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Double burden of representation: how ethnic and refugee categorisation shapes Syrian migrants' artistic practices in Austria

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the experiences of artists who were forced to leave their homes due to war, persecution, and violence that (re-)started their artistic careers in their arrival countries. Based on an ethnographic study of Syrian refugees' artistic practices in Vienna, Austria, spanning diverse cultural fields (music, theatre, literature, visual art), the paper shows how these artists are not only confronted with what has been called 'the burden of ethnic representation', but also with expectations that emerge from being categorised as 'refugees'. A four-mode typology of the artists' self-presentations (adapting/masking/switching/refusing) uncovers how this 'double burden of representation' shapes their positioning in the field of art – by emphasising either ethnic *or* refugee labels (or both or neither). The findings contribute to the study of social categorisation of migrants and their artistic practices in the cultural field and how this affects pathways of social incorporation.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, many European countries experienced a significant increase in the number of migrants from the Middle East. In Austria, 160,000 asylum seekers arrived between 2014 and 2016, most of whom were from Afghanistan (42,500), Syria (41,000) and Iraq (17,500), and involuntarily fled their homes due to persecution, torture, violence and war (BMI 2020). This migration flow is also reflected in the field of art, where a considerable number of refugees have started or restarted their careers as artists in cultural domains such as music, theatre, visual arts, or literature. Their artistic products, performances and also activities in the transmission of cultural heritage do not only contribute to local cultural life and its transformation, but may also offer pathways of social mobility and participation. However, research on migrants' artistic practices shows both opportunities for and barriers to becoming and being recognised as an artist. These relate to the arrival countries' political, legal, and economic conditions as well as the migrants' resources (Delhaye 2008; Gebesmair 2009; Lena and Cornfield 2008; Sievers 2014). One issue under consideration is the role ethnicity plays in the field of art. While ethnicity – broadly

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including race, nationhood, language, and religion (Wimmer 2013)[1] – might provide artists with opportunities for self-presentation and marketing, others describe ongoing (external) ethnic labelling as a threat associated with multiple expectations from the ethnic majority, leading to marginalisation and stigmatisation. Kobena Mercer (1994) prominently examines these expectations, referring to ethnicity as a 'burden of representation'. He shows how black artists in Great Britain at the beginning of the 1990s were supposed to represent and 'speak for' their 'ethnic community'. Mercer argues that this expectation of representation is based on a highly essentialising concept of culture, or what Andreas Wimmer (2013) critically describes as the 'Herderian common sense', which assumes that an ethnic group is characterised by homogeneity, solidarity, and shared cultural behaviour. Meanwhile, this 'burden of representation' has been studied for multiple migrant groups and cultural realms (Cheesman 2006; Hyder 2004; Thackway 2014). Furthermore, my own ethnographic work on the practices of artists who fled Syria shows how expectations surrounding notions of 'Arab', 'Oriental' and 'Syrian' music shaped how these artists positioned themselves in cultural markets outside of their home countries (Parzer 2020). However, these artists did not only comment on notions surrounding ethnicity, but also on being labelled as refugees: The categorisation as 'refugee artists' seems to play a somewhat more relevant role than any ethnic labels, and it also shapes these migrants' practices in a powerful way.

This article primarily aims to clarify and elaborate upon the nexus of ethnic and refugee representation. To better understand the pressures of representation analytically, it draws on theoretical approaches of categorisation, most notably Richard Jenkins' concept of internal definition and external categorisation (Jenkins 1997). By referring to data drawn from ethnographic research on Syrian refugees' artistic practices in Vienna[2], the article highlights specific challenges they face when labelled as 'refugee artists'. What does it mean for these artists to be subsumed under the 'refugee' category in the field of art? Which associations does this categorisation evoke? And how does it shape artistic work and positioning in the cultural market?

The prevalence of the refugee label does not preclude other ethnic labels being applied to these artists. Rather, the interplay of these two logics of categorisation both characterises and hinders the occupational pathways of artists who fled to Austria. Drawing on empirical interview data, observation and document analysis helps examine how refugee and ethnic categorisations are intertwined and how this affects refugees' artistic practices. Arguably, these artists face a 'double burden of representation', which is reflected in different ways of self-presentation in the cultural market.

The findings contribute to art and migration research by focusing on how refugees restart their artistic careers in their arrival countries. First, it adds insights into a relatively-neglected migrant group by highlighting the specific situation of refugees. Second, the findings are highly relevant to refugees' artistic work as a medium of social participation, integration, and cohesion (DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly 2010, 2015; Lena and Cornfield 2008; Martiniello 2015, 2018). On a theoretical level, this article contributes to better understanding the complexity of processes of categorisation and representation that migrants and refugees are confronted with.

First, a brief description of literature addresses the role ethnicity plays in cultural markets before discussing Jenkins' concept of social categorisation adopted for this study. Next, the data and methods are introduced, followed by an account of the main findings that shows how artists who fled from Syria are expected to represent 'refugeeness' and ‘ethnicity’ – and how this ‘double burden of representation’ shapes multiple ways of positioning in the artistic field. Finally, the findings are discussed, including suggested further lines of research.

