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Preserving and Celebrating Syrian Intangible Cultural Heritage in the UK: Strategies, Insights, and Untold Narratives

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Abstract: In recent times, the significance of living heritage during crises has gained prominence. While the aftermath of such crises often leads to lessons being forgotten, those in conflict zones persistently endure hardships. This study examines the pivotal role of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in bolstering resilience, particularly among diaspora communities, using Syrians in the UK as a case study. We delve into the primary ICH practices that they adopt, their assimilation techniques within the UK, the impact of wartime experiences on their reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and the consequent effects on host communities. Employing a diverse methodological framework that includes online public lectures, interviews, and direct observations, our results underscore the Syrian diaspora's earnest commitment to preserving its rich heritage. Beyond the poignant losses of invaluable art and treasures to conflict, a dominant narrative of hope and enduring human spirit emerges. As illuminated by our findings, Syrians' resilience extends beyond mere survival, reflecting a deep-seated pride in identity and an unyielding cultural spirit. This resilience not only marks the continuation of Syrian culture but also highlights its capacity to evolve, adapt, and enrich new environments.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; diaspora; cultural adaptation; heritage preservation; Syrian identity



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1. Introduction

Syria has occupied a prominent position in international discourse for over a decade, primarily as a result of the civil war that commenced in 2011. The narratives that have emerged from this crisis are filled with accounts of human tragedy: lost lives and livelihoods, mass displacement, the destruction of homes, and relentless attacks on historical and heritage sites. The situation extends beyond the dire human consequences; Syria's built environment is witnessing a more insidious loss: a gradual disintegration of its cultural soul. The country's centuries-old traditions, customs, and knowledge are under threat, leading to a severe fraying of its unique sociocultural fabric through displacement.

Heritage transcends the boundaries of tangible edifices and locales, deeply embedding itself in intangible values, principles, and traditions that form the core of a community's identity. Historically, Syria, with its plethora of heritage cities and sites, has been a melting pot for myriad civilizations. This rich tapestry of history is evident in structures from various epochs—be it the second-century AD Graeco-Roman architectural wonders in Palmyra and Bosra [1], the remnants of the world's oldest known church building at Dura-Europos, or the 13th-century citadels, grand mosques, and 17th to 18th-century madrasas, palaces, caravanserais, and hammams that grace Old Aleppo and Old Damascus [2]. This fusion of cultures has culminated in a vibrant religious mosaic primarily composed of Muslims (85%), Christians (10%), and a blend of minority religions, such as the Druze and Yezidis (5%) [3]. These diverse belief systems have collectively fostered a breadth of shared socio-cultural practices, some of which teeter on the precipice of oblivion, with others already vanishing into the annals of history. See Figure 1 for examples of four World Heritage Sites in Syria currently on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger.



Figure 1. Heritage Sites in Syria currently on the UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger: (**top left**) Bosra Theatre, (**bottom left**) Aleppo Citadel, (**top right**) Palmyra [4], and (**bottom right**) Palace in Old Damascus [5].

Even before the onset of the Syrian conflict, proactive steps were being taken to protect the nation's intangible cultural heritage (ICH). This commitment was evident when Syria pledged its support to the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in 2005 [6]. By the turn of the decade in 2010, the Syrian Trust for Development, established in 2001, had nationally identified over forty elements spanning the five ICH domains delineated by UNESCO [7]. Yet, of this expansive heritage, a mere quintet has garnered international recognition. This selected group comprises the shadow play theatre, traditions, and craftsmanship linked to the Damascene rose in al-Mrah; the ancient art of falconry; al-Qudoud al-Halabiya—a form of traditional music; and the crafting and performance associated with the Oud [8].

The 2003 Convention's ratification has not been mirrored in Syrian laws, which mainly safeguard tangible heritage, especially monuments [9]. Consequently, widespread awareness and appreciation of the importance of ICH were previously limited. However, with the recent reduction in conflict in certain regions of Syria, the Trust has initiated several projects. These include the 2015 Syrian Handicrafts, aimed at preserving crafts like Damascene brocade, and events like the World Day for Cultural Diversity and 2015's World Peace Day. The Trust has also assisted in restoring places such as Maaloula and Old Aleppo [10]. Yet, due to the large migration of Syrians, these efforts have not achieved full success.

To better inform our readers about ICH as we delve deeper into this article, we present a curated list of ICH elements specific to Syria. These elements fall under UNESCO-defined domains, as documented by the Syrian Trust for Development [11]. Refer to Figure 2 for examples.

1. **Oral Traditions and Expressions** Syrian examples encompass ḥakawāty (traditional storytelling), zajal (oral poetry contests), mūlawīyah (traditional folk-lyric poetry), and Syriac Christian music. Some are accompanied by traditional musical instruments like the rabābah [12]. Mainstream social groups in different parts of Syria practice the majority of these oral traditions on special occasions, reflecting local dialects.
2. **Performing Arts** In Syria, this domain includes playing traditional instruments such as the Oud [13] and Qānūn [14], dances like samāḥ and dabkah [15], the 'arāḍah performance [16], shadow-play theatre, al-Qudūd Ḥalabīyah [17], and Circassian dances [18]. Most of these performances are executed by trained professionals.
3. **Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events** Syrian examples include traditional weddings, Eid al-Fiṭr (Eid), Christmas celebrations, barjīs (a game) [19], the call

- for suḥūr by a musaḥer [20], Nowruz [21], and rituals associated with traditional coffee-making and drinking [22].
4. Knowledge and Practices Concerning Nature and The Universe Syrian examples include traditional agricultural practices and the role of an al-‘aṭār, a practitioner who prescribes traditional herbal medicine and is typically found in specific shops located in old bazaars [23].
 5. Traditional Craftsmanship In Syria, there are more than 100 categories of traditional crafts. Some, like traditional foods such as ma’mūl [24], and various cheese and other dairy products, are practiced by ordinary people in their daily lives. The remainder, including traditional building methods, rug-making and weaving, glass painting, ‘ajamī painting, and Damascus brūkār [25], are pursued as professions [26].



Figure 2. Intangible cultural heritage elements from Syria: (top left) ‘Ajamī painting, (bottom left) rug making [27], (top right) shadow play theatre, and (bottom right) Circassian dances [28].

As the Syrian conflict endures, the accompanying displacement crisis has continually escalated. Since its onset in 2011, more than 6.8 million Syrians have been compelled to evacuate their homes, with a similar number experiencing displacement within the nation’s borders [29]. A significant majority of these refugees, totaling approximately 5.2 million people, have sought sanctuary in neighboring countries, primarily Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan [30]. In tandem with these regional migrations, the United Kingdom (UK) provided residence to roughly 34,000 displaced individuals from 2011 to 2022 [31].

Considering the historical context of migrations within the UK, the country has become home to various migrant groups. These communities bring with them inherited traditions, knowledge, and aspects of their cultural heritage. However, these complex dynamics of migration are ever-evolving. On the positive side, migrants enhance their new homes by introducing innovative ideas and enriching the cultural milieu. Conversely, increased diversity can sometimes lead to social tension, xenophobia, and discrimination, thereby posing challenges to social cohesion, traditional culture, safety, and security [32]. Such challenges might inadvertently foster cultural biases, deepen social segregation, and complicate policymaking in multicultural societies like the UK [33].

A significant component of the knowledge and traditions introduced by migrant groups is encapsulated within ICH domains. Growing global recognition acknowledges the importance of ICH for promoting social cohesion, resilience, well-being, and sustainable development [34]. However, the UK’s response to this international trend has been noticeably lacking. While the UK has established national heritage policies and has signed international treaties like Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [35], it has not yet endorsed the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage [36]. By not endorsing this convention, the UK is overlooking

its Operational Directives that promote inclusivity and recognize minority and migrant heritage [37]. Without specific protective measures in place for ICH, combined with a deeper commitment to intercultural dialogue, there's a threat to the sustainability and potential impact of these cultural practices. Additionally, the UK's broader skepticism towards UNESCO charters and conventions complicates the situation further, highlighting the need for an approach tailored to suit the UK's composite cultural mosaic.

In the pursuit of a harmonized community, prevailing attitudes towards migration across different sectors present a significant challenge. The Migration Observatory's data suggest that apprehensions about immigration pervade both European Union (EU) and non-EU contexts. While there's a consensus on the economic advantages' migrants offer, views are divided over their cultural impact on Britain [38]. A study corroborates this division, highlighting how *The Guardian*, a progressive newspaper, maintains a consistent positive portrayal of Syrian refugees—even after six tumultuous months in Europe. In contrast, *The Daily Telegraph*, with a more conservative leaning, starts with a guarded view that turns increasingly negative over the same period [39].

