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Social Literacy Practices of Afghan and Somali Refugees in a Transitional Setting

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the social literacy practices of Afghan and Somali refugees in a transitional context. Although refugees have been the subject of previous research in various domains, our understanding of their literacy practices in urban areas, particularly in Malaysia, is still limited. The lack of literacy research in this setting exposes a gap in the current literature aimed at better understanding refugee literacy practices in a transitional situation. Thus, this study examines urban refugee literacy experiences via the lens of literacy as a social practice. It was exploratory in nature and used a qualitative methodology. Face-to-face interviews with four refugees were conducted at two community centres to collect primary data. In addition, field notes based on community centre visits provided by the participants were used as a secondary data source in the study to understand the literacy experiences of the participants better. The findings indicated that participants enacted literacy practices in their transitional setting for three primary purposes: to increase their funds of knowledge, to enact personal agency, and for community building. These results challenge the stereotype that refugees are powerless and highlight avenues or ways in which refugee communities can be supported in a transitional context.

Keywords: Literacy practices, Malaysia, refugees, social practices, transitional context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Research on refugee experiences often positions refugees in states of powerlessness. Malaysia, like other countries, has been receiving an increasing number of refugees from all over the world. Around 182,780 refugees have registered with the UNHCR in Malaysia by October 2022 (“[Figures at a glance](#),” 2022). Of this number, the majority are Rohingyas from Myanmar, while others are from Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, and other countries. The reasons for refugees fleeing vary as each refugee group has had its problems and struggles. In Afghanistan, for example, refugees are fleeing the decades-long conflict. On the other hand, Somali refugees are fleeing war and famine. These two countries’ refugees face distinct challenges and difficulties. Furthermore, individuals within each group have distinct experiences and backgrounds, as is true for all refugees in general ([Benezer & Zetter, 2014](#)). As Malaysia remains non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol, the refugees do not have legal status. Hence, they are excluded from formal educational opportunities and access to employment in the country. They face problems in navigating themselves socially and effectively as they await processing in order to move on to their intended destination.

Recent attention to the refugee crisis and its impact on their lives encourages us to examine how being displaced shaped their lived experiences and participation in literary practices across borders. Although a growing corpus of work has emerged to study migration and refugee literacy practices ([Capstick, 2020](#); [Cun, 2021](#); [Kim, 2018](#)), these studies were mainly conducted in Western countries. They examine how refugees’ literacies affect their lives and where these literacies fit into social, cultural, and historical settings. Most of the literature reported that refugees struggle with a language barrier due to interrupted education, often caused by political conflicts and wars. Due to limited access to education, the refugees could not finish schooling and develop literacy skills. These skills are essential for adapting to their new environment, rebuilding their lives, or negotiating onward movement from the city where refugees live. Thus, a broader understanding of how literacy facilitates and transforms refugees in transitional settings and interactions with others is needed to leverage social, cultural, and knowledge capital.

Unlike previous research examining refugees’ literacy practices in resettlement in the United States ([Compton-Lilly, 2016](#); [Cun, 2021](#); [Gilhooly & Lee, 2014](#); [Lam & Warriner, 2012](#)), the current study focuses on urban refugees’ literacy experiences situated in a transitional context. Although refugees have been the topic of past research in various fields, our knowledge of their literacy practices in transitional contexts, especially in the Southeast Asian context, is still limited. The lack of literacy research in this setting, particularly in Malaysia, highlights a gap in the present literature, aiming to better understand refugees’ literacy practices in a transitional context. According to [Perry \(2020, p. 60\)](#), each refugee community has its literacy practices, and “deeper research into one refugee population may yield insights into themes of culture, community, and identity in relation to literacies”. Thus, further research on refugee populations in the South East Asian context, particularly in Malaysia, would add more insights to the body of knowledge. A study focusing on urban refugees in Malaysia will help us better understand how they engage in various literacy practices to increase their funds of knowledge, enact personal agency, and build their community as they wait to transition to another country.

This study used a narrative inquiry approach to examine Afghan and Somali refugees' experiences and literacy practices in an urban setting. In this study, Afghan and Somali refugees shared their stories about their experiences in their home countries and their adjustment to living in Malaysia as they waited to transit to the intended destination. We hoped to explore the refugees' literacy experiences in Malaysia and contextualise them in the current refugee scenario as the refugees shared their stories. Although refugees bring a plethora of knowledge to the community, their literacy skills are sometimes overlooked. When the literacy practices of refugees are undervalued, they become disengaged and detached from the community.

