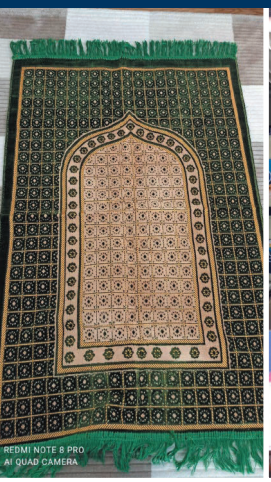
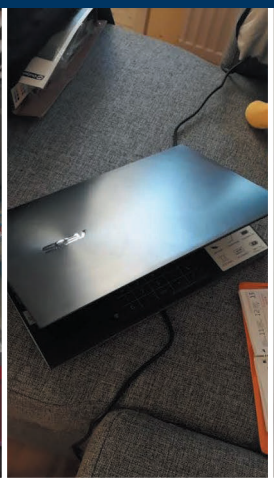
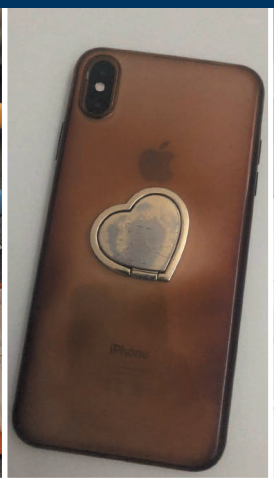
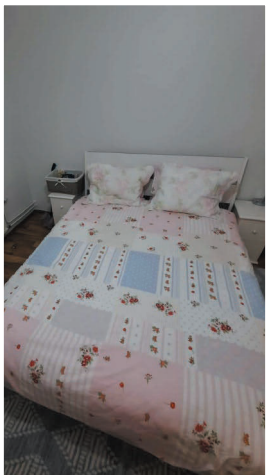
Maria Hokkinen

# Refugee Consumers Navigating Long-term Liminality

## An Agentic Perspective on Integration in Finland




Åbo Akademi University

# Maria Hokkinen

## Previous studies and degrees

Bachelor of Arts, Åbo Akademi University, 2007
Master of Economic Sciences, Åbo Akademi University, 2011
Defence of doctoral thesis in International Marketing, Åbo Akademi University, 2022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Since I started my doctoral studies, many unexpected events have unfolded, both in my personal life and in the world around us. In times of dramatic transformations – or liminality, as these experiences are called in this thesis – the importance of close relationships becomes heightened. It is clear that completing this work without the unconditional love and untiring support from my family, friends, and colleagues would not have been possible.

To begin with, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors: Prof. Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen and Associate Prof. Anna-Greta Nyström, who have guided and supported me through this endeavor. You have offered me huge amounts of knowledge and encouragement, not to mention a great deal of good laughs along the way. I also want to thank my previous supervisor, Prof. Emeritus Jan-Åke Törnroos, for inviting me into the doctoral program and believing in my scholarly capabilities long before I did so myself. I also want to express my gratitude to the two pre-examiners assigned to evaluate my thesis, Associate Prof. Pia Polsa from the Hanken School of Economics and Prof. Ian Woodward from the University of Southern Denmark. Your encouraging comments and valuable feedback helped me improve the work and pushed me across the finish line.

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I humbly thank everyone who participated in the empirical interviews of my thesis. The stories you shared will forever stay with me. I dedicate this dissertation to the displaced people of the world. May you all find a place to call home.

In Turku, Finland, November 2nd, 2022

Maria Hokkinen

# Abstract

This doctoral thesis explores the integration of refugees in Finland, focusing on the meaning of consumption during long-term involuntary liminality. Liminality stands for transitional processes that push people from one identity to another. The thesis adopts an agency view, considering refugees capable of making decisions about their lives despite structural constraints such as financial precarity and insecurity about the future. It also explores the attitudes of locals towards newly arrived refugee consumers, and looks into how contextual circumstances shape the refugees' integration trajectories. The results are reported in three original articles, each focusing on a specific aspect of refugee integration in Finland.

The thesis follows a qualitative research design. The ontological assumption is social constructionism, considering truth to be socially constructed and to consist of several different but partly overlapping perceptions and realities. Methodologically, the studies build on photovoice interviews (n=9), focus group interviews (n=23), and one-on-one interviews (n=4), as well as monitored social media discussions (n=14). The selected research strategy is abductive, moving back and forth between theory and data in several rounds of interpretations.

The thesis contributes to consumer research by challenging the extant assumption that liminality and loss push people to seek security in material possessions. Rather, the results highlight the abilities of immaterial and digital consumption to facilitate liminal transitions. By doing so, the work joins the emerging stream of literature on liquid consumption. Based on the empirical results, a model of refugee liquid consumption is developed. This type of liquid consumption involves an involuntary entry into transition, a temporary decline of interest in material possessions, and the use of digital resources to maintain close relationships and to cope. Moreover, the thesis contributes to migration studies by illuminating the relational conflicts between locals and refugees in the consumer markets. The findings offer practical implications for refugee resettlement by shedding light on the agentic decision-making dynamics of refugees and the role of the societal context in integration.

Climate change, political instability, and wars call for a better understanding of people's strategies for navigating difficult life transitions. Consumption is one way to facilitate transformations and to find solace, as well as to rebuild a new identity after a crisis. Thus, while the scope of this thesis is individual refugees in a Nordic welfare state, the results can have relevance for other situations involving involuntary long-term change, far beyond the context of forced displacement.

**Key words:** Liminality, liquid consumption, refugee agency, integration.

# Svensk sammanfattning

Den här doktorsavhandlingen utforskar integrationen av flyktingar i Finland, med specifikt fokus på konsumtionens betydelse i långvarig och ofrivillig liminalitet. Liminalitet hänvisar till ett mellanstadie eller en gränsövergång som innebär en identitetförändring. Avhandlingen ser flyktingar som aktiva beslutfattare med förmåga att påverka sina liv trots strukturella begränsningar så som stram ekonomi och osäkerhet om framtiden. Den lokala befolkningens attityder gentemot nyanlända flyktingar på konsumentmarknaden, samt de kontextuella omständigheternas inverkan på flyktingarnas integrationsstigar står också i fokus. Avhandlingen består av tre artiklar som var och en studerar en specifik aspekt av flyktingarnas integration i Finland.

Avhandlingen följer en kvalitativ forskningsdesign. Ontologiskt tar avhandlingen avstamp i social konstruktionism som ser verkligheten socialt konstruerad och bestående av flera olika men delvis överlappande perspektiv. Metodologiskt grundar sig studierna på photovoice-intervjuer (n=9), fokusgruppintervjuer (n=23), individuella intervjuer (n=4) samt granskning av diskussioner i sociala medier (n=14). Forskningen följer en abduktiv strategi, där teori och tolkning av data växlar i en icke-lineär process.

Avhandlingen bidrar till konsumentforskningen genom att utmana det givna antagandet inom nuvarande forskning att liminalitet och förlust skulle få människor att söka trygghet i materiella ägodelar. Däremot framhäver avhandlingen den immateriella och den digitala konsumtionens potential att underlätta liminala förändringar. Med detta resultat bidrar studien till den växande litteraturen om likvid konsumtion. Utgående från studiens empiriska resultat har en modell av flyktingars likvida konsumtion utvecklats. Denna typ av likvid konsumtion präglas av ofrivilligt inträde i förändringsprocessen, tillfälligt avtagande intresse för materiell konsumtion, samt användning av digitala medel för att upprätthålla sociala strukturer och att klara sig. Utöver detta bidrar avhandlingen också till migrationsforskningen genom att belysa relationer och konflikter mellan den lokala befolkningen och de nyanlända flyktingarna på konsumentmarknaden. Avhandlingen erbjuder rekommendationer för integrationspraxis i och med att den ökar förståelsen för flyktingarnas beslutsprocesser och den lokala kontextens roll i integrationen.

När vi globalt möter stora utmaningar som klimatförändring, politisk instabilitet och krig, finns det ett ökande behov av en bättre förståelse för människors strategier för att hantera svåra omständigheter och omvälvningar. Genom konsumtion kan man hitta tröst och återbygga sin identitet i utmanande livssituationer. Trots att forskningen är inriktad på flyktingar i en nordisk välfärdsstatskontext, kan resultaten vara relevanta även inom andra områden karaktäriserade av långvarig och ofrivillig förändring.

**Nyckelord:** liminalitet, likvid konsumtion, flyktingars aktörskap, integration

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*"Uncertainty is the only certainty there is,*
*and knowing how to live with insecurity*
*is the only security."*

(John Allen Paulos, mathematician)

# PART I: THESIS OVERVIEW

## 1 Introduction

Life is full of shifts and transformations, from anticipated milestones such as reaching adulthood or becoming a parent, to dramatic and blindsiding turns of events like accidents, illnesses or the loss of a loved one. In addition to individuals, also communities and whole societies face unexpected developments, drastically changing the lives of millions (Thomassen 2015). The 2015 refugee crisis with 1.5 million people fleeing from the conflict-ridden areas of the Middle East to Europe; the global Covid19 pandemic; and more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the onset of Europe's worst refugee crisis since the 2nd world war, are just some examples of the whirlwinds people have been subjected to lately.

In this thesis, I look into people's strategies for navigating such grand changes. I have chosen refugees as the empirical scope of the study. Forced displacement is a particularly rich domain to study transformations, as it involves literally leaving the old and arriving at the new, calling for an identity shift and tremendous efforts to survive and succeed. Consumption, the key area of interest in this thesis, is one way to manage such change, as material possessions can help people regain a sense of control, dignity and security in trying times (Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar 2021; Oka 2014; Kennett-Hensel, Sneath, & Lacey 2012).

Refugees are a timely topic as their number in the world is constantly growing, with no resolution in sight. In fact, during the course of my doctoral studies, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide increased by over 20 million. First, there was a global increase from 65.5 million refugees in 2016 (UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2016) to 82.4 million in the end of 2020 (UNHCR Figures at a Glance 2021). Then, the war in Ukraine set in motion a massive flight in Europe, with another five million people leaving Ukraine in the course of less than two months in February-April 2022 (UNCHR 2022), and the number still rising.

Forced displacement touches not only those fleeing their homes, but also the ones they leave behind and the communities that receive the refugees. The phenomenon could be studied from a range of different approaches and disciplines. Economic, social, psychological, legal, political and ecological perspectives, to name a few, all offer valuable knowledge about the experiences of refugees. The conceptual foundations of this thesis are in the economic and societal aspects of resettlement – namely, how refugees relate to consumption and possessions and how these can facilitate their integration and coping. Theoretically, the study is located in a junction between two disciplines: consumer research and migration research.

The empirical scope is on the individuals and their ability to make independent decisions during their grand transformation of resettlement into a new country, as well as on their interplay with the surrounding society. The thesis views refugees as agentic actors (Mainwaring 2016), trying to avoid placing them in the role of helpless victims, and instead looking into their strategies of navigating their new situation despite various societal, economic and social constrains. The empirical part of the research is set in Finland, which with its Nordic welfare state model and strong involvement of the social welfare system in the integration of newcomers (Martikainen, Valtonen & Wahlbeck 2012) serves as an interesting context to delve into the experiences of refugee consumers and their expressions of agency. The thesis is based on three rounds of qualitative interviewing as well as online discussion forum monitoring. The first interview phase was an exploratory study among nine recent refugees from Iraq to Finland, conducted with the help of the photovoice method (Sutton-Brown 2014) – that is, unstructured interviews drawing from photos taken by the research participants themselves. The second interviewing phase included semi-structured online focus groups with 23 refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Syria to Finland. The third and final interview phase was set up to crystallize and substantiate the earlier findings with the help of semi-structured one-on-one online interviews with four participants from Syria and Iraq who were, based on prior acquaintance, known to represent key facets of the studied phenomenon. In addition to the interviews with refugees resettled in Finland, online discussion forums were monitored to capture attitudes of the Finnish locals towards refugees and their consumer behavior.

The empirical material of the thesis was collected in 2017-18 and in 2021, unknowing about the new refugee crisis that was about to unfold in early 2022. The current situation in Europe further emphasizes the need for a better understanding of how people navigate extreme transformations such as forced displacement. We do not know what the future holds, but we can be certain that people will continue to be suddenly and irrevocably torn from their ordinary, everyday lives into the unknown. How they cope with this and even thrive is one of the central questions of our time.

Each chapter of the thesis begins with a short quote from media or literature that has had an impact on me. The excerpts concern different historical events, from the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, to the ongoing war in Ukraine. The quotes, while not all dealing with the particular refugee crises discussed in this thesis, exemplify the nature of exile that transcends both location and time.

## 1.1 Introduction of central concepts

The thesis aims to offer more understanding about the experience of refugees as consumers when resettling in a Nordic welfare state, contributing both to *consumer studies*, in particular to the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) stream (Arnould & Thompson 2005), as well as to *migration studies,* in particular to the research area dealing with settlement (Pyrhönen, Leinonen & Martikainen

2017). The empirical studies look into how refugee consumption plays out and how it can facilitate coping and integration during the transition of international displacement. In the following, the central concepts of the work are briefly defined and anchored in the relevant literature, in order to then justify the research gap and the research questions.

*Consumers and consumption*

The word *consumer* first appeared in the English language dictionaries in the 18th century, as a term connected to capitalism and the political economy. In those days, consumers were considered rational, economic decision-makers or victims of manipulation who blindly participated in mass consumption (Halkier et al. 2017). In the 1970s, the view started to shift towards an understanding of consumption as a way to express and create cultural meanings and to reproduce societal structures (Halkier et al. 2017).

The term *consumption* has lately gained increased ground in the public discourse. As Kravets, Maclaran and Venkatesh (2018, p. 3) point out, people today are often labeled as consumers in many different areas of life, even in healthcare and the education sector, and also mundane activities are referred to as consumption. There is also a growing interest in consumer studies. In business schools, among those applying for jobs in Marketing departments, consumer research is in fact the most popular specialization field (Wang, Bendle, Mai & Cotte 2015, p. 6).

Despite the growing interest in consumption, the concept is understood differently within different disciplines. For example, for business scholars, it can mean the exchange of a good or a service, while sociologists are more interested in the usage of items and their symbolic significance. In addition to studying the purchasing of things, it is also relevant to look at how items are used and what their meaning is to people, their appropriation and appreciation (Warde 2005). More recently, also the acts of disposal, as well as the different problematic aspects of consumption in terms of, for example, health, environment and equality, have gotten more attention within studies of consumption (Halkier et al. 2017).

In this thesis, the terms consumer and consumption are understood in a wide sense, encompassing not only the monetary exchange of a product or service. Instead, the studies aim at looking at the phenomenon socio-culturally, from a Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective. In CCT, "the contextual, symbolic and experiential aspects of consumption" are taken into account (Arnould & Thompson 2005). The Consumer Culture Theory perspective is especially suited for the purposes of this thesis, as it does not treat culture as a system of collective meanings, customs and values of a group, or as an attribute that an individual possesses. Rather, CCT looks into the lived experiences that are mediated through markets, and attempts to understand the dynamic global consumer culture (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Arnould, Crockett & Eckhardt 2021). This thesis does not attempt to capture the specific buying behaviors of the studied individuals, nor the exact monetary value of them, but rather to

explore the meaning(s) of consumption in the context of extreme life-transitions and global mobility. The aim is to study how the individuals use material and immaterial consumption to derive meaning and to cope during times of transition, and what significance this consumption bears for them in the process.

*Liminality and liquidity*

As the introductory chapter above suggests, this thesis deals with transformations. The term is used in a wide range of disciplines when talking about "profound, substantial and irreversible change" on an individual, community or global level (Brown, O'Neill & Fabricius 2013, p. 100). Because transformation remains a very broad term, I have in this thesis chosen to look at the transformational experiences of refugees through the more focused theoretical lenses of *liminality* and *liquidity*.

Liminality refers to different processes of transformation, either on individual or larger societal level, which voluntarily or involuntarily push a person from one identity to another, temporally lasting from short intervals to lifelong or even inter-generational states (van Gennep 1909, 1960; Turner 1969, 1974; Thomassen 2015; Szakolczai 2009, 2017; Hartonen et al. 2022). Consumption is relevant for the study of liminality, because it can, among its other functions, alleviate the discomfort caused by the liminal experience and help overcome the transition, supporting the construction of a new identity (Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar 2021).

Another closely related term, liquidity, in turn, refers to the broader societal phenomenon of vanishing of societal structures, rules and authorities. Bauman (2000, 2013) first introduced the term, using the dissolution of solids as a metaphor for a new era where the world is becoming increasingly hard to predict and trust. Applied to the context of consumption, liquidity refers to people's decreasing interest in solid and tangible possessions, and their reliance on access-based, digital and immaterial things, as well as increasingly mobile and flexible lifestyles (Bardhi, Eckhardt, Arnould 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt 2017; Mimoun & Bardhi 2021).

Contrasting the two central concepts of the thesis, liminality and liquidity, is not an easy task, as the two terms share common elements and are both related to transitions. In this thesis, liminality is seen as a period of change with an anticipated end at some point in the future, even if that was far away or unreachable. Even the long-term or perpetual type of liminality is regarded to rely on some solid structures that one can move between – something to leave behind and conversely, something else to wish to arrive at after the transition. Yet, in liquidity, those very structures are dissolving, and constant change becomes the status quo rather than an exception (Szakolczai 2009; 2017). The empirical studies of this thesis among refugees have inductively revealed a shift towards liquidity, implying that the liminality experienced by the refugees is not only long-term, but also to some extent characterized by the aforementioned dissolution of taken-for-granted structures.

The thesis thus engages in a conversation with the theories about liminal and liquid consumption, seeing consumption as one of the arenas where liminality and liquidity become visible.

