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**Edited by  
Prof. Wybe Popma and Stuart Francis**

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# Social Media Usage of Asylum Seekers in Germany

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**Abstract:** Topic of our research is the information and communication behaviour of asylum seekers who illegally migrated from the Middle East to Germany. We are primarily focusing on their use of social media and messaging services. The Middle Eastern region was selected because at the present time, people from those countries are the main migrant groups in Germany. Goal of the research project is to understand the asylum applicants' needs on information, self-presentation, social interaction, and entertainment via social media and messaging services. The study's theoretical foundation is the Uses and Gratifications Theory. We applied a combined quantitative and qualitative approach. We interviewed 19 persons mainly from Syria and Afghanistan face-to-face with the help of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide. The asylum seekers' self-estimation of their digital literacy varies between the mediocre (3) and very high (5) level. All 19 interviewees use smartphones and the internet, 18 persons watch TV. In order to give or to receive information via social media and messaging services, nearly all interviewees apply Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. For entertainment, they mainly use YouTube and Facebook. When it comes to social interaction, all participants utilise WhatsApp, some additionally Facebook. Only 15 out of 19 interviewed persons work with social media for purposes of self-presentation; they mostly apply Facebook, but also to a minor extend WhatsApp (Status) and Instagram. Asylum seekers in Germany clearly make use of social media, most notably of Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Further social media as, for instance, social live streaming services or news aggregators are virtually unknown. It would be an interesting aspect of the migrants' instruction to deepen the knowledge on the functionality of a broad range of social media as well as on the services' strengths and weaknesses as well as on the risk to use them.

**Keywords:** social media, information behaviour, migrants, asylum applicants, Middle East countries, Germany

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees

In 2015 and the following years, some millions of migrants illegally crossed the borders into the countries of the European Union leading to a "refugee crisis" in Europe (Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou and Wodak, 2018). Those migrants may be called *temporally illegal*, because indeed the people entered the European Union without permission (e.g., a visa); this status is only a temporarily one as they may apply (and get) asylum in the European countries (Lafazani, 2018). The migrants' home countries were partially destroyed by war or civil war. Most of the migrated people have a Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, or Afghan nationality. In our research study we want to understand the information and communication behaviour of those migrants especially regarding their use of social media and messaging services. There are many studies on people's information behaviour; however, the crucial aspect in information behaviour research is the context (Courtright, 2007).

We were able to identify some recent studies on migrants' and refugees' information behaviour, e.g., the communication behaviour of Syrians in the Za'atari camp in Jordan (Xu and Maitland 2016), the information seeking behaviour of Syrian refugees in Egypt (Manour, 2018), the role of social capital (family, friends, friends of friends) on refugees' information behaviour during the integration process (Oduntan, 2016), refugees' library service needs (Eskola et al., 2017), academic libraries' services for asylum seekers (Taylor Bowdoin et al. 2017), and on refugees' digital skills during job orientation in Germany (Stiller and Trkulja, 2018). Concerning social media, Ahmed and Veronis (2017) studied gendered practices in social media usage among Syrian refugee youth in Ottawa, Canada; Ramadan (2017) questioned the role of Facebook in the communication processes among Syrians inside and outside their country; finally, Dekker et al. (2018) analysed how Syrian asylum migrants in the Netherlands use social media information.

It is this special context that makes our study new and interesting, as it is the first empirical study of social media usage behaviour in the context of the situation of asylum applicants in Germany.

For clarity, we should define some basic terms. A "migrant" is a person who voluntarily left his or her home country. "Refugee" is a narrower term of "migrant", meaning a person who is afraid to be persecuted in their

home country. Migrants or refugees are called “illegal”, if they entered the destination country without valid official permission. An “applicant for asylum” is a migrant who requests an official approval of the status of a refugee. All our interviewees were illegal migrants and asylum applicants.

