

# The impact of technology, education and gender on conceptualizations and creation of home among immigrants and refugees

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## ABSTRACT

*When considering the conceptualization and actual physicality of home as described and created by refugees and immigrants, many factors contribute to this critical component of their journeys. By examining specifics of the concept and creation of home, differences become apparent, impacted by various internal and external factors. Since multiple modes of technology have become more readily available and accessible to immigrants and refugees, technology has become a significant influence on creation and connections of home. Similarly, regardless of cultural background, gender has a significant impact, both in the creation of a home space and in conceptualizations of home. This study examines the conceptualization and creation of home among a small group of immigrant teenagers in the United States and its importance in transitioning to a new country. In addition, the effect and interplay of education, gender and technology on the understanding of these concepts of home are explored.*

## KEYWORDS

*Home, refugees, immigrants, technology, education, gender*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Si l'on considère la conceptualisation et la matérialité du foyer tel qu'il est décrit et créé par les réfugiés et les immigrés, de nombreux facteurs contribuent à cette composante essentielle de leur voyage. En examinant les spécificités du concept et de la création du foyer, des différences apparaissent, influencées par divers facteurs internes et externes. Depuis que de nombreux moyens technologiques sont devenus plus facilement disponibles et accessibles aux immigrés et aux réfugiés, la technologie a une influence significative sur la création et la connexion des foyers. De même, quel que soit le contexte culturel, le sexe a un impact significatif, à la fois sur la création d'un espace domestique et sur la conceptualisation du domicile. Cette étude examine la conceptualisation et la création d'un foyer au sein d'un petit groupe d'adolescents immigrés aux États-Unis et son importance dans la transition vers un nouveau pays. En outre, l'effet et l'interaction de l'éducation, du genre et de la technologie sur la compréhension de ces concepts de foyer sont explorés.*

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Foyer, réfugiés, immigrants, technologie, éducation, genre*

## INTRODUCTION

“There’s no place like home...there’s no place like home” (Vidor et al., 1939). These famous often quoted words expressed by Dorothy in the film *The Wizard of Oz* continue to resonate with many, but take on a different meaning in today’s world of uprooted immigrants and refugees. This classic movie coincidentally is thought to be an allegory concerning the collapse of populism at the turn of the twentieth century, and as such, may seem an interesting opening to this chapter, since right wing populism has been connected with the refugee crisis (Campo, et al., 2021; Taylor, 2005). In the film, Dorothy has been uprooted from her home, and is in the strange land of Oz, yearning for what she does not know is a still attainable home in Kansas. Correspondingly, in modern times, refugees may be longing for homes that no longer exist as they knew them; homes may have been destroyed, and/or exist in war torn areas prohibiting return. Family members and friends may have died in their home country or in their journey to asylum. Some may be scattered to different countries. Immigrants and migrants may have left their home by choice, perhaps searching for more stable economic conditions, but still miss their native homes. Within all these groups, it is hard to disentwine the concept of home with their existence (Taylor, 2013). Home exists with some conceptual components maintaining constancy but most other components in a state of flux for many refugees and immigrants. The intricate interwoven components of home specifically with regards to these populations, the interrelated effects of the changing landscapes of what home means to them, and also specific factors that impact the creation and understanding of home in their new environments, are fertile areas for further study. It must be noted that, for some families, this is affected by the presence of grief over the loss of home, change of lifestyles, separation from friends and family, and employment opportunities. By furthering the understanding of these factors, facilitation in the development of new avenues of support in the re-envisioning of home, albeit in perhaps temporary, new location(s), is tantamount towards assisting refugees and immigrants in their movement towards building successful lives in their new settings.