*Integration*

The third central area of interest for this thesis is *integration*. As Entzinger and Biezeveld (2003, p. 6) point out, "integration is often used as a term, but rarely defined as a concept". There is also some critique towards the use of the concept altogether, denouncing, for instance, its normativity and the potential othering of immigrants through it (Spencer & Charsley 2021). Despite the criticism, the term remains to be widely used in both scholarly and societal contexts, and continues to capture something essential about the experience of resettlement.

One of the most known early theories around the concept of integration, the acculturation taxonomy by Berry (1998), considered integration as one of several possible outcomes of immigrant acculturation. This model relied heavily on the assumption that acculturation would be a linear adaptation process with clear end-goals. Later, the view on integration has become more multi-dimensional, seeing integration as a joint process occurring in several domains (structural systems, social networks, civic and political life, as well as on a cultural and an identity level). The factors affecting this process also exist in several layers, from the individual to societal structures and political interventions. (See Spencer & Charsley 2021, p. 16).

The Finnish law, Act of the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers (1386/2010, later called the *Integration Act*), defines integration as the interactive process between an immigrant and the society, aiming to "provide immigrants with the knowledge and skills required in society and working life and to provide them with support, so that they can maintain their culture and language." Thus, integration is seen as a joint effort of not only the individual immigrants, but also the society in which they arrive (Jervelund, Krasnik & de Montgomery, in Ascher et al. 2021). The two-way nature of integration has also been identified on marketplaces, noting that identity adaptation does not only happen among the newcomers, but also among the locals, whether they are aware of it or not (Luedicke 2011; 2015). The entry of new immigrant consumers to a market does not either always occur without conflict (Luedicke 2015).

In this thesis, integration is understood as a process happening in several domains simultaneously – from education to employment and from health matters to housing, as well as social bonds, cultural and language knowledge and civic rights (see conceptualization by Ager & Strang 2008). Building on this, the thesis focuses particularly on the interplay between the refugees and the Finnish society (the attitudes and actions of the surrounding community) in the context of consumption. The thesis does not attempt to study *how* people adapt to the consumption of their countries of resettlement, i.e. their consumer acculturation (Peñaloza 1989; Askegaard, Arnould & Kjeldgaard 2005), but

instead, to study consumption as one of the ways to facilitate coping during liminal transitions, of which international displacement is an example.

*Agency and coping*

In my thesis, I look at refugees as agentic actors. Thus, it is necessary to define the term *agency*. As the other central terms presented above, also agency has several definitions. As Campbell (2009, p. 407-408) states, the scholarly debate around agency contest the autonomy of individual actors with the constraining power of social structures. Citing the classical social theorist Max Weber, Campbell (2009) refers to two types of agency: one, which relates to the more personal level of self-control and ability to transform behavior, and the other more the social-political level that features the social constraints. According to Campbell, there is no apparent conflict between these two types of agency; individuals can be autonomous agents on the other hand, while still being constrained by social and cultural factors.

In this thesis, I have chosen to adhere to the agency definition by Ahearn (1999, p. 12), describing agency as the human capacity to act, a concept stemming from the 1970s critique towards structuralism's inability to consider the actions of individuals. In refugee research, agency is inherently tied with the other side of the same coin, *vulnerability* – the potential susceptibility to different physical, psychological, political, ecological or economic risks caused by, for example, discrimination and natural disasters (Schmitt 2019). In public discourse, refugees are often viewed as vulnerable victims, ignoring their abilities to act. An overly focus on the refugee agency, on the other hand, can also lead to ignorance towards the societal structures that indeed restrict their possibilities (Mainwaring 2016, Schmitt 2019).

Another term that relates to the refugee experience and agency is that of *coping*. Coping is originally a medical term that is used in animal studies to describe the behavioral reactions to aversive situations (Wechsler 1995). In human psychology, coping is associated with the ability to solve problems and reduce stress (Lazarus & Folkman (1984). In refugee research, coping is often studied from the point of view of different mental health hazards versus psychological well-being, that is, coping strategies and mechanisms (e.g., Khawaja et al. 2008; Whittaker et al. 2005; Sossou et al. 2008; Abraham, Lien & Hanssen 2018). In this thesis, coping is understood as "the thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful" (Folkman, Tedlie & Moskowitz 2004, p. 745). The stressful situation in focus is the liminal experience of resettlement and integration, and consumption is viewed as a possible means to cope with it.

The following diagram summarizes the most relevant concepts and their interrelations, along with references to the central literature:

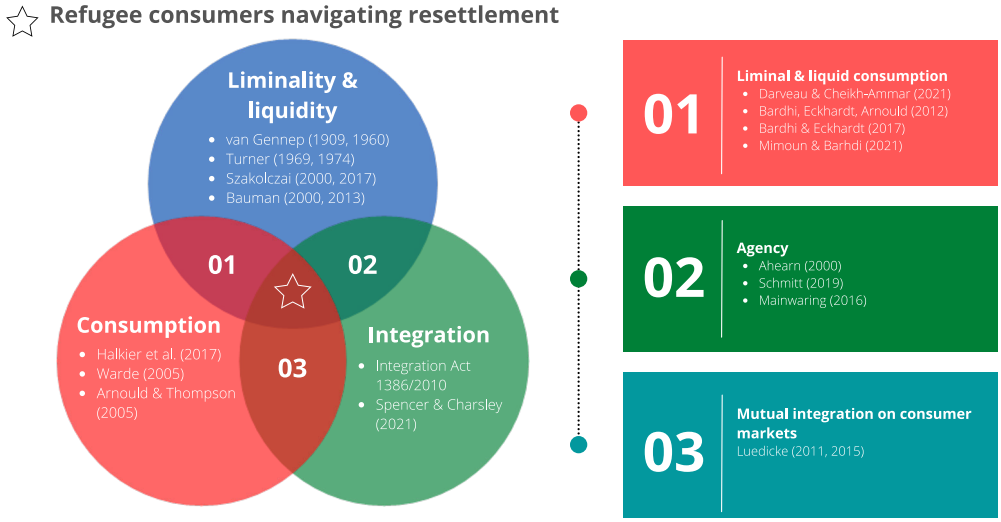


**Figure 1:** Refugee consumers navigating resettlement: Interrelations of the central concepts with reference to key literature.

## 1.2 Research gap

As the above introduction suggests, the turbulent times we live in call for more research on the strategies of people to manage unexpected and unwanted life transitions. The refugee situation of 2015 was not an isolated event – the world seems to be becoming more and more unstable, and there is a pressing need to increase our understanding of how to deal with persistent change, regardless if we become refugees or not. Anyone, including the ones who until now have considered their situation safe and resistant to disruption, need to recognize the possibility of their current lifestyle coming to an abrupt end. As natural resources are scarce and different conflicts heighten the increase of prices, also consumption needs to be viewed in a new light, in terms of liminality and liquidity. In line with this, Appau, Ozanne and Klein (2020) call for a deeper understanding of the ways in which consumption plays out in long-term liminality and how it can facilitate the process of coping and thriving.

Secondly, there is an increased need to focus research on not only the wealthy, but also on the precarious, non-elite consumers (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould 2012). The scope of earlier studies on liquid consumption has been on consumers who seek liminality and liquidity voluntarily, and who have the financial and social structures supporting them in this venture (Mimoun & Bardhi 2021). What is underexplored until now, however, are the consumers forced to the flexibility, pushed to the limits due to loss and trauma.

Thirdly, the global number of displaced people reaching an all-time high (UN News 2022) emphasizes the need to better understand the experience of refugees. There is a need for more nuanced studies of refugee integration especially in the Nordic welfare state context. In Finland, where the welfare system is actively involved in the integration of refugees, the studies about immigrants in general and refugees in particular have typically focused on societal-level measures attempting to lead immigrants into employment and education (Pyrhönen, Leinonen & Martikainen 2017). With this backdrop, it is important to add a consumption perspective to the study of integration in a Nordic welfare state context. In a research area like integration, heavily dominated by societal-level studies, is necessary to study refugees on an individual level, focusing on their own decisions, motivations and aspirations, and how these are shaped by the societal forces. Mainwaring (2016) as well as van Dijk, Knappert, Muis and Alkhaled (2021) mention the need to view refugees as active agents capable of making their own decisions, instead of being just in the receiving end of different societal integration measures. There is also a demand for a greater understanding of the micro-level experiences of refugees (Barnard & Pendock 2013).

Lastly, considering the strong emphasis on the two-way nature of integration in the Finnish law (Integration Act 1386/2010), the interplay between the locals and the newcomers, including the challenges of it, deserves more attention. The social dynamics of migration in receiving societies (Pennix, Specer & van Hear 2008), the attitudes, behaviors and perceptions of both the minorities and the majority, and the arenas in which these people interact (Pyrhönen, Leinonen & Martikainen 2017) all require further exploration. This is true also for the consumption sphere; the ways in which the relational conflicts between locals and newcomers on the market could be addressed deserve more attention (Luedicke 2015).

## 1.3 Aim and research questions

Deriving from the gaps identified above, the aim of the thesis is to shed light on refugee's agentic strategies of coping and thriving when thrust into involuntary, life-changing transitions. These experiences are studied with specific focus on consumption, in the context of resettlement and integration into a Nordic welfare state, Finland. Moreover, the thesis looks into the conflicts that the introduction of refugees on the Finnish consumer market stirred, focusing on how the Finns perceived the newly arrived refugee consumers.

In this thesis, refugees are seen as active agents with the capacity to navigate their liminal transition by different means. They can draw from their backgrounds and from their future aspirations, using consumption to facilitate the liminal process of integration. The specific focus is on consumption as a way to cope with the adverse sides of the liminal experience.

The thesis strives to answer the following research questions:

1. How do refugees as active agents navigate the prolonged liminal experience of resettling in Finland?

2. What can we learn about refugee consumers by studying the locals' perceptions of them in a Nordic welfare state context?

3. What does the refugee consumer experience teach us about the meaning of possessions and consumption in a liquid world?

4. Which conclusions can be drawn for improving refugee integration in a Nordic welfare state context?

In order to fill the gaps identified in the previous section, and to find answers to the research questions listed above, I have conducted empirical studies in the form of photovoice interviews (n=9), focus group interviews (n=23) and one-on-one interviews (n=4), as well as monitored social media discussions by Finns regarding refugee consumers (n=14).

The detailed results of the empirical studies are captured in three articles found in the appendix of this thesis. The research questions above are answered in the articles as follows:

| Research question # | **Article 1:** From loss to involuntary liquidity: Refugees' relationship to possessions | **Article 2:** Unacceptable consumption: Conflicts of Refugee Consumption | **Article 3:** Refugees' language learning and career aspirations: An agentic lens |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | X | | X |
| 2 | | X | |
| 3 | X | | |
| 4 | X | X | X |

**Table 1:** Each research question's correspondence to the articles.

## 1.4 Delimitations

In order not to have impossibly large goals to complete, I have had to delimit the scope of the thesis in several ways.

Theoretically, the thesis focuses on the meaning of consumption and possessions, rather than the acquisition of them. In other words, the theoretical focus is on the socio-cultural significance of consumption for refugee coping and integration, rather than the psycho-economic decision making patterns of consumers. The aim is not to study refugee consumer acculturation, i.e., the different ways in which consumers adapt to the markets of their new home countries. Rather, consumption is seen as a way to facilitate coping during liminality, and the focus is on the ability of refugees to make agentic consumer decisions despite the economic and systemic constraints. The focus is not on the medical and psychological issues of coping, but rather on how people use consumption to manage unwanted life experiences. It is clear that many other factors and domains are also relevant for refugee well-being and integration, but they are beyond the scope of this thesis. The refugees' strategies of navigating their liminal state of resettlement are narrowed down to the consumption sphere.

Contextually, the focus of the thesis is Finland, representing a Nordic welfare state. Thus, the thesis does not delve into the experiences of displaced people in refugee camps around the world; neither does it attempt to uncover the refugee experience in such receiving societies that lack a universal social welfare system. The support systems available in the receiving society have, undoubtedly, a tremendous effect on the level of agency one can have over their consumption when resettling in a new country. The contextual focus is not on the refugee journey or on the times spent waiting for the asylum decision. Rather, the empirical studies focus on people who had already been granted a residence permit in Finland and were thus able to start rebuilding their lives with some level of security about the future.

Methodologically, the thesis is delimited on qualitative methods – photovoice interviews, focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews, as well as thematic analysis of online discussion forum entries. Ontologically, I consider reality socially constructed and depending on a number of factors. Empirically, the perspective is on the individuals and their lived experiences. The qualitative interviews with the refugees yielded narratives describing the individuals' personal experiences, rich and deep for understanding the underlying motives and reasons for actions, rather than attempting to draw universal conclusions for statistical purposes. Temporally, the studies are delimited to one-time interviews with each interviewee in 2017-2021, one to six years after their arrival in Finland. The interviewees offered rich narratives about their past lives and future aspirations, but the studies were not longitudinal and hence, only captured snapshots of the current situation and memories of the past, as narrated by the interviewees and as interpreted by the researcher.

## 1.5 Structure of thesis

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows: Next, the theoretical background is presented, followed by a description of the empirical research context. Then, the ontological and methodological foundations of the work are discussed, followed by an overview of the three attached articles and their main results. Lastly follows the contribution section, discussing the theoretical, methodological, and societal implications of the thesis along with answers to the research questions. Finally, the limitations of the work and suggestions for future research are presented. The appendix includes selected photos from the photovoice interviews. The original articles make up Part II of the thesis.

*My daughter pauses a little before packing her suitcase for a holiday in Canada,*
*"Shall I take only summer things? Perhaps, some light autumn clothes, too?"*
*she asks me, as if not sure how long it will be before she comes back.*
*In her question, I recognize war creeping in between us,*
*because the real question behind her words is:*
*am I coming back?*

(Slavenka Drakulić, 1993: Balkan Express)

# 2 Theoretical background

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the thesis. First, in section 2.1, the overarching themes, namely, consumption, liminality, and liquidity, are presented. Then, liminality and liquidity are connected to the consumption sphere, in order to understand the interplay of consumers with the transformative and forces which they are increasingly subjected to. In section 2.2, the scope is narrowed down to international mobility, exploring the topic of integration as well as consumption in migration settings. In section 2.3, the focus is further defined on refugees; how they are perceived, and how they navigate their situation in an agentic manner. The chapter ends with a short review of previous studies on refugee consumers, concluding with a table that summarizes the literature that is of most importance for this thesis.

## 2.1 Consumers "in between"

Consumption is a central activity in human life, and it continues to happen during transitional periods. Consumption and possessions are used for much more than mere satisfying of mundane, day-to-day needs. They can serve as a distraction, offer comfort in distress, and act as building blocks for a new identity. In this section, the concepts of consumption, liminality and liquidity, as well as their interrelations, are explored in more detail.

### 2.1.1 Consumption – towards a socio-culturally embedded perspective

Consumer research as a scholarly discipline lacks strict borders and is more of an umbrella term, deriving from a number of other fields, such as business and marketing studies, sociology, psychology and anthropology (Wherry & Woodward 2019). Due to being influenced by and overlapping with other disciplines, consumer research has been affected by the current trends in the research areas it is related to, and tends to experience periodic shifts (Wherry & Woodward 2019). Due to this multi-disciplinarity, consumer research also has a number of approaches and sub-areas, all studying different things and employing different methodologies (Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet & Nowlis 2001).

Consumption in the contemporary meaning of the word has its roots in the late 18th century literature, meaning the opposite of production (Graeber 2011). The early consumer researchers were anchored in the neo-liberal, economist assumptions of individuals making rational decisions. This positivist approach was followed by the view of individuals being manipulated into (mass) consumption, influenced by Marxist ideas (Halkier et al. 2017). The positivist, psychological focus on consumer behavior largely overlooked the social contexts in which the consumption occurred (Wherry & Woodward 2019). Some of the first ones to consider the connection between wider social

and institutional structures were Nicosia and Mayer (1976, p. 69), who looked into how consumption activities were related to larger changes in values, also in arenas not directly related to consumption. Since then, the understanding of consumption as an important field to study if one aims to understand broader social and cultural change has started to emerge (Wherry & Woodward 2019).

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s the symbolic and cultural dynamics of consumption have attracted more attention. This has also given rise to the formation of the research program *Consumer Culture Theory*, CCT (Halkier et al. 2017; Arnould & Thompson 2005). In this interpretive view, consumers are not regarded as mere rational and economic decision-makers, but rather as socially connected beings "who seek to explore, identify and experience the world through consumption" (Kravets, Maclaran & Venkatesh 2018, p. 3).

A range of different views and approaches on consumer research co-exist and continue to complement each other. Some major topics and trends of the past decades in consumer research field include consumer attitudes, values and beliefs; innovations and consumer socialization; as well as the purchase decision process and brand awareness and loyalty (Peighambari, Sattari, Kordestani & Oghazi 2016).

It is necessary to define the lens through which this thesis looks at consumption. The appropriation (use) and appreciation (significance) of consumption for people (Warde 2005) is of my interest, rather than the acquisition. I have chosen to adhere to the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) approach (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Kravets, Maclaran & Venkatesh 2018; Arnould, Crockett & Eckhardt 2021), in which consumption is understood from the symbolic, socio-culturally embedded perspective. This view is not so much focused on the decision-making processes of consumers, but rather, it looks at consumers from the social scientific perspective. The CCT stream studies, for example, the socio-cultural aspects of marketing and consumer behavior, such as the construction of identity with the help of consumption, the different subcultures and consumer tribes on the market as well as consumer activism (Kravets, Maclaran & Venkatesh 2018). This thesis deals with the interplay between individuals and the market-mediated resources available to them, underscoring the inherent embeddedness of consumption in even the most extreme life situations. While also other consumer research approaches might have been suited for studying these phenomena, Consumer Culture Theory is perhaps the most natural choice when it comes to studying the meanings of consumption and possessions.