In academic discourse, dominant paradigms, such as assimilation theory, multiculturalism, and ethnic studies, often categorize society into distinct ethnic groups [40]. Historically, such perspectives have considered immigrant communities to be external entities rather than as integral members, thereby hindering genuine interaction and undervaluing their contributions. This prevailing narrative has been underscored by scholars like Colomer and Catalani [41], Arizpe and Amesuca [42], and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh [43]. Additionally, the academic focus on temporary refugee camps, which inadvertently become permanent settlements, offers a static perspective on migration. This viewpoint, explored by researchers such as Beeckmans et al. [44] and Dellios and Henrich [45], gives little recognition to migration as a dynamic process that impacts both individuals and the communities they join.

Regrettably, the perception of migrants primarily as beneficiaries rather than contributors extends beyond the scholarly realm to crucial facets of the UK's migration policy. As highlighted by McFadyen, the UK's approach to migration underscores the uneven relationship between host populations and refugees, emphasizing a delegated form of hospitality coupled with pervasive mistrust and animosity towards refugees [46]. This perspective was further critically evaluated by Eichler, who suggested that these policies foster imbalanced relationships and skepticism towards refugees, thus prompting questions about the effectiveness of international heritage laws [47].

The case of displaced Syrians in the UK presents a unique context for examination, with Liverpool standing out as a prominent destination for resettled Syrians, owing to its rich history of immigration and diverse populace [48,49]. Yet, in spite of Liverpool's dynamic cultural landscape, academic focus on interactions within these groups is limited [50]. While there are a few studies of the ICH of migrants in the UK, and even fewer of the integration of Syrians, they tend to look at their general integration rather than zeroing in on the ICH that shapes their daily lives. Notably, the role of art and intangible heritage exhibitions in the UK can significantly influence this process of sharing and assimilation. For instance, exhibitions that focus on refugees, such as the one highlighted by *Chronicle Live*, provide valuable insights into the cultural context of Syrian refugees and offer platforms for cross-cultural understanding and appreciation [51].

My distinct position as an architect, cultural heritage researcher, and Syrian migrant in the UK has afforded me a unique lens through which to examine this intricate topic. Motivated by a desire to delve into the UK's multicultural fabric, and more specifically the ICH of Syrians in the UK, I undertook this research. Its primary aim is a thorough, genuine exploration of the ICH of Syrians in the UK, adopting a much-needed grassroots perspective and acknowledging the complex socio-cultural interactions that characterize this community.

Consequently, the research project upon which this article is based was conducted between April and July 2021, recognizing the constraints of funding availability and

the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, weaving together elements of architecture, heritage, history, anthropology, and socio-cultural disciplines, aiming for a holistic examination of the ICH of Syrians in the UK. This study's primary goal is to compile, record, and document the ICH of Syrians in the UK, which encompasses oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, and the intangible knowledge associated with nature and crafts. This study seeks to understand how this heritage is being transmitted, identify the adjustments that Syrians have made to life in the UK, and comprehend how the continuation and adaptation of these traditions and practices, including those made during the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown, form a pivotal part of Syrian identity and culture.

Thus, the research was structured around these core questions:

1. What are the predominant ICH practices adopted by Syrians living in the UK?
2. How have Syrians utilized these practices to adapt to life in the UK?
3. To what degree have the wartime experiences of Syrians influenced their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in the UK?
4. What roles do these practices play in the lives of Syrians, and how do they impact host communities?

These guiding questions not only shape the direction of this study but also feed into a broader discourse on migration, cultural heritage, and integration. They prompt us to challenge prevailing narratives and advocate for a richer understanding of the multifaceted experiences of migrant communities in the UK.

2. Materials and Methods

To achieve the research objectives, the project utilized a mixed-method approach, encompassing four distinct phases:

1. Mobilization and scoping;
2. Hosting an online public lecture;
3. Conducting interviews;
4. Documenting events.

The combination of these four phases allowed a comprehensive exploration of Syrians' ICH as practiced in the UK. The mixed-method approach, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative strategies, facilitated an adaptable and multifaceted investigation, enabling the drawing of well-rounded conclusions.

2.1. Mobilization and Scoping

In the initial phase, efforts were centered on establishing foundational connections essential for the project. This process involved building relationships with Syrians in the UK, especially those actively practicing ICH. Strategic partnerships were formed with relevant entities, such as the Syrian British Cultural Centre (SBCC) and two Arabic schools, all based in Liverpool. Additionally, outreach was expanded to Syrians outside of Liverpool using both personal and professional connections. These relationships played pivotal roles in various facets of the project, ranging from planning and participant recruitment to promoting the public lecture and interviews.

To enhance communication and foster greater engagement, a dedicated Facebook page for the project was set up. This page served as a centralized platform for announcements related to the project's activities and facilitated interactive communication with its followers.

2.2. Hosting an Online Public Lecture

The second phase focused on the planning and execution of an online public lecture. Through ongoing discussions and consultations, it became evident that the term "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) was not familiar to many demographic groups. To address this issue, we organized an online lecture in Arabic. Invitations were extended to Syrians and

other Arabic-speaking individuals, urging them to attend via Zoom. This lecture was also live-streamed on the project's dedicated Facebook page and promoted through Eventbrite.

To make the lecture accessible to non-Arabic speakers, English subtitles were added post-event. The lecture aimed to highlight both the tangible and intangible aspects of Syrian heritage, emphasizing the need for preserving this cultural legacy. It showcased heritage sites from Syria, along with examples spanning different ICH domains. To encourage audience participation, interactive discussions on ICH elements relevant to daily life, like completing traditional folk proverbs, were facilitated.

The subsequent phases of the research, including interviews, were introduced during the lecture. Attendees were also invited to express their interest in participating further in this study. The lecture wrapped up with an open dialogue that stressed the event's significance, prompting diverse questions and active participation from many attendees. The details of these dialogues are further explored in the Findings and Discussions sections of this study. After the lecture, an online feedback survey was shared via Zoom to gather participants' opinions about the quality and depth of the information presented, as well as to learn about their demographic backgrounds.

2.3. Conducting Interviews

This phase of the project focused on conducting a series of interviews with Syrians residing in the UK. Participants included those who had established businesses or hobbies related to ICH domains, as well as individuals who had incorporated traditional practices into their daily lives. The primary objective of these interviews was to gather in-depth insights into the participants' experiences, perspectives, and the methods that they employed to preserve and promote their cultural heritage within a new cultural context.

2.3.1. Participant Recruitment

Participants were mainly recruited through the Syrian British Cultural Centre in Liverpool. Additionally, several participants were engaged through social media advertisements and following the online lecture. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to be 18 years of age or older; capable of communicating in either Arabic, English, or both; and have resided in the UK for at least three years as of 2021. The study received approval from the University of Liverpool's Research Ethics Committee (reference: 7841).

2.3.2. Interview Schedule

The interviews were semi-structured and split into two waves, adapting to COVID-19 restrictions. Out of the targeted 30 individuals, 26 participated. The first wave was conducted online via Zoom with 14 participants between April and June 2021. The second wave occurred in June and July 2021 and involved face-to-face interviews with the remaining 12 participants. The questions remained consistent across both modes, ensuring the uniformity and comparability of the responses. These questions were organized into five distinct sections:

- First Set: focused on general participant information, like age, gender, educational level, duration of UK residency, and attendance at the online public lecture.
- Second Set: Aimed to gauge participants' awareness of tangible cultural heritage, their memories of heritage sites, and opinions on reconstruction. This set initiated discussions and evaluated participants' understanding of historic buildings.
- Third Set: Delved into participants' familiarity and engagement with intangible Syrian heritage in both Syria and the UK. Extended discussions helped pinpoint the changes that they adopted, the reasons behind their engagement with these practices, and the role of ICH in their lives.
- Fourth Set: collected details on participants' activities during the COVID-19 lockdown and compared these experiences to those during the Syrian armed conflict's lockdown.
- Fifth Set: solicited suggestions and opinions on increasing the awareness of such heritage within the UK.

By structuring the interviews in this manner, the study aimed to build a comprehensive understanding of the participants' relationships with both tangible and intangible aspects of their heritage and how these elements have been navigated and integrated into their lives in the UK.

2.3.3. Interview Procedure

Both waves of interviews required obtaining written consent forms from participants to ascertain their preferred level of identification. Consent was either obtained electronically or on paper, depending on whether the interview was conducted online or in person. Additionally, every participant received an information sheet that outlined details about the project, assurances of anonymity, and protocols for data storage and utilization. A debriefing letter was also provided after each interview, which included useful contacts for organizations that could assist in case of stress or other concerns.

