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MIGRAMEDIA

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Head Above Water: The Inspiring Journey of *The Swimmers* (2022): A Survey on Audience Perception for the *MigraMedia* Project[1]

Abstract. This survey investigates how audiences perceive *The Swimmers*, a biographical drama about two sisters escaping war-torn Syria and their journey as refugees. The study focuses on people with migration backgrounds or experiences, with the goal of understanding how the film relates to their personal stories and how it affects public perception of migration. The participants were asked to fill a detailed questionnaire related to the film's most memorable or frightening parts, particularly those that depicted the interplay of vulnerability and resilience. This emotional paradox is crucial to *The Swimmers*, highlighting the fragility and fortitude of the human spirit in the face of enormous adversity.
It also investigates how the characters' unique experiences and personal problems are depicted, focussing on universal themes such as hope, family, and survival. Participants were urged to think on the realism of these portrayals and the consequences of relocation, focussing on how these topics related to their own experiences or knowledge on migration. The film's narrative offers a nuanced view of refu-

[1] This article was written in the context of a student project at the University of Hildesheim (supervised byProf. Dr. Markus Heide) as part of the EU co-funded project MigraMedia: Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting (Reference: 2023-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000154375), see https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/

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gees, in contrast to the reductive and frequently one-sided portrayals found in the mainstream media, which can marginalise people by presenting them as numbers or political debating points.
On the other side, it also highlights how *The Swimmers* reclaim agency for individuals affected by migration, giving a more empathic and humane perspective. The study also looks at how media portrayals, such as this film, might challenge common preconceptions, promote solidarity, and inspire optimism. By engaging audiences on a deeply personal level, *The Swimmers* crosses cultural differences, encourages understanding, and highlights the resilience and legacy of migrants worldwide.

Keywords: migration, refugees, vulnerability, resilience, hope, *The Swimmers*, media, heritage, questionnaire

"We are still humans. [...] We are not only refugees.
We are like everyone in the world. We can do something, achieve something.
We didn't choose to leave our homelands. We didn't choose the name refugee."
Yusra Mardini in her autobiographical book "Butterfly" (2018)

Migration has always been part of human history. Some people do it willingly and after a proper planning process with the aim of starting anew with a better job, to join with their family or partner or just out of curiosity about what it's like to live in another country. But obviously, not all migration processes can be planned thoroughly, as there are several dangerous reasons that might even force a person to leave everything behind from one moment to another. Persecution, human rights violations or war are reasons that can tear families apart and force refugees to take the most dangerous and life-threatening trip of their lives.

The movie *The Swimmers* (USA & UK, 2022) tells the real story of the teenage sisters Yusra and Sarah Mardini who fled their home in Syria due to the war. Dive into their inspiring story with our in-depth look at the movie and our survey on it. Discover how this powerful film is changing perspectives on the refugee crisis and resonating with audiences worldwide.

The Swimmers (2022), promotional picture for the movie (source: imdb)
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8745676/mediaviewer/rm2381319425/

What's *The Swimmers* about?

The Swimmers is a compelling, biographical film about Yusra and Sarah Mardini, two sisters from Syria who embark on a harrowing journey as refugees, eventually making it to Germany. The film follows their incredible determination and resilience as they overcome numerous obstacles, from the dangerous sea crossing to their struggle to rebuild their lives in a new country. Yusra's passion for swimming leads her to the Rio 2016 Olympics, where she competes as part of the Refugee Olympic Team, showcasing not only her athletic prowess but also the indomitable spirit of all refugees. This poignant narrative sheds light on the personal and emotional sides of the refugee experience, making it a must-watch for anyone interested in stories of courage and survival.

A contribution to the project *MigraMedia*

This article and the underlying survey were developed as a contribution to the *MigraMedia*-project at the University of Hildesheim. The aim of our contribution to this as a student project was to take a closer look at different media representations of migration, multiculturalism and refugees. Our study centred on the critically acclaimed drama film *The Swimmers* that particularly caught our eye as it was also nominated for the BAFTA-award and was praised by viewers for its outstanding storytelling.