### 2.1.2 Liminality – the study of the "in between"

Liminality, from the Latin word *limen* meaning a threshold (Merriam Webster Dictionary, n.d.), is a term first introduced by anthropologists. The early authors dealing with liminality, van Gennep (1909; 1960) and Turner (1969; 1974), were studying rites of passage among what at the time would be called "tribal communities". These rituals were interpreted to consist of three stages.

Firstly, one needs to leave something behind and separate (e.g., from parents to become an adult). Secondly, a liminal space, a kind of "tabula rasa" where everything is possible, emerges, to be followed by a "re-birth" and the creation of a new identity in reincorporation. Already Turner started to hint that liminality could have wider relevance than just such staged rites of passage. Indeed, the human experience in general is not possible without transitions and transformations – liminality (Thomassen 2015).

Hence, liminality is a lens through which we can study how people deal with change. The change can be voluntary, but more often than not, it is imposed on us (Turner 1969; 1974). As Szakolczai (2009) puts it, people are "pushed to the limit by the force of events". The spatial dimensions, limits, play an important role in liminality. The limits can be tangible places, such as a threshold or doorway or border areas between two nation-states (Szakolczai 2009). Liminality can also be understood as an intangible "space", such as the state of learning something new (Land, Rattray & Vivian 2014) or the emergent development in organizations (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003). Individuals, but also whole communities or even civilizations can go through liminal transitions (Thomassen 2015).

While the early theorists assumed liminality to eventually end and structures to reorganize (Turner 1969), the long-term potential of liminality has later won more focus. According to Szakolczai (2017), liminality can stretch from moments to periods, or become a permanent state. In permanent liminality, as Szakolczai (2017) points out, a temporary interruption of what had been taken for granted becomes perpetual. The expected liminal thresholds of separation and eventual incorporation are dissolved. This is seen as inherently negative, creating a devastating state that exhausts people of their power when they struggle to find organization and stability in vein. Szakolczai's (2017) theorization deals more with the societal level of permanent liminality, but the same can occur on micro-level for individuals, when experiencing the self between two identities (Ybema, Beech & Ellis 2015) or perpetually oscillating in a state between separation and incorporation (Appau, Ozanne & Klein 2020). These lasting states of "uncertainty, ambivalence, and tension" – liminal hotspots (Stenner, Greco & Motzkau 2017, p. 142), call for strategies to resolve the liminality.

As Martínez (2016) points out, the study of liminality is embedded in the marginality. Despite that, liminal experiences do not, by definition, need to be negative, as they can also include positive life-transitions (van Gennep (1904, 1960). However, long-term, or perpetual, liminality involves the risk of social marginalization. This term refers to having limited access to resources and social power, and as a result, to peripherialization or differential treatment (Vasas 2005). Refugees are often the most marginalized of all migrants, and this has been heightened by, for example, the Covid19 pandemic and the increased exceptionalism in asylum politics (Crawley 2021).

So, even though Mimoun and Bardhi (2021) point out that permanent liminality can also be a voluntary choice, prompted by the requirements of the

modern society to remain flexible and to continuously move between the changing social positions, this would only apply to certain contexts. As the focal point of this thesis are the forcibly displaced, the focus is on the involuntary type of liminality.

### 2.1.3 Consumption and (loss of) possessions in liminality

Consumer research evidences the importance of consumption and possessions for people in liminal transitions. Consumption can help overcome transitions, supporting the construction of a new identity or alleviate the discomfort caused by a liminal experience (Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar 2021).

In their systematic literature review, Darveau and Cheikh-Ammar (2021) summarized the types of interplay between consumption and liminality. According to their conceptualization, consumption can trigger liminality, pushing the individual over the threshold from normal order of things to a transformation. Consumption can also hold off liminality, as an attempt to remain in the pre-liminal state and resist moving into a new identity. Consumption can sustain liminality, making it more long-term, as well as serve for commemorating past liminality.

Consumption and possessions play a role in situations where the liminal transitions do not run smoothly and people are stuck in perpetual liminality. For example, the Pentecostal convert consumers studied by Appau, Ozanne and Klein (2020), oscillated between incorporation and separation in perpetual liminality, their consumption variably marking past or present attachment. Nakata et al. (2019) found that patients with chronic conditions remained in a state of long-term liminality, marked by their compliance vs. non-compliance with medicine consumption.

Possessions are extensions of the self; we both construct our identities and remind ourselves of who we are with the help of consumption and possessions (Belk 1988). There is a constant interplay between people and objects – humans and non-humans – and things are not passive but can have an effect on people (Woodward 2019). Possessions and objects can be anthropomorphized to the extent that they have social lives or agency of their own (Hoskins 2005). Objects act as reminders of the past, as building blocks for a new identity after a transition, or as a security blanket in trying times (Noble & Walker 1997; Nations, Baker & Krszjzaniek 2017; Mehta & Belk 1991). People have been found to cling to their possessions in times of transition and loss (Hill 1991; Mehta & Belk 1991; Nations, Baker & Krszjzaniek 2017), and to use them in order to manage the transformations they are going through (Pavia & Mason 2004; Noble & Walker 1997). For example, homeless women living in a shelter were found to cling onto symbolic and sacred possessions to cope with their difficult circumstances (Hill 1991), while firestorm victims gave special significance to mundane and charred objects that were recovered from the destroyed homes (Sayre 1994).

Considering the significant role that consumption and possessions play in our lives, the involuntary loss of belongings can be a traumatic event. For example, Rosenblatt, Wolf and Jackson (1976) concluded already decades ago that the loss of possessions due to for example theft or a natural disaster can lead to similar grief and psychological issues as the loss of a loved one. Ferraro, Escalas and Bettman (2011) found that the monetary value of the possession is not that relevant in this regard, but it is rather the extent in which the possession is linked to the self that determines how much grief one feels upon losing it.

Sometimes the loss of possessions can also be freeing. As Marcoux (2017) points out, people tend to hold on to possessions that are related to events and people they want to remember. In a study among survivors of the 911 terrorist attacks in New York City, Marcoux (2017) identified patterns of memory work that included active forgetting. On the one hand, the survivors wanted to remember what had happened, holding on to belongings that reminded of the traumatic events. Yet, they also actively disregarded those belongings, in order to be able to move on with their lives. Mimoun and Bardhi (2021), in turn, found voluntarily liminal consumers to engage in deliberate disposal of possessions in order to remain flexible and mobile.

### 2.1.4 Liquidity and liquid consumption

The sections above dealt with liminal transitions, temporally stretching from momentary to permanent. It is noteworthy that even the long-term or perpetual liminality assumes certain institutional structures that can be departed from, and other ones to arrive at after the transition, if that may be reached. However, the forces of the late modern world, characterized by liquidity (Bauman 2000), potentially convulse this order.

This concept, first introduced by Zygmunt Bauman (2000; 2013), refers to the dissolution of the patterns and forces that could keep order, thus leaving the individual responsible for their own "pattern-weaving". In liquid modernity, the structures and rules that one could orientate upon or incorporate in are disappearing. Liquidity presents as the opposite of solidity, where tangible structures prevailed (Bauman 2000). Liquid modernity is also characterized by speed (Davis 2013) and entails a risk of polarization of wealth and human suffering (Abrahamson 2004). As Ritzer and Rey (2016) argue, liquidity is not an entirely new phenomenon, but recently, it has become increasingly easy to spot it, as the flows in social and economic life are moving more and more rapidly.

As the examples presented in the previous section illuminate, consumer researchers have over the course of several decades established the importance of consumption and possessions for identity construction, especially in times of transformation and change. In the context of liquid modernity, where the societal structures are increasingly fluid (Bauman 2000), the link between possessions and identity may, however, not be as

straightforward. Earlier, nomadism was considered a burden of those living on the edge of the society, while settling and citizenship went hand in hand – holding on to solid possessions was regarded safe. In liquid modernity, this order has flipped around. Nowadays, the elite has the privilege of mobility and portability, of "traveling light" (Bauman 2017). The unprivileged consumers of our time who are forced to mobility and traveling light, such as refugees, have so far not attracted much attention, thus calling for a re-evaluation of Bauman's writing about nomadism and liquidity. The recently emerged literature on consumption in liquid modernity (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt 2017; Mimoun & Bardhi 2021) has so far mostly dealt with elite consumers voluntarily on the move.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) distinguish between liquid and solid consumption, which exist on a continuum. Solid consumption is characterized by enduring, ownership-based and material consumption, while liquid consumption refers to values such as ephemerality, accessibility and dematerialization. Ephemerality refers to consumption that is valued only temporarily and in specific contexts. Accessibility, in turn, is exemplified as consumption that does not require ownership, such as renting, sharing and accessing services online. This type of consumption allows the consumer to remain flexible and avoid the constraints and responsibilities of actual ownership. Dematerialization of consumption refers to immaterial products such as digital entertainment, as well as the consumption of services instead of products.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) assume that precarity – the experience of instability and lack of full personal agency – is a condition that can prompt either liquid or solid consumption. According to the authors (ibid.), economic precarity can lead consumers to seek solid consumption in order to create stability and order. Professional precarity, in turn, is more often managed with liquid consumption. Building on this, Mimoun and Bardhi (2021) studied voluntarily flexible consumers who engaged in liquid consumption in order to navigate the requirements of the modern labor markets and society. This liquid lifestyle, labeled chronic consumer liminality (CCL), is manifested on several areas of life, from housing (e.g. flat-sharing instead of ownership of home), to work (e.g. flexible co-working spaces instead of traditional offices) and to leisure (e.g. on-demand and subscription services instead of long-term commitments). According to Mimoun and Bardhi (2021), the chronic consumer liminality stems from frequent transitions and self-transformation, as well as from voluntarily embracing the precarity as a way to be unconstrained by societal norms and requirements. A liquid lifestyle does not prevent precarity, but only helps to manage it (Mimoun & Bardhi 2021, p. 18). Thus, precarity is experienced as a choice, influenced by an ideology of flexibility, where liquidity is embraced as a success strategy rather than a deviation from a desired solid lifestyle.

As the above overview of the recent literature on liminal and liquid consumers illustrates, there is a need for further investigation of liquid consumption in contexts where the precarity is not a voluntary choice but the mobility and flexibility are imposed on the consumers.

## 2.2 Consumers on the move

Moving to a new country involves a transition on several levels: from the practical traveling from one place to another to the unavoidable shifts in the way of life and the identity, often labeled as integration in the popular discourse. This chapter begins with an overview of the integration concept, followed by a consumer-perspective on international mobility and integration.

### 2.2.1 Integration – a myriad of levels and actors

One cannot write about migration-related topics without mentioning integration. There has been an influx of research on migration and integration since the 1990s. The research is fragmented; it is often focused on a specific country context and driven by policy needs (Pennix, Spencer & Van Hear 2008). The buzzword integration has become a synonym for the desired outcome of resettlement. There are also several other closely related terms, which are often used inaccurately in public discourse, such as acculturation, adaptation and assimilation.

The classical psychological theories of migrant adaptation presuppose a linear development, which builds up to an incorporation with the culture of the host country and leaving behind the old cultural identity (Gordon 1964; Bourhis et al. 1997; Bhatia & Ram 2009). In his acculturation taxonomy, Berry (1998) theorized integration as one of the possible outcomes of acculturation into a new culture. According to Berry, integration means adapting to the new culture and society while still preserving elements of the background culture and identity. Other possible Berrian acculturation outcomes include assimilation to the host culture, separation from the host culture, and marginalization where the individual is astray from both their indigenous and the host culture.

Looking at migrant acculturation in linear terms with set end-goals and polar "home and host cultures" is too simplistic in the multifaceted and fragmented reality of globalization and mobility of today. The cultural identities are not fixed, but fluid and constantly re-negotiated (Bhatia & Ram, 2009).

Taking distance from the linear and individual perspective in the Berrian acculturation model, Ager and Strang (2008) shift focus to the many social and economic factors that affect integration. Their model starts from the foundation, which are the legal rights, followed by facilitators of integration, i.e. language knowledge, cultural knowledge and safety. Only then is it possible to form social connections and ties. The practical markers of integration, according to Ager and Strang (2008) include employment, education, housing and health.

Another more recent model of the integration process by Spencer and Charsley (2021) attempts to further consider the myriad of dimensions in which the integration processes occur, of which identity is only one. The other

dimensions include structural systems one is a part of, such as education and labor market, social dimensions such as relationships and networks, and civic and political participation in the society. The fifth dimension covers the cultural values, attitudes and behaviors, and does not only relate to the immigrants but to all members of the society. Spencer and Charsley (2021) also take into account the many effectors influencing the integration process, from individuals and their social networks to societal structures and even transnational systems. Interestingly, the integration model by Spencer and Charsley (2021), does not talk about migrants in their definition at all. Rather, integration is seen as a general interactional process encompassing the whole society, simultaneously happening on several levels from local to transnational.

It is noteworthy that already Berry's acculturation model (1998) assumes some level of a two-way integration; it is not only the migrant but also the host society who is expected to change in some ways (Phillimore 2012). Also the Finnish Integration Act (1386/2010) defines integration in mutual terms. According to the Law, integration is the interactive development between the immigrant and the society that aims to provide the immigrant with the necessary skills for participating in society and workforce, while simultaneously offering the possibility to preserve their own language and culture. Despite the emphasis on the two-way nature of integration in the Finnish legislation, the Integration Act (1386/2010) does not mention any tangible integration measures tailored to the locals in the society. Data from the UK suggests that structured events and information directed towards the locals improved community relations and indirectly made the refugees more adept on settling down in the community (Phillimore 2012). However, as Castles (2011) points out, the call for cultural cohesion has in many places not led to social unity, but rather to what Castles (2011) calls a "crisis of integration"; urban riots, ethnic tensions, and exclusion of minorities. Thus, the societal realities may still be far from the conceptual ideals of mutual integration.

### 2.2.2 Consumption in international mobility

Consumption plays an important role in cross-border mobility (Peñaloza 1989; Askegaard, Arnould & Kjeldgaard 2005; Luedicke 2011; Bardhi, Eckhardt, Arnould 2012). Moving to another country is a liminal transition, during which possessions and consumption can serve the purpose of anchoring the migrants to their past and/or present cultural environment and easing the transition into the new culture (Mehta & Belk 1991; Oswald 1999; Peñaloza 1994).

Consumer acculturation research has since the 1980s dealt with the interplay of consumption and immigration (Luedicke 2011). The early constitutive papers about consumer acculturation (e.g. Wallendorf & Reilly 1983; Deshpande, Hoyer, and Donthu 1986) built on the acculturation taxonomy by Berry (1980, 1998), and studied the levels and intensities of immigrant adaptation to the consumer cultures of their new home countries.

Since the groundbreaking study by Peñaloza (1989), exploring the consumer acculturation of Mexican immigrants to the United States, the scholars started to focus more on how the consumer acculturation occurs, rather than the mere levels of it. The immigrants' ways of preserving their own culture, their commitment to remain anchored to their backgrounds, as well as the attempts to fit in the new country of residence through consumption and possessions attracted increased focus (Joy & Dholakia 1991; Mehta & Belk 1991). Later, literature on the manifold and instable consumer acculturation outcomes started to emerge. Oswald (1999) identified behaviors of culture-swapping, while Lindridge, Hogg and Shah (2004) studied how immigrants used multiple identities to negotiate with the different cultural contexts. Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard (2005) built on this by introducing a non-linear acculturation model of consumers moving between different positions, affected by not only the home-host culture dichotomy but also a global, transnational consumer culture. In this stream of consumer acculturation literature that has become to be called post-assimilationist, also the impact of the immigrants' pre-existing cultural, social and economic capital was taken increasingly into account. This is seen, for example, in the study by Üstüner and Holt (2007), about poor Turkish migrants; a study that sheds light on shattered identity projects that result from the failure to reach desired identity projects due to the lack of resources.

In this thesis, the focus in not on the processes of adapting to the consumer behavior of the "host country", neither on the different outcomes of it. Rather, the thesis looks into the ways in which consumption and possessions can help navigate the liminal process of resettling into a new country. As established above, international mobility implies a strengthened attachment to possessions. Yet, the frequently mobile expats studied by Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) were found to not exhibit a particularly strong attachment to solid possessions. These "elite nomads" who had ample access to resources and voluntarily moved from one location to another, were found to value items that could facilitate their reterritorialization to the ever changing environments. They appreciated items that offered use-value, i.e. functionality instead of symbolic value. According to Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012), immaterial possessions that could be easily accessed anywhere, such as digital photos and online entertainment, were especially important for the expats. Situational value also emerged as a characteristic of the global nomads' relationship to possessions; their attachment to belongings was tied to certain locations and contexts only. According to the authors (ibid.), a liquid relationship to possessions can emerge in conditions of global nomadism, characterized by repeated relocations and freedom from of suffering and homesickness, which are connected with traditional forms of migration.

### 2.2.3 Mutual integration on marketplaces

As pointed out above, the relevance of studying liminality and integration is not limited to the migrants or refugees. The societies and communities where the refugees arrive are also pushed to some degree of transition, either voluntarily or involuntarily. The consumer market is an arena where integrational frictions can become visible. Yet, the interactions between the locals and the newcomers on the market has only quite recently started to attract scholarly attention (Wang, Joy, Belk & Sherry Jr 2020). The constitutional study on mutual adaptation of both locals and immigrants on the consumer market by Luedicke (2015) delved in the rural Austrian context upon the introduction of Turkish immigrant consumers. Luedicke (ibid.) identified four ethnic consumer conflicts, stemming from the locals' worry of community sell-out; challenging of their authority; violation of equality matching rules; and the locals' inner conflict between micro- and macro-level social morals. The study by Wang et al. (2020), on the other hand, shed light on the acculturative processes of locals on the market in Hong Kong towards Mainland Chinese consumers. The study revealed that frictions arise from the perceived differences in identity, visible in the form of languages, manners and perceptions of class and taste. Thus, in both of these studies, one of the major sources of consumer conflict seems to be the fear of the own culture and identity being diluted, occupied or lost. This, combined with the specifics of the Nordic welfare state context with broad universal social support from the state and the rising suspicious discourse against refugees in the public discourse, calls for further investigation of the relationships between the locals and the newcomers on the market.