Of all participants, fourteen agreed to be identified by their full names and six by their first names, and the remaining six chose complete anonymity. For clarity, in this paper, only the first names of 20 participants are used, accompanied by their age range, gender, and city of origin to provide context about their backgrounds. The other six are identified by their gender alone. All interviews were recorded in both audio and video formats to facilitate data analysis. However, any images will be shared with due consideration to the level of anonymity specified by participants in their consent forms. Interview durations varied, ranging from 20 to 50 min, depending on the depth of participants' responses.

2.3.4. Interview Analysis

Given the open-ended nature of the questions and the wide spectrum of issues raised by participants, leveraging analogical research became essential. This strategy uses analogies to understand a subject in one domain by drawing insights from another. This method has been recognized across diverse fields, from cognitive science to architectural design [52]. Guided by three principal constraints—similarity, purpose, and structure—the analogical process was set in motion [53]. With this foundation, and based on Kvale [54] and Brinkmann and Kvale [55], the subsequent analysis of interview data unfolded systematically:

- Recording and transcription: Interviews, primarily conducted in Arabic, were recorded and meticulously transcribed. They were then translated into English to ensure the nuances of participants' expressions were retained.
- Data organization: During transcription, salient points were annotated to extract themes. The resulting data were organized in tandem with this study's main questions and the structure of the interviews.
- Thematic analysis: employing the methodologies of Drisko and Maschi [56], recurrent themes were identified, particularly those focusing on participants' perceptions of Syria's heritage and their practices of ICH during Syria's conflict and the UK's lockdown.
- Coding: line-by-line coding was employed in line with Saldaña's strategies [57], influenced by the primary research questions and previously identified themes.
- Narrative analysis: Key narrative elements were emphasized, aligning them with the core findings of this research. This step offered a holistic understanding of ICH and its related themes [58].

The synergy between the analogical research strategy and narrative analysis reinforced the study's reliability, validity, and scope of applicability. Such a comprehensive approach authenticated the gleaned interview insights while addressing the inherent limitations related to time and participant availability. Consequently, this facilitated a profound grasp of the participants' experiences and views, highlighting the depth and complexity of the research.

2.4. Documenting Events

The final phase involved recording two events related to Syrian culture and heritage in the UK. These events were as follows:

1. Social gathering for Iftār: This event saw female colleagues and friends congregating to celebrate Iftār at the conclusion of Ramaḍān. It mirrored the Syrian tradition of bolstering connections between individuals. Although primarily associated with Islam, the gathering was inclusive of all religious affiliations, echoing the inclusive nature of the practice in Syria.
2. Private family Iftār gathering: This was an intimate Iftār gathering involving a single family. Hosted at their residence, it emulated traditional Syrian cultural practices.

The methodology was anchored in participant observation. While its application in empirical research into event studies may be limited, participant observation offers valuable potential for uncovering fresh perspectives on social behavior [59]. As articulated by Jorgensen, it serves as a crucial method for scrutinizing processes, human relationships, continuities, patterns, and sociocultural contexts [60] (p. 12).

Events Analysis

The data analysis began by exploring the cultural landscape, before delving into specific cultural domains and their subcategories [61]. This methodology was chosen for two reasons: to validate the study and to zero in on the domain of ‘social practices, rituals, and festive events’. This approach deepened insights into community dynamics in various settings and fostered broader relationships, enhancing data integrity [62]. Despite some constraints, this strategy significantly enriched the research.

3. Results

3.1. Reflection on the Online Public Lecture

The online public lecture, centered on Syria’s cultural heritage, drew a diverse crowd of 38 participants. A post-lecture survey revealed that 28 of these were Syrian nationals, with the remainder hailing from Oman, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. The event was structured with a 35-min presentation, followed by a 25-min discussion period, eliciting both intellectual and emotional reactions from the audience.

Post-lecture, several Syrians, reacting to a prior announcement, expressed interest in being interviewed. The ensuing discussions were notably insightful. For instance, Mr. Siad from Oman recalled his visit to Syria before the recent conflict, highlighting the unique socio-cultural cohesion he witnessed among its diverse religious communities. He suggested that this harmony sets Syria apart from other nations with similar religious makeups. This led to a thought-provoking question about possibly replicating Syria’s ‘successful’ model of integration in nations with a similar cultural constitution. Central to the ensuing discussion was the value of mutual understanding and awareness of different traditions and behaviors. The overarching aim of the ongoing project is to foster this awareness, beginning with specific groups, but eventually embracing the multifaceted richness of Syrian culture.

The conversation also touched on strategies to inspire Syrian youth in the UK to cherish their cultural heritage. Suggestions included organizing heritage-focused workshops to deeply engage children, building on the initiatives by the Syrian British Cultural Centre in Liverpool. Beyond the cerebral discussions, the emotional depth was evident. One participant’s reminiscence, prompted by images of Syrian heritage sites, opened up the captivating topic of memory studies—a promising avenue for subsequent research, although beyond the purview of this piece. Feedback from the post-lecture survey offered tangible validation of the event’s success, as the vast majority of attendees found the lecture useful and informative.

3.2. Interviews

The following analysis is organized around six thematic areas that surfaced during the interviews. These themes deeply delve into the multifaceted experiences of the participants. The analysis begins by outlining the demographic profiles of the participants and then delves into their awareness and understanding of Syrian cultural heritage. This encompasses tangible assets, such as historical sites and artefacts, as well as intangible elements, like traditions and practices. Additionally, participant dialogues provided detailed insights into their preferences and expectations regarding heritage reconstruction in Syria post-conflict. Personal narratives detailing experiences during the Syrian conflict and subsequent adaptations during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK enriched this section. These stories illuminate aspects of their living heritage that were maintained, actively practiced, and sometimes challenged.

The analysis also delves into the intricate challenge of preserving heritage during difficult times. It evaluates necessary adaptations due to faced challenges, the resulting impacts on participants' lives, and how these experiences influenced their resettlement process. Attention then pivots to explore potential methods that Syrians might favor to share and protect their heritage in the UK context. Beyond the five primary thematic areas, specific emergent themes from the analysis are underscored and deeply examined, adding richness to the overarching narrative. This exhaustive analysis, thus, leads to the creation of a detailed compilation of ICH as practiced by Syrians in the UK, showcasing the vibrant tapestry of experiences represented by the interviewees.

3.2.1. Demographic Characteristics

As previously mentioned, this study encompassed a total of twenty-six individuals who were interviewed between April and July 2021. This total included 14 interviews conducted online via Zoom and 12 face-to-face interactions. The set of questions was consistent across both online and in-person interviews. Among the participants, fifteen were females, and eleven were males (Figure 3). The majority were aged between twenty-five and sixty years old. Every participant had completed at least secondary education, and 18 had pursued higher education. Their current professions in the UK encompass roles such as housewife, school teacher, specialist doctor, businessperson, restaurateur, and PhD student.

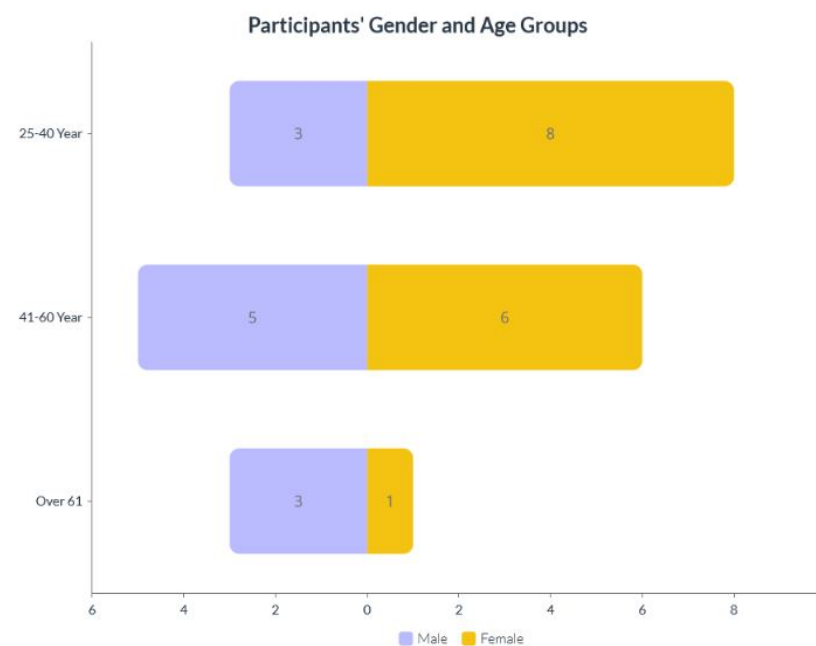


Figure 3. Participants' gender and age groups.

