneurs in Turkey. Their suggestions are displayed in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Frequency of Responses for the Suggested Measures for Improvement



The quotes reveal a prevalent need for improved legal and procedural training for refugees starting businesses in Turkey. Many participants highlighted the necessity for guidance from state institutions on navigating essential tasks such as completing paperwork, obtaining licenses, finding accountants, paying taxes, and applying for work permits and citizenship. The lack of clear information and support often forces refugees to depend on others, which can lead to risks such as scams, fines for non-compliance with complex legal requirements, or business closures due to tax debt, among other emotionally, socially, and economically depleting outcomes.

In Turkey, the state inspects the shops a lot. There are so many laws and rules. Taxes, high rents, and licenses are required. It's hard to start a business when you don't know how to do these things. We would be happier if there was better information for those coming from foreign countries (AJ).

Taxes in Turkey are very high, and legal procedures for export are very complex. Yes, there are incentives, but the system is really very complicated. I think it would be better if there were not so many procedures or if there were clearer procedures. People can avoid exporting because their chances of making mistakes increase due to the legal procedures (SH).

5. DISCUSSION

This research examined the acculturation outcomes of Afghan and Syrian refugee entrepreneurs in Turkey, highlighting the complex role of entrepreneurship in both supporting and challenging adaptation processes. The findings show that entrepreneurship functions as a dual mechanism, fostering psychological and social adaptation while also presenting significant obstacles. Psychological adaptation was supported by stable residency, children's well-being, and religious coping, with entrepreneurship providing a sense of stability and purpose. Social adaptation was enhanced through job satisfaction and expanded social networks, with entrepreneurship playing a central role in building

these connections. These findings are consistent with the core assumptions of the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM), which conceptualizes acculturation as an outcome of the interaction between refugees and the host society rather than as a purely individual process (Bourhis et al., 1997). Within this framework, entrepreneurship represents not only an economic activity but also a socially embedded arena through which refugee entrepreneurs engage with institutions, markets, customers, and the wider community. At the same time, the findings indicate that these interactions were shaped by different institutional conditions. The more clearly defined administrative position of Syrians under Temporary Protection and the greater status uncertainty described by many Afghan participants influenced their access to institutions, sense of security, and opportunities for sustained engagement with the host society. Accordingly, the psychological and social outcomes identified in this study should be understood as emerging from the interaction between entrepreneurial agencies and the institutional conditions encountered by refugee entrepreneurs, rather than from entrepreneurial activity alone.

Consistent with previous research, the findings indicate that entrepreneurship benefited not only refugee entrepreneurs themselves but also their families (Chang, 2025). Entrepreneurial activity contributed to children's educational opportunities, family stability, and future aspirations, suggesting that its adaptive effects extended beyond individual economic outcomes. These family-level benefits were also strengthened through refugees' broader engagement with the host society. Business ownership created opportunities to establish social and economic relationships, expand support networks, and increase families' participation in everyday community life. However, the findings also indicate that entrepreneurship alone did not guarantee successful adaptation. Rather, the contribution of entrepreneurial activity to family well-being depended on refugees' ability to access institutions, sustain supportive social relationships, and navigate legal and administrative processes. This suggests that entrepreneurship became a meaningful pathway to adaptation when economic participation was accompanied by accessible institutions and supportive social environments.

However, the research also identified several structural barriers that constrained refugee entrepreneurship, including bureaucratic procedures, language-related difficulties in official processes, and uncertainty surrounding residence or protection status. Consistent with previous research (Bizri, 2017; Desai et al., 2021; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006), these barriers limited access to public services, formal business procedures, and long-term business planning despite refugees' strong motivation to become economically self-reliant. The findings further suggest that these challenges should be understood within Turkey's differentiated refugee governance framework. While Syrian participants generally operated under the Temporary Protection system, many Afghan participants described greater uncertainty regarding their legal and administrative status, influencing their access to documentation, mobility, public services, and formal business opportunities. These institutional arrangements shaped the conditions under which refugee entrepreneurs participated in economic and social life. In addition,

participants' experiences reflected Turkey's broader macroeconomic environment, where economic volatility, rising operating costs, and declining purchasing power further challenged business sustainability. Although entrepreneurship created opportunities for economic participation, its contribution to adaptation depended on an enabling institutional and economic environment.