**Table 1:** Number of asylum applications in Germany (2017) by migrants’ home country

| Country      | Number |
|--------------|--------|
| Syria*       | 50,422 |
| Iraq*        | 23,605 |
| Afghanistan* | 18,282 |
| Eritrea      | 10,582 |
| Iran*        | 9,186  |
| Turkey       | 8,483  |
| Nigeria      | 8,261  |
| Somalia      | 7,561  |
| Russia       | 6,227  |
| Albania      | 6,089  |

\* : Middle East Country. *Source:* BaMF (2018); all home countries with more than 6,000 migrants.

In 2017, the countries of the European Union with the highest numbers of asylum applications were Germany (222,683 applications), Italy (128,855), France (99,330), Greece (58,660), and the United Kingdom (33,850) (BaMF 2018, p. 30). It seems natural to study the situation in Germany as there are by far the most illegal migrants in Europe. In 2015, Germany realized 476,649 asylum applications; in 2016, the number grew up to 745,545 applications, while in 2017 the number decreased to 222,683 cases (BaMF 2018, p. 15). We decided to study mainly those migrants coming from home countries with the most asylum applications. The overwhelming majority of illegal immigrants originate from Middle Eastern countries, namely Syria (rank 1), Iraq (rank 2), Afghanistan (rank 3), and Iran (rank 5) (Table 1). We have to mention the large amount of people from Kurdistan, who have the nationality of Iraq, Iran, Syria, or Turkey; however, there are no exact figures on their concrete numbers. Among the German *Bundesländer*, North Rhine-Westphalia hosts most illegal migrants. In 2017, 53,343 asylum applications were administered in North Rhine-Westphalia, followed by Bavaria with 24,243 (BaMF 2018, p. 18). That is the reason why we conducted our interviews in this *Bundesland*.

There are almost equally as many female and male asylum seekers from Syria and Iran; more males than females are coming from Iraq and from Afghanistan (Table 2). The most frequent age group of all adult migrants in Germany (not only from the Middle East) are people aged 18 to 24 years (18.9% in 2017), followed by 25 to 30 year olds (11.4%). However, the most frequent age group of all illegal migrants includes children aged 0 to 4 (23.2%) (BaMF 2018, p. 24). Mostly young families with their (partly very young) children came to Germany.

**Table 2:** Middle East migrants in Germany by gender

| Country     | Male / Female |
|-------------|---------------|
| Syria       | 51.0% / 49.0% |
| Iraq        | 53.2% / 46.8% |
| Afghanistan | 66.1% / 33.9% |
| Iran        | 58.2% / 41.8% |

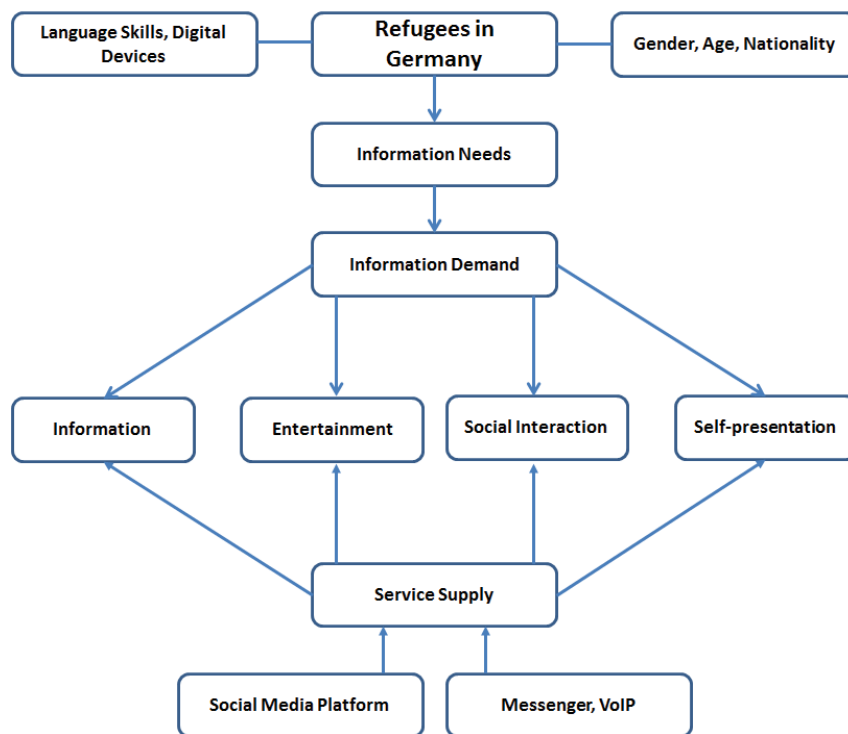
*Source:* BaMF (2018).