Most of the interviewees had resided in the UK for a period ranging between four and nine years. They primarily originated from three main regions in Syria: Damascus, Aleppo, and Daraa. All had undergone a mandatory confinement period due to the ongoing conflict in Syria. Only ten participants confirmed their attendance at the online lecture that had been previously organized.

3.2.2. Heritage Awareness and Memory

A significant observation from this study is that every participant displayed a general knowledge of major heritage sites in their respective localities. For instance, participants from areas around Damascus were well-aware of the significance of Old Damascus, encompassing landmarks such as the Umayyad Mosque, various bazaars, the citadel, and Qasion Mountain. Khoula, a 41–60-year-old female from Damascus, commented, “I hail from Damascus, often considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. The Umayyad Mosque is a marvel, and the Mountain of Qasioun is valuable both for its association with Damascene identity and its religious significance”. Others exhibited knowledge of a wider array of historical sites near their hometowns. Gazwan, a 41–60-year-old male from Daraa noted, “In my town, Sanamen, numerous buildings date back to the Roman era, including several bridges and a Roman temple. There’s also a water cistern or channel intended for animals to drink from. However, due to hygiene concerns, these ceased to be in use since the 80s”.

Furthermore, participants identified key heritage sites in Syria, regardless of their regional background. Prominent locations like Old Damascus, Old Aleppo, and Palmyra—all designated as World Heritage Sites on the UNESCO List of Heritage in Danger—were highlighted by the respondents. However, it is worth noting that most participants were unaware of the UNESCO heritage classification; to them, these places simply represented major historical sites in Syria. Likewise, the term “ICH” (intangible cultural heritage) was unfamiliar to the majority, barring those who had attended the online lecture. Upon clarification of the concept and by providing examples from each of the five primary domains, every participant recognized their involvement in various traditional practices in daily life. These practices spanned areas such as singing traditional songs and cooking traditional dishes, the details of which will be expanded upon in the subsequent sections.

When asked about their views on reconstruction in Syria, approximately 70% of the participants emphasized the importance of reconstructing residential structures first, followed by iconic landmark buildings. In contrast, the remaining 30% favored prioritizing valued landmarks, believing that such a focus would inspire individuals to return and rebuild their homes. Notably, there was unanimous agreement about restoring historically significant buildings and sites. Participants expressed a keen desire to see these structures rebuilt in their original architectural style. However, for residential and public buildings, the sentiment varied; they advocated for reconstruction with improvements and enhanced urban planning.

Participants’ statements showcased a profound connection to the architectural heritage of Syria, laden with nostalgia and respect for traditional designs. Umayya, a female aged 25–40 years old from Daraa, echoed this sentiment, stating, “We miss everyday life. The images in our memory should remain intact”. Khoula expanded on this connection, highlighting the distinctiveness of Syrian architecture: “In Damascus, we have the old courtyard houses, each with its unique spirit and characteristics. If we return to Syria, I want to experience that again. We have a model in our UK living room that features elements from a courtyard house. It serves as a reminder of our heritage. Sometimes, we feel nostalgic when we look at it, and we proudly share with our non-Syrian friends the function and history of each item”. See Figure 4 for more details.



Figure 4. A model featuring elements of a courtyard house from Syria, owned by one of the participants and displayed in their UK home.

While many supported the faithful restoration of historical buildings, some participants proposed a more layered approach. They felt that preserving certain structures as ruins could offer educational value for future generations, serving as tangible evidence of the nation's history and resilience. Ghena, a female aged 25–40 years old from Daraa, echoed this view, stating, "Our children and the coming generations should comprehend the struggles Syrians have faced. By preserving some ruins, we provide a powerful reminder of our past and a stark caution against future conflicts".

This collective perspective reveals more than just architectural preferences. It underscores the participants' profound attachment to their cultural heritage, intertwining respect for historical legacy with the pragmatic needs and aspirations of contemporary Syrian society both at home and in the diaspora.

3.2.3. Adaptation and Challenges

Upon arriving in the UK, all participants demonstrated an unwavering commitment to practicing ICH, adapting these practices to their new lives. Majed, a 25–40-year-old male from Damascus, expressed it as "In Syria, we were surrounded by numerous historical buildings, tangible testaments to our rich history. Now, residing in the UK, our focus has shifted to preserving our traditions, customs, and ICH. We are devoted to safeguarding these practices so our children can inherit them, ensuring they remain connected to and proud of our cultural identity".

In Syrian traditions, much like in other Middle Eastern countries, family holds paramount importance. A cornerstone of cultural practice involves visiting grandparents on weekends and during special occasions, such as Ramadan and Eid. As such, the traditions most deeply missed by the participants center around familial connections and shared customs with close friends and family. Omar, a 25–40-year-old male from Aleppo, articulated this longing by stating, "As a community in Liverpool, we try to practice some of our customs and traditions as much as possible. When we attend a social event, whether a joyful or sad occasion, we feel at home. But upon returning to our individual houses, we feel like migrants once again. Thus, we established the SBCC in Liverpool to reconnect with Syrians living in the UK". Kholod, a female aged 25–40 years old from Aleppo, echoed this sentiment, saying, "We miss festivals and gatherings. Our traditions and customs are part of our identity and existence. The pain is palpable when we remember the special pastries and bread my mother used to make". This loss also extends to the younger generation. Another male participant noted, "Our children miss the bond with their grandparents who

pass down traditions and customs. We are without our relatives and families, and this absence is felt deeply by all”.

Being distant from their family and friends has prompted Syrians to actively engage in a spectrum of communal celebrations, ranging from weddings to funerals. Gazwan shared, “In Syria, familial and friendly gatherings were the hallmark of various life events. After relocating to the UK, we formed bonds with Syrians from diverse regions. United by a shared goal, we aim to revive traditional celebrations symbolic of our individual hometowns. The eagerness to maintain these cherished traditions is palpable; they reflect our collective identity and evoke poignant reminders of home. Here in the UK, I’ve been privileged to partake in numerous traditional weddings. Even in times of sorrow, our community’s bond strengthens as we rally to offer emotional and financial support. Resolutely, we continue to brew our traditional coffee and prepare customary meals for the bereaved, mirroring the traditions we treasured in Syria”.

These practices proved to be incredibly diverse, reflecting not only the unique cultural backgrounds and skills of each individual but also their specific geographic origins within Syria. For instance, individuals from Damascus showed keen enthusiasm for participating in ‘arāḍah during festive gatherings and relished traditional stovetop-brewed coffee made with cardamom—customs predominant in Damascus. In contrast, participants from Daraa expressed interest in furnishing their living rooms with specific floor-level sofas and had a distinct method for preparing and serving traditional coffee; these practices were characteristic of Daraa (see Figure 5). Such variations in practices across different regions of Syria became newly apparent to some after relocating to the UK. Fatima, a female aged 25–40 years old from Daraa, observed, “The traditions in Daraa differ from those in Homs, Damascus, and Aleppo. Our move to the UK allowed us to learn more about these differences as we met Syrians from various cities and towns, traditions we might not have encountered before”. Ghena also emphasized regional uniqueness, stating, “In Daraa, newlyweds typically live in the large family house. This might not be the norm in other parts of Syria. We don’t send wedding invitations; everyone in the village or even town is implicitly invited. We have dishes unique to our region in southern Syria, like (mlehy) [63]. Many Syrians I met in the UK, hailing from other regions, had never tasted it”.



Figure 5. Serving traditional coffee and ma’mul at a participant’s home in the UK, originally from Daraa, Syria.

Language barriers present another prevalent challenge, not only impeding communication but also obstructing the conveyance of the richness of Syrian culture. This issue is compounded by prevailing negative perceptions of Syrians. Furthermore, there’s a lack of

awareness among host communities about Syrian heritage, and equally, a knowledge gap among Syrians about UK culture. Thabet, a 41–60-year-old male from Damascus, reflected, “When we arrived eight years ago, the local communities were divided between welcoming us and ignoring us. I wish my English had been better so I could explain how civilized, educated, and beautiful Syria is, but the war tainted its beauty”. This challenge is not confined to the Syrian experience alone; participants also expressed limited familiarity with other cultures in the UK, including British heritage itself. Ali, a 25–40-year-old male from Aleppo, commented, “In the UK, there should be organized visits for both adults and children to learn more about this country and its history”.

