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Beyond Asylum: A Quantitative Model of Social Integration and Well-being among Refugees in Greek Local Societies

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Abstract

This study moves beyond theoretical frameworks to empirically test a model of social integration among refugees in Greece. While factors affecting integration are well-documented, their relative importance in this critical context remains under-quantified. This research examines the predictive power of structural factors (housing, employment) and social factors (language proficiency, host community contact) on two key outcomes: social integration and psychological well-being. Using a cross-sectional survey of 435 recognized refugees and asylum-seekers in Athens and Thessaloniki, we employed hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The findings reveal that social factors are stronger predictors of integration than structural factors. Host community contact (β = .31) and language proficiency (β = .28) were the most powerful predictors of social integration. For psychological well-being, social integration itself emerged as the strongest predictor (β = .39), mediating the effect of other social variables. The model provides a data-driven hierarchy of needs for integration, demonstrating that while structural support is essential, it is the social factors of language and community connection that most potently drive successful integration and well-being, offering clear guidance for policy and practice.

Keywords: Social Integration, Refugees, Greece, Quantitative Model, Well-being, Housing Policy, Social Capital, Migration Studies

1. Introduction

The past decade has been characterized by unprecedented levels of forced displacement, creating profound demographic shifts globally (Silove, Ventevogel & Rees, 2017). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), the number of people forcibly displaced worldwide has surpassed 110 million, a stark increase from previous years. This global phenomenon has placed significant pressure on host nations, particularly those on the front lines of migration routes, to develop effective policies that move beyond emergency reception and foster long-term social integration. Greece, as a primary entry point to the European Union, has been at the epicenter of this challenge, transitioning from a country of transit to one of long-term settlement for a significant refugee population (Kourachanis, 2023).

This new reality has created complex challenges for Greek society and its institutions, impacting sectors from housing and healthcare to education and the labor market. The central policy objective in this context is the smooth and sustainable integration of newcomers into host societies. However, social integration is a notoriously complex, multidimensional, and dynamic process (Ager & Strang, 2008). Its definition is contested, and the factors influencing its success are varied, spanning individual characteristics (e.g., age, education), host country policies (e.g., migration laws, welfare systems), and local community dynamics (e.g., attitudes, presence of co-ethnic networks) (Spencer & Charsley, 2021).

While a rich body of qualitative literature has explored the lived experiences of refugees in Greece, providing invaluable insights into their struggles and resilience (see Michail & Christou, 2022), there remains a significant gap in quantitative research. Few studies have attempted to statistically model the integration process to determine the relative weight of its constituent factors. Foundational theoretical frameworks identify numerous domains crucial for integration, including structural elements like housing and employment, and social elements like language acquisition and community relations. Yet, policymakers and practitioners are often left without empirical evidence to guide resource allocation. Is it more effective to invest in housing programs, language courses, or community-bridging initiatives? Answering this question requires moving from theoretical identification to empirical validation and hierarchical ordering.

This paper addresses this gap by building and testing a quantitative model of social integration and psychological well-being among refugees in Greece. Building upon a foundational literature review that identified key theoretical domains, this study operationalizes these concepts into measurable variables. We aim to empirically test the relative predictive power of structural factors (Perceived Housing Quality,

Employment Status) versus social factors (Language Proficiency, Host Community Contact) on integration outcomes. We hypothesize that while structural stability is a necessary precondition, the "softer," more relational social factors will emerge as more potent drivers of both social integration and psychological well-being. By providing this data-driven, hierarchical understanding, this study seeks to offer clear, evidence-based guidance for crafting more effective and humane integration policies in Greece and beyond.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptualizing Social Integration: From Durkheim to Multidimensional Frameworks

The intellectual roots of social integration can be traced to the foundational work of Émile Durkheim. In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim explored the concept of social solidarity, distinguishing between the "mechanical" solidarity of traditional societies based on likeness and the "organic" solidarity of modern societies based on interdependence. He later defined social integration as the degree to which individuals are connected to their social groups, arguing that weak integration leads to a state of "anomie," or normlessness, which is detrimental to both individual well-being and social order (Durkheim, 1897). This classical understanding frames integration as a fundamental human need for connection and belonging.