## 2.3 Refugees in focus

In this section, the scope is narrowed down to refugees, whose experience is at its core liminal (Dudley 2010). A refugee leaves the old life behind and enters the unknown, transiting through both tangible and intangible borders towards a new homeland and a new identity (Hartonen et al. 2021). This section deals with the perceptions of refugees that indirectly affect the reception and resettlement policies, as well as with the role of agency in the resettlement process. The section ends with a brief overview of previous studies on refugees as consumers.

### 2.3.1 Perceptions of refugees

The agreements and laws protecting refugees and offering them the possibility to apply for asylum stem from the decades after the Second World War, from the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees 2010). The way refugees are portrayed in media shape our emotional reactions and attitudes towards them, and produce preconceived ideas on how a "real refugee" behaves and looks like (Wright

2002; Haynes et al. 2004), indirectly nudging the policies of refugee reception and resettlement.

In the Finnish media, refugees of the 1940s to 1960s were depicted as poor but strong and determined, often presented with names and personal stories. The refugees were often similar to the readers, both regarding their habitus and their ethnic background, as Europe was the epicenter of the turmoil at the time. (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021; 2022). People tend to be more sympathetic towards refugees from nearby locations, who are easier to relate to (Gibney 1999). Since the 1960s, as the situation in Europe started to stabilize, the focus in the Finnish media shifted from the West to the "rest", as news coverage of the large-scale crises in the developing countries increased. The shocking images of people facing extreme violence, starvation and suffering became the norm, while the habitus of the people in the images was clearly different from that of the average newspaper reader. According to Kotilainen and Pellander (2021; 2022), these images shaped the public understanding of the "acceptable refugee". The asylum-seekers of the 1990s and beyond were often considered undeserving based on their visual signs of well-being, which did not fit the media imagery of the starving victims. Historical developments since the 1990s – the dissolution of the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia, the emerge of international criminal networks involved in human trafficking and the terrorist attacks of the early 2000s in New York, Madrid and London – added to the suspicion of refugees (Howarth & Ibrahim 2015). A division between "us and them" was strengthened by media discourses describing the refugees in terms of a force of nature, such as a flood (Grove & Zwi 2006; Haynes et al. 2004).

Bauman (2016) points out that the recent refugee crises forces us to encounter the *Strangers at our door*, people with whom we are not used to interacting and who cause us discomfort as we have difficulties dividing them into categories of "good and bad". As Kotilainen and Pellander (2021) note, the habitual similarity of the 2015 refugees, savvy with technology and with neatly cut hairstyles, pushes people to face a paradox; the newcomers are too similar to us, yet too different. They force us to consider the uncomfortable possibility that we, too, might be thrust into a sudden crisis one day (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021) – a scenario feeling ever more likely since the onset of the newly emerging refugee crisis in the heart of Europe.

### 2.3.2 Refugee agency

Agency, a concept that stems from the early 20th century writings by the "father of sociology" Max Weber (1864-1920), has gained increased foothold in a wide range of disciplines since the 1970s. Agency is broadly understood as the human capacity to act, constituted and constrained by larger societal structures (Ahearn 1999, Campbell 2009).

The general discourse around refugees is often focused on victimhood, humanitarian aid distribution or suspicion, all reducing the refugee to a role of an object (Bauman 2002; Howarth & Ibrahim 2015; Kotilainen & Pellander

2021). A division of refugees being seen as either "at risk" or as "a risk" has come to dominate both scholarship and media discourse (Ghorashi 2021). In refugee research, the notion of agency has often been studied in the context of protests and resistance, even in drastic expressions like self-mutilation and hunger strikes (Bousfield 2005; Puggioni 2014), or acts of activism such as performance art (Bhimji 2015).

As Mainwaring (2016) points out, the agency demonstrated by asylum-seekers can compromise their applications for protection; refugees are expected to fit the "victim role" in order to be accepted. On the other hand, an exaggerated focus on agency can also undermine the societal structures that de facto constraint refugees' ability to act. Instead of restricting the view on either agency or vulnerability, Schmitt (2019) suggests a nexus model for understanding the unique situation of refugees. By tying agency together with vulnerability as two sides of a coin, Schmitt (2019) expands on the understanding of vulnerability as socially constructed. He advocates for not putting the sole responsibility of a better life on the refugees, while also distancing from the view of refugees as simply vulnerable.

In my thesis, deriving from Schmitt (2019), I strive to perceive refugees as active agents, capable of making decisions about their desired lifestyles and integration trajectories, while also not ignoring the socially and societally constructed obstacles that have the potential to make this agency harder to exercise for those in the position of forced displacement.

In line with Emirbayer & Mische (1998) and Mainwaring (2016), agency is regarded to consist of three interlinked and interactive elements: habit, imagination and judgement. Habit refers to the iterative processes derived from past experiences which guide decisions in the present moment. Imagination, in turn, is the future element, focused on dreams, goals and fears about future courses of events. Judgement presents the central pillar of agency, combining the dimensions of past and present into practical decisions. All agentic decisions are, as pointed out by Schmitt (2019), made in societal contexts that can inhibit or restrain the full agency on the individual. For example, in the case of refugees, the actors who guide and advise them in the integration measures also play a decisive role in restricting vs. enabling of refugee agency, nudging the newcomers to integration trajectories that may not correspond to their qualification level or future aspirations (Nardon et al. 2021). In addition to the contextual forces, also motivation (van Dijk et al. 2021) plays a role in refugee agency, as the agentic force that interacts with the structural integration measures defined by the host society, either by conforming to them or resisting them. The market is one of the arenas where agency can be enacted, yet constrained by its structural boundaries and the capital one has available.

### 2.3.3 Refugees as consumers

In comparison with the long-standing interest of consumer researchers in immigrant consumers, the specifics of the refugee consumer experiences is little studied. The studies on the topic are predominantly focused on the economic life in refugee camp settings (e.g., Dudley 2010, Oka 2014, Alloush et al. 2017) or on the consumption of different health and social services in the countries of resettlement (Stapleton et al. 2013, Dubus & LeBoeuf 2019). The studies exploring the meaning of consumption and possessions for refugee coping are rare. Dudley (2010) studied displaced Karenni refugees in long-term camp life in Thailand, shedding light on the ways in which the refugees use material objects to make sense of the separation from the previous life, and to re-create the past in the present moment. For the Karenni refugees, whose liminality is often prolonged, the consumption of foods, rituals and clothing reminding of the old life prior to fleeing offered, on the one hand, a break from liminality, but on the other hand, reminded painfully of what was lost and made the liminality more noticeable (Dudley 2016). Oka (2014), in turn, studied refugee coping and well-being in the setting of a refugee camp in Kenya, illustrating that consumption of small "luxuries" can offer the displaced people a sense of normalcy and dignity. There is, however, a need for a deeper understanding of the ways in which refugees can use consumption to navigate their liminal transitions beyond the context of the refugee camps, in settings that enable more agency and strive for a long-term integration.

## 2.4 Summary of theoretical background

Above, an overview of the theoretical concepts relevant for the thesis was provided. The chapter presented the overarching topics of liminality and liquidity, referring to the transformational processes and destabilization of norms and structures that people are increasingly faced with. The interplay of liminality and liquidity with consumption was explored, shedding light on the ways in which liminality can affect consumption and vice versa, and how consumers adapt to the ever-changing requirements of liquid modernity. Then, the scope was narrowed down on immigrants, discussion consumption in international mobility as well as the concept of integration, both in the society and on the market. The last section of the chapter provided an overview of the perceptions of refugees and refugee agency, along with a brief review of previous studies on refugee consumption.

The following table summarizes the most important theoretical concepts along with their definitions and the central references to literature:

| Concept | Definition | Central literature |
|---|---|---|
| TRANSITIONS | | |
| Liminality | Transformational processes, voluntary or involuntary, lasting from moments to permanent. | Van Gennep (1909, 1960)<br>Turner (1969, 1974)<br>Szakolczai (2009, 2017)<br>Thomassen (2015) |
| Liquid modernity | The dissolution of societal structures, values and rules to orientate upon. | Bauman (2000, 2013) |
| Integration | An interactive process of learning and adapting to the society on several levels from civic participation and culture to social relationships and identity. | Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010)<br>Ager & Strang (2008)<br>Charsley & Spencer 2021) |
| CONSUMPTION | | |
| Consumption (socio-cultural perspective) | The acquisition, use, and appreciation of things. The meaning of possessions for identity. | Belk (1988)<br>Warde (2005)<br>Arnould & Thompson (2005) |
| Liquid consumption | Consumption practices that value temporal, context-bound, access-based and immaterial consumption over solid ownership. | Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould (2012)<br>Bardhi & Eckhardt (2017)<br>Mimoun & Bardhi (2021) |
| REFUGEES | | |
| Refugee agency | The capacity to act and make decisions despite societal constraints, based on personal background, motivation and future aspirations. | Ahearn (1999)<br>Emirbayer & Mishce (1998)<br>Mainwaring (2016)<br>Schmitt (2019)<br>van Dijk, Knappert, Muis and Alkhaled (2021) |

**Table 2:** Main theoretical concepts, their definitions and reference to central literature.

*What should you bring?*

*First: If possible, food and drink for 5 days.*
*Second: Enough clothes for the winter, and if possible, an empty mattress bag and a cover. In the winter, bring a white cloth for camouflaging in the snow.*
*Third: Money, valuables and important documents.*
*Fourth: Other valuable possessions can be brought along to the extent you are able to carry. Take into account the daily walk of approximately 20 km.*
*Fifth: A bike, or in the winter, a kick sled or a pair of skis. Unless otherwise instructed, only the sick, the old and the children are allowed to use horse carriages.*

*Strictly obey official orders to advance your journey. Give way to trucks and military vehicles. Keep to the side of the road. If possible, avoid movement in open areas and on the roads during daylight. Remember that a white cloth will protect you in the winter, and in the summer, you can easily take cover in nature, as long as you avoid movement when airplanes are near.*

*Staying calm is a Finnish virtue, and you are a Finn.*

*Provincial government*

(Order to evacuate the civilian population from the Finnish Karelia region, used during the wars of 1939-1940 and 1941-1944.
Translation by author.)

# 3 Empirical context

The empirical studies of my dissertation are set in Finland, which is in many ways an interesting context for researching refugees. Until quite recently, Finland had a very low rate of immigration and a small foreign-born population. In fact, until the 1980s, the net immigration was negative, i.e. more people moved out of Finland than vice versa. (Pyrhönen, Leinonen & Martikainen 2017). The first international refugees[1] to Finland came from Chile and Vietnam in the 1970s, but still in very modest numbers. Refugees started to arrive in a slightly larger scale since the early 1990s from Somalia and former Yugoslavia. Around the same time, the immigration started to pick up due to the repatriation of Ingrian Finns (descendants of Finnish settlers to Russia in the 17th century), and the labor immigration especially from Russia and Estonia. (Saukkonen & Pyykkönen 2008; Lönnqvist, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Verkasalo 2011). With this background in mind, the year 2015 with the arrival of 32,000 asylum-seekers in Finland, mainly from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, was a historical turn, increasing the number of asylum applications to over 10-fold compared to the previous years (Finnish Immigration Service 2016). After the peak year of 2015, the number of asylum applications settled to 1,500-6,000 per year (Ministry of the Interior 2021), only to rise again in the wake of the war in Ukraine in 2022. In addition to those who apply for asylum after arriving in the country, Finland also accepts a predefined number of so called quota refugees each year. Their refugee status[2] has been determined by the UNHCR before the arrival in Finland. For example, in 2021 the number of quota refugees to Finland was 1,050 (Finnish Immigration Service, 2021).

The official policies surrounding immigration and refugee resettlement are established in the Finnish law, the *Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration* (1386/2010). The Finnish legal definition of integration strongly emphasizes labor market participation and the role of the social welfare system in integration (Martikainen, Valtonen & Wahlbeck 2012). All unemployed immigrants are eligible for an Integration Plan, which is drafted together with

[1] The arrival of refugees in the 1990s was not the first time Finland faced the task of resettling a larger number of displaced people. Around 400,000 people (accounting for about 11 percent of the population of Finland at the time) whose home regions were ceded to the Soviet Union as a result of the 2nd world war, evacuated to the rest of Finland in the 1940s. This resettlement operation required a major effort from a nation recovering from war, but was eventually relatively successful. The process might have been mitigated by several circumstances, not least the fact that the Karelian refugees – despite some cultural differences with the mainstream population – came from the same country, and from a region that was specifically sympathized with due to its significance for the Finnish national epic (Alasuutari & Alasuutari 2009).

[2] The formal definition of a refugee by the United Nations (UN 2021) covers anyone unwilling or unable to return to their home for well-founded fear of persecution or inhumane treatment. Quota refugees are granted the UN-defined refugee status before they arrive in Finland. For those applying for asylum after arriving in Finland, the need for international protection is evaluated individually (Finnish Immigration Service, 2021).

the employment office and includes the measures necessary for successful labor market entry and active participation in the society. If the agreed measures, such as attendance in language courses and other types of education, are not adhered to, the immigrant risks losing their unemployment benefits (Integration Act 1386/2010). Despite the labor market focus, the immigrant population, and especially those with a refugee background, continue to have significantly higher unemployment rates than the general population (Pyrhönen, Leinonen & Martikainen 2016; Arajärvi 2009). One possible explanation to this is the strict, but often unspoken, requirements on language skills in employment. The level of language skills sufficient to pass the integration courses is often not enough for landing a job, so the local language (or lack thereof) risks becoming a gatekeeper to finding employment in Finland (Tarnanen & Pöyhönen 2011). In addition, the poorer educational outcomes among refugee-background children and adolescents compared to their local peers in the Nordic countries make labor market integration more difficult (Jervelund, Krasnik & de Montgomery 2020).

The issues around labor market integration are not a phenomenon unique to Finland – the "canvas ceiling" hindering workforce participation of immigrants (Lee et al. 2020) and the societal attitudes shaping the integration-related advice given to the newcomers (Nardon et al. 2020) shape the outcomes of resettlement throughout Western societies. The aggregated studies in the *Coming of Age in Exile* project (Ascher et al. 2021), which mapped out integration of young refugees in a number of Nordic welfare states, point out towards the need to understand integration as a process of mutual adaptation. In addition to individual effort by the refugees themselves, also the receiving society (its individuals and social structures alike) should to be willing to include the newcomers as members of the society (Jervelund, Krasnik & de Montgomery, in Ascher et al. 2021).

The Nordic welfare state model that Finland follows is characterized by redistributive policies – relatively high taxes, small differences in wages and universalism (Greve 2007; Bowles & Gintis 2000). This enables refugees to participate in consumption and to have a level of agency in their consumption choices; distinguishing the situation from, for example, refugee camps, a typical empirical setting for refugee studies (e.g., Oka 2014; Dudley 2010). The egalitarian welfare state models traditionally enjoy strong support from the people, at least as long as the recipients of the benefits are socially not too distant from the givers. (Bowles & Gintis 2007). However, as was the case post-2015, increasingly critical voices were raised against the income support for refugees in Finland, and their material possessions stirred relational conflicts and suspicions of benefit abuse (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021). Studying refugee integration in such an atmosphere is a delicate task and closely connected to people's perceptions of refugees and their expectations on how a "real refugee" ought to act and look like.

*Wanna know the only difference between you & a refugee?*
*Luck.*

(Dr. Naheed Dosani, on Twitter, February 25, 2022,
2nd day of Russian invasion of Ukraine)

# 4 Methodology

In this chapter, I first describe the research approach and my assumptions of reality that underlie it. Then, I give an overview of the research design and the data collection methods used for each of the studies of this thesis. I also describe the sampling process and the analysis methods. To conclude, I reflect on the use of language in multicultural setting as well as on ethics of doing research with people who have a refugee background.

## 4.1 Underlying philosophical assumptions and research strategy

Many research projects start with a choice of research design, which is preceded by a set of philosophical considerations. Those, in turn, are shaped by the researcher's own worldview and assumptions about reality and truth, and affect conducting the research. In the following, I explain the philosophical assumptions underlying my methodological choices.

One of the first questions relates to the understanding of reality. Do we attempt to observe and find universal laws whose validity and generalizability can stand the test of time (Gaudet & Robert 2018), or do we employ more qualitative methods to offer a "plausible explanation" of the phenomenon, while being aware that there are also other possible interpretations, each probably revelatory in some way (Gioia 2021, p. 27)?

As Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) argue, a debate about the superiority of qualitative vs. quantitative research design is unfruitful, and the decision should be guided by the specific research problem and aim at hand. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen a qualitative research design. This choice was made because the topic of refugee integration is complex, historically situated and dependent on the researcher's and the participants' subjective perspectives (Gaudet & Robert 2018).

*Ontologically*, i.e. concerning the nature of reality, choosing a qualitative research design usually means an understanding of the "truth" as consisting of multiple realities (Creswell & Poth 2016). My thesis relies on the ontological assumption of social constructionism; meaning that reality is socially constructed and depends on a number of factors, such as the public discourse and the culture. In social constructionism, both the reality and the subjective perspectives on it are important (Gaudet & Robert 2018, p. 17). This philosophical view draws on the ideas of the classical social constructionists Berger and Luckmann, Goffman, and Foucault, who placed emphasis on the subjective meanings of phenomena, the interactions between individuals and the discursive production of meanings (Irwin 2011).