Displacement of individuals from their homes and countries is growing at an alarming rate. By May, 2021, over 100 million individuals were forcibly required to leave their homelands, increasing the number of displaced individuals by 10.7 million from the previous year (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). In 2020, the number of immigrants was 281 million individuals (Natarjan et al., 2022). These data comprise two expansive groups who are recreating home, and often experiencing significant loss – refugees, i.e. those who have been forced to leave their homes crossed international borders due to war, terrorism, etc., and migrants/immigrants i.e. those who are not covered by the legal protections afforded to refugees, but have chosen to leave their homes for a variety of reasons, such as economic reasons, reuniting with family, etc. (Edwards, 2016; UNHCR, 2016a). There are further distinctions between migrants and immigrants as well, in that migrants tend to move from place to place seeking better working opportunities, whereas immigrants often remain in one chosen area, and frequently seek citizenship; however, both migrants and immigrants share the characteristic of choosing to leave their native countries, often in search of better economic opportunities (International Rescue Committee, 2023). Despite these delineations, the reasons for leaving a native country are not always clear – oftentimes, the reasons overlap or are interrelated (Hynie, 2019). All of these groups are placed in new countries with perhaps new languages, new cultures, and frequently the stigma of being the Other. This occurs while they are experiencing the loss of “home” in their birth country, and tasked with the creation of a different home, either temporary or permanent, in a different location, two factors that are often unknown when starting their lives anew.

Hence, it is critical to examine what the term “home” means since it can be a significant factor in easing the transitions to new homes. This may be done while reviewing current

theorists' approaches defining the various understandings of home. In viewing the dimensions of home as put forth by prominent theorists, and considering the definitions and concepts expressed by our immigrant interviewees, a broader understanding of home and factors that are impacted in its development will be discussed.

Moreover, while using these understandings as a grounding foundation, two areas that have distinctive impact with the conceptualization and creation of home will be explored. The first is how technology has helped form/change the conceptualization of home to immigrants and refugees. The second will be how gender impacts it as well. The interrelationship between gender and technology use with relation to home may also become apparent.

A group of teenagers who are attending public schools in a modest sized city in northeastern United States were interviewed as part of a voluntary after-school project. Two students were from Central America, and two from South America, with three males and one female. While they identify as immigrants and none were identifying as refugees, one was leaving the country after four years to return to her native home and had alluded to political unrest as rationale for leaving as part of her narrative. To maintain confidentiality, their names have been changed in this text; we will use the names Luis, Carlos, Victor and Ana. This population of interviewees was chosen because they may have had more access to technology through their school systems than some adults, and may be more reliant on technology because of the importance of the role social media plays in young adults' lives (Janicke-Bowles et al., 2022; Veinberg, 2018). They provide narratives concerning their ideas about home and the role of technology in shaping their ideas of home.

Furthermore, this group of teenagers was chosen because they live in a school district that is very supportive of gender rights, sexual preference, and transgender concerns. Because of this open atmosphere, these students might be more exposed to examining or understanding gender issues than their parents or their peers living in others areas of the USA. In addition to technology components of questions, they were asked to examine how they observed gender's influence as it relates to conceptualization and creation of home.

## **HOME AS BOTH THE CONCEPTUAL AND CONCRETE AMONG IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES**

### ***Foundational factors impacting home creation***

Much research has been published on the concept and ideation of home, and this becomes even more critical in today's changing societies. With 3.6 percent of the world's population not living in their native countries (UNHCR, 2023), many individuals are residing in a temporary home, i.e. a refugee camp or temporary home in a country that is not their destination of choice. Alternatively, their home may actually be where they intended to have as their final stop, their new home. The cause for their leaving birth home can significantly impact their ideas about their new home and about their concept of home.

Some of the reasons for leaving include wanting to improve economic status, experiencing impingement on human rights, having to contend with rigid, embedded societal prejudices and social justice issues, and improvement of healthcare and educational access, among others (UNHCR, 2023). Poor governance in a country may be the root cause for leaving. However, when delving deeper into each of these areas, the interconnection and sometimes lack of clarity in terms of deciding if an individual is a refugee or immigrant becomes apparent in some cases, while very clear in others. Economic causes can range from abject poverty, lack of economic opportunities, to even lack of access to technology as motivating factors for leaving a homeland. Safety factors can be interrelated with political factors ranging from political differences to wars, persecution, and social justice related actions (or lack thereof).