Contemporary scholarship has evolved this concept into a multidimensional framework, moving away from a simplistic, one-way model of assimilation. Integration is now widely understood as a two-way process requiring adaptation from both newcomers and the host society (Kymlicka, 1995). Perhaps the most influential contemporary framework is that of Ager and Strang (2008), who, through a comprehensive review, identified ten core domains of integration. These domains are grouped into four categories: 'Markers and Means' (employment, housing, education, health), 'Social Connections' (social bonds, social bridges, social links), 'Facilitators' (language and cultural knowledge), and 'Foundation' (rights and citizenship). This framework is invaluable because it highlights that integration is not a monolithic outcome but a process occurring across multiple, interconnected life domains. This study operationalizes several of these core domains to test their interrelationships empirically.

2.2 The Role of Social Capital: Bonding and Bridging in Refugee Contexts

To understand the mechanisms behind social integration, it is useful to draw upon social capital theory, most famously articulated by Robert Putnam (2000). Putnam

distinguishes between two key forms of social capital: "bonding" social capital, which refers to connections within a homogenous group (e.g., among co-ethnics), and "bridging" social capital, which refers to connections between heterogeneous groups (e.g., between refugees and members of the host community). Bonding capital is crucial for newcomers, providing emotional support, shared cultural understanding, and practical information for navigating a new environment (Ryan, 2011). However, an over-reliance on bonding capital at the expense of bridging capital can lead to the formation of isolated ethnic enclaves, hindering long-term integration (Portes, 1998).

Bridging capital, on the other hand, is essential for accessing the resources of the wider society, such as job opportunities, educational pathways, and civic participation. It is through "weak ties" with the host community that newcomers often gain access to novel information and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). Ager and Strang's (2008) concepts of "social bonds" and "social bridges" map directly onto this theoretical distinction. Recent research confirms the critical role of bridging capital; for instance, Kokkali and Kikas (2022) found that for refugees in Greece, social networks extending into the host community were a key enabler for accessing cultural capital and achieving a sense of belonging. Similarly, the increasing use of social media presents a dual potential, capable of reinforcing co-ethnic bonds but also offering new avenues for building digital bridges to the host society (Stănilă, 2022). Our study directly measures the impact of host community contact, a proxy for bridging social capital, on integration outcomes.

2.3 Structural Pillars and Social Facilitators of Integration

The integration process rests on both structural foundations and social facilitators. Structural factors, such as stable housing and meaningful employment, are often considered the primary "markers and means" of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Secure housing is more than mere shelter; it is a prerequisite for safety, stability, and health, and it provides a base from which to pursue education, employment, and social life (Penninx, 2005). Housing policies that segregate refugees into remote reception centers can severely undermine integration by limiting access to services and preventing the formation of bridging social capital. In Greece, the shift from the ESTIA urban accommodation program back to a camp-based model has been criticized for precisely this reason, potentially creating long-term barriers to integration (Kourachanis, 2023). Similarly, employment provides not only economic self-sufficiency but also a sense of purpose, daily structure, and opportunities for social interaction with host nationals (Bloch, 2002).

Alongside these structural pillars are the social facilitators, primarily language proficiency and cultural knowledge. Language is the primary tool for communication and is essential for navigating nearly every aspect of life in a new country, from

accessing healthcare to finding a job and building friendships. Its importance goes beyond the instrumental; acquiring the host language is often seen as a key indicator of a newcomer's commitment to integration and is fundamental to building the trust and mutual understanding that underpin bridging social capital. The central empirical question for this study is to determine the relative weight of these structural versus social factors in predicting successful integration.