This paper offers insights into complex issues of language and literacy practices in transitional communities in migration contexts and how refugees navigate and position themselves in various sociocultural fields. Existing research on refugees in Malaysia tends to focus on the Rohingyas and Chins from Myanmar (Hoffstaedter, 2015; Nursyazwani, 2020; Wake & Cheung, 2016), but little is known about other groups of refugees, such as the Afghans and Somalis. Given the paucity of research on urban refugees' experiences with literacy practices in the Malaysian context, the current study attempts to fill a gap in this essential yet understudied field. This study aimed to examine the research question of "How do Afghan and Somali refugees in Kuala Lumpur employ literacy practices in a transitional setting?"

Thus, the current study attempts to explore the social literacy practises of Afghan and Somali refugees in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Examining how these urban refugees employ literacy practices in their transitional setting would, in turn, provide us with better insights into the literacy skills needed by urban refugees to survive in an urban context. The current host country is not necessarily the final destination for these refugees. Providing the right literacy programs could have the potential to help the refugees improve their literacy skills and contribute fully to their new nation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Literacy

A framework of literacy as a social practice serves as the theoretical lens for this paper's investigation of literacy practices among urban refugees in a transitional setting like Malaysia. A growing body of research has proposed a sociocultural perspective on the nature of literacy practices in globalised spaces (Barton et al., 2000; Perry, 2012; Street, 2003). Street (1984) defined literacy as a social practice, referring to the different ways individuals use literacy in their daily lives for varied goals.

New Literacy Scholars (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2004) look at literacy in everyday life, what people do with it, and how individual, social, and cultural meanings impact people's literacy practises and literacy events (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Literacy as a social practice framework emphasises literacy's usage in a broader social context. The participants' literacy practices were linked to the social environments where they were performed, such as the domains of home, community, education, and service providers.

Literacy encompasses more than just the learning of basic literacy skills. Barton et al. (2000) argue that literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, with some literacies becoming more dominant, visible, and influential

than others. Researchers can use these concepts to look into how refugees' literacies are viewed, how they affect their lives, and where these literacies fit into social, cultural, and historical contexts. These viewpoints allow us to consider who uses literacy, how literacy is used, and for what objectives persons use literacy. The following context serves as an example to illustrate the nature of literacy as a social practice. Somali refugees frequently engaged in literacy events that involved reading the Quran for various purposes, such as Quran study classes or guiding personal prayer. As a social practice, these events are connected with the larger life domain of religion. Reading the Quran was done purposefully, for a variety of reasons, as the refugees engaged with their Muslim communities. This practice has been shaped by the social institution of the mosque, with historical and power dimensions.

2.2 Refugees and Literacy

Refugees have different literacies and use a variety of texts to navigate their homes and outside worlds. Literacy is crucial in maintaining relationships, especially for refugees' families, whose lives are "shaped by values, ideas, and practices from the many sites and levels of the transnational social fields they inhabit" (Levitt, 2009, p. 126). Literacy practices are used as cultural capital to promote or negotiate social exchanges within various social sectors. The rapid development of technological innovation and globalisation has influenced the use of digital literacy practices among refugees. Digital technologies, including the internet, mobile phones, computers, tablets, and smart devices, have made transnational interaction and communication widely available. The usage of mobile technology enables individuals to contact family and friends across borders, access information and sources of support, and represent themselves (Dekker et al., 2018; Donà & Godin, 2019). Gilhooly and Lee (2014) study reported how Karen refugees employ digital literacy practices in refugee resettlement to adjust to their life in the United States and communicate with their family members in their home country. Such technology can also make it easier for refugees to seek work, providing those who have it an advantage. Through digitally mediated literacy practices, refugees increasingly participate as consumers and producers of information (Gilhooly & Lee, 2014; Kedra, 2021).