2. Ethnicity in the field of art and the power of categorisation

Research on the role of ethnicity in art and in cultural markets has emphasised the ambivalence of ethnic categorisation. Many migrant artists present themselves as ‘ethnic’ artists, highlight their ethnic origin or – sometimes ostentatiously – display their ethnic belonging. While this kind of self-presentation is not restricted to migrants, as artists of the ethnic majority can also present their work as ‘ethnic’[3], migrants have been observed to potentially have a twofold advantage: First, they may display their art as ‘different’ from the mainstream culture, which constitutes a unique feature in the cultural market; second, migrants can make legitimate claims for credibility and authenticity, as their roots – no matter how exaggerated and socially constructed they might be – are seen as the artists’ proof of ‘real’ familiarity with certain (foreign) cultural traditions (Brunner and Parzer 2011). This ‘use’ of ethnicity can be beneficial for artists. It may contribute to symbolic recognition, create, or enable their positioning in economic niches, and it may work as an important marketing tool that helps gain attention in a relatively saturated market (Gebesmair 2009; Lu and Fine 1995; Parzer and Kwok 2013).

However, this positive view of ethnicity’s role in the field of art has been contested: Artists do not always have a choice, but are embedded in a complex network of social relations, resulting in a set of expectations associated with ethnicity. They are often subsumed under the category of ‘ethnic art’ (Parzer and Kwok 2013), and economic niches might emerge as restraints to some, particularly when symbolic recognition and economic success depends on presenting themselves as ‘ethnic’ artists. In her study of intercultural festivals in Chemnitz, Germany, Inken Carstensen-Egwuom (2011) shows how sub-Saharan musicians highlight their ‘foreignness’ by displaying stereotypes and clichés of ‘Africanness’ in order to attain symbolic recognition.

These two traits – being forced into an ethnic niche and the threat of exoticism – are linked to what Mercer labels the ‘burden of representation’ (Mercer 1994). Drawing on black art in Great Britain, he shows that artists in this field are confronted with a specific set of expectations regarding their status as ‘representatives’ for a certain social group, describing that

> [w]hen artists are positioned on the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production, they are burdened with the impossible task of speaking as “representatives”, in that they are widely expected to “speak for” the marginalized communities from which they come. (Mercer 1994, 235)

Likewise, Wiebke Sievers (2016, 17) demonstrates how migrants’ artistic products in the literature field are often perceived as a source of information and knowledge about ‘foreign’ worlds rather than as aesthetically valuable artistic work. In his study of several migrant cultural economies in Vienna, Andreas Gebesmair shows how this logic of representation forces migrant artists into ethnic niches where they continue to stay and can hardly escape from. Meanwhile, Rehan Hyder (2004) examines bands with ‘Asian backgrounds’ in the United Kingdom, who are referred to as Asian bands, and how they handle the ‘burden of representation’.

Such studies show that expectations regarding ethnic representation are based on an understanding of culture that emphasises the notion of cultures as fixed, stable, and homogenous entities. While this conceptualisation remains extremely powerful in everyday life, it has been criticised by sociologists, anthropologists and scholars in postcolonial studies, who show that focusing on ethnic groups as taken-for-granted entities with a shared identity and similar cultural behaviour risks oversimplifying and essentialising by dismissing the social construction of ethnic groups (Barth 1969; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013; Wimmer 2013) as well as the hybridity of culture (Bhabha 1994). Wimmer calls this essentialist conception of culture 'Herderian common sense' and suggests a new understanding by focusing on the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries as core processes of emerging and transforming ethnic groups. On a categorical dimension, boundaries refer to 'acts of social classification and collective representation' (Wimmer 2013, 9), helping to divide the social world into 'us' and 'them'.

Theoretical concepts of 'categorisation' – which date back to the beginning of sociological thinking – help to better grasp the issue of representation. Michèle Lamont defines categorisation – and similarly, 'typification' – as a process where people determine to which group a certain object or person belongs (Lamont 2012, 206). She states that categorisation is a fundamental element of processes of (e)valuation, which positions some groups within symbolic (and hierarchical) orders. Categorisations evoke expectations, based on assumptions about – and sometimes stereotypes (Hall 1997) of – a certain group. Jenkins (1997) provides an additional account, which enhances how categorisation is understood, by distinguishing between processes of internal and external definition. While internal definitions refer to the self-definition that actors signal to in- or out-group members, processes of external definition are based on how individuals or groups define and categorise the other(s) (Jenkins 1997, 53). Drawing on Fredrik Barth's boundary approach (Barth 1969), Jenkins highlights that ethnic groups are not essential entities, but rather defined and reproduced situationally. Jenkins' account is useful in three ways within the context of this article's research focus. First, he underscores the dialectical process of internal and external definition. Internal identification can affect external identification, and, conversely, external definitions may affect how individuals and groups define themselves. This becomes most apparent in the field of art when migrants or members of an ethnic minority present themselves primarily as 'ethnic' according to the ethnic majority's expectations. Second, Jenkins argues that social categorisation (i.e. external definition) might not be solely based on negative categories and classifications, explaining,