## 1.2 Information behaviour

This research study is on the illegal migrants’ information behaviour. In line with Pettigrew, Fidel, and Bruce (2001, p. 44) we define “information behaviour” as “how people need, seek, give, and use information in different contexts, including the workplace and everyday living”. Thus, our approach does not only consider information seeking and consumption behaviour (as often found in information science) (e.g. Cole, 2012; Fisher and Julien, 2009), but information production and dissemination behaviour as well. Wilson (2000, p. 49) also defines “information behaviour” in a rather broad way: “Information Behavior is the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking, and information use. Thus, it includes face-to-face communication with others, as well as the passive reception of information as in, for example, watching TV advertisements, without any intention to act on the information given”. Human information behaviour is embedded in the users’ “information horizons” (Sonnenwald, 2005) including the users’ social contacts and networks (their social capital) as well as their concrete contexts and

situations. As on social media and messaging services both, information production as well as information seeking and reception behaviour, is always given, only this broad definition of information behaviour is sufficient for our research (Scheibe, Fietkiewicz and Stock 2016; Zimmer, Scheibe and Stock 2018).

In line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, researchers may study the users’ needs and then uncover how they are gratified by the media – in our case, by social media and messaging services. Or vice versa, we observe gratifications and look for the needs that are gratified. Of course, researchers may analyse the social and psychological origins of audience expectation and gratifications as well (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973, p. 510). Blumler and Katz (1975) and later MacQuail (1983) found four basic dimensions of gratifications, namely information, personal identity, entertainment as well as integration and social interaction. Information means the motive of giving or finding knowledge (including everyday information behaviour) (Ocepek, 2018); personal identity is related to our motive to define our identity or to present ourselves (e.g., constructing an own Facebook page); entertainment comprises escaping from problems, relaxing, filling time, or sexual arousal; social interaction is the motive to interact with other people and to maintain social capital (for details, see Zimmer, Scheibe and Stock, 2018).



**Figure 1:** Our research model

### 1.3 Our research

In this article, we restrict our scope only to information behaviour on social media and messaging services (and ignore other online services, printed services, and face-to-face contacts). We follow the well-known definition of “Social Media” by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61): “Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Social Media includes, among others, social networking services (as Facebook), sharing services for videos and images (as YouTube and Instagram), social live streaming services (as Periscope) and services for knowledge exchange (as Twitter) (Linde and Stock, 2011, pp. 259 ff.). Messaging services “allow mobile users to send real-time text messages to individuals or groups of friends at no cost” (Church and de Oliveira 2013, p. 2013). Nowadays, WhatsApp is the most prominent messaging service. Additionally, we asked for VoIP services (Voice on Internet Protocol as Skype).

Now we would like to introduce our research model (Figure 1). Starting with the migrants in Germany, we are interested in their gender, age, and nationality as well as in their language skills and their competencies to master digital devices. If there is an information need, e.g. for social interaction, i.e. to send and to receive information (for instance, “I want to speak to my mother in Aleppo, Syria”) an information demand will be



triggered (continuing the example, “I would like to use a device for a video call”). This demand matches (in positive cases) a service supply of a social media platform or a messaging service (i.e., our user applies WhatsApp’s video call functionality). Reading our research model from the bottom to the top, we have to identify all social media platforms and messaging services as well as their supplies. Information demand will match (or maybe not) the supplies concerning the four gratification types of information, entertainment, social interaction, and self-presentation. We try to find answers to the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: How good are the asylum seekers’ digital literacy skills?
- RQ2 to RQ5: How do asylum seekers satisfy their needs for information (RQ2) / entertainment (RQ3) / social interaction (RQ4) / self-presentation (RQ5)? What social media and messaging services do they apply for the given situation?