We decided to conduct our own survey with 30 questions in total on the movie itself and further cultural thought-provoking impulses. A total of 14 peers, students and acquaintances and the two of us shared their perception of the film. The survey aimed to anonymously capture diverse thoughts, emotions and critiques regarding the portrayal and handling of migration topics in contemporary German society.

Through our exploration of *The Swimmers* we aim to highlight the transformative power of cinema in addressing crucial social issues and celebrating the human spirit. In our opinion, this film serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and courage of refugees everywhere, and its story is one that deserves widespread dissemination and discussion.

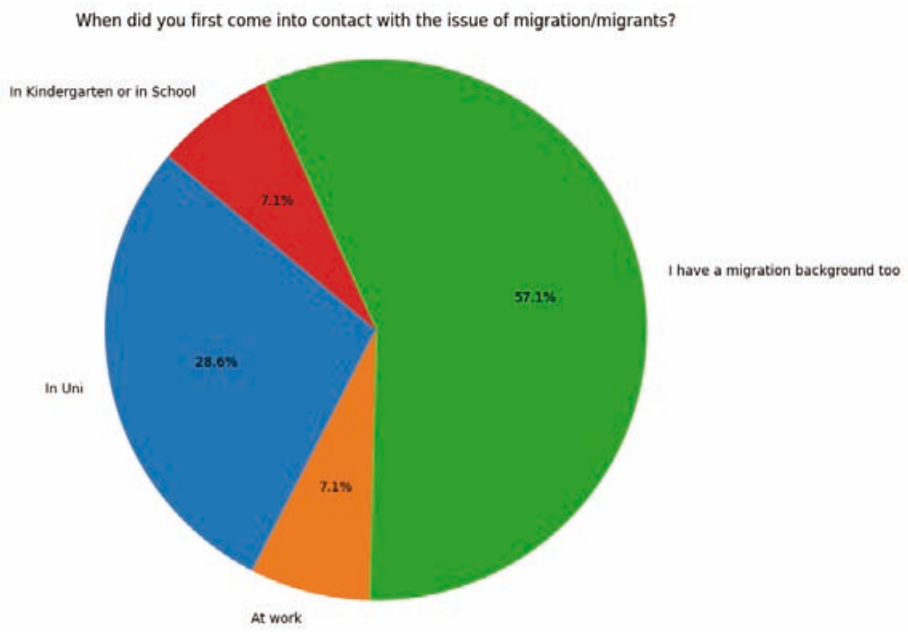
About our survey and the group of respondents

To gain a deeper understanding of the impact of *The Swimmers*, we conducted a survey with a diverse group of viewers. We offered our survey in both English and German to reach a wider audience. Our respondents ranged in age, with most falling between 24 and 30 years old. The majority of our participants were male, but we also had a significant female representation.

The survey participants represented a diverse group hailing from Syria, Iran, Israel, Russia, Germany, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and India. This varied demographic provid-

ed a rich array of perspectives on how the film was received and what aspects resonated most with viewers. Some participants were born in Germany, but their families had migrated from other countries due to war, political unrest, or the hope for a better life for themselves and their children. One respondent shared, "I am a human rights activist and was in prison after the Gezi demonstrations in Turkey in 2014. For safety, I am here." Another noted, "I fled due to the injustice of the Al-Assad regime."