Environmental factors, such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, etc. clearly often cause groups to leave their homes, but tend to cause internal migration within the home country as opposed to international migration. Demographic causes can be to population crowding, but also could be interrelated with employment opportunities, as in countries with a large percentage of their population in the under thirty age group seeking jobs (Hynie, 2019; Murtaza, 2020; Telsac & Telsac, 2022;). Being formally identified as refugees offers some protections not available to migrants and immigrants. However, because refugees' experiences in transitioning to life in a new country, their lives may be more fraught with anxiety, difficulty in acceptance, and resentment. Migrants and immigrants generally can choose to return to their native countries and, unlike refugees, should have the protection of their government if they do decide to return (UNHCR, 2016a). All of these groups may have embarked upon difficult journeys before arriving to their current placement, but it is important to recognize that they have unique backgrounds that may impact the ease in which they are able to create a new home.

Differences existed within our interview group, and some of this may have related to reasons for leaving. Three out of the four expressed contentment in their new homes, with Carlos and Luis specifically noting that they had a better future in the United States as opposed to their birth home in Central America. Ana, however, expressed some disappointment with her new home in the United States. She suggests her reason for leaving was not for better economic situations, and notes "when the country changes, it is very traumatic for a person". Additionally, she sorely misses extended family members who remained in her native country, and misses communicating with them.

The rationale for leaving a country and the location where the new home is created intertwine with how the new home is perceived. Some countries have been accepting immigrants and refugees in significantly larger proportions as compared to others in the world. For example, the United States has 50.6 million immigrants, with Germany and Saudi Arabia having the next greatest amount (United Nations, 2019). Similarly, with regards to number of refugees, Turkey, Columbia, and Germany, respectively, have the most refugees within their borders (UNHCR, 2022). All of these immigrants and refugees are integrating into a new society, finding ways to live, work, and thrive within a new culture, while maintaining components of their birth culture. These individuals are trying to create new homes, sometimes by choice, sometimes by force, sometimes seeking to make permanent homes, and sometimes needing to make temporary homes in areas and locations far less favorable and less similar in culture than their original homes before conflict forced them to flee. Many, especially refugees, are contending with transnational issues, in that instead of demanding that refugees must select one country to which they will identify, they most likely will be in the position to have multiple ties and allegiances to more than one country. These connections contribute towards the need for understanding the concept of home as a dynamic, changing concept instead of static, and while not necessarily developed by choice, they are often, nonetheless, a reality in the lives of refugees (Taylor, 2013).

It is important to understand what home represents and how creating a personal place of safety is critical to these populations. How it is perceived by immigrants and refugees, and how creation or re-creation, so to speak, of such a space and such a concept within their uprooted lives is a vital part of successful integration into their new societies. Grønseth and Thorshaug (2022) point out that the process of "making home" is a key component of "making self". Murray (2014) highlights the importance of understanding of the concept of home plays in identity, space and belonging of these individuals, since these are crucial components of their well-being. Mohammed (2020) notes that for refugees who do not have the luxury of returning home for holidays or the ability of foreseeable return to their home countries, the process of settling down and rapid integration into their new societies is even more urgent. For immigrants

and migrants who are economically disadvantaged and lack the ability to return to their original homes, this also holds true.

All of these components contribute to the ability of immigrants or refugees to thrive in their new home. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the experiential differences each individual brings to their new setting, and support these differences, for they may significantly impact the creation, conceptualization, and transition to a home. This is reflected in interviews with students.

### ***Theoretical components of home***

In her work with refugees in Cyprus, H. Taylor (2013) has identified four key components of home to consider while working with refugees and migrants. These include the spatial, the temporal, the material, and the relational aspects of home.

The spatial dimension of home questions if there exists an innate connection between people and place. If there was not some truth to this, it would imply that refugees and immigrants could simply make a new home anywhere. However, it is apparent that deep connections exist between people and place, and in the case of refugees, perhaps even more so, since this represents something, they perceive as unchanging, while their current lives may seem in a state of flux (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021; Taylor, 2013).