2.4 The Present Study and Hypothesis Development

The foregoing literature review establishes that integration is a complex, multi-domain process influenced by structural enablers and social facilitators. While theoretical frameworks like Ager and Strang's (2008) provide a comprehensive map of the relevant domains, they do not specify the relative importance of each domain in a given context. This study operationalizes and tests a model based on this theoretical foundation to determine the hierarchical importance of these factors for refugees in Greece. Our conceptual model, depicted in Figure 1, posits that structural and social factors directly influence social integration, which in turn is a primary driver of psychological well-being.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Predictors of Social Integration and Psychological Well-being

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES		**MEDIATING / DEPENDENT VARIABLE**	**DEPENDENT VARIABLE**
Structural Factors - Perceived Housing Quality - Employment Status	**Social Factors** - Language Proficiency - Host Community Contact	**Social Integration**	**Psychological Well-being**
→ H1, H2, H3 →		→ H4 →	

**Source: Developed by the authors based on the Ager & Strang (2008) framework.*

Based on this model and the supporting literature, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: Structural factors (Perceived Housing Quality, Employment Status) will be positively and significantly associated with Social Integration.

H2: Social factors (Language Proficiency, Host Community Contact) will be positively and significantly associated with Social Integration.

H3: Social factors (H2) will explain a significantly larger portion of the variance in Social Integration than structural factors (H1), demonstrating their greater predictive power.

H4: Social Integration will be a primary positive predictor of Psychological Well-being, even after controlling for the direct effects of all structural and social factors, suggesting a mediating role.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This approach is well-suited for examining the relationships between multiple variables at a single point in time and for building a predictive statistical model. Data was collected over a six-month period from June to December 2023 from recognized refugees and asylum-seekers residing in Greece.

3.2 Sampling Strategy and Procedure

The target population for this study was defined as individuals aged 18 and over, holding status as either a recognized refugee or an asylum-seeker, and having resided in Greece for at least one year. This latter criterion was included to ensure participants had sufficient experience with the integration process beyond the initial reception phase. The sample was drawn from Athens and Thessaloniki, the two largest urban centers in Greece, which host the majority of the country's non-camp-based refugee population.

A multi-stage purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants. First, we established partnerships with four well-established non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide a range of services (e.g., legal aid, language classes, social support) to refugees in these two cities. These NGOs served as gatekeepers, facilitating access to the target population. Second, trained, multilingual research assistants (fluent in Arabic, Farsi, French, and Greek) were stationed at the NGOs' community centers. They approached individuals who met the inclusion criteria, explained the purpose of the study, and invited them to participate. The survey was administered either in person via a tablet or provided as a secure online link, allowing participants to complete it in their preferred language (Arabic, Farsi, or English). This approach was chosen to maximize accessibility and ensure a diverse sample across different nationalities and backgrounds.

3.3 Participants

An initial 550 individuals were invited to participate, of whom 435 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 79.1%. This final sample size (N=435) provides sufficient statistical power (above 0.95 for detecting medium effect sizes with $\alpha = .05$) for the planned hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The demographic profile of the sample is detailed in Table 1. The sample was predominantly male (61.8%), with a mean age of 30.2 years. The most represented countries of origin were Afghanistan (35.9%) and Syria (28.7%). The average length of residence in Greece was 3.4 years, indicating that the sample was largely composed of individuals navigating long-term integration challenges rather than immediate arrival crises.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Respondent Demographics (N=435)