*Epistemology* refers to the understanding of the distance between the researcher and those researched. Traditionally, qualitative research tries to get close to the people, for example in the form of fieldwork (Creswell & Poth

2016). During my thesis project, I employed several methods of data collection (which are elaborated more in the following sections), all of which aimed at getting close to the lived experience of the participants.

A third philosophical assumption to consider is *axiology*, which relates to the values of both the researcher and those being researched (Creswell & Poth 2016). I believe that the underlying values of both my interviewees and me played a role in the knowledge production for this thesis, all the way from the choice of research topic to interview questions and the interpretation of the results. For example, my background in advocating refugee rights and my personal interest in different cultures and languages was a starting point that not only steered the selection of the research topic, but also affected the way in which I approached the questions at hand and interpreted the data. While the interview participants' underlying values were not the focus of this project, they still undoubtedly played a role in how they expressed themselves during the research interviews. For example, the fact that many of the interviewees were highly educated and had occupied a relatively high social status in their home countries prior to the exile is assumed to affect how they approached consumption and (the loss of) their possessions. Also, my position as a local might have hampered the interviewees from freely expressing some of their negative experiences of integrating in Finland. In sum, the results are a reflection of my values, experiences and interpretations, as much as those of the people who participated in the research.

Another important decision to make when planning a research project is the explanatory method. Usually, a distinction between deduction and induction is made (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2017). Scientists using a *deductive* approach start from a hypothesis and test its validity with a number of experiments, deriving from a general rule to single cases. On the contrary, *inductive* research starts from the data. The goal is to create understanding of reality in a specific setting and context (Gaudet & Robert 2018). In my thesis, I used an *abductive* approach, or *systematic combining*. In this approach, empirical insights are used to continuously challenge and reformulate the initial theoretical assumptions (Dubois & Gadde 2002). During the course of the thesis work, I was constantly moving back and forth between theory and data in a non-linear manner. After each round of data collection, I went back to the literature and refined my research questions and theorization. The research process included three separate rounds of interviewing and one round of social media monitoring, which, along with back-to-back literature studies, gradually developed my understanding of the topic. The initial research idea and scope were prompted by the events in 2015, when an unprecedented number of refugees arrived in Europe. Then, I started reading extant literature and begun to formulate the research questions. My initial theory focus was on consumer acculturation and refugee consumer vulnerability. However, the agency and resourcefulness that I perceived during the interviews in the first round of data collection in 2017-2018 made me reconsider the topic. Before the second and third rounds of interviews (both in 2021), I shifted my literature studies

towards refugee agency and the meaning of possessions during liminality, re-formulating my research questions accordingly. Here as well, my assumption about the centrality of material possessions for refugees was soon challenged by the empirical interviews. Finally, the abductive process lead me to insights about involuntary liquid consumption and the importance of immaterial possessions during long-term liminality (both explained in more detail in Ch. 5).

## 4.2 Research design and data collection methods

Due to the complex and context-bound nature of the studied phenomena and the goal to understand rather than measure it, my thesis employs a qualitative research design. During the course of this project, I used several data collection methods that all supported me in gaining an in-depth understanding of the multifaceted experiences of refugees integrating in Finland. The used data collection methods include one-on-one photovoice interviews, online discussion forum analysis and online focus group interviews complemented with one-on-one online interviews. In the following table, the data collection methods used for each article are listed, followed by a more detailed presentation of each method.

| **Article** | **Used method(s)** |
|---|---|
| 1. From loss to involuntary liquidity: Refugees' relationship to possessions | Photovoice interviews (n=9)<br>Online focus group interviews (n=23) |
| 2. Unacceptable consumption: Conflicts of Refugee Consumption | Online discussion forum monitoring (n=14) |
| 3. Refugees' language learning and career aspirations: An agentic lens | Photovoice interviews (n=9)<br>Online focus group interviews (n=23)<br>Online one-on-one interviews (n=4) |

**Table 3:** Data collection methods and their correspondence to each article

### 4.2.1 Photovoice interviews

The first phase of data collection for my thesis started in 2017 with interviews employing material (visual) methods. Material methods attempt to get people to talk; the accompanying materials have the purpose to evoke narratives that might not surface otherwise (Woodward 2019). The specific method I selected was photovoice, also called participant-directed-photo-elicitation (PDPE), which has its roots in participatory action research with the aim of giving a voice to marginalized populations (Wang & Burris 1997; Sutton-Brown 2014).

Its difference to traditional visual methods of inquiry is that the photos are taken by the participants, not by the researcher. The method allows participants to choose what to photograph and in this way bring up topics that are meaningful for them, while the researcher's own interview guide must remain flexible to change as new and unexpected issues may come up (Patton 2002). The photos themselves are objects, but they are also photos *of* objects, which can have effects on people (Woodward 2011).

The photovoice method proved to pose some challenges. A few weeks prior to the scheduled interviews, I gave instructions to each participant, asking them to take approximately 10 photos of their daily consumption and favorite/desired possessions. However, as the interviews started, it became clear that each interviewee had interpreted the instructions quite differently. Some had taken over 30 detailed photos of each item they had purchased, while some only provided one photo presenting a week's worth of groceries, or a screen shot of a product they were dreaming of buying. Thus, the method required flexibility (see Patton 2002) and continuous adaptation of interview questions.

Despite these challenges, the photovoice method helped me to uncover things that would otherwise have been ignored, had I followed a strict interview guide with questions posed from my own position. At the onset of my data collection, I had planned to study the vulnerability of refugee consumers in Finland. However, when conducting the photovoice interviews, I encountered a "breakdown" (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007) – the empirical material that pointed at agency and resourcefulness rather than vulnerability pushed me to reconsider my original ideas and research questions. This is an example of the abductive research process that moved between theory and empirical data and evolved as I gathered and analyzed more narratives.

In the photovoice method, the photos as such are not a central data set, but rather a way to uncover verbal narratives (Wang & Burris 1997). In the case of my interviews, the photos not only helped to bring up topics that were important for my interviewees, but also bridged some language barriers and helped to break the ice at the beginning of the interviews. However, the actual photos were not treated as data and not analyzed as such either. Instead, they served as conversation starters and icebreakers for the spoken interviews.

Previously, photovoice was considered a difficult method due to the technical side, such as the distribution of cameras and development of films (Sutton-Brown 2014). These issues had been resolved by the advance of phone cameras and easy access to them by all interviewees. The interviewees sent their photos to me before the interviews through social media channels or e-mail, and the interviews were guided by, but not limited to, the topics seen in the photos. The photovoice interviews were recorded with a Jabra conference microphone and later transcribed into text. Each participant was rewarded with two movie tickets after the interview.

The data collected with the help of the photovoice interviews was used for two articles of my thesis, analyzing it from different perspectives depending on

the scope of the article. For Article 1, *From loss to involuntary liquidity: Refugees' relationship to possessions,* I analysed the data with consumption in mind, focusing on the narratives about the relationship to possessions and consumption and its meaning for coping as a newly arrived refugee in Finland. For Article 3, *Refugees' language learning and career aspirations: An agentic lens*, the analysis concentrated on the agency of the refugees when making decisions about their integration trajectories. Having a deep set of data covering a range of topics was an advantage that resulted from the fact that the initial study was exploratory in nature, not restricted by a rigid set of predetermined questions.

To exemplify the benefits of the photos to support the gathering of deep and rich data, selected images from the photovoice interviews are presented on the cover of the thesis, as well as included in the appendix (see appx. 1). The selected photos only represent a fraction of the total amount of over 100 images provided by the interviewees. The chosen images are typical examples of the photographs provided for the interviews, and represent key facets of the studies phenomenon – the importance of immaterial and digital possessions; the centrality of food; and the dreams of solid material possessions.

### 4.2.2 Discussion forum monitoring

Article 2, *Unacceptable Consumption: Conflicts of Refugee Consumption in a Nordic Welfare State,* is a book chapter about the reactions of the local consumers towards the newly-arrived Middle Eastern refugee consumers in Finland. In order to uncover the locals' attitudes, I decided to dive into online discussions where people were talking about the refugees anonymously. The empirical data of this essay consisted of discussion forum entries published between September 2015 and January 2018. Two Finnish discussion forums were selected for the study: *Suomi24,* which at the time of writing was the biggest online discussion forum in the country with around 20 000 new entries weekly, and *Hommaforum,* a discussion forum focused on anti-immigration related discussions. After performing searches on the forums with Finnish key words relating to refugees and consumption, 14 relevant discussion threads were selected for closer study of attitudes and opinions about refugee consumers. The threads were downloaded from the online forums and saved as MS Word documents, in order to be able to analyze them without the risk of losing the data due to website updates or page moderation.

Discussion forum monitoring was the only data collection method of my thesis that did not involve any direct contact with the participants. People are found to be more intense in their communication when discussing anonymously online, as opposed to personal conversations in real life (Suler 2004). Thus, the findings from the social media discussion analysis cannot be equaled with results from personal interviews. Additional data collection among Finnish locals could have enriched the results and shed light on the underlying values behind anti-immigration sentiments. However, finding and

selecting the participants might have posed some challenges in that case. Article 2 did not aim to be representative, but rather strived to illuminate certain aspects of the political discussion around refugee consumption in the context of Finland. Therefore, an extensive data collection through personal interviews might have resulted in a data set beyond the scope of the paper.

### 4.2.3 Online focus group interviews

In the spring 2021, the Covid19 pandemic had forced countries around the world to put massive restrictions in place to halt the spread of the respiratory virus that at the time had been plaguing the world for already a year. I wanted to gather more data by interviewing refugees and to ask more detailed questions, which I had developed after analysing the previous photovoice interviews. However, it soon became clear that arranging in-person meetings would be impossible due to Covid19. Therefore, an online interviewing method with small focus groups was chosen.

Critique has been voiced against the use of online methods of interviewing (Gray et al. 2020), due to the possible distractions and technical difficulties connected to the setting. As Gray et al. (2020) note, reluctance to participate in online interviews has become a non-issue lately as online studies and meetings have become more and more common. Also in the case of this study, most of the interviewees were already very familiar with online communication methods, not only from personal social media use but also from attending online studies and meetings during the pandemic. Hence, there were no apparent technical issues with reaching the participants.

The online format allowed for some additional benefits, such as the ease of access to interviewees living in other cities, and the possibility to participate from the convenience of their own homes. No traveling to and from the interview site was necessary, neither arranging child care during the interviews. Some interviewees chose to participate with their voice only, without the video. This was simultaneously a setback, diminishing the social contact within the focus group and making the participation less personal, along with cutting off the visual cues of body language and facial expressions (see Gray et al. 2020 on disadvantages of online interviewing). On the other hand, considering the background factors affecting the interviewees (such as possible risks related to political persecution in home country and the wish for anonymity, or the decision of some of the female interviewees to dress modestly), the online format and its possibilities for greater privacy were not only a drawback but also a benefit for the study.

The online interviews were mainly carried out in focus group settings. The focus group format allows for interaction and sensemaking within the group, while the interviewer takes a step back and acts more like a facilitator. (Greenbaum 1999; Nyström & Wendelin 2020). One of the recognized benefits of focus group interviews is that the group format may encourage participants to discuss sensitive topics, as the similar experiences of others help bringing

up own emotions and issues (Greenbaum 1999). This was noticeable in the interviews conducted, as the participants encouraged and sometimes also countered each other when discussing shared experiences.

The focus groups were deliberately kept small, 3–5 participants in each, hence called "micro focus groups". The size of the groups was restricted due to the specific circumstances of the interviews, such as the need for translation (as explained in more detail in section 4.3 below), the online format and the sensitive topics discussed. All this called for a smaller group size than in regular focus group settings that could accommodate up to 15 people at once. In addition, two of the interviewees invited to participate in the focus groups wished to be interviewed separately due to sensitivities around their identity.

The online focus group interviews were recorded with the built-in recording function of the Zoom app and later transcribed into text. The participants were given a gift card worth €20 to a local supermarket chain as a symbolic compensation for their time and effort.

### 4.2.4 One-on-one interviews

In addition to the focus group interviews described above, four one-on-one interviews were arranged for the purposes of Article 3, to substantiate the findings from the earlier interviewing steps. Semi-structured interviews are used for uncovering people's perceptions, experiences and attitudes. They can offer rich data and are open for follow-up questions that might arise during the interview (Harvey-Jordan & Long 2001). The four one-on-one interviews of my thesis were semi-structured, using targeted questions to uncover the central phenomena identified in the earlier interviewing rounds. Due to the pandemic, also these interviews had to be conducted fully online on the video conferencing tool Zoom, thus reducing the possibility to note non-verbal cues. However, the interviewees were familiar to me from before, which decreased the potential depersonalization caused by the online format. The interviews were recorded on the Zoom app, saving both the video and the audio of each interview. Later, the audio recordings were transcribed into text. Each interviewee got a €20 gift card to a local supermarket chain after the interview.

## 4.3 Language of interviews

The empirical data collection for this thesis involved a number of different languages. The interviewees were native speakers of Turkish, Arabic and Kurdish languages. The Arabic-speakers represented two different dialect groups, Iraqi and Syrian Arabic. Even though I have studied some Arabic and Kurdish, I would not have been able to carry out interviews in those languages. Several of the interviewees had good command of English, and at the time of the interviews, some of the participants had already learned fluent Finnish. I chose to conduct interviews both with and without a translator.

As Marschan-Piekkari and Reis (2004) point out, conducting interviews in multilingual settings involves specific challenges, not only related to the data and rapport, but also the dynamics of the interview situation. For example, the differences in language skills can lead to power-imbalance. On the other hand, multilingual interviewing, with its (mis)understandings, can also open up new avenues of cultural and contextual insight (Welch & Piekkari 2006).

The first round of interviews (n=9), employing the one-on-one photovoice method, was conducted without a translator, using only Finnish and/or English. This had several benefits, for example the ease of scheduling the interviews when only two people needed to be present. Also, some interviewees might have been more open about their lives when no "insiders" of their own culture were present (see section 4.6.1 Positionality and power for further discussion on this). However, even though the photos eased the communication and bridged some language barriers, it became clear that a deeper investigation of the experiences and attitudes of the participants would require the use of a translator. Therefore, an interpreter-assistant fluent in both Arabic and Turkish was employed of the second phase, the focus group interviews (n=23). The final one-on-one interviews (n=4) were again conducted without an interpreter, because the participants were fully fluent in Finnish and/or English.

As Temple (2002) notes, the role of translators in interviews is often not discussed enough, and they appear as "shadowy figures" who are barely mentioned in research reports. If an interview is seen from a positivist point of view, just as a method of gathering information, researchers and translators alike are considered simple transmitters of neutral information. On the other hand, when conducting interpretive, reflexive research as I was doing, the researcher and the translator are seen as active producers of knowledge, and their own positions, values and backgrounds affect the final product of the research (Temple 2002). In the focus group interviews of this thesis, the interpreter-assistant had a central role, not only in disseminating the contents but also as an active co-producer and interpreter of information (Ryan, Kofman & Aaron 2011). After each focus group interview, the interpreter and I discussed the results and I had the opportunity to gather additional country-of-origin specific information.

Yet, even the best of translations runs the risk of leaving out or simplifying metaphors and expressions specific to the language and culture (see for example Banikalef & Naser 2019; Al Amer et al. 2016). Not being able to interview in the native language of the participants is a disadvantage I needed to navigate. In my opinion, the choice to interview both with and without an interpreter was a combination that suited this research project.

## 4.4 Sampling and participants

The sampling strategies used for the different stages of the empirical studies can all be described as purposeful (Patton 2002, 230-231). Both the social media discussions and the interview participants were selected based on criterion sampling (Patton 2002, p. 243); they all met a criteria suitable for the purpose of the study. The interview participants all shared the experience of being refugees. In addition, the selected individuals had already been granted a residence permit in Finland, either based on the need of international protection or due to being family-members of a person who had been granted international protection.

For the initial photovoice interviews (n=9), the participants were recruited through a local grassroots organization working for refugee rights. Some of the participants also helped recruit their acquaintances who were suitable candidate for the subsequent interviews, thus employing snowball sampling (Patton 2002, p. 237). All the participants in these initial photovoice interviews were men, between ages 21-35 from Iraq who had lived in Finland 1-3 years. This demographic was reflective of the refugees who arrived in Finland in the peak year 2015, of whom over two thirds came from Iraq and 81 percent were men (Euroopan muuttoliikeverkosto/ Maahanmuuttovirasto 2016).

In order to expand the participant-base to a larger demographic and to find women to include in the studies, the interpreter-assistant helped recruit participants for the focus group interviews. In order to find potential interviewees, she engaged her own networks and posted ads about the research project in relevant groups in social media. These rounds of criterion sampling resulted in a more heterogeneous interviewee base, consisting of 13 refugees from Turkey, 8 from Iraq and 2 from Syria. Of the focus group interviewees (n=23), 13 were female and 10 were male, and at the time of the focus groups, they had lived in Finland for 1-6 years. The interviewees were 18 to 43 years old.

For the third and final interview step, consisting of four interviews, intensity sampling was used (Patton 2002, p. 243). The aim of the last round of interviews was to deepen the understanding that had emerged from analyzing the photovoice and the focus group interviews. Thus, the four participants for the one-on-one interviews were strategically selected with a specific profile in mind, among people whom I assumed to be information-rich regarding the relevant facets of the phenomenon. Three of the interviewees came from Syria and one from Iraq. At the time of the interviews, they were 30-40 years old and had lived in Finland 6-8 years. Two of them were men and two women.

## 4.5 Analysis methods

To begin with, the interview recordings were transcribed. Some of the interviews were translated into Finnish or English, and only the translated excerpts of the audio were transcribed. The program Nvivo was used as the

technical tool for the analysis. The photovoice interviews also yielded photographs, but as mentioned above, those were not treated as data in themselves, but rather as discussion-starters and icebreakers for the interview talks.