> [l]abelling is not just a negative phenomenon. Inasmuch as the external social world is at least as much a source of self-esteem as it is a threatening environment of hostile labelling, this basic model can also be applied to the incorporation of positive public images into self-imagery. (Jenkins 1997, 60)

This aspect is especially important in the art field, where positive labelling seems to be the status quo. However, positive labelling does not imply that symbolic boundaries will disappear or eliminate the 'burden of representation'. Third, Jenkins emphasises the role of power in processes of social categorisation. In the field of art, social categorisation is also shaped by and shapes symbolic struggles about inclusion and exclusion (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Delhaye 2008). In her analysis of the Austrian literature field, Sievers (2008; 2016) examines how increasing nationalisation during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in a still-ongoing closure, which hinders migrants from gaining access to the Austrian artistic field or symbolic recognition as writers. Furthermore, categorising migrant artists is typically highly intertwined with migration and integration policies as well as the migrants' social reception in the arrival society (Lena and Cornfield 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2019), where 'negative classifications' used and reproduced by members of the arrival society result from boundary work between established groups and newcomers (Elias and Scotson 1965; Neckel and Sutterlüty 2010). For refugees from Syria, most 'negative classifications' were associated with religion. A combination of widespread anti-Muslim sentiments and assumptions that Syrians could be ISIS terrorists (Gowayed 2020), plus stereotypes of misogynist, backward Muslim men (Scheibelhofer 2017), means that Syrian migrants in Austria (and elsewhere) face stereotypes and prejudices assigned to (Islamic) religion.

These boundaries drawn against Syrian refugees from segments of the arrival societies are being reinforced by further processes of categorisation: First, there is a tendency to ignore the heterogeneity of religious beliefs among Syrians; by lumping them all together and highlighting 'Islam' as the one and only (and highly essentialised) identity, Muslims are seen in sharp contrast to an (imagined) European Christianity (Zolberg and Long 1999). Second, religion visibly conflates with race, when the refugees' religion becomes racialised. This is most visible in the differentiation between 'white European' and 'dark Arabic' Islam, the latter being seen as threat and danger for European societies (for a discussion of how Balkan Muslims were distinguished from Syrian Muslims during the 2015 migration flow see Rexhepi 2018). These symbolic and social boundaries along religion (and race) significantly impact Syrian refugees' lives, including opportunities to find recognition in the artistic field.

3. And what about the 'refugee' label?

While the ambivalent role of ethnicity in the arts has been examined extensively, little is known about how categorisations surrounding notions of 'being refugees' shape migrants' artistic practices. Studies in migration and refugee research have emphasised two contradictory aspects of the 'refugee label'. On one hand, it offers access to important resources, as being legally classified as a 'refugee' guarantees protection from persecution, oppression, and torture (Erdal and Oeppen 2018), and also offers access to services and support from aid organisations (Ludwig 2016). However, being labelled as a 'refugee' can also be a source of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Ludwig 2016; Zetter 2007) wherein

> [it] becomes a burden when it serves as a reminder of past flight and refugee experiences which frequently inform and reinforce stereotypes about refugees as victims without control over their lives and dependent on hand-outs and aid. Thus, the label refugee becomes a stigma with psychological burdens. (Ludwig 2016, 15)

Several scholars also emphasise that the process of becoming a 'refugee' should be taken more rigorously into account (Weiß 2018; Zetter 2007). In her study of refugees in Canada, Marie Lacroix (2004) analyses this 'making of' the refugee label in detail, and examines the process of 'becoming a refugee' as something that starts in the country of origin, where political events, war, turmoil and persecution forced migrants to leave their home countries (Lacroix 2004, 155). After leaving, the process of 'becoming refugee' continues on the macro level (international refugee regime), on the meso level (discourse practices within the arrival society), and on the micro level (individual experiences in work, family life and bureaucracy) (Lacroix 2004, 154). Lacroix' 'refugeeness' concept helps demonstrate how the 'refugee label' is not naturally given, but embedded in an ongoing and complex process consisting of legal and political frameworks and discourses from which refugees develop a specific subjectivity, shaping multiple spheres of life. It cannot be chosen and is closely intertwined with processes of identity formation.

In order to capture the role of 'refugee' categorisation in artistic fields and how it affects Syrian artists' work as well as their positioning in the cultural market, the following draws on data gained from fieldwork within the different cultural domains where artists from Syria participate and attempt to restart their artistic careers.

4. Data and methodology

By using an ethnographic approach, the project aims to study the role of representation from an emic perspective, 'taking on the point of view of those being studied' (Babbie 2013, 301). Therefore, it involved 20 in-depth interviews with artists from Syria who fled to Austria between 2011 and 2016 and restarted an artistic career since arriving. Additionally, participant observation was conducted at assorted cultural events in Vienna, including concerts, theatre performances, exhibitions, and rehearsals. To capture as full a picture as possible, interviews were additionally conducted with cultural event organisers as well as audience members; furthermore, insights were collected from relevant webpages and promotion materials (e.g. event flyers or concert programmes), which were added to the corpus of data.