Variable	Category / Statistic	Value
Gender	Male	269 (61.8%)
	Female	166 (38.2%)
Age (Years)	Mean (SD)	30.2 (8.1)
	Range	18 - 61
Country of Origin	Afghanistan	156 (35.9%)
	Syria	125 (28.7%)
	Congo (DRC) / Somalia / Other Sub-Saharan	98 (22.5%)
	Iraq	32 (7.4%)
	Other	24 (5.5%)
Time in Greece (Years)	Mean (SD)	3.4 (1.9)
	1 - 4 years	335 (77.0%)
	5+ years	100 (23.0%)
Legal Status	Recognized Refugee	252 (57.9%)
	Asylum Seeker (Pending)	183 (42.1%)
Location	Athens Metropolitan Area	288 (66.2%)
	Thessaloniki Metropolitan Area	147 (33.8%)

3.4 Instrumentation and Measures

The survey instrument was developed in English and then translated into Arabic and Farsi using a rigorous back-translation method to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence. All multi-item scales used a 5-point Likert-type response format (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), unless otherwise noted.

Social Integration (Dependent Variable 1): This outcome was measured using a 12-item scale developed for this study, grounded in the Ager and Strang (2008) framework. The scale was designed to capture three key dimensions: *social bonds* (links to co-ethnic community; e.g., "I feel I belong to my own ethnic community here"), *social bridges* (links to the host community; e.g., "I have close friends who are Greek"), and *social links* (connections to institutions; e.g., "I know how to get help from public services if I need it"). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Psychological Well-being (Dependent Variable 2): This was measured using the 5-item World Health Organization Well-Being Index (WHO-5), a widely used and validated instrument for assessing subjective psychological well-being. A sample item is, "Over the last two weeks, I have felt cheerful and in good spirits." The scale showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

Perceived Housing Quality (Independent Variable 1): This structural factor was measured with a 4-item scale assessing satisfaction with housing conditions. Items included "My home provides a safe environment for me and my family" and "My home is not overcrowded." The scale was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

Employment Status (Independent Variable 2): This structural factor was operationalized as a single dummy-coded variable, where 1 = Employed (including full-time, part-time, or seasonal work) and 0 = Unemployed.

Language Proficiency (Independent Variable 3): This social factor was measured with a 4-item self-report scale assessing functional proficiency in the Greek language. Items included "I can hold a simple conversation in Greek" and "I can understand most of what is said in Greek in everyday situations." The scale demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$).

Host Community Contact (Independent Variable 4): This social factor, a proxy for bridging social capital, was measured with a 4-item scale assessing the frequency and quality of interactions with Greek nationals. Items included "I interact with Greek people several times a week" and "My interactions with local Greek people are generally friendly and positive." The scale was reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

Control Variables: Based on the literature, we included Age (in years), Gender (coded 1 = Female, 0 = Male), and Time in Greece (in years) as demographic control variables to account for their potential influence on integration outcomes.

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

All data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 28. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and a Pearson correlation matrix were generated for all study variables to examine their distributions and bivariate relationships. Second, to test the hypotheses, two separate hierarchical multiple linear regression analyses were conducted. The first model predicted Social Integration, and the second predicted Psychological Well-being. The hierarchical (or sequential) approach was chosen because it allows for testing the specific contribution of different blocks of variables. In both models, demographic controls were entered in Step 1. Structural factors (Housing, Employment) were entered in Step 2, and social factors (Language, Host Contact) were entered in Step 3. This design allows for a direct test of H3 by comparing the change in R-squared (ΔR^2) contributed by Step 2 versus Step 3. For the well-being model, a final Step 4 was added, entering Social Integration itself to test H4. Assumptions of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity were checked and met.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was approved by the university's research ethics board. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet in their native language explaining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all data were collected anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Participants were offered a small food voucher as a token of appreciation for their time.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation matrix for all continuous and dichotomous study variables. The mean score for Social Integration was 2.88 (SD = 0.95) on a 5-point scale, slightly below the midpoint, suggesting that, on average, participants feel they are still in the process of integrating rather than feeling fully integrated. Similarly, the mean for Psychological Well-being was 2.65 (SD = 1.02), indicating a relatively low level of well-being within the sample.