The cyclical nature of home and the repetitiveness that tends to occur around home best describes the temporal nature of home (Taylor, 2013). This does not necessarily follow a linear timeline, but instead is connected to events and occurrences that are part of the human life cycle. There is, in a sense, some predictability in this. When refugees and immigrants are thrust into a new environment, there can be a longing for this past, temporal dimension of home in their native countries. Part of that cycle may be brought forth to their present setting in having set a goal to return home, to complete the cycle (UNHCR, 2006). When considering home when placed in the framework of its relation to immigrants and refugees, there is clearly an increased complexity, no longer a linear timeline, but instead including ruptures not only in the timeline but also in personal histories (Grønseth & Thoshaug, 2022).

This cyclical, nature of home is represented by Ana as a longing to return home, implying a wish to end this time in a new home that is so different (indeed, she will be leaving the United States soon). Carlos, on the other hand, describes how his ideas about home have both changed and not changed since coming to the United States. He mentions what hasn't changed "is the fact that I can still go back to my native country and visit my family". The material component of home is related to people's interaction with nature related components of their country. Food plays an important part in this – not only in the specific types of food, but how they are accessed, i.e. via gardens, olive groves, etc. These components have a surprisingly important impact on their culture, and pieces of this can become symbolic reminders as they create new homes abroad (Taylor, 2013). Our group of interviewees discussed this in relation to extended family members cooking and creating recipes that were replicas of what they ate in their native countries. Victor states that they make soups that are especially similar to what he ate in his birth home. Luis mentions that "whenever his grandmother comes to visit, she cooks(s) the same way she would back in my native country". He states that his aunt does as well. Carlos also mentions having traditional dishes served by his grandmother. Ana notes that although she does eat dishes that were served in her native country, "it doesn't taste the same ...because products from my country are hardly [ever] found in [local] market[s]". Hence, Ana makes a distinction to what is available in this geographic area, and how it is not the same as what she had access to in her native country.

Another strong component of home is the relational aspect, in that social connections and cultural practices that occurred daily with friends and family members in their native countries can be deeply missed or changed in their new homes. Home is not just as it relates to

the individual, but also as the individual relates to family and friends (Rosbrook & Schweitzer, 2010; Taylor, 2013). Of course, part of the intricacies of the relational aspect of home is its impact not only on the social, but how these social connections also impact the economic well-being or lack thereof, and how they can help with the formation of opportunities and empowerment (Kissoon, 2015).

All four of our interviewees mention family and/or belonging in their description of home. With regards to their new homes in the United States, Carlos discusses how he has extended family members that live within fifteen minutes of his home. Both he and Luis mention visits from their grandmother. Ana clearly connects her conception of home in her native country to her grandparents, mentioning them in detail when describing her previous home, and succinctly expressing how much she misses them. The lack of their daily involvement in her life is definitely something she views as a void in her home in the United States. There is, perhaps, a spatial component to this as well, in that regular communication with them seems absent, and when she returns after four years, the spatial component may become more apparent to her, as she is relying on memories that are connected to place, without envisioning these important family members as having moved forward, continuing their lives while she has gone.

Education plays a crucial role in shaping one's sense of home, particularly for immigrants and refugees adapting to new environments. Schools serve as spaces where individuals build connections, develop a sense of belonging, and integrate into their new communities. For children like Ana, Carlos, and Luis, education can provide stability and continuity, offering opportunities to form relationships that compensate for the absence of extended family. Additionally, educational experiences influence cultural adaptation, language acquisition, and personal growth, allowing individuals to bridge the gap between their past and present homes. In this way, the school environment extends beyond academics, becoming a vital factor in shaping one's evolving concept of home.

Home cannot be easily defined as merely a space, a physical location – it has strong psychological components. It can represent a goal, something to seek. It can represent a place to rest, or a place of opposites – a calm space, a place of conflict, happiness and sadness, an area that represents security, even in the containment of all these varied dimensions of life (Papadopoulos, 2019). As such, its existence, however changing, is integral towards the immigrants' and refugees' transition to their new environments.