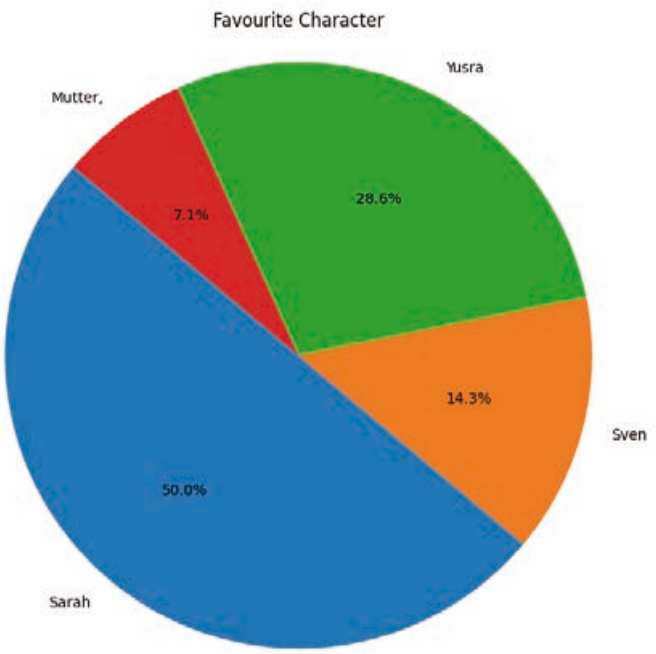
We also asked our participants when they first encountered the topic of migration or migrants. According to the survey results, 7.1% reported becoming familiar with migrants at school or kindergarten, and another 7.1% at work. The graph provides a clearer understanding of the data. A more significant 28.6% met them at university, nearly double the percentage of those who first encountered them at school or work. The majority of participants 57.1% indicated that they themselves have a migrant background.



Core takeaways from our survey

In our survey, a clear majority of 50% of respondents were particularly moved by the character of Sarah, the older sister, who was consistently described as a protective and strong figure. Yusra, the younger sister who eventually competes in the Olympics, was also frequently highlighted for her determination and courage, garnering 28.6% of the votes. Viewers described Yusra's story as one of persistence, strength, and the struggle for survival, emphasising how her journey epitomises the broader refugee experience. Sven, a German who always supported the Mardini sisters and trained

Yusra, emerged as the third favourite character. The least favourite characters were the Mother, with just 7.1%, and Nisar, the cousin, who received no votes.



The film was praised for its unique contribution to migration and biographical cinema, capturing the diversity of the refugee crisis while maintaining historical accuracy. Moreover, viewers appreciated its sensitive portrayal of challenges that refugees face and its emphasis on resilience, hope and family support in adversity. Many praised the way it highlighted the personal anecdotes behind the broader geopolitical issues and felt that *The Swimmers* underscored the need for more such stories to foster empathy and understanding.

In our article, we delve into these insights, exploring how *The Swimmers* has not only entertained but also educated and inspired the audience. We discuss the film's critical reception, its significance in the context of current global issues, and its potential to influence public perception and policy regarding refugees.

Diving deeper into it: what did our respondents share with us?

Our survey resulted in collecting many different opinions and interesting insights on how our respondents perceived the movie and further discussion points were explored from a variety of perspectives. In order to dive deeper into our results, we

summarised the replies to each of our questions, giving a good overview of the many different levels on which the film moves, inspires and surprises.

If you were fleeing with Yusra and Sarah, what part of the journey would have scared you the most?

Picture: Yusra and Sarah swimming next to the sinking rubber dinghy, "The Swimmers", 2022
https://readthespirit.com/visual-parables/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2023/09/Dinghy.jpg

It's not a big surprise that all of our respondents mentioned the 'boat scene'; the moment when the big group of "desperate and scared" refugees sits together in a small dinghy and the situation gets more and more dangerous from one moment to another. Many respondents were particularly scared by the huge level of uncertainty that the flight over the sea brings. The worries don't end with the uncertainty though; the difficulties and unexpected, fatal happenings, such as "when the engine went out" caused many of the passengers to lose hope in the movie as well.

Some of our respondents underlined that feeling of hopelessness that quickly turns into a fight for survival by "not knowing when a wave big enough to drown all of you will crash". Moreover this highlights that the uncertainty is caused mainly by the danger of nature and how unpredictable the sea can be.