## **2. Methods**

We are going to analyse the information and communication behaviour of asylum seekers. Therefore, the gratifications sought and obtained have to be considered as embedded in a special context (being a migrant in a strange country) and a very special situation (arriving illegally in the country, being not allowed to work in Germany for the first time after arrival, and not always speaking the German language fluently). Indeed, as Case and Given (2018, p. 48) state, “context and situation are important concepts for information behavior research”. We can assume that the migrants’ information horizons are very special and are influenced by the situation in their home country, the migration from their home country to Germany, and the unfamiliar circumstances along with new social contacts in Germany.

To gather data, we employed the survey methodology, i.e. “a sample of individuals is asked to respond to questions” (Case and Given, 2018, p. 236). The authors spoke to the interview partners in person. While visiting German language courses of an adult education centre, the teachers selected students for our interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. We applied a combined quantitative and qualitative approach (Sonnenwald and Iivonen, 1999, p. 430) and interviewed 19 refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran in the town Dorsten face-to-face with the help of a questionnaire (leading to quantitative data) and a semi-structured interview guide (leading to qualitative data) on Nov 28 and 30 as well as Dec 3, 2018. At the last two dates, a translator for Arabian to German was present. Dorsten is a town with about 75,000 inhabitants, located between the Southern Münsterland and the Northern Ruhr area. It is part of North Rhine-Westphalia’s metropolitan region Rhine-Ruhr.

We asked for specific social media and messaging service usage for each of the (four) main gratification types (entertainment, social interaction, information, self-presentation) including Facebook, Instagram, Live Streaming (e.g., Periscope), Pinterest, Reddit, SMS, Skype, Snapchat, WhatsApp, YouTube, and 9gag. There was always the option to name another service. Concerning the information content, we asked for news, documentary materials, on Germany, on the home country, jobs, education, law, health, and religion, family/friends in their home country, family/friends in Germany, other migrants from the same country and from other countries, and other Germans such as neighbors (social contacts); establishment of social contacts, reports on their own situation, reports on Germany, and “it’s fun” (self-presentation). In each case we provided a category “other”.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Demographics**

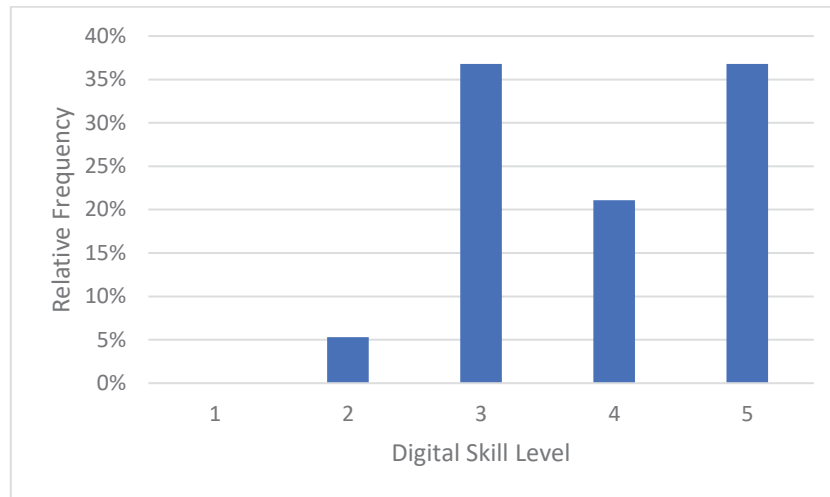
In Dorsten, we interviewed 19 persons who were from Syria (12), Afghanistan (3), Iran (2), Iraq (1), and Morocco (1). Their age varies from 21 to 55 years; the mode is at 34, the median at 30, and the mean at 32.6 years. Ten asylum applicants were male and nine were female. All persons were attending German language courses; three persons at A1 level, nine at A2 level, and seven at B1 level. At the date of the interview, they stayed in Germany from 12 to 48 months, but most of them (mode) 36 months.