The snowball sampling method was used to recruit interviewees, which involved different 'entering points' to get access to at least three different social networks. Theoretical sampling strategy was used to gain multiple cases with maximal variation. The sample includes artists from diverse artistic fields including music, theatre, literature, and visual arts, while other differences arose regarding artistic career paths and sociodemographic dimensions, including age, social class, religion, and gender.[4] Furthermore there was variation according to when the artists arrived in Austria as well as their legal status: While most had legal refugee status at the time of the interview and two were given a initially limited three-year residence permit ('Asyl auf Zeit'), two were still waiting for a decision. It became clear that those without legal and permanent refugee status suffered from insecurity and fear as well as from limited access to resources. However, it is important to note that even those with refugee status are often ascribed an 'informal label refugee' (Ludwig 2016, 5), which arises from a lack of distinction between asylum seekers and refugees in everyday discourse and the media. The artist interviews were conducted in English or/and German, depending on the interviewees' language abilities and preferences.

The data analysis included interview transcripts, field protocols as well as documents collected during fieldwork, and follows the theoretical coding paradigm as suggested by Kathy Charmaz (2014). First, open-coding methodology was used to categorise accounts relating to interviewees' experiences of restarting their artistic careers in Austria. Second, focused coding was centred around the expectations they felt confronted with. It should be highlighted that doing research with refugees and vulnerable groups presents ethical considerations and precautions (Kohlenberger et al. 2017; Papaeti and Grant forthcoming;

Temple and Moran 2006). First, it is necessary to recognise potential traumatic topics, particularly regarding experiences of torture or the recent loss of family members. This awareness was ensured during the interviews by using open questions where interviewees could decide what they wanted to talk about. Second, a special emphasis should be placed on confidentiality. The interviewees were assured that the knowledge gained from the research would not be handed over to any third party and would only be used for scientific purposes. Third, informed consent is imperative and should be maintained during all research stages.

5. Representing refugeeness: the ‘refugee label’ as barrier in regaining recognition

When asked about the most challenging barriers on the path to restart their artistic careers, the interviewed artists mentioned two intertwined aspects. First, they highlighted the difficulties associated with their current social and economic situation. The phrase ‘to have to start from zero’ emerged as an in-vivo code and core concept, referring to the challenges of starting their artistic careers anew. This becomes most visible on a material level. When the participants left their home countries, they had to leave behind their equipment (e.g. musical instruments, cameras, brushes, and easels) and even their artistic works (e.g. paintings). Therefore, purchasing the necessary equipment to create art is one of the first steps in restarting an artistic career. On an organisational level, artists must acquire funding, opportunities for concerts, gigs, performances, or exhibitions as well as rehearsal rooms or visual art studios. Therefore, social networks are extremely helpful as is being familiar with the structures and institutions of cultural life in the arrival society. In the immediate aftermath of arrival, social ties to relevant actors who could facilitate access to art scenes are weak and establishing own social networks takes considerable time – and also depends on one’s economic and cultural capital, including language skills. However, the interviewees seemed most worried about matters on a symbolic level centred around the difficulties in regaining their recognition as artists. While many were famous or at least widely-recognised artists in Syria, hardly any long-time Austrian residents know them. The struggle to (re)gain recognition is therefore considered one of the most difficult challenges. The interviewed artists report that they must permanently demonstrate their artistic skills and competencies, and constantly reiterate that they were already artists in their home countries. It is here that the second aspect comes into play: The role of being seen and categorised as a refugee – not only by bureaucratic institutions, but in everyday discourses and daily encounters with the established members of the arrival society. The following analysis shows how being seen as a refugee produces pressures of representation that affect artists’ practices as well as their positioning and self-presentation in cultural markets.

5.1. ‘Being lumped together’: representing ‘the’ refugees

One aspect of the artists’ burden of representation is grounded in the widespread use of the ‘refugee label’ as an oversimplifying category subsuming people from entirely different countries and regions. This becomes most visible in events and initiatives where ‘refugee art’ is presented, regardless of the artists’ geographic, national and regional origin, their language, religion or ethnic and social belongings, their reasons and motivation for fleeing their countries, or their cultural traditions. The burden of representation then lies in the expectation that an artist from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq or elsewhere represents the whole group of currently-arriving refugees, and that the unique artist is expected to be an example of the 'typical refugee'. Many artists complain and argue that they feel lumped together with completely different groups of people, neglecting the uniqueness of each cultural tradition, which can no longer be distinguished when all artists who fled to Austria are labelled as one homogenous mass of 'the refugees'; or, how Fatina A. and Basina K.[5], who worked as actors in Syria, describe:

> We want that the Austrians get to know Syrian culture. Syrian culture is completely different from Afghan or Iraqi culture. It hurts us that we're always lumped together with all others. Even 'Oriental' does not mean 'Syrian'.

In a similar vein, Samir N., a musician and composer from Damascus, argues that the uniqueness of cultural traditions is obscured when all refugees from the Middle East are seen as a homogenous entity, disregarding the diversity of different musical traditions. This becomes obvious in the following fieldnote excerpt:

> When I asked Samir to describe his music and his compositions, he started with a detailed explanation of the theoretical and historical foundations of Syrian music. He took his Oud in order to show me the various scales and tonal principles—not only of Syrian music, but also various different musical traditions, e.g. in Iran or Turkey. Obviously, he wanted to emphasise the differences between certain musical traditions and concluded that for him, the uniqueness of each of these traditions is crucial and should not get lost. At first sight, I did not know why he placed so much attention on this aspect. Later, it became clear to me that the idea of subsuming all the migrants' traditions together was quite disturbing for him.