One of our respondents added that nature isn't the only danger that the girls face in the movie. When the group survived the escape to Europe, they quickly encountered dangers caused by the unfriendliness and lack of compassion of humans. Especially the guarded borders seem like an insurmountable hurdle for the group that would have also scared our respondent. Furthermore, the girls get into human-caused danger when a man tries to sexually assault Yusra. Overall, the actions, behaviours and decisions of many other people play a big role on how dangerous and tricky the flight is.

If you were Yusra, would you agree to swim for the "Team Refugee" at the Olympics, or would you insist on representing your home country in such a situation and why?

This question was answered with a clear vote for "Team Refugee" by most of our respondents. The explanations for that decision were that it's an opportunity "to test [one's] swimming skills on a global level" and that the athletes of Team Refugee "are still professional athletes and the sudden refugee status has not changed that". Some of our respondents recognized the big inspirational value of this decision by stating that the Olympics are "a platform to be the voice of people in war zones" and, in more general words, a "once-in-a-lifetime possibility". By achieving that dream, it might open the possibility "to represent my country in later Olympics" one respondent supposes.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents had some strong arguments on why it would actually be important to represent one's own country in such a case. One important motive was the aim "to make the country proud" and to "draw attention to the situation in Syria" at the same time, if Yusra decided to insist on joining the Syrian team instead.

One respondent made an interesting statement saying that the "place of birth is irrelevant" in such a case, so it doesn't matter which team they are competing for. Another one takes that argument even further and beautifully writes: "My loyalty to humanity is ahead of my loyalty to my country".

Which moment of the movie impressed you the most? Which one shocked you the most?

Picture: Yusra Mardini swimming for the Refugee Olympic Team (R.O.T.) at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, 2016 (source: The Guardian)

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/17/yusra-mardini-syrian-refugee-and-olympic-swimmer-inspires-film#img-1

First of all, the film's authentic portrayal of diverse environments and countries left a strong impression. The respondents that already heard about similar escape stories or experienced it themselves praised the accuracy, but were also not too surprised by the dramatic conditions. That implies that many refugees had a similarly horrible experience and that "The Swimmers" portrayed it well. Some respondents who stated to mainly know such flight stories from e.g. the news in Germany wrote that the shocking accuracy made them reflect on the topic of flight itself and on how refugees are being treated on their dangerous journey, as well as in their destination country and for example the refugee shelter in Berlin.

Many respondents were deeply impressed by Yusra winning the Olympic medal after regaining her physical endurance and strength "despite restrictions and many weeks without training [and] homesickness". On that note, our viewers were also moved by Sven's kind and supporting attitude, making him the one humanitarian and voluntarily helping characters of Yusra's story.

A counterexample are the people that refused to help and showed no compassion; they were mentioned as shocking moments of the movie as well, for example the rude Greek restaurant owner that didn't want to give the refugees water and the people that left the group's calls for help in the middle of the sea unanswered.

Obviously, the boat scene left many of our respondents shocked as well as impressed. One of them stated that it was shocking to see how most of the group went on the rubber dinghy, even though all of them knew that it was unsafe and way too small. Others were able to also draw some inspiration from that scene, praising the incredible courage and "the team spirit of the group on the boat [...], even though everyone had only met a few hours before". When the group finally reached the island Lesbos, a sad and shocking long shot of a huge and wide pile of swim vests welcomed the refugee group. One reader contemplates that "some of [the people who wore those swim vests] may have survived the same dangerous trip, while some of the vests might have washed ashore and belonged to people who died at sea."

Last but not least there were a few respondents who seemed to be the most shocked and at the same time impressed by the very ending scene of the movie that revealed that Sarah decided to go back to Lesbos and help refugees who are taking on the same life-threatening journey as she did.

According to you, do the happy or the sad moments of the movie predominate? Which ones left a bigger impact on you? Do you think that the happy ending outweighs the 'sad reality'-part of the movie?