A few (21%) only have a *minijob* (part-time job) in Germany, because they need to pass the language class for level B1 if they want to work in a full-time job. All of them were employed in their home country, for example as police officer, car mechanic, electronics technician, bricklayer, teacher, hairdresser, and agricultural engineer.

All interviewed migrants use social media. However, some asylum seekers do not have enough time for social media application, because of housekeeping, caring for their family and children as well as learning the German language. Some interviewees told us that a short time is spent on social media in bed before sleeping.

- RQ1: How good are the asylum seekers’ digital literacy skills?

The researchers asked the interviewees to estimate their digital literacy skills on a 5-point Likert scale. All in all, the asylum seekers’ digital literacy varies between the mediocre (3) and the very high (5) level. There was no single interviewee with a very low self-estimation of his or her digital literacy.



**Figure 2:** The migrants’ digital literacy skills (Likert scale; 1: very low; 5 very high; self-estimation; N=19)

All asked migrants own a smartphone and apply internet services. Also, nearly all watch TV (Table 3). Only few asylum seekers have an own tablet, laptop, or computer. Just a minority applies land-line telephony in order to contact other people.

**Table 3:** Migrants’ devices used for information and communication (N=19)

| Device              | Amount (Percent) |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Smartphone          | 19 (100%)        |
| Internet            | 19 (100%)        |
| Television          | 18 (94.7%)       |
| Radio               | 8 (42.1%)        |
| Tablet              | 4 (21.0%)        |
| Laptop              | 3 (15.8%)        |
| Land-line telephone | 3 (15.8%)        |
| Computer            | 2 (10.5%)        |

**Table 4:** Applied social media services for the satisfaction of their needs on information (N=19)

| Information    |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| Social Media   | Amount (Percent) |
| Twitter        | 6 (31.6%)        |
| Facebook       | 18 (94.7%)       |
| WhatsApp       | 17 (89.5%)       |
| Reddit         | 0 (0%)           |
| YouTube        | 17 (89.5%)       |
| Instagram      | 12 (63.1%)       |
| Live Streaming | 0 (0%)           |
| Telegram       | 2 (10.5%)        |

- RQ2: How do the asylum seekers satisfy their information needs?

Nearly all interviewed migrants apply Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube in order to satisfy their information needs (Table 4). In addition to WhatsApp, two migrants mentioned that they are using Telegram to receive



information. Other services that have also been used were Instagram (63.1%) and Twitter (31.6%). Surprisingly, no single asylum seeker works with Reddit, which is the world-leading news aggregator (Zimmer et al. 2018).

**Table 5:** Asylum applicants’ information needs (N=19)

| <b>Information</b>              |                         |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Information need</i>         | <i>Amount (Percent)</i> |
| News                            | 17 (89.5%)              |
| Thereof: in German language     | 9(47.4%)                |
| ... in language of home country | 13 (68.4%)              |
| ... in English                  | 1 (5.3%)                |
| Documentary reports             | 10 (52.6%)              |
| Thereof: in German language     | 5 (26.3%)               |
| ... in language of home country | 4 (21.1%)               |
| ... in English                  | 2 (10.5%)               |
| On Germany                      | 15 (78.9%)              |
| On home country                 | 13 (68.4%)              |
| Jobs                            | 11 (57.9%)              |
| Education                       | 14 (73.7%)              |
| Law                             | 12 (63.2%)              |
| Health                          | 17 (89.5%)              |
| Religion                        | 7 (36.9%)               |
| Driver license                  | 2 (10.5%)               |
| Children (e.g., education)      | 2 (10.5%)               |

The asylum applicants told us about their needs for news (17 persons); they prefer to receive news in the language of their home country (13) as well as in German (9), but hardly in English (only 1 interviewee) (Table 5). When it comes to documentary reports (10 people have this information need), the migrants prefer German language reports (5) and information in their home language (4), but only 2 interviewees articulate needs for English language reports. Nearly all migrants are interested in information concerning Germany (15) and their home country (13).