Apart from maintaining relationships, religion and culture affected the majority of the refugees' literacy practices because, according to Sarroub (2002), religion and culture are intricately linked. Refugees who have recently been resettled face numerous struggles and hardships in learning how to navigate a new country's system. These challenges may be alleviated by religion. In Muslim refugee literacy practices, Islam plays a significant influence. Participants employed religious literature to assist them in navigating many realms, according to Sarroub (2002). The studies by Nojumi (2002) and Cun (2021) have shown that faith had a role in some of their literacy practices and practising their religion helped them maintain a connection to their homeland. In the case of Afghan refugees, they have experienced numerous conflicts and a great deal of insecurity. However, one of the few constants in their life has been their faith.

Furthermore, Islam "has always been a significant part of the people of Afghanistan's social and cultural identities" (Nojumi, 2002, p. 5). Islam is ingrained in Afghan culture and identity. Therefore, maintaining religious beliefs was beneficial to the resilience of Afghan refugees (Kanji & Cameron, 2010). Furthermore, religion

can assist refugees in adjusting to their new culture after they have arrived in the country where they seek asylum (Pieloch et al., 2016).

3. METHODS

A narrative inquiry was employed for this study to examine the social literacy practices of selected refugees in Malaysia. According to [Clandinin and Connelly \(2000, p. 4\)](#), narrative inquiry uses “narrative as both phenomena under study and method of study”. It is a valuable tool for exploring the social literacy practices of refugees in a transitional setting because it allows researchers to capture the complexity and diversity of individual experiences, beliefs, and values. In particular, narrative inquiry can help uncover the social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape refugees’ experiences and practices of literacy.

Through narrative inquiry, the researchers collect and analyse stories from the refugees, which provide rich and detailed accounts of their lived experiences. This study portrayed the experiences of two Afghan male refugees and two Somalian male refugees. Transcripts acquired during semi-structured interviews with the refugees who took part in the study were used as data sources. By analysing the narratives, the researchers identify patterns, themes, and meanings that underpin the social literacy practices of the refugees in a transitional setting. In addition, field notes based on community centre visits were also used to support the study’s data sources to understand the participants’ literacy experiences better.

Previous research on refugees ([Döringer, 2021](#); [Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011](#)) has identified limitations and a lack of clarity with the sample frame as a persistent issue. However, in this exploratory study, the primary focus was to provide an in-depth contextual understanding of participants’ individual experiences rather than attempting to obtain statistically generalizable data or a comparative representation of the population data. Due to the lack of formal legal recognition for refugees in Malaysia, the researchers initially faced several obstacles and barriers during the sampling and recruitment of participants. Hence, a purposive sampling technique was used, which included “information-rich cases” for an in-depth study, which are those from which one may learn a great deal about “themes of central relevance to the research’s objective” ([Patton, 2015, p. 256](#)). Purposeful participant selection involves selecting participants who are knowledgeable or experienced with a specific phenomenon ([Creswell & Poth, 2018](#)).

3.1 Data Collection

Four male respondents participated in this study. With only four responses, no ‘saturation’ of the population under study can be claimed as a result of this study. Face-to-face interviews with the participants were conducted at two community centres in order to collect primary data. All interview conversations were held in English with an interpreter on-site to assist the researchers with the interview. The participants were found through non-government organisation refugee centres in Kuala Lumpur and recruited for this exploratory project. The researchers visited prospective participants to explain the study’s goal and procedures. Ethical considerations relating to the

protection of the participant's identity and the data obtained were addressed. Finally, the researchers obtained the university Ethics Board's approval to conduct this study.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Name (Code)	Age	Years in Malaysia	Level of Education	Languages spoken	Occupation
AH	25	5	High school	L1-Somali L2-Arabic L3-Spoken and Written English	Administrator at a Community Centre
DW	26	4	High school	L1-Somali L2-Arabic L3-Spoken and Written English	Volunteer teacher at a community centre
AL	46	8	High school	L1-Persian L2-Urdu L3-Spoken English	Administrator at a Community Centre
BS	48	7	High school	L1-Persian L2- Arabic L3- Spoken English	Administrator at a recycling centre

Table 1 displays the background information of the participants. Two participants are male refugees from Afghanistan, referred to in this study as AL and BS. In comparison, the other two male participants are refugees from Somalia, referred to in this study as AH and DW. Prior to arriving in Malaysia, none of the participants was exposed to the Malay language and had varying levels of formal education involving the English language. The participants were of varying ages, with the Somalian participants in their mid-twenties and the Afghanistan participants in their mid-forties. All participants are in Malaysia alone except for AL, whose family has joined him in Malaysia from Afghanistan. The identities of participants are kept anonymous not only for privacy and confidentiality reasons but also due to the sensitive issue of their presence in Malaysia. Each interviewee had the consent form explained orally and all signed it before the interview started.