In particular, events devoted to displaying refugees' artistic practices may contribute to the imagination of a homogenous group without considering their very different artistic traditions. Although usually well-intended, by highlighting the universality of music and the refugees' shared experiences, many artists experience a lack of recognition towards their specific cultural traditions.

The image of refugees as a homogenous entity has been linked to 'typical' characteristics ascribed to them. In the field of art, these characteristics are transformed into expectations that 'refugee artists' must fulfil, with the expectation of displaying their expertise on flight – rather than their artistic competencies – being most prevalent.

5.2. Displaying refugee (instead of artistic) experience: representing expertise on flight

One of the most salient expectations 'refugee artists' feel confronted with refers to notions of refugeeness: their becoming refugees, starting from the decision to leave their country, to their flight and arrival in Austria. They feel expected to specify their flight as a central topic in their artistic work, to express their experiences and feelings in their art and/or that they use these experiences and feelings to explain their artistic work. Members of the arrival society ought to learn about the causes, the trajectories, and the consequences of flight; they should get an impression of traumatic experiences, the dangers of flight as well as what it is like to be confronted with discrimination and social exclusion in the arrival society. The artists, then, are seen as experts on all issues regarding refugeeness.

However, many artists ask themselves: When we are conceded to be experts on fleeing, why we are not similarly considered to be experts in our arts? As long as they are primarily seen as representatives of flight and refugeeness, it is not their art and artistic experiences, their artistic competencies – and most importantly, their artistic biographies – which are recognised, but 'solely' their life as refugees. Or as some of the artists state, their art would only be recognised because they are refugees, but not because they are artists.

Again, the initiatives that provide visibility to refugee artists are seen as contributing to this emphasis on flight. Omar B., who was a considerably famous visual artist in Damascus, was quite annoyed when he was invited to an event dedicated to presenting some refugees' visual artistic work and to support artists as they restart their careers. However, from his perspective, the organisers failed to distinguish between professional and amateur art.

> When I realised that most of the invited artists were only amateurs, I was disappointed. I would have liked to take off my pictures immediately and go home.

Omar B. was disappointed, but also felt offended and hurt. For him, this situation showed that the organisers (and probably the audience, too) were only interested in his refugeeness and expertise on fleeing Syria. This marginalisation of an artist's proficiencies and neglect of their artistic biographies are decisive points for understanding the logics of refugee representation in the field of art. However, an alternative logic of representation visualises the refugee as poor, passive and powerless, which artists from Syria are expected to provide evidence of or embody.

5.3. 'Pretending to be the poor and needy refugee': representing victimhood

One of the most common imaginations regarding refugees depicts the poor, needy migrant who is heavily dependent on help from the arrival society. In its most negative form, this entails discourses blaming refugees for abusing the social welfare state (Ludwig 2016). In its positive and benevolent form, it encourages members, organisations, and institutions in the arrival society to engage in refugee aid and/or to support refugees in various ways. For the fields of art and cultural production, the latter becomes most visible through the support and appreciation of refugees' artistic practices. In the past five years, several initiatives were founded in Austria that aim to present refugees and their artistic work to a broader audience. On one hand, artists appreciate these initiatives, as they give them the opportunity to show their artistic work and gain recognition. On the other hand, they contribute to the artists' discomfort, as they tend to accentuate the image of the refugee without any agency. Artists feel as if they are displayed as actors who – not as artists, but as refugees – would not 'make it' without the support of the host society. The artists are explicitly labelled as refugee artists and expected to be thankful for the support that they receive. For Fathi S., that expectation of being a poor (and thankful) refugee artist has been one of the greatest burdens to his artistic work:

> I'd never wanted to pretend to be the poor and needy refugee. I got invitations to exhibitions, because I'm from Syria; they want you to pretend to be poor, then you'll get something. I really hated these situations. But I'm not an artist from Syria, I'm an artist everywhere. 'Artist from Syria'—I never wanted to have this word in my CV.

Many artists experience being reduced to their refugee status as a devaluation of their artistic skills, and also as a marginalisation of their artistic biographies. Zain F., an actor and filmmaker from Homs, underscores this, arguing that she always has the feeling that she had to provide proof of her artistic identity:

> I think it's difficult to be an artist in Syria as well as in Austria. However, the most difficult aspect, and one which I had not imagined before, is that people judge before they take a closer look. They only see you as Syrian refugee, and I always have to demonstrate that I'm an artist.