The chosen analysis method for both the interview data and the discussion forum entries was content analysis (Stemler 2000; Harwood & Garry 2003; Hsieh & Shannon 2005). As the resulting transcribed data consisted of material in two languages, a simple content analysis by counting frequencies of words (Stemler 2000) was not appropriate. Instead, the interview data and the discussion form entries were categorized and grouped into meaningful clusters with the help of conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Following the procedure described by Schmidt (2004), I started the analysis by through reading of the transcribed interview materials. It became obvious, as Schmidt (ibid.) points out, that some of the most interesting passages did not come up directly after the related questions, but rather as side notes or in connection with other topics. From the initial reading and analysis, analytical categories (Schmidt 2004; Spiggle 1994) started to emerge. These were further developed into codes. In Nvivo, the software I used for analysing the data, codes are understood as "tagging" or assigning text (or other material, such as photos or parts of them) to specific "folders", called *nodes* in Nvivo (Kaefer, Roper & Sinha 2015). When opening the key word for a specific code in Nvivo, one can view all of the tagged material in one place, making it easier to go back a forth between the central themes. The coding of the interview data was done inductively, i.e. using the interview materials as a starting point to explore which themes were frequently mentioned in them, rather than starting for theory-based pre-defined categories (Kaefer, Roper & Sinha 2015). The empirical categories were then merged into more general conceptual classes (a process called *abstraction* by Spiggle 1994). Finally, the conceptual classes were analysed in light of their characteristics and integrated (Spiggle 1994) into the theoretical contributions of each article.

The coding process was done in two separate rounds, once for Article 1 and once for Article 3. The codes and their interrelations were then interpreted and eventually led to findings and new insights. For Article 1, the starting point of the analysis was the temporal nature of the refugee journey narrated by the interviewees – from the past in the home country to the present moment in Finland and the aspired future. Codes relating to possessions and consumption emerged under each of these temporal categories, little by little leading to the theoretical insight of liquid consumption and the conceptualization of the characteristics of refugee liquid consumption (described in more detail in Ch. 5). For Article 3, the coding process involved categorizing the materials first in terms of frequent topics relating to, for example, the interviewees' lives in their home countries, the refugee journeys, and the different integration trajectories. Those categories represented the past, present and future dimensions of the refugee experience. They were then abstracted to more conceptual categories relating to refugee agency: habit, judgement, imagination and motivation. The

coding included several occasions of going back and forth between the data and theory. I was consciously avoiding to restrict myself too much with my predefined ideas of what would emerge from the data upon analysis. Thus, the same chunks of interview transcripts were analysed several times during the course of the research project. This was a part of the abductive process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), in which new discoveries lead me to see the theory and the empirical material in a new light. For example, I was first assuming – based on the previous literature I had studies – that the meaning of material possessions would be central for the interviewed refugees. However, the empirical studies revealed that the case was quite the opposite; the interviewees seemed to have lost their interest in material possessions, and were rather relying on immaterial consumption. Another insight from the abductive back-and-forth process was the centrality of agentic decisions in the refugee integration process. In order to deepen my understanding of the phenomena and to avoid at least some of the pitfalls of misunderstandings due to cultural and language differences, also I consulted my interpreter-assistant at several occasions while analyzing the data.

As the work is epistemologically embedded in social constructionism (Gaudet & Robert 2018), the empirical data was not treated as an objective "truth". Therefore, the material was analyzed as narratives stemming from the perceptions, values, motivations, and memories of the participants in the specific social, cultural and temporal context of the interviews. Also, the past events the interviewees were reminiscing cannot be regarded as factual depictions, but rather as narratives of something as they (want to or are able to) remember it. I argue, however, that this does not diminish the value of the results or interpretations presented below. Rather, the results should be seen as reflections of several perspectives on the studied phenomenon, like crystals that each reflect the light on their own (see Polsa 2013, on crystallization and research).

## 4.6 Research ethics

Conducting research with refugees requires careful consideration of ethical issues. Many general codes of conduct are not specifically tailored for research among forcibly displaced people, despite the rise in both scholarly and popular interest in the topic (Clark-Kazak 2019; Leinonen et al. 2020). I requested an ethics assessment and statement about my research plan from the Board of Research Ethics (FEN) at Åbo Akademi University prior to starting the empirical interviews. However, as Leinonen et al. (2020) point out, an ethics clearance at the onset of the project is not enough. Instead, research ethics should continue to be taken into account throughout the whole research project. In this section, I will highlight some of the ethical issues that I have been considering during my thesis work. I begin with the more methodological points, such as informed consent and anonymity, and continue then to reflect upon positionality, power and the "do no harm" principle.

Obtaining informed consent from the participants was one of the first questions I needed to resolve before starting the photovoice interviews in 2017. Bearing in mind possible language difficulties, I decided to draft an information flyer about the interviews in both Finnish and English including visual aids. The flyers were given to every participant before the interview, while also explaining the purpose of the interviews and the rights of the participants (e.g. the possibility to stop participation at any point) in person. It turned out, however, that quite many of the informants were familiar with similar procedures from their own previous university studies, which made it easier to explain the principles to them. At the later stages of interviewing, when the interpreter-assistant was involved, I no longer used the flyers to inform the participants. Instead, I explained the steps in the beginning of each interview and asked the interpreter-assistant to translate the information and make sure that everyone had understood the process and their role in it. In this way, the possibility of misunderstandings was minimized.

Another issue that arises from interviewing displaced people is the special importance of anonymity and safeguarding confidential information. The interview data includes rather detailed information about the participants' backgrounds, which could pose a risk to them, considering that they have fled persecution in their own home countries. Therefore, I paid specific attention to anonymizing the data, by not only changing the names to pseudonyms when quoting interviewees, but also by changing and/or concealing other parts of information that could have risked exposing the person's identity. At several occasions during the project, I was asked to provide an overview table of the interview participants with demographic information such as age, home country, previous occupation and current position. Publishing all this information collectively about each informant would have been too risky, because the refugee community in Finland is relatively small. Even small pieces of information, when all gathered together, could risk revealing the identities of the research participants to a curious reader.

Storing the interview data safely was another aspect of safeguarding the privacy of the participants. For this purpose, I used the data protected portals set up by Åbo Akademi University.

### 4.6.1 Positionality and role of the researcher

Every researcher is a product of their own background and culture, affecting the way they see the world and their ability to understand other cultural viewpoints (Singh et al. 2020). Because this research project was interpretive and reflexive in nature (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2017), my own background, culture, values, sympathies and preconceived knowledge all unavoidably affected the process.

In qualitative research, the conformability of research refers to the extent in which the researcher has reflected on their own influence on the research process and its outcomes (Singh et al. 2020). During the course of the project, I

made a conscious effort to reflect on my position as a researcher. It is obvious that my own interests and personal connections to refugees influenced the process, starting from the choice of research scope and the selection of methods.

My position as a researcher was also related to the power balance in the interview situations. Even if a research interview is kept seemingly informal, it is not a regular conversation. There is always a power imbalance between the researcher and the researched (Kvale 1996). This imbalance was especially apparent in the specific interview setting of my project: a white, university-educated PhD student belonging to the mainstream population researching recent refugees. I made an effort to select methods that would even out the power imbalance and give voice to the interviewees despite the constraints of the setting. In my opinion, the chosen methods, especially the photovoice interviews and later, the focus groups supported by a translator, contributed to successful interviews and bridged the cultural and language differences, and helped give voice to the interviewees themselves.

Being an "outsider" in regard of the refugee community was something I reflected on a lot during the research project. My position might have been a benefit more than an obstacle; it gave me the freedom to ask naive questions (Ikonen & Ojala 2007), and alleviated the power imbalance by allowing the informants to act as experts of their culture and current consumption habits (Clark-Ibáñez 2004). If I had been an "insider", the interviewees might have taken much context for granted and might not have been verbalized in the interview. Instead, the informants assumed me to have no pre-knowledge of their culture, habits or religion and explained their lifestyles to me eagerly and in great detail.

In the one-on-one interviews, my position as an outsider might also have enabled informants to disclose their behavior more freely, without the fear of judgement. Several informants mentioned that they try to avoid behaving in a controversial way in front of their compatriots, especially ones that they are not close to. This is also the reason why I was initially unwilling to include an interpreter or gather focus groups. I was suspecting that the presence of several people, native to the culture of the interviewees, could have led (regardless of assurances of confidentiality) to the informants concealing aspects of lifestyles that might be considered inappropriate in their native countries. Yet, after the initial one-on-one interviews, I weighed the pros and cons of gathering focus groups and using an interpreter, and decided it was worth using both methods to gather as broad and deep data as possible.

My position as a female researcher is also worth reflecting upon. For example, Arendell (1997) found that men were more prone to disclose their emotions to a female interviewer, and even considered the interviews as welcome opportunities to share their experiences, while normally being cautious to show their emotional vulnerability to other men. I agree with this point to some extent; some traumatic past experiences of the informants did surface during the one-on-one interviews, and the effect of the "emotionally

disarming" female interviewer could be additionally emphasized by the cultural and religious background of these specific interviewees. In the later stages of data collection, facilitating focus groups with female participants and when interviewing women, my gender became a different type of advantage; it created familiarity with the interviewees who themselves were also women with small children. Finding this common ground with my interviewees warranted also me as a researcher to disclose something about my family setting and myself. This type of a two-way interaction in a research interview can serve to create deeper findings, as the dualism between the "knower" and the "known" is faded (Polsa 2013).

### 4.6.2 "Do no harm"

The ancient Hippocratic Oath binds medical professionals to "do no harm". The same principle applies to researchers, protecting study participants from harm and ensuring that nobody is subjected to research against their will. However, the "do no harm" principle is not enough, especially not when researching refugees and other vulnerable populations (Hugman, Bartolomei & Pittaway 2011). A researcher involved with refugees should consider the overall contribution of the research; what is given back to the participants, and also on a societal level, how the research benefits the participants and the communities in general (Leinonen et al. 2020; Hugman et al. 2011).

During the course of my doctoral project, I attended a seminar called "Doing research that goes under the skin", where I gained a lot of useful knowledge about the psychological risks involved for both the researched and the researcher when dealing with narratives of suffering. In the case of my interviews, the topics were seemingly "light" (consumption, possessions and future aspirations). No direct questions about the interviewee's possible traumatic experiences in the past were asked. I was consciously trying to avoid stressing or re-traumatizing the interviewees, and attempted to steer the conversation towards lighter topics when necessary.

The choice to only interview people who had already been granted a residence permit in Finland had partly to do with the issues discussed above. For example, a longitudinal study design following the integration trajectories of refugees starting from day one of their arrival in Finland would have been very interesting from a scholarly point of view. However, interviewing people in the very first stages of their resettlement, when they are at their most vulnerable both in terms of their legal status and psychological stress would be ethically unsustainable. Approaching people who have just left their homes, their loved ones and their lives behind would have felt intrusive, even though the possible data would have been relevant. Fischer (2022) summarizes this thought into the principle "People first, data second", meaning that we should prioritize refugees over our need of collecting data (Fischer 2022, p. 38).

As mentioned before, avoiding causing harm to research participants is not enough; a good research project should also give back to the participants and

benefit the society at large. Especially when studying people in vulnerable situations and settings, research should lead to "deeper involvement and action" (Polsa 2013, p. 89). The direct benefit to each interviewee might have remained small (apart from the movie tickets given to all participants in 2017-18 and the 20-euro supermarket gift cards of 2021). Yet, a comfortable interview situation might have been empowering for many, perhaps opening new avenues of thought and offering the possibility speak up and to be heard, in addition to making new connections in the focus groups to others in similar situations. While perhaps modest on their own, the results of my studies can contribute to a larger body of research about refugee integration and coping. Together with other relevant research, they can offer new insights into how people find their place in the society and which things they value, thus helping to tailor better integration policies and programs. The societal contributions are discussed in more detail in chapter 6 of this thesis.

*The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes*
*is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete.*
*They make one story become the only story.*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author,
The Danger of The Single Story
TED Talk, 2009

# 5 Articles: Outline and summary

In this chapter, the main findings of the articles of this thesis are presented, while also answering the research questions #1–#3 of the thesis. The following table summarizes my contribution to each article:

| **Article** | **Publication phase** | **Contribution of author** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. From loss to involuntary liquidity: Refugees' relationship to possessions | In review (round 3) for *Consumption Markets and Culture*. | Single author (100 %). |
| 2. Unacceptable consumption: Conflicts of Refugee Consumption | Published in 2019 in *Nordic Consumer Culture – State, Market and Consumers* (Palgrave Macmillan). Ed. Søren Askegaard and Jacob Östberg. | Single author (100 %). |
| 3. Refugees' language learning and career aspirations: An agentic lens | In review (round 3) for *Journal of International Management*. | First author (85 %). Co-authored with Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen. |

**Table 4:** Articles of the thesis, their stage in the publication process and the contribution of the author.

Research Questions #1–#3 answered in the articles:

1) How do refugees as active agents navigate the prolonged liminal experience of resettling in Finland? (Articles 1 & 3)
2) What can we learn about refugee consumers by studying the locals' perceptions of them in a Nordic welfare state context? (Article 2)
3) What does the refugee consumer experience teach us about the meaning of possessions and consumption in a liquid world? (Article 1)

Research question #4 *Which conclusions can be drawn for improving refugee integration in a Nordic welfare state context?* is a normative one, deriving from the findings of all of the articles, and will be answered in Chapter 6 in the Practical contributions section.

## 5.1 From loss to involuntary liquidity: Refugees' relationship to possessions

In review (round 3) for *Consumption Markets and Culture*.

Author contribution: Single author of the article (100 %), responsible for planning, data collection, analysis and writing.

The following summary offers answers to research questions *#1: How do refugees as active agents navigate the prolonged liminal experience of resettling in Finland?* and *#3: What does the refugee consumer experience teach us about the meaning of possessions and consumption in a liquid world?*

### 5.1.1 Overall summary

This article deals with the abilities of liquid consumption to facilitate coping during long-term, involuntary liminality. When beginning the empirical data collection for my thesis, the lack of attachment the interviewees seemed to exhibit towards their possessions surprised me. This appeared to be in contrast with previous literature about consumers in liminal transitions; the central role of possessions in identity projects (Belk 1988; Arnould & Thompson 2005) and the role of consumption and possessions in overcoming and alleviating the strenuous experiences of liminality (e.g. Mehta & Belk 1991; Sayre 1994; Noble & Walker 1997; Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar 2021). The concepts of liquid consumption and liquid relationship to possessions offer partial explanation to this phenomenon. The frequently relocating expats studied by Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) and the voluntarily flexible consumers in Mimoun and Bardhi's study from 2021, were avoiding building strong relationships to belongings in order to stay flexible amidst the requirements of their mobile lifestyle and the fluctuations of the labor market. Liquid consumption is characterized, according to Bardhi & Eckhardt (2017), by ephemeral (i.e. context-bound), access-based, and dematerialized forms of consumption, as opposed to deriving value and security from tangible, solid possessions. However, the previous studies on liquid consumption were focusing on well-off, voluntarily liminal consumers, leaving unanswered the abilities of liquid consumption to facilitate precarious consumers' navigation of their liminal state. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017, p. 592) conclude that despite the rise of liquid consumption, people who are involuntarily thrust into liquidity still try to manage their state with solid consumption, while prompting future research on non-elite consumers' ways of enduring insecurity in the long run. Also Appau, Ozanne and Klein (2020, p. 187) call for more research on how liquid vs. solid consumption can help people navigate long-term unwanted liminality. Building on this, the article aims to explore how liquid consumption manifests in the context of involuntary, long-term liminality.

The article is empirically based on one-on-one photovoice interviews (n=9) and online focus group interviews (n=23). All interviewees were refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Syria, who had lived in Finland for 1–6 years. The interviews were semi-structured and covered topics related to integration, consumption and the relationship to possessions. The interview transcripts were coded and analyzed with Nvivo.

### 5.1.2 Main results

The analysis of the interviews revealed three chronological layers; past, present and future. The narratives about the past were depicting a comfortable life characterized by a stable economic situation and the possibility to engage in solid consumption. This had come to an abrupt end at the time of fleeing; many of the study participants had reached Europe through irregular routes and had not been able to bring many belongings with them. The loss of possessions was aggravated by purposeful disposal of the remaining items on the way or upon arrival in Finland. Many interviewees were portraying a decline of interest in material possessions. This altered relationship to possessions is theorized to stem from the loss and trauma of the refugee experiences, along with the wish to break free from the disturbing memories and the past identity.

Despite the fact that all of the interviewees had already secured a residence permit in Finland and many had also passed the integration state, they still described their current situation in terms of liminality, of not really fitting in and not having found a meaningful integration trajectory. To navigate this long-term unwanted liminality, the refugees utilized liquid consumption. Their consumption was characterized by immateriality – many struggled to name their most important belonging, but finally concluded it must be the phone (or another digital communication device), used to keep contact with loved ones back home and to engage in learning or entertainment. Also, physical artefacts symbolizing intangible values were brought up, such as a double-bed as a symbol of family. However, even here, the actual tangible item was not important and could have be replaced; only the values it represented were important. Momentary reincorporation with the past and comfort in liminality was also sought through food and cooking practices, which emerged as a central theme in the interviews.

The future dreams depicted by the interviewees revealed a wish to return to solid consumption and the pre-flight lifestyle. Hence, the declined interest in solid consumption was not permanent. Rather, liquid consumption was regarded a temporary survival strategy until one would be able to return to the familiar lifestyle of the past. The expected time frame for returning to solid consumption was quite long, implying an expectation of prolonged liminality for the foreseeable future. The decisive milestone to exit liminality was, according to the analysis, not the accrual of a permanent residence permit, but

rather a stable employment that would enable both a full-fledged integration and participation in consumption.