Our interview protocol was adapted from the instrument developed by [Purcell-Gates et al. \(2011\)](#). The semi-structured interviews meant that while we had a list of planned questions and themes for discussion, we were open to new information and paths throughout the interaction with the participants in line with a narrative line of inquiry. The protocol was as follows:

- began by eliciting an account of the informant's definition of literacy (asking how individuals used print literacy to communicate with others etc.)
- inquired about present and past literacy practises, as well as texts read and written
- inquired about the practices of persons in participants' communities and family members
- the kinds of texts and literacy activities that participants used in their home countries and Malaysia.

The questions were designed to encourage open dialogue about the refugee's experiences with literacy. The participants were asked to use their own words to

describe their experiences. The interviews took place in rooms at the community multicultural service centres where the participants' privacy could be protected. Each participant was interviewed twice, each for roughly sixty to eighty minutes.

3.2 Data Analysis

The main data collection technique involved is a series of in-depth interviews with the individual participants at different times as a means of data triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The in-depth interview allowed researchers to learn more about the participants' everyday lives, views and behaviours (Kvale, 2007), and literacy experiences. In addition, each interview allowed the participants to tell their tales. All interview conversations were held in English since three of the participants had good knowledge of the English language. One of the participants, however, required a translator to participate in the interview.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the first researcher analysed data. Coding data on refugees' social literacy practices using the narrative inquiry method involved a systematic process of identifying, categorising, and analysing key themes that emerge from the narratives provided by refugees. This process allows researchers to comprehensively understand the complex social and cultural contexts that refugees navigate in a transitional setting.

The first step in coding data is to familiarise oneself with the data by reading through the narratives provided by refugees. Next, initial codes that capture the main themes that emerge from the narratives were generated. Then, as new codes and categories arose during the coding process of the other transcripts, a coding framework was created, which was constantly reviewed. Then, we developed the themes for the data based on categories within the social literacy framework, i.e., historical, cultural, and social literacy practices (see Table 2). Finally, the manuscript's second author read all of the transcripts, offered peer review, and re-evaluated the data analysis.

In the next stage, different data sources were triangulated. Triangulation refers to "using multiple data-collection methods, multiple sources, multiple investigators, and/or multiple theoretical perspectives" (Glesne, 2010, p. 53). Using this definition as a guide, the researcher examined the field notes and transcripts of interviews and informal conversations with participants to conduct a more thorough examination. Finally, the researchers interpreted the data to generate insights into the social literacy practices of refugees in a transitional setting. The codes and themes were used to support this interpretation. This stage led to the final development of three themes: literacies to increase funds of knowledge, literacies to enact personal agency, and literacies for community building. The findings section explores these themes.

Table 2. Coding scheme.

Interview questions	Categories	Codes	Field notes	Excerpts
Do you read and write in your first language?	Historical literacy	Life histories	Had a basic education in a masjid. Can read and write in Arabic and Persian	Yes. In Persian. I wrote this I wrote about Afghanistan's history in Persian. I wanted to write about my sons, like, real memory....

Table 2 continued...

What do you read during your free time?	Cultural literacy practices	Cultural values and religious beliefs	Multilingual. Can read in Arabic, Persian and Russian. But tend to focus on religious texts.	I read many books... In Arabic, what's called... to akhirah... In the akhirah is important. I have a Quran book.
Tell me about what it's like when you need to speak English (e.g. at the grocery store, bank, with friends etc.).	Social literacy practices	Intercultural communication	Can speak Somali and Arabic. Learn English at the age of 15 years.	So, if you speak English..., your communication is better. So, I can go hospital, I can go anywhere, I can contact some friends from different countries.
What do you like to read and write?	Social literacy practices	Knowledge development	Learn to read and write in Arabic at a madrasah. Learn English at secondary school. Engages in an online community.	I love to read management books. For example, looking for quotes because mostly I'm creating posters and flyers to post on social media.