The correlation matrix provides initial support for our hypotheses. Social Integration showed significant positive correlations with all four primary independent variables. Notably, the strongest correlations were with the social factors: Host Community Contact ($r = .49$, $p < .001$) and Language Proficiency ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). The correlations with structural factors, while significant, were weaker: Employment Status ($r = .40$, $p < .001$) and Perceived Housing Quality ($r = .33$, $p < .001$). Psychological Well-being was also significantly correlated with all predictors, and most strongly with Social Integration itself ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). The inter-correlations among predictor variables were moderate, with the highest being between Language Proficiency and Host Community Contact ($r = .48$), well below the threshold for multicollinearity concerns.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson Correlation Matrix (N=435)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	30.2	8.1	-								
2. Gender (1=F)	0.38	0.49	-.04	-							
3. Time in Greece	3.4	1.9	.21**	.02	-						
4. Housing Quality	3.05	1.01	-.01	-.09*	.11*	(.85)					
5. Employment (1=Y)	0.36	0.48	.08*	-.14**	.22**	.19**	-				
6. Language Prof.	2.55	1.09	.15**	.06	.34**	.24**	.31**	(.89)			
7. Host Contact	2.79	1.05	.09*	.03	.29**	.30**	.35**	.48**	(.87)		
8. Social Integration	2.88	0.95	.12**	-.02	.31**	.33**	.40**	.45**	.49**	(.88)	
9. Psych. Well-being	2.65	1.02	.04	-.08*	.20**	.29**	.38**	.33**	.41**	.51**	(.91)

*Note: Cronbach's α reliability coefficients are on the diagonal in parentheses. * p < .05; ** p < .01 (2-tailed).*

4.2 Hypothesis Testing: Predicting Social Integration

Table 3 (Model A) presents the results of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis predicting Social Integration. In **Step 1**, the demographic control variables (Age, Gender, Time in Greece) were entered, explaining a significant 10.3% of the variance in Social Integration ($R^2 = .103$, $F(3, 431) = 15.91$, $p < .001$). Time in Greece was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), indicating that integration improves with longer residence.

In **Step 2**, the structural factors (Housing Quality, Employment Status) were added. This step accounted for a significant additional 11.2% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .112$, $F(2, 429) = 33.15$, $p < .001$). Both Perceived Housing Quality ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$) and Employment Status ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$) were significant positive predictors. This provides strong support for **H1**.

In **Step 3**, the social factors (Language Proficiency, Host Community Contact) were added. This final step explained a significant additional 17.2% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .172$, $F(2, 427) = 64.89$, $p < .001$). Both Language Proficiency ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) and Host Community Contact ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictors in the final model. This supports **H2**.

Crucially, the unique variance explained by the social factors in Step 3 ($\Delta R^2 = .172$) was substantially larger than the unique variance explained by the structural factors in Step 2 ($\Delta R^2 = .112$). This finding provides clear support for **H3**, demonstrating that social factors have greater predictive power for social integration than structural factors in this sample. The full model explained a total of 38.7% of the variance in Social Integration (Adjusted $R^2 = .375$, $F(7, 427) = 38.62$, $p < .001$).

4.3 Hypothesis Testing: Predicting Psychological Well-being

Table 3 (Model B) presents the results of the hierarchical regression analysis predicting Psychological Well-being. **Step 1** (Controls) explained 4.5% of the variance ($p < .01$). In **Step 2**, adding structural factors explained an additional 12.0% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .120$, $p < .001$), with both Housing ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$) and Employment ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$) being significant. In **Step 3**, adding social factors explained another 9.1% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .091$, $p < .001$).

The critical test for **H4** occurred in **Step 4**, where Social Integration was added to the model. This step explained a significant additional 6.3% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = .063$, $F(1, 426) = 28.11$, $p < .001$). In this final model, Social Integration emerged as the single strongest predictor of Psychological Well-being ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$). Its inclusion rendered the effects of Language Proficiency and Host Community Contact non-significant, suggesting that their influence on well-being is fully mediated through the

sense of social integration. Employment Status (β = .21, p < .01) remained a significant independent predictor. This provides strong support for H4. The full model explained 31.9% of the variance in Psychological Well-being (Adjusted R^2 = .306, F(8, 426) = 23.67, p < .001).