### ***Gender and its role in creation of new homes***

As migration occurs, the immigrants and refugees find themselves no longer part of one culture but many cultures they may encounter during their journeys. They are embedded within new areas for varying lengths of times, and interacting with individuals from differing cultural backgrounds (Jurkova & Guo, 2021). Yet throughout these encounters, this movement between cultures, indeed, the movement itself is gendered, not only in appearance and following social norms, but even in roles within the home, and in adjustment to their new circumstances (Twigt, 2019).

Many women are leaving more patriarchal environments and relocating to environments wherein women are working outside the home by choice, or by necessity (Arvanitis & McLoughlin, 2023; Culcasi, 2019). Refugee women are often required to change their traditional roles of caregivers, and now work outside of the home. In addition, they may, in some circumstances, become the primary head of the household in their new environment. Clearly, family composition, economic need of family and the country wherein new homes are being established all play a role in the extent of gender role changes within the creation of new homes.

Luis noted that in his native country, fairly stereotypical gender roles existed in creation of the home. Without being asked, he volunteers his ideas about these roles. He states “usually the guy works hard and provides food and a roof for the family while the woman takes care of the house ...and does what she has to do for the children...I don’t think one is better than the other”. Ana observes that “if you’re a woman, the only thing you do is clean, take care of the children, wash...what the women do”. Yet in the United States, Ana expresses missing family time “... [we] try to spend more time with the family” yet both of her parents are working, and to find to spend together at home has been difficult.

When new home sites are near family members and populated by large groups from the same country or similar cultures, gender roles from birth countries are not as drastically changed (Twigt, 2019). Carlos’s aunts and uncles live very close to his new home. Within our interview group, grandmothers and aunts brought components of their native homes in their new home spaces by the food they cook, relegating the role of cooking to the female as done in his native country. When Carlos’s grandmother visits, “she cook(s) the same way she would back in my native country”. Again, paralleling traditional gender roles, Luis admits that he doesn’t cook but when his aunt and grandmother come to visit, [they] create food that is like that which he ate in his native country as well. Through these gendered roles, the female relatives are bringing components of their native homes into the creation of their new homes.

When discussing their native country family composition, many interviewees were cared for by extended family females. Luis did not have contact with his mom and dad with his aunt being his primary caregiver. Both Luis and Victor commented on how female family members reinforced societal norms; i.e. the importance of respect to others (Luis) and carrying out traditions and [rules] to make the house a better one (Victor). Ana deeply misses her grandmother, and discusses how her grandmother always showed her affection and love.

The role of fathers, grandfathers, and uncles were important in our interviewees’ native countries, but were generally quite different from that of female family members. Luis noted that uncles provided him with rides when needed, taught him how to work and do things around the house to help, and, more than the females, helped him with having fun. Carlos revealed that his father and step-grandfather gave him good sense of home by taking him “places we had never seen”. Victor thought the main distinction between female and male roles was that male(s) help a lot with the economic part of home creation. Ana describes how she really misses her grandfather, and how he helped her with schoolwork, protected her, and made her laugh.

These teenagers are observing some of the differences in gender role firsthand as they struggle with feeling “at home” in such a different culture. While some of the “machismo” component of Hispanic male cultural expectations have lessened in recent years, clearly there exists some clashing in the adoption of new roles, especially of women. Miller (2013) notes that after moving to the United States, Latina women are still expected to continue the role of caretaker in their household, while additionally taking on an economic support role, since quite often, their male partners are working for low wages that need supplementation. Ana addresses the impact of this economic burden specifically to how she is unhappy with her current home in the United States, in that she misses being able to be together as a whole family because they are at work, and when at home, are engaged with “important” telephone calls.

Nonetheless, students felt that gender roles were more flexible in the United States. They had diverse observations about this. Carlos attributed more flexible gender roles to education. Luis attributed some of this flexibility as having an economic component, whereas he observed that in rich households, the woman stays home. Ana alludes to the economic component when discussing how she misses having family members around her more regularly, stating that “we have to work very hard in this country”.