4. RESULTS

The findings from the data analysis revealed that the refugees perform literacy practices in a transitional setting for three primary purposes: to increase funds of knowledge, to enact personal agency, and for community building. These purposes are unpacked in the following sections.

4.1 Literacy to Increase Funds of Knowledge

Literacy practices are valued and used to develop the refugees' funds of knowledge (Compton-Lilly, 2016; Dabach & Fones, 2016). All participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the need to expand their knowledge and literacies while they waited for their refugee applications to be processed. This category emerged as the participants demonstrated the use of multiple literacies to increase their funds of knowledge for different reasons despite being in a setting that does not provide them with legal status or protection.

The excerpt in (1) illustrates how DW, a Somali refugee, shared his experience developing oral and written literacies while transitioning to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

- (1) Because we are coming as refugees here and working to go to another country. Maybe in the other country, they speak English. So, if you don't speak English, how to communicate with people? Sometimes I use for Grammarly app for grammar info. When I write, then I'm writing English I use Grammarly and I see everything. A lot of errors, and a lot of wrong words. That's how I'm learning how to write in English. (DW)

Another Somali refugee, AH, described how he developed his reading and writing skills in Malaysia.

- (2) I learned myself to read books in English and I learned from YouTube how to speak in English. When I'm writing, I'm using my phone for voice messages. Then I use this [pointing to the Dictate feature on the phone]. Because here we come as refugees. So, if you don't speak English, how to communicate with people? (AH)

BS, an Afghan refugee, owns a mobile phone and laptop through which he accesses his Google Drive folder that stores a growing online library with novels in Persian and English. AH and DW also have mobile phones. They are very active in their community centre run by NGOs, where they use computers and the Internet for various reasons, as explained in the following sections. In short, all participants seemed to prioritise accessibility to at least one digital device and practice different literacies for the purpose of self-improvement and to increase their funds of knowledge.

The participants could not pursue formal education in Malaysia due to visa issues and financial limitations so they viewed these digital tools as the primary means of obtaining educational resources. In addition, each participant was intent on building upon and extending their existing funds of knowledge. Therefore, they would download reading materials in accordance with their individual goals. For example, AH focused on leadership and management books to better understand his role as a representative of his community and culture. BS preferred novels both in Persian and English that he often obtained from Telegram groups, and DW would look for materials he could use in class when he teaches English and Mathematics, while AL favoured religious texts.

Of course, they had to develop their digital literacy skills with English as the primary language of operation to access such materials. DW, for instance, asked people around him for help in learning how to operate a laptop and now prepares lesson plans and test papers using his laptop. As AH commented, these improvements were necessary and useful to be used when they later arrive at the targeted country of immigration or should they decide to return to their home countries, as is the case for BS. Even if BS does intend to go home to Afghanistan, he puts in the effort to increase his knowledge. Having learned how to operate a computer at an education centre in Afghanistan, he uses that knowledge to increase his English knowledge while in Malaysia.

- (3) I think my knowledge of Persian is high level. In English, not enough. Because I don't know grammar. I cannot use English grammar in my writing. My talking also, I don't know many words. Many, many things I don't know. (BS)

In short, being in a transitional context seemed to encourage literacy development for self-improvement in skills and aspects that will better prepare them for future employment even if they could not seek long-term jobs in Malaysia. The participants in this study were able to establish and mobilise different resources within their capacities to develop their funds of knowledge, be it linguistic, academic, or cultural, as they waited to transition to other countries.

4.2 Literacy for Personal Agency

The second theme that emerged from the data is the use of literacy practices for personal agency. [Ahearn \(2001, p. 112\)](#) defines agency as “the sociocultural mediated

capacity to act”, distinguishing this theme from the first in that the focus of agency is on actions taken by the participants to respond to and engage with the experience of being a refugee in a transitional context. Indeed, in a transitional context, certain literacy practices and activities seem to take on added significance with three subcategories emerging, namely the use of literacy practices to obtain sources of supplementary income, construct personal narratives, and sustain personal religious identity.