However, there are exceptions. Some migrants do not want to know the latest information about their home country “because there is always bad news”, as one of the interviewees told us. The issue “health” dominates (with 17 persons) the topical orientation of the information, followed by education (14), law (12), and jobs (11). Only 7 persons have information needs for religion.

- RQ3: How do the asylum seekers satisfy their needs on entertainment?

**Table 6:** Applied social media services for the satisfaction of their entertainment needs (N=19)

| <b>Entertainment</b> |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Social Media</i>  | <i>Amount (Percent)</i> |
| Twitter              | 1 (5.3%)                |
| Facebook             | 14 (73.7%)              |
| WhatsApp             | 11 (57.9%)              |
| Reddit               | 1 (5.3%)                |
| YouTube              | 17 (89.5%)              |
| Instagram            | 7 (36.8%)               |
| Live Streaming       | 0 (0%)                  |
| TikTok               | 2 (10.5%)               |
| Snapchat             | 1 (5.3%)                |
| 9gag                 | 0 (0%)                  |

For entertainment, our interviewees prefer YouTube (17 persons), followed by Facebook (14), WhatsApp (11), and Instagram (7) (Table 6). All other social media services only play a minor role in the gratification of this need. It is rather surprising that a typical entertainment service as 9gag is not used by the migrants.

- RQ4: How do the asylum seekers satisfy their needs for social interaction?

All of the interviewed asylum seekers (19 persons) are communicating and interacting with social contacts through WhatsApp. The second most used social media service was Facebook (14). For VoIP only two respondents apply Skype (Table 7) as WhatsApp is more popular and contains more similar functions with easier access than Skype.

**Table 7:** Applied social media services for the satisfaction of their needs for social interaction (N=19)

| <b>Social Interaction</b> |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Social Media</i>       | <i>Amount (Percent)</i> |
| Twitter                   | 1 (5.3%)                |
| Facebook                  | 14 (73.7%)              |
| WhatsApp                  | 19 (100%)               |
| Reddit                    | 0 (0%)                  |
| YouTube                   | 0 (0%)                  |
| Instagram                 | 5 (26.3%)               |
| Live Streaming            | 0 (0%)                  |
| TikTok                    | 2 (10.5%)               |
| Snapchat                  | 3 (15.8%)               |
| Skype                     | 2 (10.5%)               |

Although with live streaming there were ideal channels to interact synchronously, i.e. in real-time (as, for instance, YouNow or Periscope) (Scheibe, Fietkiewicz and Stock 2016; Zimmer 2018), no interviewee seems to know that this option exists.

Let us have a look at the asylum applicants' needs for social interaction (Table 8). Of course, all of them are cultivating contacts with their family in their home country. But, additionally, most of them interact with friends in Germany (18), other migrants from their home countries (18), and friends from the home country (16). 14 persons like to contact their family members in Germany and other migrants in Germany. Nearly all migrants (17) are going to expand or to cultivate social contacts to German people. Surprisingly, only three asylum seekers are having social contacts to a German official advisor. Upon request, our interviewees told us that not every migrant in Dorsten has an advisor.