Through these accounts, the complexities of integration and the effort to maintain cultural identity in a foreign land become palpable, revealing the deeply personal and communal challenges faced by Syrian immigrants in the UK.

3.2.4. Motivations

In exploring the assimilation and cultural adaptation of Syrian immigrants in the UK, an intriguing paradox emerges. While the respondents to this study actively engaged in practices related to ICH in Syria, such as cooking, social customs, and traditional dances, they did not turn these practices into professional or business pursuits until after relocating to the UK.

One participant, Mahmoud, a 41–60-year-old male from Aleppo, stated: “In Syria, I never imagined I’d establish a Syrian restaurant. My career was in the military, and I had never cooked before—even at home, as my wife took care of that. However, after moving to the UK, I realized how distinct our Syrian cuisine was from the culinary traditions here. I began with a small van selling falafel wraps, and over time, this venture evolved. Today, we have our own restaurant, run by myself, my wife, one of our sons, and his wife”. In a similar vein, Lina, a female aged 25–40 years old from Damascus, shared, “Back in Syria, I wasn’t particularly fond of cooking. Yet, after arriving in the UK, I began to explore and learn traditional cooking methods. I soon found myself catering for weddings and other events, serving people from various nationalities, including Syrians and the British”. See Figure 6 for more details.



Figure 6. Traditional Syrian sweets made by one of the participants.

During the interviews, the motivations driving individuals to develop new businesses or professions after relocating to the UK were identified and can be categorized into four themes:

1. Preservation of heritage: There's a pronounced commitment to preserving and transmitting living heritage to subsequent generations, ensuring that their children and youth remain connected to their origins. Practices included language, Arabic calligraphy, crafts, dances, festive events, and prayers.

Many parents are eager to impart Arabic to their children. For example, two Arabic schools have been established in Liverpool. The first is managed by the SBCC, and the second is named the Syrian British Academy. Both institutions cater to children across different age groups and are open to Syrians, as well as non-Syrians with Arabic-speaking parents. Students are organized based on their language proficiency. Besides language instruction, they offer lessons on the Quran and Islamic prayers. The SBCC school adopts a traditional teaching approach enriched with varied activities. Conversely, the Syrian British Academy utilizes an innovative method, providing audio recordings of readings accessible via scanning a code on mobile devices. This approach assists children in listening and learning classical Arabic. Notably, while Arabic-speaking countries have diverse dialects, the focus here is on the universally recognized classical Arabic.

Moreover, all participants expressed a strong desire to impart cultural wisdom and positive values to their offspring. This process includes watching historical documentaries and sharing tales related to Syrian traditions. These activities play a crucial role in bridging the generational and cultural gap, especially for UK-born children. One participant taught her daughter the *samāḥ*, a traditional dance from Aleppo. When the daughter showcased this at the Arabic school, it led to the formation of a small *samāḥ* dance troupe. Another participant mentioned initiating their children into the *dabkah* dance, popular across many Syrian regions, especially in the west and south (Figure 7).



Figure 7. A group of Syrian men performing the dabkah dance in Liverpool, UK.

Nowruz celebrations also emerged as a common theme among participants. Rooted in Iranian culture as the Persian New Year, Nowruz is celebrated by various ethnic groups worldwide. Notably, the Syrian Kurdish community has passionately upheld this tradition. Among the Syrian Kurdish diaspora in the UK, there's a significant push to rejuvenate these customs for future generations. Celebrations feature traditional music, native clothing, distinct culinary practices, and the use of the Kurdish language.

2. Necessity of specific goods or skills: The unavailability of particular goods or foods in the UK, which individuals had grown accustomed to in Syria, spurred them to develop skills or methods to replicate these items. This need has fueled innovation and led to the founding of new businesses.

For example, one female participant recounted her first Eid in the UK, where she deeply missed *ma'mūl*, a unique biscuit central to Syrian culture, usually procured fresh from specialty bakeries. With these bakeries non-existent in the UK, she took it upon herself to master the art of making *ma'mūl*. As she perfected her skill, she eventually started her own business, selling these biscuits during Eid and on other occasions. Her repertoire also grew to include cakes reminiscent of those found in Syria, which quickly gained traction and demand.

Khoula, after relocating to the UK, lamented the difficulty in finding familiar cooking or coffee-making equipment, tapestries, curtains, and decorative items. Acquiring these items, often online, served as a bridge to the familiar, instilling a sense of 'home' amidst UK settings. Many respondents had to adapt due to the absence of specific products. Online ordering became common, especially for home decor and Arabic books. Others turned to alternative ingredients to replicate traditional Syrian dishes. As a female participant pointed out, "In Syria, we sun-dried our vegetables and fruits. Given the UK's climate, we've adapted by using ovens for drying".

This gap in the market inspired Nadia, a female aged 25–40 years old from Aleppo, to launch a shop in Liverpool, streamlining the import of certain Syrian goods. Recognizing the significant demand among Syrians for items reminiscent of home, like the Aleppo stone (renowned for its bathing properties), natural sponges, laurel soap, traditional clothing, etc., Nadia initiated a business in Liverpool. Her enterprise manages the import of distinctive Syrian items, such as mosaic artwork, coffee pots, and traditional commodities including perfumes. She also imports dried herbs used for traditional Syrian healing methods. These imports include *zhourāt* (a blend of dried flowers and herbs) and handcrafted creams formulated to alleviate symptoms such as migraines. See Figure 8 for more details.

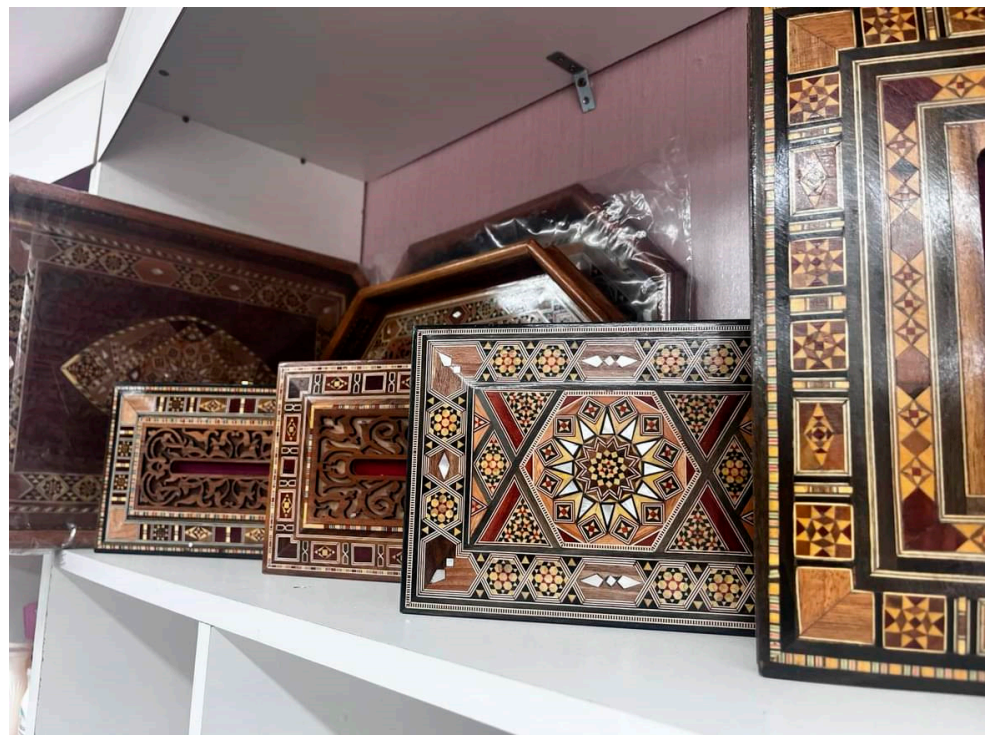


Figure 8. Items on display at the newly opened Syrian shop.

3. Cultural representation: Syrian immigrants harbor pride and a fervent wish to portray their culture as rich and accomplished, be it through showcasing traditional crafts, arts, cuisine, or other facets of their cultural identity.

Kindah, a female aged 25–40 years old from Damascus, shared, “My British friends often inquire about our tales and traditions, largely unfamiliar to the UK populace. The media hasn’t always offered a fair or complete depiction of our music, food, and customs. To address this, I embraced the role of a ḥakawāty (traditional storyteller) and delved into the realm of traditional storytelling. Stories present a relatable and poignant medium to illuminate societal issues or shared experiences”. Kindah further elaborated on her unique position as a female ḥakawāty in the UK, a role traditionally reserved for older men in Syria. “My online videos garnered attention, bolstering my self-esteem here in the UK. People began recognizing me on the streets, inquiring about the narratives I share. Being a female ḥakawāty, I feel, projects a positive image of Syrian women”.