### ***Technology and the creation of home***

Technology plays a significant role in shaping both the educational experiences and the sense of home for immigrants and refugees. As they transition to new environments, access to technology helps bridge the gap between their past and present lives. It serves as a vital tool for communication, economic stability, and social integration (Marlowe, 2020; UNHCR, 2016b).

The use of social media among refugees and immigrants has been examined specifically with regards to its use in bridging and bonding and how these two components can ease the transitioning to a new country (Alencar, 2018; van Uden & Jongerden, 2021). Bonding implies the creation of strong connections, while bridging consists of starting to utilize or explore different networks because of looser connections with individuals in those networks. An example of use of social media for bonding purposes would be when it is used to contact/chat with family and friends, sometimes as part of their new environment, or to connect with family both nearby, as well as family members that they no longer see (Alencar, 2018; van Uden & Jongerden, 2021).

However, the accessibility and usage of technology vary significantly. While some students have multiple devices at their disposal, others may have limited or no access. This digital divide can influence feelings of isolation and difficulty in adapting to a new environment. For instance, a student with little access to technological devices expressed a stronger sense of disconnection from her new home, missing both her family and cultural experiences from her country of origin.

With our group of interviewees, their use of social media was predominantly for communication and bonding. Three students had access to a tablet and owned Smartphones. While most had access to computers, one stated she had no access to one. They used their Smartphones more than other technology, and most used them for communication and games. They noted that their parents used these tools primarily for communication. Carlos shared the economic bonus a Smartphone brings to his family. His father used the phone often for work, since he has a landscaping and a construction company. Carlo notes that the use of the phone makes it much easier for his father. Both Carlos and Ana noted some concerns about the uses of the Smartphone. Ana shared that the use of the phones in her family prevents her from feeling “at home” because of the large amount of time spent on phones. Carlos notes the importance of a person being able to control the use of the Smartphone, implying overuse was not good.

Interestingly, the one interviewee who described herself as having very little access to technological devices (i.e. tablets, computers, Smartphones) was the interviewee who verbalized feeling the least at home in the USA, and the one who sorely missed her family members left behind in her native country. She also misses the food from her country and notes how hard it is to live in the USA.

Education is another key aspect where technology plays an influential role. Students use it for school assignments, research, and communication with peers and teachers. However, disparities in access to technology can create educational gaps, making it more challenging for students with fewer resources to keep up. Schools and communities must work towards providing equitable technological resources to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, can benefit from digital learning tools and opportunities.

In conclusion, technology significantly impacts the experience of home and education for immigrant and refugee students. While it offers ways to stay connected, support family businesses, and enhance learning, its accessibility and mindful use are critical in shaping a positive and inclusive experience in a new country.



## CONCLUSIONS

When resettling in a new country, immigrants and refugees bring conceptual and concrete components of home based upon their homes in their native country, their experiences, and their reasons for journeys. Successfully establishing a new home is an important step in transitioning to their new lives. Access to technology, especially for communication with peers and family was an important factor for easing this transition among our group of teenagers. It was also noted that technology helped their parents in employment related areas. Additionally, they noted while gender roles shifted in the United States with regards to females working outside the home, sometimes negatively impacting the sense of home, females also played a more traditional role in bringing components of their native homes into their new home creation with cooking traditional recipes. None reported specific changes in the gender roles for males.

For many, education becomes a bridge between their past and present, helping them integrate into their new society while maintaining ties to their heritage. The presence of family members, as mentioned by the interviewees, reinforces this sense of home, but educational experiences also contribute significantly to their transition. A supportive learning environment can ease the challenges of cultural adjustment by fostering community, offering language acquisition opportunities, and providing stability amidst change. Just as home is not merely a physical space but a deeply psychological and emotional construct, education, too, extends beyond the classroom, shaping identity, aspirations, and one's sense of belonging in a new country.

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