6. The double burden of representation: strategies of self-presentation

As the previous section showed, artists who fled from Syria and have been restarting their artistic careers in Austria are confronted with certain expectations regarding their role as refugees in artistic fields. They feel expected 'to speak' for the whole group of refugees; they seem to be recognised only for their expertise in flight and refugeeness and not their artistic competencies. Further, they are supposed to pretend they are passive 'victims without agency' (Ludwig 2016, 7). Ultimately, the artists experience this as a marginalisation of their individuality and artistic particularities, a devaluation of their artistic skills and a neglect of their artistic biographies. The omnipresence of being categorised as refugees masks everything beyond the refugee lens and reproduces a logic of representation of 'homogenous communities' that do not exist in reality. However, the omnipresence and dominance of refugee categorisation does not mean that ethnic categorisations have disappeared. Rather, ethnic labels seem to simultaneously remain relevant, which is most visible in the expectation that Syrian refugees' music should sound like Oriental music, as imagined by members of the arrival society, or when visual artists are expected to refer to Syrian belonging. Artists from Syria, therefore, face a 'double burden of representation'. They are both expected to speak for 'their' community of refugees, yet they are also supposed to represent their ethnic community (regardless of if there is any shared culture). This double burden of representation is reflected through different means in the artists' self-presentations. For some, adapting to and affirming the 'refugee' label seems to be the most promising way of coping with it, while others try to escape the 'refugee' niche by masking any notions that point to refugee categorisation. However, refugees also face ethnic labelling in addition to being labelled as 'refugees'. The empirical analysis shows that ethnic and refugee labelling are closely intertwined and that different strategies of self-presentation can only be understood by accounting for these categories' interdependencies.

The following typology distinguishes between two dimensions: Strategies of self-presentation can either be differentiated between according to the respective salience of the refugee label, or according to ethnic labelling, i.e. if notions of ethnicity are salient or avoided. Using this typology reveals four types of self-presentation: adapting, masking, switching, and refusing. Before discussing these strategies, it is important to note that the boundaries demarking these fields and strategies are sometimes fuzzy, and that artists might change their positioning over time.

6.1. *Adapting*

The first type of self-presentation, adapting, is clearly centred around notions of refugeeness. It does not involve highlighting individual artistic work, but rather the shared experiences of all currently-arrived refugees from Syria. This is reflected in both strategies of self-presentation and marketing, where the flight becomes the biographical crux and also legitimises doing and presenting art. In other words, the dominance of refugeeness becomes evident in the artwork itself, such as a composition demonstrating aspects of war, a painting portraying the dangerous ferry ride across the Mediterranean or a play with discriminatory experiences as a central topic.

Artists who draw on this strategy present themselves according the anticipated expectations of the arrival society – and they also claim to 'to speak' for all currently-arrived refugees. Ethnic categorisation, however, does not play a role at all.

One example is the 'Checkpoint' theatre group: In their self-presentation, the ten players emphasise that they are 'Syrian refugees' who '[…] share the agonies, aspirations and challenges of War experience whilst living in Syria and the experience of becoming refugees integrating in Austria in the present moment' (Checkpoint, programme folder). Their play, 'I have/have not arrived' focuses on the arrival of Syrians in Austria and the challenge 'between arriving physically to a new destination and perhaps not arriving "in their mind and soul yet"' (ibid.). Adaptation as a strategy of self-presentation serves at least three social functions: First, some artists find an intrinsic need to work artistically on issues of refugeeness to cope with the challenges they have experienced. Second, some artists emphasise the importance of giving members of the arrival society the opportunity to retrace and understand the trajectories that refugees had and continue to experience. Third, presenting oneself as a 'refugee artist' is seen as a chance to gain symbolic recognition in a field where getting attention is a scarce resource, where refugeeness as a unique feature (or selling point) provides the chance to stand out.

In accordance with these observations, 'adapting' as an artist's strategy appears more likely among recently-arrived refugees, who have rather weak social networks and have not yet entered – or do not aim to enter – professional art worlds in the arrival country. This can lead to a pronounced awareness of the ambivalences towards displaying refugeeness, which becomes most visible when artists who previously emphasised their refugeeness later want to leave this refugee niche. This 'break-out' is described as a very difficult task, as illustrated in a fieldnote excerpt that describes the situation after the rehearsal for a play, when five actors and the director sat together to talk about future projects:

> Suddenly the discussion became lively: One of the actors suggested that they shouldn't refer to refugee issues anymore in future and that they—finally—should get out 'there'. Another actor replied that this is would not be easy, as public attention only can be received by displaying their refugeeness. Another member of the ensemble pointed to the role of theatre as a chance to confront the arrival society with their stories, their experiences and their views. (Fieldnotes)

6.2. *Masking*

The second type of self-presentation is characterised by downplaying notions of refugeeness while concurrently highlighting ethnic self-categorisation. In particular, it involves emphasising certain ethnic traditions in music or visual arts, which are highlighted and described as something specific to particular ethnic belongings, most notably nationhood, race, language, or religion (e.g. Syrian music or Kurdish lyrics), often by drawing symbolic boundaries against other ethnic traditions. While ethnic representations play a central role, notions of refugeeness are marginalised; they are masked by ethnic labels, meaning that ethnic labels are highlighted to avoid speaking about refugeeness.