In terms of psychological adaptation, refugees who achieved a stable life and consistent work routine reported higher well-being, with entrepreneurship playing a central role in creating this stability. However, factors such as separation from family, concerns about the home country, and early adaptation challenges, including language and housing, negatively affected well-being, consistent with prior research (Berry, 2005). The findings further suggest that psychological adaptation cannot be understood solely as an internal coping process. While entrepreneurship enhanced participants' sense of stability and self-confidence, these benefits depended on an enabling institutional and social environment. Predictable legal procedures, access to public institutions, and positive interactions with customers reinforced psychological well-being, whereas legal uncertainty, mobility restrictions, and prolonged bureaucratic challenges weakened these benefits. The comparison between Afghan and Syrian participants further indicates that differences in psychological adaptation reflected not only individual coping capacities but also differences in the institutional and social environments in which entrepreneurial activities were pursued.

Regarding social adaptation, entrepreneurship contributed to the expansion of social networks and increased work satisfaction, thereby supporting refugees' integration into Turkish society. Consistent with previous research (Abu-Rayya, 2009; Chung et al., 2008; Mähönen et al., 2013), social support also enhanced well-being in the workplace. However, heavy workloads, limited social networks, and institutional barriers continued to constrain broader social integration. The findings further suggest that entrepreneurship created opportunities for interaction with customers, suppliers, employees, and local business networks, but these contacts did not automatically translate into meaningful social inclusion. Rather, the contribution of entrepreneurship to social adaptation depended on refugees' ability to develop supportive social relationships, access institutional support, and experience positive everyday interactions within the host society. These findings indicate that the social benefits of entrepreneurship were shaped not only by opportunities for contact but also by the quality of refugees' interactions within Turkey's institutional and social environment.

Shared cultural and religious ties supported participants' adaptation to Turkey. Religion provided belonging, coping, and motivation for entrepreneurship as a form of social contribution. These findings align with studies showing that religious, collectivist, family, and communal values influence Muslim entrepreneurs' adaptation and business activities (Adam & Ward, 2016; Najib, 2015; Sidek et al., 2018). Unlike studies conducted in non-Muslim contexts, participants did not report hostility or social exclusion associated with religious visibility (Salmon & Singleton, 2025). Instead, they generally

perceived shared religious identity as facilitating initial acceptance and social connection, supporting previous findings on religion as a bridge to integration (Zehra & Usmani, 2023). At the same time, participants described a decline in collective cultural practices, such as communal religious activities and family gatherings, which contributed to feelings of cultural loss and alienation. These findings suggest that shared religious references reduced participants' perceived cultural distance from the host society and supported early interaction. However, because this study reflects only the perspectives of refugee entrepreneurs, these findings should be interpreted as participants' perceptions rather than as evidence of host-society orientations or uniformly positive reception.

Life satisfaction emerged as a multifaceted outcome shaped by both personal and contextual factors. Positive influences included religion, expanded social networks, earning a livelihood, and feeling "settled." For refugees, being settled reflects not only physical security but also psychological stability, belonging, self-agency, and the restoration of social status. Entrepreneurship contributed to these outcomes by promoting economic stability and self-reliance, strengthening pride and self-esteem (Zehra & Usmani, 2023), enabling the transition from "agency-in-waiting" to active participation (Nafari & Ruebottom, 2025), and restoring a sense of agency and dignity (Salmon & Singleton, 2025).

However, worsening economic conditions, legal uncertainty, bureaucratic barriers, and perceived discrimination negatively affected life satisfaction. Repeated exposure to legal and institutional obstacles reduced motivation and hindered entrepreneurial progress by limiting future planning (Nafari & Ruebottom, 2025; Yesli et al., 2024), while negative societal attitudes further shaped refugees' experiences (Ayasli, 2025). These findings suggest that the psychological benefits of entrepreneurship depended not only on refugees' own efforts but also on the institutional and social environment in which they operated. Although entrepreneurship reflected refugees' aspirations for economic participation and self-reliance, these benefits were weakened when they encountered legal restrictions, limited institutional access, or unsupportive social conditions. This was particularly evident among participants whose uncertain legal status reduced predictability and constrained long-term planning.