The article contributes to consumer research by corroborating the liquid consumption theory by questioning the previously taken-for-granted view on the centrality of possessions in situations of mobility and transformation. The study challenges previous assumptions of the liquid consumption stream by revealing that also non-elite precarious consumers can engage in liquid consumption to cope and thrive during transformations. However, this liquidity is not by choice, but forced by a turn of fate.

The paper outlines five features of Refugee liquid consumption. This type of liquid consumption is characterized by 1) a single entry into liquidity (as opposed to frequent destabilizations of consumption previously identified in literature); 2) the involuntary nature of liquidity (as opposed to it being a voluntary lifestyle choice); 3) the consumers economic precarity (versus extant theories of the liquid elite); 4) strong attachments to loved ones that are maintained through digital communication (as opposed to transactionalization and liquidization of relationships); and 5) the wish to eventually exit liquid consumption (as opposed to it being a permanent life choice).

The article can offer implications for societal actors and NGOs working with refugees by shedding light on the coping strategies of refugees, especially the ability of digital and access-based consumption to facilitate coping during forced migration. The results also highlight that refugee liminality does not end when a permanent residency status is granted. Thus, improving the possibilities for swift and successful integration, especially in terms of labor market integration, could help refugees exit the long-term liminality, and facilitate the move towards a life where returning to solid consumption could be possible. The lack of attachment to previous possessions and the drastic drop in standards of living upon fleeing to Finland are findings that can help elucidate the refugee experience and challenge the public and political discourse, often preoccupied with suspicions of benefit abuse and the idea of the refugees coming to Europe “for the money”.

## 5.2 Unacceptable Consumption: Conflicts of Refugee Consumption in a Nordic Welfare State

Published 2019 in the book *Nordic Consumer Culture – State, Market and Consumers* (Palgrave Macmillan), edited by Søren Askegaard and Jacob Östberg.

Author contribution: Single author of the article (100 %), responsible for planning the research, data collection, analysis and writing.

The following summary answers research question *#2: What can we learn about refugee consumers by studying the locals' perceptions of them in a Nordic welfare state context?*

### 5.2.1 Overall summary

The motivation for this study stems from the public discourse surrounding the legitimacy of refugee consumption in the wake of the 2015 refugee situation in Europe. In 2015, over 1.5 million people fled from the Middle East to Europe, and Finland experienced a peak year of asylum applications with over 32,000 applicants. The situation evoked public outcry and political turmoil throughout Europe, leading to stricter asylum policies and demands on social welfare restrictions for non-citizens. Voices were also raised to question the consumption patterns of the refugees, criticizing for example their smart phone use and hairstyles and connecting this to questioning the legitimacy of their asylum claims (see e.g. Kotilainen & Pellander 2017).

I decided to look at the phenomenon through the theoretical lens of mutual acculturation (Bourhis et al. 1997) and the relational configuration analysis of indigenous' responses to immigrant consumer acculturation (Luedicke 2015). The model by Luedicke is based on Fiske's (1991) relational models theory, expanding it to the consumption realm. According to Luedicke, relational conflicts can arise when the previous social norms, expectations and practices are challenged with the arrival of immigrants in a market. Luedicke (2015) identifies four sources of ethnic group conflict on a marketplace where immigrants are introduced; 1) *Perceived sell-out of indigenous community*, referring to the perceived erosion of the indigenous community when the immigrants drew closer and became more visible on the market, for example by buying real estate property and frequenting middle-class supermarkets. 2) *Reconfiguration of Authority Ranking Relationships,* which is visible in the indigenous' interpretations of immigrant consumption practices that are seen as breaching previously established social hierarchies. For example, the immigrants' acquisition of luxury items was seen not as a sign of acculturation, but rather as challenging or threatening the previously taken-for-granted authority position of the indigenous on the market. 3) *Violation of equality matching rules* refers to the indigenous' assessments of how much the

immigrants contribute to vs. exhaust the community resources. In the absence of exact data, the immigrant consumption patterns are used by the indigenous as a measure of their societal contribution/exploitation. 4) *Micro-macro moral dilemma* arises from the conflict between the macro-level values of equality and democracy, which the indigenous want to adhere to, while simultaneously treating the immigrants as outsiders on local level.

The empirical focus of Luedicke (2015) was Turkish immigrants in Austria. In my study, I decided to look at these conflicts in the context of refugees in Finland, assuming that the conflicts might play out differently in a Nordic welfare state context and with forcibly displaced people as the newcomers on the market. In order to unveil Finnish indigenous consumers' opinions on the introduction of Middle Eastern refugees on the market, social media monitoring was carried out. After sorting search results for relevance, 14 threads from two Finnish discussion forum outlets Hommafoorumi and Suomi24 from 2015-2018 were selected for closer analysis. These two channels were selected due to their size (Suomi24 was the biggest online discussion forum in Finland at the time of the data collection) and the topic (Hommaforum was an online discussion channel solely focused on immigration-related themes, representing anti-immigration and far-right ethos).

### 5.2.2 Main results

Based on the empirical data, a picture of the relational conflicts arising from the arrival of the Middle Eastern refugees in the Finnish consumption sphere in 2015 started to emerge. The analysis revealed that the relational conflicts played out slightly differently in the Finnish context with refugees. Moreover, a fifth relational conflict was identified, unique to the Nordic welfare state context.

The perceived sellout of the indigenous community (1) was apparent from the discussions related to establishing refugee reception centers. The centers were perceived as security threats and suspected to cause cultural erosion, bolstered by economic arguments made against the "reception business" in otherwise struggling communities. The challenging of authority ranking positions (2) took the form of accusing the refugees of benefit abuse while "not looking like real refugees". Here, the suspicion stemmed from the looks and the products used by the refugees, which were deemed unfit for refugees, placing them in a consumption position previously reserved for the indigenous. The violation of equality matching (3) was especially visible in the welfare state context of Finland. The online discussions uncovered a deeply rooted belief that the refugees should not be eligible for the same social benefits as the local indigenous population. Micro-macro moral dilemma (4), was, however, not identified in the analyzed material. This could depend on the political makeup of the selected discussion forums, where the anti-immigration sentiments were perhaps raging more freely than among the general indigenous population.

Also, the Finnish context with its relatively short history of larger-scale immigration differs from the Austrian one studied by Luedicke, where the immigrants had been an integral part of the society since decades. The arrival of the refugees in 2015 could, for many indigenous, have been the first time they had personal encounters with refugees, thus making the phenomenon harder to relate to. A fifth and novel relational conflict, Mistrust in the righteousness of the welfare system (5) was inductively interpreted from the data. This refers to the suspicions of not only benefit abuse, but also the failure of the welfare system to distribute the benefits fairly. The discussion forum participants were accusing the Finnish social security system for "handing out" money to the refugees to be used on non-essential purchases. This type of indigenous response related to the organization of the state was not part of Luedicke's model, and is interpreted to be related to the specifics of the welfare state context.

In sum, the book chapter corroborates the relational configuration analysis by Luedicke (2015), revealing relational conflicts between the indigenous and the immigrant consumers. However, the conflicts play out slightly differently due to the specifics of the context (Nordic welfare state) and the immigrant demographics (refugees). The study builds on Luedicke's (ibid.) model by inductively adding a fifth relational conflict – the mistrust in the righteousness of the welfare system – interpreted as symptomatic for the so called post-truth society and the increasing mistrust in traditional media and state structures. The results also imply perceived inequality and mistreatment by the social welfare system among the discussion forum participants, thus raising the question of the ability of the society to take care of the basic needs of all of members; and in this way, indirectly increasing the risk for anti-immigration sentiments. The societal implications of the chapter call for enhancing communication towards the general public about how the welfare benefits are distributed and which requirements one needs to meet to be eligible for them.

## 5.3 Refugees' language learning and career aspirations: An agentic lens

Hokkinen, M. & Barner-Rasmussen, W. In review (round 3) for *Journal of International Management*.

Author contribution: First author (85 %) of the article, responsible for data collection and analysis, and producing a complete first draft of the article. Prof. Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen supervised the research process, helped conceptualize the theoretical framework and contributed to the writing (15 %).

The following summary offers answers to research question *#3: How do refugees as active agents navigate the prolonged liminal experience of resettling into Finland?*

### 5.3.1 Overall summary

The article deals with the integration of refugees into the economic life in Finland, with special focus on their agentic decisions regarding the acquisition of language skills relevant for employment. Consumption and labor market participation are intrinsically interconnected; being outside of the labor market severely restricts the possibilities of freely participating in consumption. Securing employment is considered a central aspect of integration into the Finnish welfare state, emphasized in the law (Integration Act 1386/2010) and the policies derived from it. Employment is an important prerequisite for consumption, giving the individual the financial possibility to engage fully in agentic choices on the market. Thus, this article complements the spectrum of studies on refugee integration in Finland. The choices that the refugees make regarding their language learning and employment trajectories are a tangible expression of agency, exemplifying how the individuals are capable of making decisions about their lives despite the evident constrains existing in the receiving society.

The primary theoretical lens of this article is agency. Drawing on language-sensitive international business (IB) research and migration research, the article recognizes that despite the structural constraints in the society and the vulnerabilities connected to the refugee status and experiences, refugees are able to make decisions about their lives drawing from their motivations, personal backgrounds and future aspirations.

Research on international mobility of workforce has so far mostly focused on expats and other voluntary movers (Szkudlarek et al. 2021, Buckley, Doh & Benischke 2017) rather than forcibly displaced people. The importance of language skills in integration into the labor markets of the host country are widely recognized (e.g., EU Common basic principles for immigrant integration policy 2004; Tenzer, Terjesen & Harzing 2017). The local language ideologies, ranging from the "one nation, one language" (Woolard 1998) to viewing

English as the language of globalization (Phillipson 1992) shape how the newcomers are expected to learn and integrate into their country of resettlement and can maintain structures that hinder the agency of the newcomers. In addition to language, also other barriers intersect and create what Lee et al. (2020) call the "canvas ceiling", making it difficult for refugees to reach their career aspirations and to land jobs that would correspond to their previous experience and education.

Looking at the phenomenon from an agency perspective, refugees are perceived as agentic decision-makers within the aforementioned boundaries of the societal context. The agentic decisions are studied in terms of habit, imagination, judgment (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, Mainwaring 2016) and motivation (van Dijk et al. 2021), looking at how and why the refugees choose specific language learning and integration trajectories in the Finnish context. The article seeks to offer implications for more effective and inclusive integration strategies for refugees to find their place in the labor markets in Finland.

The empirical study is based on 36 interviews with recent refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Syria to Finland. The interviews were conducted in three stages; Stage 1 was an exploratory phase consisting of one-on-one photovoice interviews with nine (9) refugees from Iraq. This stage mapped out the general topics related to integration and resettlement in Finland that the refugees themselves brought up as relevant. Based on the experiences from the initial interviews, Stage 2 was set up to further explore these themes that, for example, ranged from the refugees' reasons for coming to Finland, their studies and labor integration trajectories and their dreams for the future. Stage 2 was conducted as micro focus group interviews (3-5 participants in each group) with 23 refugees from Turkey, Iraq and Syria. Stage 2 was supported by an interpreter-assistant who was fluent in both Arabic and Turkish and could not only translate the interviews but also assist in recruiting the participants and interpreting the results. The focus group interviews were semi-structured and dealt with the topics that had been derived from Stage 1. After these two data collection stages and a preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts, a third and final stage was set up to substantiate the initial results and to create a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Stage 3 participants, one (1) Iraqi and three (3) Syrian refugees, were recruited with purposive sampling. The interview questions dealt specifically with the key areas identified in the earlier stages, that is, the participants' integration into working life, their language learning choices and the support services they had used along the way.

### 5.3.2 Main results

The analysis of the interview materials revealed that most of the refugees had made a conscious choice of coming to Finland, often based on the country's reputation of high-level education and egalitarian system. Deriving from their

backgrounds, having often been highly educated and having had successful careers in their home countries, many refugees were eager to continue pursuing their dreams when arriving in Finland. However, as it soon turned out, they had to negotiate their decisions about language learning and career integration trajectories in the – often-contrary – conditions of what kind of future they aspired for themselves and for their children; what they deemed realistically possible to reach; and what type of the official integration advisories were advocating for them. They engaged in *sensemaking* (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005) where they weighed in and aligned the different constraints on macro-level (such as the societal expectations and language ideologies prevalent in Finland) and micro-level (such as the advice given by teachers and integration advisors) in relation to their own motivations and future aspirations.

The results shed light on the ways in which the refugees' agentic decisions about language learning and labor integration are guided by the three elements of agency; habit (the personal backgrounds), imagination (dreams for the future), and judgement (an evaluation of these two). The motivation for longer studies versus swift entry to workforce, as well as the choice of integration language, were strongly shaped by the refugees' family situations and the advice given to them during the integration period. Based on our analysis of the refugees' narratives, we found that refugees were often nudged to think that it would be unrealistic for them to attempt reaching a level of Finnish language sufficient for higher education and qualified career positions. Instead, they were advised to rather aim at blue-collar sectors that are easier to enter with less qualifications, and to industries where there is a lack of workforce in Finland, such as nursing and construction. Thus, especially those who had families to care for, gravitated to focusing on the future aspirations of their children, giving up their own dreams and settling for lower-level positions than they held before their displacement. On the other hand, the younger informants and those who did not have children to care for, were more stern in resisting the official integration trajectories and focused on reaching their own study and career goals, even if that meant focusing on English language rather than Finnish and a longer time needed for education before entering the labor market.

The article increases our understanding of the decision-making processes of refugees. It sheds light on how the individuals' personal motivations, backgrounds, and dreams interact with societal forces in decision-making. The article underlines the ability of refugees to make agentic decisions about their lives. The article also contributes to language-sensitive international business research by shedding light on the effects of job-related language skills on an often overlooked demographic group (Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze 2014, Karhunen et al. 2018) and by building on literature on professional vulnerabilities caused by irrelevant or lacking language skills (Sliwa & Johansson 2014, Aichhorn & Puck 2017).

Based on the results, we offer several suggestions for improving the strategies of refugee integration into the labor markets and into the society as a whole. Firstly, refugees should not be viewed as a homogenous mass when advising them about their integration options, as it is evident that they possess different backgrounds and varying aspirations depending on their own set of priorities. Deriving from this, the people involved in the advisory services should be better equipped and willing to take the refugees' prior skills and education into account, and support also non-traditional integration trajectories, even when that requires a longer education period before entering the workforce. Thirdly and perhaps provocatively, we question the strong focus on the "one nation, one language" ideology (Woolard 1998) ask if it was possible to shift towards accepting English as an alternative integration language, especially when the career goals of the individual are directed towards the global markets. We also suggest that the ways of teaching the local language in the context of Finland could be made more efficient, as it seems that many of our interviewees found the level of language skills reached in the formal integration courses not to be sufficient for a meaningful integration in the workforce or elsewhere in the society. Finally, we point to the need for increased scholarly and societal focus on the specific challenges of integrating into non-English countries and the issues of potentially getting "locked in" a system without global relevance.

*One day that summer, after a year of struggling with grief, nightmares,*
*and the fear that she would never move forward with her life,*
*Dooa joined her host family on a picnic at the beach. After they finished eating,*
*on an impulse Dooa stood up, kicked off her sandals, and walked into the shallow*
*sea until it reached her shoulders. The water was clear and cool and still.*
*She stood there holding her breath, then calmly let her body sink down until*
*the water covered her head for a few moments. When she came out and returned*
*to the shore, she turned back to look at the horizon and thought,*
*I am not afraid of you anymore.*

(Melissa Flemming, 2017:
A Hope More Powerful than the Sea – The Journey of Dooa Al Zamel)

# 6 Discussion and conclusions

In this chapter, I will first briefly summarize the findings of the thesis. Then, I will move on to its contributions from theoretical, methodological and practical perspective. The practical contributions in section 6.2.3 also form the answer to the normative research question #4. In section 6.3, I will discuss the limitations of the thesis and some possible future avenues for research. To conclude, in section 6.4, I will briefly reflect on the overall relevance of this work.

## 6.1 Summary of findings

The aim of this thesis was to explore how refugees navigate the prolonged liminal transition of resettling in Finland, and what role consumption plays in this process. While perceiving the refugees as agentic actors capable of making decisions about their lives and futures, the thesis also took into consideration the contextual powers and the attitudes of the surrounding society in the liminal process.

The results of the empirical studies in article 1 and 3 imply that refugees in Finland remain in a liminal state long after securing a residence permit and completing the formal integration programs. They use liquid consumption to manage this prolonged experience of being "betwixt and between" (Turner 1974). Instead of being attached to tangible possessions, they derive meaning from immaterial, digital consumption, which enables them to keep contact with loved ones far away and to engage in learning and entertainment. The prolonged liminal state of attempting to integrate in Finland is interpreted to force the refugees to liquid consumption. In a country where the welfare system provides the necessary means for immediate survival, the liminal transition can be facilitated with the help of immaterial, liquid consumption. As opposed to previous studies on voluntarily liquid consumers, the refugees dream of returning to solid consumption at a later stage, thus hinting that the liquidity is seen by them as a deviation rather than a desired state.

The analysis of online discussions about the newly arrived refugee consumers in article 2 reveal negative sentiments towards refugee consumers among the locals in Finland, interpreted to be stemming from five different relational conflict sources, drawing on Luedicke (2015). Based on the analysis of the online discussions, locals perceive the refugees as a potential threat to their community and culture, and suspected the newcomers of exploiting the social welfare system while engaging in conspicuous consumption unsuited for "real refugees". In addition to being critical towards the refugees, there is also a rising mistrust in the social welfare system of Finland and its ability to fairly distribute benefits to those in need. It is noteworthy that this mistrust in the societal system may not be organically conceived, but could be a result of deliberate information warfare aiming to shake the social order and to cause chasm between different people in the society.