4.2.1 To obtain sources of supplementary income

The participants viewed their presence in Malaysia as a transition so they did not seek long-term job security. However, they did focus on means to supplement their daily expenses when necessary. As a result, they mostly used facilities and assistance from non-governmental organisations, with AH and DW taking on responsibilities within their communities as offered by the NGO. AH, for instance, was asked to be a youth leader in the community while DW took on the role of a Mathematics and English teacher for the children in the community. AH and DW used their literacy skills to take on community roles in both instances. AL and BS, however, sought employment outside their communities. Notably, BS gained an employment opportunity with a local recycling company where he would write memos, receipts, and minutes of meetings in English.

- (4) I type the minutes meeting, then on the computer and put them in the WhatsApp group because all the workers should know about the job. I write an incident report. Also, I write bills. (BS)

BS is very much aware that legal issues prevent him from holding long-term employment and recounts an incident when immigration officers had come to his workplace. However, instead of giving up, BS continued seeking short-term employment and used the internet to look for these opportunities, again displaying how literacy is used to overcome challenges. Again, these short-term employment opportunities were deemed satisfactory as the participants intended to leave Malaysia for other countries.

- (5) I mean by the rule that rules do not allow me to work. So, I searched on the internet about online income. For example, online income for I search many, many subjects, affiliate marketing. (BS)

Such employment experiences differ significantly from their previous work experiences in their respective countries. BS, for instance, had established an education centre in Afghanistan and ran it for years before he was forced to flee to Malaysia due to war. Now in Malaysia, BS utilises his language and management skills to assist his employers in a recycling company, as cited above, which is different from the educational context that he experienced. On the other hand, AH developed new literacy practices where he learned how to write activity reports in English. This language became essential to him only when he had to leave Somalia while DW developed new literacy practices as a teacher. DW had no prior experience in teaching before arriving in Malaysia. However, he has learned to select teaching material, plan lessons, and construct assessments in his new role as a teacher.

4.2.2 *To construct personal narratives*

One of the surprising results of this study emerged that these participants felt an increased need to document their experiences in a transitional context. BS, in particular, began writing prose excerpts and poetry in Persian, his first language. He had initially intended to pursue career possibilities as a content writer for online platforms when he first arrived in Malaysia because visa and passport requirements were perceived to be less stringent for online employment. At one point, he even attempted to write a book about the history of Afghanistan. However, at the point of the interview, what he chose to write about expanded significantly.

- (6) Then I started writing about Afghanistan's history in Persian. And in the book, I wrote, I started with the Afghanistan situation. So, it was also difficult for me. So, after I wrote the intro, I stopped. I write I wanted to write about my sons, like, real memory... Write like a memory book, a memory book. (BS)

DW, likewise, keeps a written diary of his experiences in Malaysia. The literacy practices of DW and BS have certainly influenced the result of being in a transitional context. However, we argue that in such instances, these changing literacy practices also allow them to exert a sense of self in a transitional context. By archiving their experiences, they preserve a sense of identity not practised before arriving in Malaysia.

4.2.3 *To sustain religious identity*

All participants share a commonality in religion, with religious literacy playing a significant role in their lives. They brought their Muslim beliefs, including reading the Quran, and the Arabic language is fundamental to their sense of self.

- (7) English for here, to live in here. In Arabic, because the, what's called, to *akhirah* [hereafter]. It's very important. Not all here. In the *akhirah* it is important. (AL)

The participants continued to engage with literacies for religious reasons in various ways, including reading the Quran (a religious scripture). Learning to read the Quran is fundamental in all participants' literacy experiences. Reading the Quran helped the participants maintain their religious convictions. AL recalled spending at least one hour every morning with his father during his childhood as his father taught him how to read the Quran. For AH and DW, their first introduction to formal education was classes in religious schools before entering primary education institutions. Indeed, the participants relied on these assumed shared literacy experiences to communicate with the interviewers who were also Muslim. AL was asked about the languages of his reading materials, and (8) is his response.

- (8) I have a Quran book...a lot of the Quran I have. My children...all they read. And you read Al Quran, your book, your book. Just like me. (AL)

As such, the participants' literacy practices become a means of identification to relate to those in a transitional context who are of the same religion. In addition, religious literacy practices are important because they help refugees to interact in "local spaces with people who shared religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds" (Compton-Lilly, 2016, pp. 32-33).