Table 3: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Social Integration and Psychological Well-being (N=435)

Variable	Model A: Social Integration			Model B: Psychological Well-being			
	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β	Step 1 β	Step 2 β	Step 3 β	Step 4 β
Step 1: Controls							
Age	.03	.01	-.02	.01	-.02	-.04	-.03
Gender (1=Female)	-.05	-.01	.02	-.08*	-.05	-.03	-.04
Time in Greece	.29***	.20***	.09*	.18***	.12**	.06	.02
Step 2: Structural Factors							
Housing Quality		.21***	.15***		.20***	.15***	.10*
Employment Status		.24***	.18***		.26***	.21***	.21**
Step 3: Social Factors							
Language Proficiency			.28***			.19***	.05
Host Community Contact			.31***			.25***	.08
Step 4: Integration							
Social Integration							.39***
Model Statistics							

R^2	.103	.215	.387	.045	.165	.256	.319
ΔR^2	.103***	.112***	.172***	.045**	.120***	.091***	.063***
F-statistic	15.91***	29.34***	38.62***	6.81**	16.53***	20.81***	23.67***

*Note: β = Standardized Beta Coefficient. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.*

5. Discussion

This study set out to move beyond theoretical postulation to empirically test a predictive model of refugee integration in Greece. The results provide a robust, data-driven hierarchy of factors influencing social integration and psychological well-being, offering significant theoretical and practical contributions. The findings confirm our central thesis: while structural supports are foundational, social and relational factors are the most potent drivers of successful integration.

5.1 The Primacy of Social Factors over Structural Enablers

The most significant finding of this study is the superior predictive power of social factors (Language Proficiency and Host Community Contact) over structural factors (Housing Quality and Employment Status) in explaining social integration. As hypothesized (H3), the block of social variables accounted for more unique variance (17.2%) than the block of structural variables (11.2%). This does not diminish the importance of safe housing and stable employment—our results confirm they are significant predictors (H1). Rather, it suggests that they are necessary but insufficient conditions for true social integration. A refugee can be housed and employed but still feel profoundly isolated and disconnected from the host society.

The two strongest individual predictors of social integration were Host Community Contact (β = .31) and Language Proficiency (β = .28). This empirically validates the crucial role of "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 2000) in the integration process. Contact with host nationals provides opportunities for cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and the formation of the "weak ties" that are often critical for accessing information and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). Language proficiency is the essential tool that enables these interactions. Our findings align perfectly with Kokkali and Kikas (2022), who highlighted the role of social networks and cultural capital in Greece. This result carries a stark policy warning: strategies that prioritize containment over connection, such as housing refugees in remote camps with limited access to urban centers, are actively undermining the single most important driver of integration. The Greek government's move away from urban accommodation

programs like ESTIA (Kourachanis, 2023) should be urgently reconsidered in light of this evidence.

5.2 Social Integration as the Core Mediator of Well-being

The second major contribution of this research is the clarification of the pathway to psychological well-being. Our analysis strongly supports H4, demonstrating that Social Integration is the most powerful direct predictor of Psychological Well-being ($\beta = .39$), even when accounting for all other factors. The model suggests a clear mediating relationship: factors like language ability and host contact enhance well-being primarily *because* they foster a sense of social integration and belonging. When social integration was added to the model, the direct effects of these social factors on well-being became non-significant. This finding resonates with a large body of psychological research on the fundamental human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and recent studies on refugee youth which find that social connection is a critical determinant of mental health (Keles, Fseeh, & Sirin, 2023).