Ali highlighted the power of ICH through his experience of performing traditional Syrian songs with his band. He recalled the participation and elation of individuals from various backgrounds, dancing to their melodies, epitomizing the true essence and humanity of the Syrian populace. Sara, a 25–40-year-old female from Damascus, further underscores the role of ICH in fostering intercultural dialogue and exchange. “As my proficiency in English flourished”, she mentioned, “I began volunteering, sharing tales of my Syrian life, inviting others to reciprocate, engendering a profound cultural discourse with volunteers of diverse origins”.

These cultural activities also paved the way for some Syrians to bond with locals, convey a positive image of Syrians, and forge new relationships. Rania, a 41–60-year-old female from Damascus, recounted, “Upon our relocation to this quaint UK town, we stood out as the sole refugee family. Some would pass by, casting quizzical glances. On one occasion, a townswoman questioned our mode of arrival and the nature of our voyage”. Rania continued, “When we inaugurated our eatery, locals flocked to savor our Syrian offerings. They appreciated our cuisine, which led to enriching dialogues about our customs and culinary traditions. I also collaborated with British women in our town on traditional crocheting, a craft cherished in both Syrian and UK cultures. This commonality facilitated a deeper cultural connection. Through these interactions, we shared our pre-war life in Syria and introduced them to our Eid traditions. By volunteering in community events, we embedded ourselves in the local fabric. We no longer feel isolated”. Thabet remarked, “Our relocation here was a matter of circumstance, compelling us to acclimate to new surroundings. The community’s warmth towards us grew, especially after we launched our business and they observed our interactions. Many remain oblivious to Syria, even its geographic location, often mistaking us for other ethnicities. Nonetheless, our self-belief has been affirmed”.

4. Professional and educational affairs: Syrian immigrants often face challenges when attempting to continue their professions or leverage their educational degrees in the UK. These complications arise from issues related to the recognition or adaptation of their university degrees and professional qualifications. While there are a few exceptions where these hurdles are overcome, such successes are not the norm.

Consider the journey of Razan, a 41–60-year-old female pharmacy graduate from Damascus. She encountered challenges when trying to adapt her degree in the UK. Ingeniously, she turned to the resources around her. “In Yorkshire, where I settled, fresh milk is plentiful. This abundance inspired me to launch Yorkshire Dama Cheese, a nod to the cheese from Damascus. By combining traditional Syrian cheese-making methods with the rich resources of the UK, like creating Haloumi cheese from sheep’s milk similar to that found in the Syrian deserts, I’ve been able to support my family, lead a stable life, and give back to a nation that took me in”.

Another success is exemplified by Ghazwan’s narrative. Arriving in the UK in 2014 with his family, Ghazwan, who had undergone medical training in Syria and specialized

as an otolaryngologist, invested seven arduous years studying and persevering in the UK before resuming his specialization. In his free time, he maintains a small garden, cultivating fruits and vegetables common in Syria but less so in the UK, such as jute mallow. His wife, Ghena, was able to pick up her teaching career, making notable progress. She now serves as the headteacher at the Arabic School in Liverpool.

3.2.5. Syrian Experiences of Conflict, Lockdown, and Tradition in the UK

Participants' experiences of conflict in Syria greatly varied based on their location, the duration of their exposure to intense conflict areas, and the threats they faced. Those from Daraa experienced the conflict for the longest duration, while those from Aleppo had the shortest period of lockdown due to the conflict.

Interestingly, a consensus emerged among most participants: managing the COVID-19 lockdown was comparatively easier due to their previous experiences of lockdown in Syria, enhancing their adaptability. Challenges like living with uncertainty and isolation and dealing with trauma, loss, limited resources, and confined spaces were not new to them. Sara, who lived through five years of conflict in Syria, emphasized that "in the UK, people had more control and could limit contact with others to feel relatively safe". Omar, who endured six years of conflict, noted the similarities between the two situations but felt a greater sense of peace in the UK. Omar equated the uncertainty during the UK's COVID-19 lockdown to feeling like "hamsters on a wheel".

However, some respondents felt that the Syrian conflict was more threatening, highlighting food, water, and energy shortages as primary concerns. One shared, "Life during the war was much worse, with constant fear of death. The absence of internet and the impossibility of even sourcing food made the UK lockdown feel easier in comparison". Another male participant shared how playing the oud, a traditional Syrian instrument, was risky during the Syrian conflict due to the potential noise attracting unwanted attention. In contrast, during the UK lockdown, he enjoyed the freedom to play the instrument and connect with loved ones online.

Most interviewees found the UK lockdown to be a valuable opportunity to bond with family, recounting tales of their lives and Syrian history. Many agreed that these traditions significantly benefited them emotionally, economically, and psychologically. Razan commented on the adaptability learned from the Syrian conflict, saying, "The war taught us to accept reality, even if perilous. In our UK business, we innovatively combined a product with traditional Syrian herbs, a mindset nurtured from our ability to adjust during crises". Another female participant contrasted her experiences: "During the UK's COVID-19 lockdown, we felt safe and engaged in educational and religious activities with our children. In Syria, however, staying at home during conflict meant living in fear".

The study also delved into Ramadan practices, such as *sekbāt* Ramadan, which involves sharing food with neighbors. Some participants mentioned offering *Iftār* food to non-Muslim neighbors during the UK lockdown, introducing them to Syrian hospitality and traditions, thereby fostering mutual respect and understanding.

Activities practiced during the Syrian conflict lockdown, like Arabic calligraphy, crafting decorations, oral traditions, and preserving traditional foods like *mūnah* [64] continued during the UK lockdown. Khoula elaborated, "In Syria, due to street conflict, people baked bread at home using traditional methods. They also employed traditional food preservation techniques, such as making *mūnah*, to eliminate the need for electricity. During the UK's pandemic, these practices saw a resurgence".

In conclusion, participants' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown were shaped, to an extent, by their prior experiences with conflict and displacement. The significance of intangible cultural heritage in fostering cultural resilience and adaptability during challenges was evident. However, some participants expressed struggles in terms of retaining their traditional heritage in the UK, while others discussed adaptations that they made.

3.2.6. The Role of the Practicing of ICH by Syrians in the UK

Every participant in the study affirmed that engaging with elements of Syrian ICH was pivotal in helping them to address a myriad of challenges. These challenges spanned the direct repercussions of war and displacement to the indirect ramifications of the COVID-19 lockdown and the process of reconstructing their lives in the UK. From the interviews, several primary roles of ICH emerged, highlighting its significance to the Syrian community in the UK:

- Financial role: engaging in ICH often led to business ventures or opportunities, such as selling traditional crafts, food, or other culturally significant items, offering a potential source of income.
- Social role with family or friends: Participating in traditional activities became a means of bonding, ensuring connection with family and friends, both from the past and present. Furthermore, Syrians bridged their native culture with their new setting, nurturing a sense of belonging to both their homeland and their new UK community.
- Enhancement of identity: preserving and practicing aspects of their ICH reinforced individuals' ties to their origins and instilled pride in their identity.
- Communicating a Positive Image of Syrian Society: by showcasing and sharing their rich cultural heritage, Syrians could challenge stereotypes and misinformation, highlighting the diversity and richness of their society.
- Positive psychological role: delving into traditional practices offered a touch of familiarity in unfamiliar surroundings, bolstering mental well-being.
- Political role: Some participants emphasized the role of ICH in uniting Syrians. One remarked, "There's been a social and political divide in Syria due to ongoing conflicts, causing a rift among its people. ICH plays a crucial role in reconciliation, as these shared traditions and practices bridge differences, whether religious or political, and have the power to unite Syrians once again".

Importance of Social Practices, Rituals, and Festive Events

During this study, we were honored to attend two Iftār events during Ramadan. The experiences were deeply touching, evoking memories of Syria. The genuine hospitality of Syrians, combined with the heartfelt manner in which traditions were upheld, mirrored practices native to Syria.

The first event, a gathering of female colleagues and friends, echoed similar events held in Syria during Iftār, aimed at fostering bonds. This event was inclusive, welcoming colleagues from diverse religious backgrounds, a reflection of inclusive practices in Syria (Figure 9). Each attendee contributed a dish from her city of origin, and the table was adorned with traditional decorations. The fast was broken with dates and water, followed by a meal, prayers, and the savoring of traditional Syrian coffee and treats. The second Iftār event, centered around a family, encapsulated traditional practices akin to those in Syria. Beyond the traditions witnessed at the previous gathering, this event featured the preparation of special bread for Iftār and family-crafted decorations for Eid. Together, these accounts shed light on the profound impact of practicing ICH among Syrians in the UK, framing it as a mechanism for adaptation, resilience, self-validation, and intercultural dialogue. The multifaceted influence of engaging with Syrian ICH in a diasporic context offers invaluable perspectives on the human facets of migration and cultural conservation.