4.3 Literacy for Community Building

In a transitional context, literacy becomes an essential aspect of community building. This category is defined by the use of literacy practices to empower the community by strengthening relationships between community members, addressing their needs, and sharing vital information. More importantly, the second subcategory is labelled to represent the community for visibility purposes.

4.3.1 To empower the community

All participants have received as well as shared information with others within their respective communities. BS, for instance, arrived in Malaysia without knowing anyone but was able to make contact with his fellow citizens after asking around. He was then welcomed into a community where they celebrate National Day and Women's Day. On the other hand, AH has now taken on the role of spokesperson or community leader. He would funnel news and information to others in his community regarding events or opportunities they could benefit from. He has also taken it upon himself to be a source of encouragement for his community.

- (9) When I'm now on the computer, I'm writing and reading, only for quotes for, like, support each other. When I found the quotes, I printed them out and pasted them in the classroom. For example, how to say thanks, how to say *du'a* [prayers], and how to love Allah. Yeah. So, I'm looking for some quotes for me, the personal and the community centre. (AH)

In addition, literacy plays a supportive role by equipping community members with basic linguistic knowledge and communication skills to interact with the local Malaysian community. As the status of the community is transitional, the focus on developing literacy was placed on functional language skills in the Malay language. At the same time, English was prioritised for future readiness regardless of the country they would transition to. Due to this language perception, community members and leaders offer formal English classes for children. DW, teaching English in his community, shared a transformative literacy experience with one student.

- (10) Her phone was not working at that time. She doesn't have anybody to go with her or show up to help her to speak up. Then she went alone, but she remembered one word when I was teaching before. That was 'fixing'. Then she did there and she said 'Fix my phone'. Only that. Okay, then, her phone was fixed. It becomes okay. Then, in the afternoon, she came to class, she ran and hugged me, I said 'Wow, what is going on?' 'You know teacher, you teach me one word. Today my phone is working'. (DW)

AH also believed that literacy can be functional and transformative for his community.

- (11) We are teaching the mothers how to speak English to communicate with the people. Because that time, many people were in the shop. When I was, when I sat in the front shop, she couldn't speak English. Then after I saw that, I started teaching English classes for free...For our mothers, single mothers. Then the school will do English for all subjects because now the mother and her son can translate. (AH)

In terms of the Malay language, however, importance was placed on functional literacy. For instance, AH learned the numbers one to one thousand in Malay. On the

other hand, AL peppered his speech during the interview with Malay words like *kampung*, which means ‘village’. Significantly, these new words are integrated into their linguistic knowledge and practised daily. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on improving English proficiency. AH and DW strongly encourage the children in their community to speak English amongst themselves and outside their home environments, as developing their English language skills would broaden their opportunities in future.

4.3.2 *To enhance community visibility*

This category is defined by the concept of representation, where community members construct public narratives about the community. Literacy is used to make the community and its experiences visible to others in the local community and beyond. As a community leader, AH has received requests to speak at seminars or events related to Somalia as well as refugee experiences in local institutes of higher education. He searches for information online and in the centre’s library to prepare a presentation that he delivers in English. AH shared:

- (12) Sometimes I go to universities...to do presentations on what happened in Somalia and the people in Somalia. I give presentations to international students. (AH)

Aside from enhancing visibility about the plight of his homeland, he has the agency to construct his narrative, using his own words, and persuade his listeners. This desire to shape his community’s narrative and influence how his community is perceived is also seen in his online activities.

- (13) When I do some activities, then I post to our Instagram or Facebook page. Now I have experience of how to manage youths. I’m starting inside the community to call the youth group for social activities. (AH)

Once again demonstrating how literacy is used in a transitional context, AH posted about his community’s activities on Instagram and Facebook as a way to archive the community’s experiences in Malaysia as they wait to move on to another country. His posts are mainly in English, but he does use his own language once in a while. He also responds to comments online, replying in the same language that a comment was made. Moreover, AH’s posts reach an international audience, evident from diverse Facebook users viewing their page, allowing AH and his community to extend their presence beyond national borders. This case underscores the empowering role of digital literacy in enhancing community visibility.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explores how urban refugees, particularly male Afghan and Somali refugees in Kuala Lumpur, use literacy practices while assimilating in their transitional setting. The goals of our research on the literacy practices of these refugees are two-fold: firstly, to contribute to the academic discussion of the use of literacy in a transitional setting and, secondly, to derive implications that can inform educational practices and policies.