The findings also highlight the close relationship between cultural adaptation and life satisfaction, as both were influenced by religion and social networks (Adam & Ward, 2016). Religion facilitated cultural adaptation by fostering a sense of connection with the host society while also serving as an important source of psychological coping and well-being. Likewise, supportive social networks and feeling "settled" contributed to both adaptation and life satisfaction. However, the findings suggest that life satisfaction was more sensitive to institutional, economic, and social conditions, including financial hardship, legal uncertainty, and perceived discrimination, whereas cultural adaptation was

more closely associated with refugees' ability to establish meaningful cultural and social connections within the host society.

The study found that entrepreneurship empowered refugees by providing flexibility, independence, and opportunities to expand social networks, thereby supporting both psychological and social adaptation. At the same time, participants reported substantial challenges, including financial stress, mental fatigue, work–life imbalance, and legal complexities. Long working hours and the demands of running a business often limited family and social life, illustrating the gap between the potential benefits of entrepreneurship and the realities of building a business in an unfamiliar institutional environment. The findings also highlight important policy implications. Refugees emphasized the need for clearer legal guidance, accessible information, and greater support in navigating Turkey's regulatory system, as difficulties with business regulations, taxation, and administrative procedures frequently created financial and emotional burdens. The findings further suggest that policy responses should recognize the different legal and institutional circumstances of refugee groups. Support designed primarily for Syrians under Temporary Protection may not adequately address the documentation, mobility, residence, and long-term planning challenges described by many Afghan entrepreneurs. Accordingly, policy interventions should combine simplified administrative procedures with status-sensitive legal guidance, multilingual information, accessible advisory services, and stronger links between refugee entrepreneurs, local business organizations, municipalities, and public institutions. Such measures would not only strengthen entrepreneurial sustainability but also create more predictable and reciprocal conditions for refugees' participation in host society.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample primarily included refugee entrepreneurs with relatively higher education and transferable skills, which may underrepresent more socioeconomically vulnerable refugees in Turkey. Consequently, the findings may not fully reflect the diversity of refugee entrepreneurial experiences and promoting entrepreneurship without adequate institutional and financial support may risk reinforcing existing inequalities. Second, the study provides a cross-sectional perspective and does not capture how changing economic conditions, policies, and legal circumstances shape entrepreneurial experiences over time. Third, female refugee entrepreneurs were underrepresented, with only three women included in the sample. As a result, the study provides limited insight into the gendered and intersectional challenges faced by refugee women entrepreneurs, including childcare responsibilities, gender norms, and societal expectations. Finally, although the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) informed the interpretation of the findings, the study draws solely on the perspectives of refugee entrepreneurs and does not include members of the host society, institutional representatives, or policymakers. Consequently, the study does not examine host-society orientations directly or test the interactive structure of IAM. Rather, IAM served as an interpretive framework for understanding how refugee entrepreneurs perceived institutional conditions, social

interactions, and cultural adaptation. Future research could adopt a multi-actor and longitudinal design that incorporates both refugee and host-society perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurial acculturation processes.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that entrepreneurship can serve as an important pathway for refugee acculturation by supporting psychological well-being, social participation, and economic self-reliance. However, its contribution to adaptation was neither automatic nor uniform. Rather, the findings demonstrate that entrepreneurship should be understood as a context-dependent pathway to acculturation, with its outcomes shaped by institutional, legal, economic, and social conditions. In the Turkish context, differences in legal status and institutional access contributed to distinct entrepreneurial experiences among Afghan and Syrian participants. These findings highlight the need for targeted and context-sensitive policies that address the diverse legal and institutional circumstances of refugee entrepreneurs while reducing administrative barriers and strengthening access to support services. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multi-actor approaches to examine how entrepreneurial experiences and acculturation processes evolve over time and how different institutional and community support mechanisms influence refugee entrepreneurs' long-term integration and well-being.

Ethics committee approval for the study was obtained from İzmir Katip Çelebi University Ethics Committee on 08/02/2022, with decision number 2022/03-09.

The authors declare that the study was conducted in accordance with research and publication ethics.

The authors state that artificial intelligence tools were employed only for the purpose of language polishing.

The authors declare that there are no financial conflicts of interest involving any institution, organization, or individual associated with this article. Additionally, there are no conflicts of interest among the authors.

The authors declare that they contributed equally to all processes of the research.

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