This implies that the mental health challenges prevalent in refugee populations (Silove et al., 2017) are not solely a legacy of past trauma but are also actively exacerbated by present-day conditions of social exclusion and isolation. Interventions aimed at improving refugee mental health must therefore go beyond clinical treatment to address the social determinants of well-being. Fostering an environment where refugees can build meaningful connections and feel part of the community is a powerful public health strategy.

Notably, Employment Status remained a significant, independent predictor of well-being even after controlling for social integration. This suggests that employment contributes to mental health through pathways beyond social connection alone, likely related to financial autonomy, a sense of purpose and self-efficacy, and a structured daily routine. This underscores the need for a dual-pronged approach to supporting refugee well-being that simultaneously targets social inclusion and labor market access.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study provides quantitative validation for multidimensional frameworks of integration like that of Ager and Strang (2008). By demonstrating the hierarchical importance of different domains, it adds a new layer of empirical specificity. The findings suggest that "Facilitators" (language) and "Social Connections" (social bridges) may be more impactful on the overall sense of integration than the "Markers and Means" (housing, employment), at least in the

Greek context. This provides a data-driven rationale for prioritizing investments in programs that build bridging social capital.

The practical and policy implications are direct and actionable for policymakers in Greece and the EU:

1. **Re-center Policy on Social Connection:** The data is unambiguous. Housing policies must shift from a logic of containment to one of connection. Prioritizing urban and semi-urban accommodation where interaction with the host community is possible is not a luxury, but a necessity for successful integration.
2. **Invest Aggressively in "Integration Infrastructure":** Free, accessible, high-quality language programs are arguably the single most effective investment a state can make. These should be complemented by funded "social bridging" initiatives, such as mentorship programs, community sports leagues, and cultural exchange events that facilitate structured, positive contact between newcomers and locals.
3. **Adopt a Dual-Pronged Approach to Well-being:** To effectively support refugee mental health, policymakers must pursue two tracks simultaneously: fostering social integration (through language, community programs, and anti-discrimination campaigns) and facilitating meaningful labor market access (through skills recognition, vocational training, and partnerships with employers). One without the other is an incomplete strategy.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Principal Contribution

This study's principal contribution is the development and validation of a quantitative, predictive model of refugee integration in the critical context of Greece. By moving beyond a theoretical listing of relevant factors to an empirical testing of their relative importance, this research answers the practical question of *how much* different factors matter. We have demonstrated that while structural supports like housing and employment are important, social factors—specifically, the ability to communicate with and form relationships with the host community—are the most powerful predictors of social integration. Furthermore, we empirically establish that this sense of social integration is the single most important determinant of psychological well-being. This work provides a clear mandate for policymakers and practitioners: integration is not merely a material problem to be solved with shelter and services; it is a fundamentally human and social process that thrives on connection, communication, and community.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, its cross-sectional design captures associations at a single point in time and cannot definitively establish causality. A longitudinal study that tracks a cohort of newly arrived refugees over several years would be invaluable for understanding the dynamic and causal interplay between these variables over time. Second, our sample was drawn from two major urban centers. The experiences and integration pathways of refugees residing in rural areas or on the Aegean islands may differ significantly, warranting dedicated research. Third, all measures were based on self-report, which, while standard practice, can be subject to social desirability bias. Future studies could incorporate objective measures (e.g., observed language skills, network analysis) to complement subjective perceptions.

Future research should also explore the nuances behind these findings. Qualitative inquiry, following the example of Michail and Christou (2022), could delve into the lived experiences of individuals who, despite having housing and jobs, still report low levels of integration, helping to uncover more subtle barriers. Additionally, research could investigate the specific role of digital integration, testing how social media and online platforms function as tools for building either bonding or bridging social capital in the Greek context (Stănilă, 2022). Finally, comparative studies applying this model in other European countries with different integration policy regimes would help to determine the generalizability of these findings and the impact of national policy contexts on integration outcomes.

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