One example of this strategy is demonstrated by the self-presentation of Orwa Saleh, an oud player and composer who restarted his musical career in Austria after he fled from Damascus. He is portrayed on his website as a musical ambassador who keeps old Syrian traditions alive: 'From ancient Syrian tales and contemporary sensations, Orwa embroiders his distinctive colourful music with stories and poems' (https://orwasaleh.net). The website mentions 'the elegant heritage of Syrian songs' and the idea of bringing 'old Arabic melodies back to nowadays life' (ibid.). However, there is no hint of Orwa's flight from Syria nor his situation as a 'refugee artist' aside from the description of 'The Syrian Oud player and composer who left Damascus 2012' (ibid.). What is striking is that the notion of ethnic markers (e.g. nationhood, language) are so dominant that any refugee categorisation in the cultural market is downplayed or even avoided. Applying this strategy fulfils various social functions: First, such a self-presentation based on ethnic markers helps to defend oneself against lumping all cultural traditions together under the label of 'refugee art'. Second, it also opposes devaluation: Not being the poor and cultureless refugee, but a proud migrant from a Syrian or Kurdish culture. Third, drawing on ethnicity serves to revise the image of Syria as a completely destroyed country and prevalent associations of war. Placing attention on Syrian culture therefore aims to repair this stereotype, or as Abdul, a musician who lived in Damascus, argues: 'With our art it is the aim to show others [long-established people in Austria], that we do not only have bad things such as war. We also have culture, a music, a life'.

Referring to ethnic rather than refugee categorisation helps draw attention away from the focus on the refugee label. This is common for artists who were professionally trained in the arts and who primarily want their artistic qualifications to be recognised. Typically, these artists are endowed with high amounts of cultural capital.

6.3. Switching

In 'switching', artists within this type are able (and willing) to switch and navigate between ethnic and refugee categorisations. They are familiar with the different expectations according to either ethnic or refugee categories and can draw on the entire repertoire of narratives and images associated with both refugee and ethnic labels. Some display one or the other category depending on the occasion, while others distinguish between different projects (or ensembles, bands), which are dedicated to one of the two self-presentation strategies.

One example is Salah Ammo, a Kurdish musician and Bouzouk player who left Syria 2013. He describes his art as being 'shaped by the deep heritage of Oriental music and poetry' (https://salahammo.com), focusing on his familiarity with Kurdish and Arab folk music, while at the same time, he does not hide being a refugee, nor that he left 'his home Syria because of the war' (ibid.) and that he sees his music as a chance to deal 'with the ongoing events in Syria and their consequences on the Syrian people' (CD Booklet 'ASSI – A story of a Syrian river'). A closer look at his various musical projects and concerts shows that Salah Ammo can switch between the two labels – both the 'ethnic' Syrian/Arab/Kurdish label and the 'refugee label'.

Such a strategy seems promising both economically and for positioning in the artistic field, as it offers heterogeneous opportunities and different audiences. Regarding factors that might facilitate this ‘switching’ between different labels, the data suggest several assumptions: Flexibility and a significant endowment with social and cultural capital might each play a role. Furthermore, and relatedly, this strategy seems more likely for artists who have lived in Austria for more than a few years and are both familiar with German and have had the chance to build different social networks within the arrival society.

6.4. Refusing ethnic and refugee categorisation

The final type of self-presentation is characterised by rejecting both ethnic and refugee categorisations, which can be found among artists who draw on this strategy to position themselves and their artistic work in the realm of international, transnational and/or cosmopolitan cultural production. They aim to critically reflect on both kinds of categorisation (refugee and ethnic labels) and try to escape from the pressures of representation. For example, apart from using his Arabic name, the Syrian painter Adel Dauood avoids mentioning any hints associated with ethnic or refugee markers on his website, instead focusing solely on his art, which is presented as timeless and without any context (http://adeldauood.com).

Fathi S., describes how the audience should focus on the artwork itself, and complains about being always asked about where he comes from:

> It’s always the first question: Where are you from? The question is okay, but it shouldn’t be asked in the first second. I want them to look at my art, and then, after one hour, they might ask me where I’m from.

This kind of self-presentation is highly intertwined with a conceptualisation of art as an autonomous sphere, which should be decoupled from any social or cultural context. It can be found in professional artistic milieus that are characterised by high amounts of cultural capital, and is typical for artists who had positioned themselves within an international art field when they lived and worked in Syria.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Artists who fled from Syria to Austria are not only confronted with forms of social categorisation along ethnic lines, but also along notions of their ‘refugeeness’. In reference to Kobena Mercer (1994), this may lead to what I call the ‘double burden of representation’, as they are expected both to represent their imagined ‘ethnic’ community and a specific group of refugees. The latter usually includes all migrants associated with the publicly and highly-debated flow of migration during the summer of 2015, when thousands of migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq came to Europe, including Austria, because of the political situation in their home countries. By drawing on data gained from ethnographic research in diverse fields of artistic practice, this research aimed to illuminate how these challenges that stem from social categorisation are experienced and addressed by the artists. The expectation ‘to speak’ for the whole group of refugees is perceived as a challenge (and sometimes a threat), as it forces them to emphasise multiple clichés and stereotypes associated with refugees (imagined as a homogenous group), while concurrently neglecting their artistic and individual competencies. However, ethnic categorisation does not disappear – and still plays a role.