3.2.7. Suggestions for Safeguarding the ICH of Syrians in the UK

During this study, participants offered various insights and recommendations to protect and promote Syrian ICH within the UK. Their suggestions can be categorized into four thematic areas:

1. Educational initiatives and workshops for children: participants strongly advocated for education centered around Syrian cultural heritage, especially targeted at children.
2. Continuation of current practices: Several participants underscored the significance of preserving existing traditions, be it in daily life or business or as hobbies. Parents

expressed a wish for their children to take pride in both their British upbringing and their Syrian heritage, maintaining ties to their cultural origins, encompassing language and traditions.

3. Community engagement and cultural awareness: Participants recounted positive experiences of cultural exchange in the UK. They found that local communities were often receptive to understanding Syrian traditions. Recommendations also spanned the showcasing of Syrian culture to UK residents through public endeavors, such as music performances, culinary experiences, dances, exhibitions, events, festivals, and markets.
4. Digital platforms and technology: Participants recognized the promise of technology as a tool to champion Syrian culture. Suggestions encompassed the creation of a digital platform for cataloging and documenting Syrian folklore, as well as a social networking platform designed to facilitate the sharing of folklore among Syrians.



Figure 9. Iftar gathering by Syrian women in Liverpool, UK.

In summary, these recommendations emphasize a comprehensive strategy for preserving and championing Syrian ICH in the UK. They underscore the importance of education, the consistent practice of traditions, community outreach, celebrating cultural diversity, and leveraging technology to engage wider audiences.

4. Discussion

4.1. Summary of Findings

This study is the first in the UK to delve into the intangible cultural heritage practices of Syrian migrants. The findings highlight a profound sense of pride and acknowledgment among Syrians for both their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. However, it is worth noting that their awareness of UNESCO listings and regulations remains limited. Syrians exhibit a strong desire to restore their homeland's monuments and sites, reflecting the cherished memories these landmarks represent. These insights offer a novel perspective to memory and heritage studies concerning the Syrian diaspora in the UK.

While these migrants come from various regions of Syria, they have presented a diverse spectrum of cultural traditions in the UK that echo their hometowns. In Syria, while ICH was intricately woven into their daily lives, it was not typically pursued as a professional endeavor. Yet, in the UK, many have displayed remarkable adaptability, forging careers, businesses, and hobbies rooted in this rich heritage. The alterations made to their cultural practices, to fit their new environment, underscore their dedication to integrating into and thriving within their adopted communities.

Cultural heritage undeniably stands as a cornerstone of Syrian identity, with an earnest desire to pass this legacy on to future generations. ICH acts as a robust link to their homeland, and its significance is not confined to economic or identity-related considerations. It profoundly shapes Syrians' public perception and meets both psychological and political needs while reinforcing their social ties, both internally and externally.

Most findings aligned with our preliminary hypotheses, but the diverse motivations propelling their actions were especially intriguing. These motivations spanned a fervent commitment to heritage preservation, the search for particular goods and skills, a challenge to prevailing stereotypes about Syrians, and navigation through academic and professional obstacles. Moreover, the experiences of Syrians during the homeland conflict, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, emphasized the pivotal role that ICH assumes during crises. These observations highlight the importance of heritage and call for proactive heritage impact risk assessment strategies to both safeguard and leverage this heritage amidst similar challenges. It is worth noting that the loss or unavailability of tangible heritage can further complicate the preservation of ICH. Tangible assets often serve as touchstones for ICH, anchoring memories, practices, and traditions. Their absence can pose a significant challenge to the continuity and transmission of intangible traditions and practices.

Based on the activities observed in this study, the Syrian participants in the UK engage with the following ICH elements, examples of which are presented in Figure 10:

1. Oral traditions and expressions: This tradition encompasses the Arabic language, traditional and religious songs, Islamic prayers, and storytelling. The latter is practiced both professionally (as a ḥakawāty) and within a familial context.
2. Performing Arts: this category includes playing traditional musical instruments like the oud and ṭablah, performing traditional dances such as samāḥ and dabkah, and participating in 'Arāḍah performances.
3. Social practices, rituals, and festive events: activities under this category range from Iftār events with friends, colleagues, and family during Ramadan and sebkāt Ramadan to traditional weddings, death ceremonies, and games like Barjīs.
4. Knowledge related to nature and the universe: predominantly, this knowledge entails using herbs and traditional knowledge to treat ailments like the common cold, fever, and migraines.
5. Traditional craftsmanship: this tradition involves skills such as Arabic calligraphy, preparing traditional Syrian cuisine and mūnah, and crafting Eid decorations.



Figure 10. Examples of ICH practiced by Syrians in the UK captured by our study: (top left) traditional storyteller, (bottom left) serving Syrian coffee, (top right) samāḥ dance, and (bottom right) traditional Syrian bread made at home.

4.2. Interpretation and Implication of Results

In terms of the implications of our findings, we believe host countries, especially those receiving migrants from culturally rich regions, could benefit from crafting integration programs that enable migrants to showcase, share, and build upon their cultural practices. For instance, the UK has seen varying levels of success with such initiatives. Programs like the Community Sponsorship Scheme in the UK have demonstrated the potential for fostering mutual understanding and respect between migrants and host communities [65]. However, there still remain challenges in achieving widespread awareness and appreciation of diverse cultures, pointing to areas needing further enhancement [66].

Such initiatives might promote mutual respect and understanding and even yield economic advantages. A gap exists in migrants' awareness of international recognitions and regulations, such as UNESCO listings. Addressing this issue could empower migrants, like those in the Syrian community, to more effectively preserve and advocate for their heritage. In countries like Canada and Germany, awareness-raising and educational programs have played a crucial role in empowering migrant communities and preserving their ICH [67,68].

The emphasized importance of heritage, especially during crises, points to the need for policies and strategies that assess risks to these heritages and ensure their protection. This issue is particularly pertinent in regions or among communities facing challenges, as seen in the diverse experiences of migrants across Europe and North America [69]. These insights can be harnessed in broader narratives and campaigns to counter prevalent negative stereotypes about Syrians (or migrants in general), highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and invaluable cultural contributions.

Moreover, our findings reveal several avenues for future research. These include cultural adaptation in diaspora, the economic dynamics of ICH, the transmission of ICH to younger generations, a comparative ICH analysis between Syrian and other migrant communities in the UK, and heritage impact risk assessments. Research into these areas could further illuminate the multifaceted relationships between migrants and their cultural heritage, providing valuable insights for both policy and practice.

4.3. Reflections on Existing Literature

The outcomes from this study enrich the broader corpus of the literature on ICH, migration, Syrian displacement, and ICH practices within the UK, particularly referencing works by Beeckmans, Marschall [70], Colomer, Catalani, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Dellios, Henrich, McFadyen, Eichler, Arizpe, and Amesuca, among others.

Our results illuminate participants' awareness of the cultural significance of renowned Syrian cities and structures, even though they display a limited understanding of UNESCO listings. While prior studies did not specifically explore such knowledge, a 2015 survey concerning Aleppo unveiled intriguing insights. When questioned about spiritually significant places, participants often mentioned mosques and churches. However, a notable 40% associated their feelings with the old city of Aleppo and its eminent citadel [71]. Such data underscore the paramount importance of heritage sites for Syrians, a sentiment our findings further confirm. Most of our respondents were familiar with significant structures in their native regions. The parallels between our results and the Aleppo project are striking, especially when participants prioritized rebuilding homes over restoring historical edifices. Still, the dominant sentiment leaned towards the conservation of the historic architectural essence, which mirrors our conclusions.

The challenges Syrians face in the UK, as identified by our study, are consistent with the existing literature. For instance, a 2017 UNESCO survey, which interviewed sixty displaced Syrians in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey [72], as well as a 2021 study of Syrians in the UK that involved twelve interviewees [73], highlighted the language barrier as a major hindrance for Syrians in different host countries. Further complexities from the UNESCO survey encompassed economic, psychological, and social difficulties resulting from war and displacement. Societal stereotyping and perceived burdensomeness compounded these issues. Our results and the UNESCO survey found common ground, especially

concerning the unavailability of specific products, including traditional food items and equipment. Unsurprisingly, the 2017 UNESCO survey indicated that conditions in refugee camps presented heightened challenges, with more pronounced economic constraints and a noticeably more negative perception of Syrians by host communities. Our research not only corroborates these findings but also delves deeper into Syrian adaptability, revealing multifaceted motivations. These motivations range from promoting a positive perception of Syrian culture and navigating academic challenges to addressing material shortages and the fervent wish to pass on their heritage to future generations.