In their efforts to cope with the liminality and to exit it to a stable state, the refugees exhibit agency. Their decisions on integration trajectories are based on a sensemaking process weighing in not only the societal expectations and advice received, but also their background experiences, their motivations and aspirations for future. They assess their options in the light of what they deemed possible to reach, sometimes lowering their initial expectations, sometimes continuing on their desired path even if it required considerable efforts and time.

## 6.2 Contributions

This section summarizes the theoretical, methodological and practical contributions of the thesis. The practical contributions form an answer to the fourth and final research question: *#4 Which conclusions can be drawn for improving refugee integration in a Nordic welfare state context*?

### 6.2.1 Theoretical contributions

Firstly, the thesis contributes to the consumer research stream that studies the importance of possessions and consumption in liminality (Belk 1988; Mehta & Belk 1991; Hill 1991; Noble & Walker 1997; Nations, Baker & Krszjzaniek 2017; Darveau & Cheikh-Ammar 2021) by challenging the assumption of the centrality of material possessions for people experiencing life transitions. By doing so, it participates in filling the gap identified by Appau, Ozanne and Klein (2000) on a deeper understanding of the significance of consumption in coping during long-term liminality. The thesis joins the emerging stream of literature on liquid consumption (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould 2012; Bardhi & Eckhardt 2017; Mimoun & Bardhi 2021); corroborating that also immaterial and access-based consumption can serve to facilitate liminality. The thesis builds on the existing liquid consumption theory and answers the call by Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) to further focus on non-elite mobile consumers. The thesis does this by elucidating that also precarious and involuntarily liminal consumers use liquid consumption to cope and thrive. The boundaries of liquid consumption are expanded by introducing a new concept, Refugee liquid consumption, characterized by a single, involuntary entry into liquidity, the desire to return to solid consumption in the future, and the importance of solid, close relationships.

Secondly, the thesis contributes to consumer research focused on studying ethnic consumer conflict (Luedicke 2015; Wang, Joy, Belk & Sherry Jr 2020), shedding light on the social dynamics of migration and the interaction between locals and newcomers in the society (as called for by Pennix, Spencer and van Hear 2008 and by Pyrhönen, Leinonen and Martikainen 2017). The study on the attitudes of locals on the consumer behavior of the refugees who arrived in Finland in 2015 unveils Finnish locals' perceptions of refugees and how these

shape what is deemed as acceptable consumer behavior. The thesis builds on Luedicke's (2015) relational configuration analysis by adding a fifth type of ethnic conflict – the mistrust to the righteousness of the welfare system – specific for the Nordic welfare state context. This conflict dimension refers to the locals' suspicions that that the newcomers are favored by the social welfare system while they themselves are unfairly treated. This sentiment is assumed to be a product of the increasing economic scarcity, the failed attempts of the welfare state to take care of all of its members, and the insufficient knowledge of social welfare policies in what could be called a post-truth society.

Thirdly, the thesis contributes to agency research (Ahearn 1999; Emirbayer & Mische 1998), and specifically to the stream dealing with refugee agency (Mainwaring 2016; Schmitt 2019; van Dijk, Knappert, Muis and Alkhaled 2021) by unraveling the decision-making dynamics of refugees during their liminal state of integration into a new country. The thesis corroborates earlier studies on the topic by recognizing the role of societal agencies and advisories in nudging the integration trajectories towards societally desired end-goals. At the same time, the thesis emphasizes the ability and willingness of refugees to make agentic decisions and to follow unorthodox integration trajectories despite the external pressures. Their personal motivations, backgrounds and future aspirations are found to play a key role in this process.

### 6.2.2 Methodological contributions

Methodologically, the thesis offers new insights into online interviewing methods. Conventional methods of face-to-face focus group interviewing were not possible during the empirical Stages 2 and 3 of this thesis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As of now, there is only little research available on the impact of the pandemic on qualitative methods (with the exception of Dodds & Hess 2020), but it is clear that also qualitative researchers all over the world were forced to make a digital leap due to the restrictions in 2020-2021. The pandemic drove me to test online focus group interviewing that I might not have chosen otherwise. The method proved to have several benefits ranging from the ease of setting up groups and scheduling interview times to the specifics related to the particular sensitivities of the population under research – the possibility of not disclosing ones full name or appearing with a video to the other participants. The positive experiences from this project outweigh the drawbacks of online interviewing and may encourage other refugee researchers to try online methods of interviewing.

Connected to this, the thesis also contributes to the ongoing discussion about ethical principles of researching refugees (see, e.g. Leinonen et al. 2020). The empirical interviews of my thesis were precluded by careful consideration of the possible risks to the participants, described in more detail in Chapter 4 about methodology. The experiences from the interviews revealed that while ethical considerations and questions about power balance need to take center stage in any research project involving refugees, the practical interview

situations need to not be overshadowed by this. The experiences from the photovoice interviews and the online focus groups are examples of methods that can help empower the participants and steer the discussion from the researcher-predefined themes to topics relevant for the refugees themselves. The methodological conversations on the use of objects and visual cues in interviewing can also be enriched by these insights.

The thesis also adds to the consumer research field with experiences from interviewing in a multilingual setting. As described in more detail in Chapter 4, I chose to conduct interviews both with and without an interpreter, finding out that the use of a translator was less problematic than I had initially expected. Building on Welch and Piekkari (2006), my experiences underpin the positive sides of using several languages in interviews. The initial misunderstandings led to broader explanations and helped uncover additional cultural insights. The involvement of an in-group interpreter was crucial for finding and recruiting a heterogeneous participant base, and enabled discussions about the cultural context outside the actual interview situation.

Finally, the thesis underlines the importance of an abductive approach, the continuous movement between theory and data during the research process. My experiences corroborate the notion of "breakdown moments" (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007). In this project, it turned out to be impossible to predict the outcome of interviews beforehand, as any literature studies were insufficient to fully uncover the experience of refugees. The surprising results from the interviews required re-working the interview guide and conducting the empirical studies in several stages, emphasizing the need to be flexible with the research design.

### 6.2.3 Practical contributions

The practical contributions of the thesis condense to the fourth a final research question; #4 Which conclusions can be drawn for improving refugee integration in a Nordic welfare state context?

The thesis has several implications for integration practices in the Finnish context. Firstly, the results suggest that refugee liminality in Finland is prolonged due to slow and straggled integration processes. Even the ones who are no longer waiting for their asylum decisions or residence permits are often stuck in a state of continued liminality and instability. The welfare state context could, at best, offer a setting where meaningful integration is expedited by social services, accurate and timely advice on the available opportunities and the necessary financial means to swiftly get back on one's own feet. However, it appears that improvements are still needed in the ways in which the society helps newcomers find their place in the society and exit the liminality. The results of the thesis imply that the Finnish integration system, at present predominantly focused on quick labor market entries and relying on the role of the welfare system in integration (Integration Act 1385/2010; Martikainen, Valtonen & Wahlbeck 2012) would benefit from a wider view of integration

trajectories and goals. Instead of being overly steered by the shifting labor market needs, meaningful integration outcomes in a long-term perspective could be reached by allowing for a wider agency over the decisions for the newcomers themselves. Steering the refugees to stereotypical default integration trajectories risks a lot of previous qualifications and valuable skills going to waste. Allowing time and resources for those who wish to begin or continue their education in Finland, while simultaneously expediting the entry into workforce for those who want to start working as soon as possible require differentiated measures in terms of both linguistic and professional competences, instead of a broad brush approach on all refugees. Changing this would require not only a societal attitude shift, but also structured efforts to improve the competences of the advisors involved in the resettlement process.

There is also a pressing need to address the relational conflicts between the local population and the refugees. While providing a solution to the overarching issues of discrimination and racism is beyond the scope of this project, the thesis does offer some implications from the consumption point of view. As noted in earlier literature (e.g. Phillimore 2012; Charlsey & Spencer 2021), integration is a mutual process, and structured information and engagement campaigns towards the locals could have a positive impact on migrants' integration outcomes. The results of this thesis indicating suspicions and mistrust towards the foundations of the Finnish welfare system point to the need to improve the information about how the social benefits are distributed and what significance consumption plays in the lives of the refugees. The importance of accurate information is heightened in the current atmosphere characterized by disinformation and direct attempts to influence people's attitudes through propaganda.

Increasing the understanding of the reasons behind certain types of refugee consumption – e.g., the use of smartphones, which initially stirred controversies – could diminish the risk of conflict on consumer markets and the society in general. Seeing refugees not in simplistic terms of a victim or a threat but as agentic actors capable and willing to thrive requires increased understanding of the diversity of their backgrounds, current lives and future aspirations. Directed measures by the welfare state can help this process, but equally importantly, every individual in the society, whether a local or a newcomer, can facilitate this by hearing each other's stories.

## 6.3 Limitations and directions for future research

Despite the contributions presented above, I acknowledge that this thesis has certain limitations that would be worth addressing in future research.

The thesis deals with the specific context of the Finnish welfare state. While this type of interpretative, qualitative research projects do not aim for generalizability across contexts, it would still be interesting to expand future studies to, for example, other European countries. As noted in the theoretical

background chapter, studies on refugee coping and refugee consumer behavior are often set in extreme liminal settings, such as refugee camps. While these contexts undoubtedly yield interesting results, more research is needed about the everyday life experiences and integration trajectories of resettled refugees in Europe and other Western societies.

The data collection for this thesis was done in several stages, refining the methods and the questions after each stage and remaining flexible to unexpected turns in the process. Yet, the following alterations and additions to the research design could have strengthened the results: Firstly, using projective techniques, such as working with mood boards and other creative visual methods, could result in interesting data about refugees' lived experiences, and also bridge language differences in case an interpreter is not available. Secondly, a longitudinal research design, i.e., following the same individuals for extended periods of time and interviewing them, for example, once a year, could generate deep and rich data, encompassing not only the developments in the integration trajectories of the participants, but also the societal changes surrounding them. The recently arrived Ukrainian refugees would offer an opportunity to engage in such longitudinal projects starting from the early stages of integration. However, research ethics need to be carefully considered if planning research projects with very recently arrived refugees. Thirdly, a bigger multi-cultural research team with native skills in the languages spoken by the informants could further enhance the rapport and enable direct interviewing without the help of an interpreter.

Theoretically, an interesting avenue for future research would be to look closer into the times *before* the onset of liminality. This phase is often shrugged off as the pre-liminal phase when things follow order and stability. However, the ways in which people consume when they are mentally preparing for a possible future liminality (which might not even actualize) deserves scrutiny. For example, within days from the onset of the war in Ukraine, the sales of certain items such as camping gear, first aid materials and bulletproof vests and helmets peaked in Finland (YLE Uutiset, March 11, 2022). This raises questions about the temporary boundaries of liminality; are we still dealing with a pre-liminal phase or does the change in consumption actually mark the onset of liminality, even though the everyday lives still seemingly continue in an ordinary fashion? The ways people's relationship to consumption and possessions change when expecting extreme liminality deserve our attention as "doomsday prepping" becomes more and more mainstream.

Another possible direction for future theory-development would be the time frames of agency in the refugee experience. The findings of the studies indicated that the refugees were aspiring a future free of liminality and liquidity, and a return to a solid lifestyle. It was, however, not clear how long they envisioned the transition to continue. The family situation of the refugees also affected their view on the future opportunities, older participants with dependents gravitating towards an over-generational perspective and leaving the realization of their dreams to their children. Thus, the temporal dimensions

in which the refugees enact and perceive their agency would be interesting to delve into in the future.

There are also several unexplored angles to liquid consumption. The reliance on immaterial, digital consumption among refugees needs to be studied more, in order to understand its implications for integration. Digital consumption and the social relations it enables appear to facilitate coping during liminality, but future research should study whether it can also have a simultaneous averse effect, hindering integration. This, along with questions relating to the emotions and affects towards liquid vs. solid possessions and the disposal of items could be looked into in future research projects.

## 6.4 Conclusions

Global warming, war, and pandemic are some of the examples of recent and ongoing issues that have recently forced people all over the world to liminal transitions. How individuals manage and cope with unwanted transformations and disruptions has been a leading focus of this thesis. The findings about refugee consumers' agentic strategies to cope with an involuntary transition have significance beyond the realm of forced displacement. The increasingly fluid societal structures and the frequent macro-level shifts have the potential to cause liminality also to other than those considered most vulnerable. As Appau, Ozanne and Klein (2020) note, we may all be heading towards a new "transitional endpoint", long-term liminality with no resolution in sight.

The scarcity of resources, the rising prices and the ecological issues should lead everyone to rethink and reduce their material consumption. The refugees' reliance on liquid, immaterial consumption is a result of their extreme circumstances, but can also serve as an example of resilience for others. The refugees' decline of interest in material possessions and even deliberate disposal of items represent an extreme form of minimalism, one not engaged in by choice. However, also others may learn from this when attempting to reduce their reliance on material possessions.

Knowing the negative connotations of consumption relating to the exploitation of natural resources, the increasing amounts of pollution and waste, the inhumane treatment of labor in many production facilities in the developing countries and the ever-louder cries to stop over-consumption, it may come as a surprise that one would like to dedicate a whole doctoral thesis to studying this topic. While staying critical towards the adverse sides of consumption, my aim has been to shed light on its many forms beyond the material one, and its positive abilities to help us deal with and overcome hardships. It is my wish that this work has offered the readers an alternative viewpoint on what it means to consume.

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# Appendix

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Examples of photos from photovoice interviews

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**Photo 2:** Reminding of home: Cheese familiar from childhood


**Photo 3:** Most important belongings: Phone.


**Photo 4:** Groceries for cooking Middle Eastern food.

**Photo 5:** "My dream car" (photo captured online by interviewee)

**Photo 6:** Most important belongings: computer.

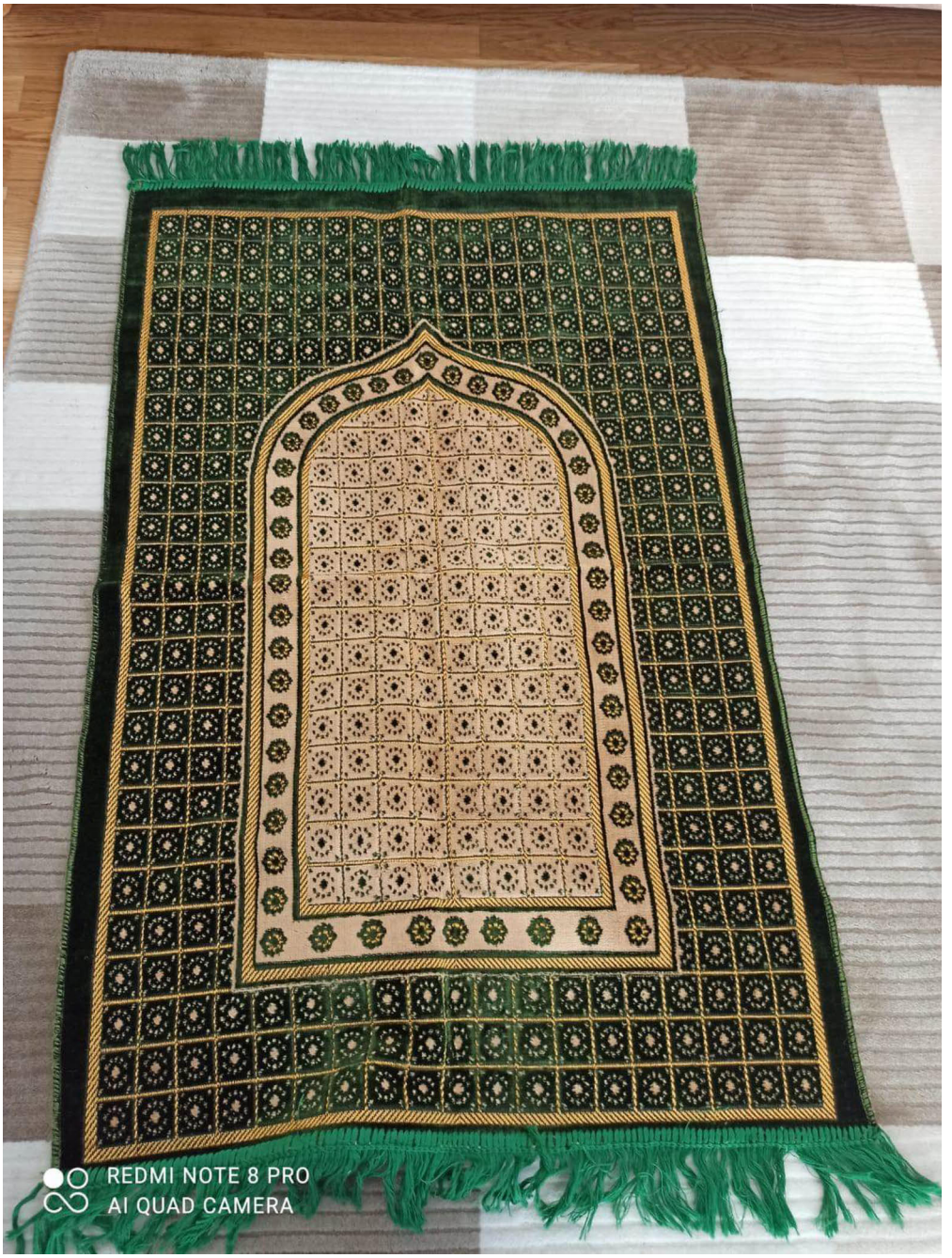


**Photo 7:** Most important belongings: Prayer mat


**Photo 8:** Planning future purchases (iPhone)

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