A typology of self-presentation strategies was developed to empirically grasp this double burden. While 'adapting' draws on the emphasis of refugee labelling, 'masking' refers to downplaying refugeeness by simultaneously highlighting notions around ethnicity. 'Switching' describes a strategy of navigating between different sets of categorisation, while 'refusing' means avoiding any categorisation related to ethnicity or migration status.

These findings contribute to better understanding the barriers and challenges migrant artists are facing as they restart their artistic careers abroad. By examining artists who fled to Austria from Syria, this research focused on a specific and particular vulnerable group of migrants, which so far has been neglected in the field of art and migration. Whether artistic activities will end in social mobility and social inclusion – as hoped for by integration policy as well as a number of migration scholars (DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly 2015; Lena and Cornfield 2008; Martiniello 2015; 2018; Vanderwaeren 2014) – will also depend on how categorisation and representation processes are shaped by the actors and institutions of the arrival society. On a more theoretical level, the findings contribute to unpacking the relationship between social categorisation and representation by showing how ethnic and refugee labels are intertwined and shape artists' practices as well as their positioning in cultural markets.

This study may, nevertheless, have certain limitations: First, given the small number of participants, it does not provide any explanatory account. It would be interesting to empirically identify factors that make using certain strategies of self-presentation more likely than others. However, the data suggest that artists' cultural and social capital play a vital role, as high amounts of these resources prevent them from being forced into a niche. Those who can display and mobilise their social contacts, as well as cultural capital and familiarity with German, might find it easier to switch between different coordinates in the cultural field. Furthermore, access to the respective artistic field seems to be another relevant aspect regarding opportunities to move between different realms. The more inclusive the respective artistic field, the more likely artists from Syria are to integrate into the artistic mainstream and express themselves beyond ethnic or refugee categorisations. Empirical evidence to support these hypotheses could contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between structure and agency in the artists' process of restarting their careers.

Second, another promising line of research concerns different critical approaches in artistic work that negotiate the ambivalences of social categorisation – and challenges of representation. It could be fruitful to specifically shed light on subversive strategies in the artistic work itself and examine the potential of art to find, experiment with and establish new forms of representation beyond taken-for-granted classification systems (Catalani 2019; Petersen and Schramm 2017). Therefore, it would be promising to consider the artwork itself more rigorously, as suggested by the 'new sociology of art' (de la Fuente 2007).

Third, it is important to recognise that representation logics might transform over time. The 'refugee' label is not fixed and stable: It can even disappear – or at least lose its meaning and significance (Ludwig 2016; Rotas 2012). However, even if Syrian artists are no longer referred to as 'refugee artists', they will most likely continue to face the burden of ethnic representation.

Notes

1. I refer to Andreas Wimmer's conceptualisation of ethnicity, who, drawing on the works of Max Weber and Fredrik Barth, emphasises the social constructivist character of ethnicity and focuses on those ethnic markers 'that are used to substantiate the belief in shared culture and ancestry' (Wimmer 2013, 7–8). Wimmer distinguishes between subtypes of ethnicity, e.g. race, nationhood, religion, or language. For artists from Syria in Austria, nationhood seems most important in processes of internal and external categorisation; however differences are emphasised within certain national categories according to race, religion or language.
2. Artists from Syria were chosen because Syrians constitute one of the largest groups of refugees in terms of recent migration flows to Austria. Between 2010 and 2019, 57,965 Syrians applied for asylum in Austria, many who have since being recognised as refugees (48,415 positive decisions 2010–2019) (BMI 2020). In the context of this study and in order to address some of the critique surrounding the term 'refugee' (Erdal and Oeppen 2018; Weiß 2018), I use the expression 'Syrian refugees' in a broad sense, referring to people who have fled Syria during civil war (2011–). This definition encompasses both people who seek protection in Austria (the majority of them by applying for asylum) and those who have already been granted 'refugee status' by the Austrian government on the basis of the 1951 Refugee Convention, subsidiary protection or residence permit. However, it is important to note that although the rate of positive decisions for Syrians has been relatively high, the majority of recognised refugees only have temporary asylum ('Asyl auf Zeit'). This new protection status was implemented by the Austrian government in June 2015 to tighten asylum law, and initially limits the right of residence to three years. Although the right of residence can become indefinite after three years, many refugees experience nevertheless their status as unsecure and precarious.
3. Ethnicity might be displayed by 'Austrian' artists who highlight the typical 'Austrian' elements of their art or ostentatiously refer to stereotypical portrayals (e.g. in so called 'volkstümliche Musik', in which the ethnic (Austrian) categorisations play an essential role). However, there are also members of the ethnic majority who use 'other' ethnicities as marketing tool. This has been most prominently observed in 'Balkan music' in Europe, where many 'natives' started a career as a musician or DJ in the Balkan music scene (Brunner and Parzer 2011).
4. The age range of the sample is from 18 to 55 and includes 8 female and 12 male artists. Based on interviewees' responses, their religious beliefs encompass Islam, Alevitism, Druze faith and Christianity, as well as atheists. Although I did not explicitly ask about social class, given the respondents' endowment with cultural capital, it can be assumed that most of them have a middle-class background.
5. All personal names in the transcripts and fieldnotes are pseudonyms.

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