The 2017 UNESCO survey highlighted that, regardless of geographical or social dislocations, ICH provides “a sense of belonging and enhances psychological, social, cultural, and economic resilience”. It is evident that displaced individuals frequently turn to a wide range of cultural expressions to navigate adversities. In research conducted by the Aleppo Project, Paudyal et al. and Cratsley et al. [74] support the pivotal role of inherited ICH as a therapeutic strategy, promoting mental and physical well-being and strengthening the relationships between Syrian migrants and their host communities. Moreover, the uncertainties associated with ‘temporary asylum’ have intensified certain challenges, especially the acquisition of essential goods [75]. A noticeable gap existed in the interactions between Syrian camp residents and host societies, positioning the former primarily as ‘consumers’ and ‘recipients’, rather than acknowledging them as ‘producers’. Yet, other research underscores the adaptability of refugees, spotlighting their achievements in forming communities and businesses in host countries, with a special focus on the traditional food sector [76]. While the UNESCO survey largely covered areas with cultural norms similar to those of displaced Syrians, our study reveals that despite the cultural differences between Syrians and the dominant UK culture, ICH remains a powerful medium for Syrians to connect with host communities.

Moreover, while a considerable number of our participants had no prior professional engagement with ICH in Syria and only experienced it in their daily lives, many developed these skills after migrating to the UK, showcasing their adaptability. In contrast, other studies, such as the aforementioned UNESCO survey and Shahab [77], highlighted individuals with distinct craftsmanship skills. Even with these differences in terms of recognizing skill sets, our findings underscore Syrians’ innate adaptability and the crucial role of heritage in enhancing resilience. This issue became particularly evident when comparing participants’ experiences during two major lockdowns: the Syrian conflict and the COVID-19 pandemic.

When juxtaposing the classification of heritage elements observed during the COVID-19 lockdown with an archival review of documented practices, particularly the UNESCO worldwide survey conducted between 2020 and 2021 that collected around 200 testimonies from 70 countries, shedding light on ‘how people experience their living heritage in times of crises’ [78], notable parallels emerge. This issue is especially evident in the domain of knowledge and practices associated with nature and the universe. A comprehensive analysis of over 250 elements catalogued by the UNESCO Platform further highlights similarities between Syrian practices and those prevalent in other nations, notably within the Arab Region. For instance, “Hakaya” (storytelling), as practiced in Palestine [79], and culinary traditions native to Lebanon find resonance [80].

While these comparative analyses might initially appear tangential, they emphasize that the ICH practices embraced by Syrians during both the COVID-19 crisis and the Syrian conflict are in line with internationally recognized practices. Consequently, living heritage in emergency situations has become an international priority for safeguarding. Our findings contribute to this effort by identifying the ICH of Syrians during two distinct crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns resulting from conflict.

While displacement might cause some elements of ICH to be lost, transformed, or even emerge anew, the dynamic nature of ICH suggests that it should be perceived as a shared commons [81]. This inclusive view would accommodate the vibrant cultures produced by people in transition. One such example is the OneLoveKitchen, a shared space collaboratively established by migrants, refugees, and nomadic citizens. It represents a

platform where ‘strangers’ and ‘newcomers’ challenge the conventional understanding of ICH as exclusive to clearly defined, stationary communities [82].

4.4. Strengths and Limitations

The existing literature on the IC of migrants has primarily focused on migrants in Europe and other global regions, giving scant attention to the UK context [83–85]. While a few studies touch upon the UK milieu, they tend to emphasize policies and institutional behaviors, see, for example, McFadyen and Eichler.

Earlier research into Syrian migrants has delved into the perceptions and aspirations of displaced Syrians and the practitioners in host countries. These studies highlight the relationships between displacement and select indices of household well-being, as well as humanitarian needs [86,87]. Furthermore, while recent academic contributions have discussed the mental health of Syrians, they rarely emphasize the importance of practicing ICH, consider the works of Paudyal et al. as well as Cratsley as examples. Identity studies have largely centered on the political dimension, leaving the socio-cultural perspective somewhat overlooked, refer to the work of Bachleitner, for example.

A unique aspect of our study is its innovative bottom-up approach and linguistic alignment, as this study was conducted entirely in the participants’ native language and dialect. This study distinguishes itself by covering six thematic areas, and its methodology started with an online lecture to raise awareness about such heritage and culminated in interviews. My Syrian origins, combined with deep involvement, evident in my attendance at two Ifṭār events, ensured a comprehensive understanding of the activities studied.

However, our study does have limitations. A noticeable one is the limited number of participants ($n = 26$). While this sample might not represent the majority of Syrians in Liverpool or the broader UK, it offers a foundational understanding of essential ICH practices. Compared to similar studies, our sample size is moderate. For example, Paudyal et al. and Shahab interviewed twelve and three participants, respectively, whereas UNESCO’s study engaged 60 participants, and Bachleitner’s study involved 100 Syrians. It is worth noting, however, that larger samples usually encompass multiple countries and predominantly employ online surveys rather than interviews. We faced challenges in recruiting participants from this vulnerable group, especially considering the trauma experienced by Syrians and ongoing integration issues. However, we believe that the shared narratives, even if indirectly obtained, hold validity due to the close-knit nature of Syrian refugee communities and evidence that points to common experiences among refugees [88]. Qualitative research, irrespective of its sample size, does not necessarily pursue generalization. Instead, it seeks to gather in-depth data to inform future inquiries [89]. Furthermore, qualitative studies prioritize understanding the intricacies of human experiences within specific contexts, often yielding findings that are rich in insight and particular to the context [90].

Another limitation is geography: most participants are from the Liverpool City Region (LCR), with only a few coming from other locations. Though our findings might not extend to refugee communities in other countries, many identified themes are consistent with those from diverse refugee backgrounds. Despite our robust methodological framework, which ranges from heritage awareness to various data collection methods, there are inherent constraints. Researchers like Dewalt and Dewalt [91] have highlighted potential drawbacks in relying predominantly on observations. They suggest that aspects like gender can impact access to information and subsequent data analysis.

5. Conclusions

This study thoroughly investigated the ICH practices that Syrians in the UK value, examining their role in facilitating adaptation to a new environment and the impact of war-time experiences on coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Our findings emphasize Syrians’ profound connection to their cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, revealing its central role as an anchor for emotional and spiritual support.

While previous research has primarily examined the identity of displaced Syrians through political and ethnic lenses [92], our study underscores the paramount importance of their cultural identity. Despite challenges to the continuity of Syrian living heritage, instances of its tangible expression flourish, acting as pillars of mental stability and mitigating feelings of isolation and fear. Participants' testimonies illuminated the influential role of living heritage in strengthening identity, promoting pride, providing potential economic opportunities, and shifting perceptions. This study encourages a reframed perspective: rather than seeing Syrians solely as misunderstood displaced persons, it advocates recognizing them as culturally enriched individuals compelled to leave a homeland replete with cultural richness.

Regardless of the UK's affiliation with the 2003 Convention or the formal incorporation of Syrian heritage practices into the UK's ICH inventory, our study emphasizes a critical point. Specifically, while the conflict, subsequent displacement, and the pandemic have exposed the vulnerability of Syrian living heritage and posed challenges to its continuity, they have also created innovative environments for tangible expressions of ICH. Our findings advocate for the incorporation of cultural heritage into strategies promoting social cohesion, mental well-being, and economic opportunities for migrants. For host nations, there's value in developing integration programs that celebrate and leverage these cultural riches. Enhancing migrants' awareness of international heritage directives could also strengthen preservation efforts.

Beyond academic insights, our study bridges understanding of the rich tapestry of Syrian ICH practices in the UK, underscoring Syrians' aspirations to safeguard their invaluable heritage amidst global challenges. The haunting realities of art and treasures lost in war cannot be ignored, leaving a lasting impact on the dispersed Syrian diaspora. Yet, our study illuminates a prevailing theme: the resilient spirit of human endurance and cultural preservation. Despite adversities, cultures and communities do not merely endure, they thrive. The vitality of Syrian culture, as evidenced in our study, is not merely surviving but is positioned to flourish, a testament to the indomitable strength of humanity.

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