Throughout all three themes identified from the data, some literacy practices that were part of the refugees' lives before arriving in Malaysia continued to be practised. These literacy practices were often further developed and honed to achieve certain goals, and, more importantly, new literacy practices were learned and used to transform and influence their respective situations. The findings of this study also showed how literacy practices are used to acquire resources and enact some form of agency in the refugees' lives. [Gilhooly and Lee \(2014\)](#) highlighted how refugees might use digital literacy and activities to adapt to a new environment. The data of this study further illustrate how digital literacy practices are used for self-improvement and community visibility.

Apart from that, this study contributes to the understanding of refugee journeys where attention is not only paid to issues experienced in the final destination of refugees but also to their experiences on the way to those destinations, which, as in the case of this study, maybe years in the making. All experiences throughout this journey contribute to what [Dabach and Fones \(2016\)](#) term "funds of knowledge". While this paper has presented funds of knowledge as a theme distinct from a personal agency for ease of presentation and analysis, the study participants have demonstrated a need for self-improvement in many aspects important for their future lives and preservation of self and communal identity. Recognising that when the refugees arrive at their intended destination, they bring with them the skills, knowledge and resources from their home country and those of the country where their transition will help others in the host country best respond to the refugees.

Some literacy practices take on added significance in a transitional context. In particular, the data of this study highlights the link between religion and literacy practices. What this study does add is that these religious literacy practices are essential throughout the refugee journey as a means of maintaining one's identity. This supports other studies that have shown how religion is essential to refugee narratives ([Kanji & Cameron, 2010](#); [Nojumi, 2002](#); [Pieloch et al., 2016](#)).

The results of this study imply that public perception regarding refugee stereotypes should change. This study supports the call to practice more nuance in the representation of refugees in that they are not homogenous but do respond differently to similar situations ([Benezer & Zetter, 2014](#)). [Hoffstaedter \(2015\)](#) points out that there is "no single experience for the urban refugees of Kuala Lumpur, rather, individuals from varied ethnic and religious backgrounds that have diverse experiences of refugee life in Malaysia's largest city" (p. 2). Understanding how these refugees use diverse literacies and how their literacy practices reflect and affect their access to social institutions could assist in informing more relevant and engaging community programs that speak to refugees' current needs and future objectives. While acknowledging that it is beyond the scope of this study to comment on policy and legislative issues, it would help intercultural understanding to recognise that each refugee is an individual who can contribute to society.

6. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study illuminated the importance of relating the refugees' literacy practices and how their practices can shed light on providing alternative access to education and policy in resettlement. Framing literacy as social practice broadens

discussions regarding literacy from a focus on language skills and proficiency to literacy in context, particularly in how the refugees use literacy to exert agency.

Refugees from different countries go through various challenges and research that recognises these challenges would offer insights into their needs and better inform policy and stakeholder decisions about how best to support refugees, especially in a transitional context. It is not just a matter of processing documentation to move refugees to their intended destination or ensuring that their basic needs are met. As this article concludes, the refugees are keen to develop their skills and knowledge to better prepare for their targeted country of choice. Programs incorporating the refugees' knowledge and cultural capital can improve their well-being and help them integrate into society, resulting in long-term social harmony and economic growth. While there are legislative concerns in Malaysia, local stakeholders could make provisions for alternative education for refugees in Malaysia with assistance from international aid agencies. In addition, transition paths should be provided to refugees and migrants with literacy, basic education, and language needs to assist them in preparing for further education or employment.

The most obvious conclusion is that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Instead, policies, strategies and programmes that are flexible enough to suit the demands and challenges of a given setting are required for good practice solutions. In comparison to large-scale specialised services, tailor-made holistic answers are usually more open to differentiation, individualised methods, and flexibility.

While offering some insights into two refugee communities in a transitional context, the study has limitations. First, despite our best efforts to include diverse compositions of refugees, the four participants in this study might not accurately represent all refugee families in Malaysia. Second, interviews from female refugees were not obtained due to a lack of volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic when the data was collected. Finally, future research would benefit from involving a sizable number of participants of different genders to better understand the literacy practises of Afghan and Somali refugees.

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