**Table 8:** Asylum applicants' needs for social interaction (N=19)

| <b>Social Interaction</b>                         |                         |
|---|-------------------------|
| <i>Information need</i>                           | <i>Amount (Percent)</i> |
| Family in home country                            | 19 (100%)               |
| Friends in home country                           | 16 (84.2%)              |
| Family in Germany                                 | 14 (73.7%)              |
| Friends in Germany                                | 18 (94.7%)              |
| Other migrants from home country                  | 18 (94.7%)              |
| Other migrants in Germany (not from home country) | 14 (73.7%)              |
| Advisor   | 3 (15.8%)               |
| With Germans                                      | 17 (89.5%)              |

Indeed, migrants apply further offline and online services for social interaction, for instance, e-mail (14 interviewees), SMS (11), land-line telephone (3), and – only for official documents – letters (8).

- RQ5: How do the asylum seekers satisfy their needs for self-presentation (RQ5)?

As four persons do not present themselves on social media, we have only data for 15 interviewees (Table 9). They mainly apply Facebook (14), the Status functionality of WhatsApp (8), and the image sharing service Instagram (8).

**Table 9:** Applied social media services for the satisfaction of their needs for self-presentation (N=15)

| <b>Self-presentation</b> |                         |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Social Media</i>      | <i>Amount (Percent)</i> |
| Twitter                  | 0 (0%)                  |
| Facebook                 | 14 (93.3%)              |

| <b>Self-presentation</b> |                         |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>Social Media</i>      | <i>Amount (Percent)</i> |
| WhatsApp (Status)        | 8 (53.3%)               |
| Reddit                   | 0 (0%)                  |
| YouTube                  | 0 (0%)                  |
| Instagram                | 6 (40.0%)               |
| Live Streaming           | 0 (0%)                  |
| TikTok                   | 2 (13.3%)               |
| Snapchat                 | 1 (6.7%)                |

The concrete needs of the migrants' self-presentation on social media are to show their own situation (8 interviewees), simply for fun (7), and to tell others about their life in Germany (3).

#### **4. Discussion**

While Dekker et al. (2018) analysed the asylum applicants' social media usage before migration and during migration we concentrate on the social media application after migration. Asylum seekers in Germany clearly make use of social media, most notably of Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

The migrants' self-estimation of their digital literacy varies between the mediocre and the very high level. All interviewees possess smartphones and have connection to the internet, 18 of the 19 interviewed persons watch TV.

In order to give or to receive information via social media and messaging services, nearly all interviewees apply Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Even Instagram is more often considered as information source than Twitter. What information is looked for? Asylum applicants articulate information needs especially for news and documentary reports, both in German language and in the language of their own home country. Many migrants are searching for information on news about Germany and a little bit less on the situation in their home country. They want to be informed about health, education, jobs, and the law as well.

For entertainment, they mainly use YouTube and Facebook. When it comes to social interaction, all persons utilise WhatsApp, some additionally Facebook. There is a broad spectrum of social contacts, for instance, the family in their home country, friends and other migrants in Germany, and German people.

Only 78.9% of the interviewed migrants work with social media for purposes of self-presentation; they mostly apply (like always) Facebook, but also to a minor extend WhatsApp (Status) and Instagram.

Our study has some limitations. Our sample size is very small (19) and there were no children or seniors involved. Also, the interview partners are based in only one town in North Rhine-Westphalia. Furthermore, all interview partners are students of German language courses in Dorsten. In this article we concentrated on social media usage and ignored the gathered data for all other online services.

Although we have conducted qualitative interviews, in this article we are mainly presenting the quantitative data. We have already planned to perform further interviews with children and young adults and to broaden the geographical area as interviews in other cities are planned as well. Of course, the qualitative data of all interviews should and will be evaluated by a content analysis. Furthermore, we will be able to formulate and study new research questions with the knowledge gained through our interviews. Are there any practical consequences from our study? Many social media systems as, for instance, social live streaming services or news aggregators are more or less unknown. It would be an interesting aspect of the migrants' instruction to deepen the knowledge on the functionality of a broad range of social media as well as the services' strengths and weaknesses.

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**Katrin Scheibe, Franziska Zimmer and Wolfgang Stock**

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