The opinions about the movie are diverse, yet a common theme emerges: its profound emotional impact stemming from its portrayal of sadness and struggle, despite a seemingly uplifting ending. Many viewers noted that while the film concludes positively, the lingering sadness reflects the harsh realities faced by those escaping war zones.

One viewer remarked, "Sad moments were more powerful as they took more than the first half of the movie, and even though you expect a happy ending, you can still get overwhelmed by the sad events." This sentiment resonates, especially among those with personal connections to the story. An immigrant shared how the sisters' struggle to contact their parents resonated with them, emphasising the film's authentic depiction of longing and separation.

While some appreciated the film's balanced portrayal of joy and sorrow, the underlying sadness remained palpable. Another expressed, "Even though the movie ended happily for the girls, it left me with bitterness." This feeling was echoed by others who, despite moments of hope, felt a closer connection to the grim realities many refugees face. The uplifting journey of Yusra and Sarah to Germany is contrasted by the film's depiction of those who did not survive or remained in precarious situations, adding an inescapable layer of sadness.

The film's success story does not overshadow the tragedies, reminding viewers that many do not survive such journeys. Even survivors like Nizar continue to grapple with homesickness and mental health issues. While Yusra and Sarah's happy ending was celebrated, it raised questions about the fate of their family and others in similar circumstances. One viewer noted, "For me, the happy ending of the two doesn't outweigh the sad reality, as I also wondered what would happen to the rest of the family."

Conversely, some viewers appreciated the emotional balance, feeling the film captured life's complexities where joy and sorrow coexist. "Both the sad and happy moments left an impression on me," one person reflected, acknowledging that even in darkness, support and joy can emerge. Others found hope in the film, believing that the beautiful moments outweighed the terrible ones, leaving them with optimism rather than despair.

Eventually, the film strikes a balance for many, ensuring that while audiences may leave with heavy hearts, they are also reminded that hope persists and new beginnings are possible, even if they do not fully erase the pain of what has been lost.

In what ways did the film highlight the resilience and the vulnerabilities of migrants? How did the film depict the challenges and obstacles migrants face during their journey?

The film vividly portrays the intense journey of refugees, capturing the delicate balance between resilience and vulnerability. One viewer noted, "Resilience was highlighted through the boat journey where everyone behaved responsibly, and Sarah and Yusra also lifted the spirit of everyone with their heroics." This resilience is further emphasised by the fact that they supported each other against all odds, enduring the bureaucratic delays and discrimination while trying to build new lives in foreign lands.

The harsh realities faced by refugees are depicted with stark realism. "Realistic representation of troubles while escaping and surviving as a refugee, they didn't have documents or medals to prove their worth, no language skills in the beginning, living in

a shelter, racism," one viewer commented. The uncertainty, fear of death, and helplessness are palpable throughout their journey. As another viewer noted, "It felt like there was one challenge and danger after another and no opportunity to really rest and feel 100% safe."

The film also sheds light on the exploitation and dangers refugees face, such as being at the mercy of smugglers who see them as mere profit. "Their lives are laying in the hands of smugglers, who see them as nothing but an opportunity to get the last bit of money out of desperate people," observed a viewer, highlighting the risks and sacrifices made by Yusra, Sarah, and Nizar.

The emotional toll of migration is powerfully conveyed, from the fear and uncertainty of the journey to the struggle of adapting to a new life. "The emotional separation was portrayed quite well; from family, from what you know as home," remarked a viewer, underscoring the profound impact of leaving behind everything familiar. The film does a commendable job of illustrating how migration can affect anyone, regardless of their status, showing that the path to safety and a new life is fraught with obstacles, desperation, and the constant struggle for survival.

Looking at the media reports and documentations about flight and migration from the last few years; do you think that it's possible for a German citizen to get a proper view on the conditions and dangers of fleeing your home country or is the media reporting too one-sided?

Picture: the German Tagesschau reporting about a EU meeting on the 'refugee crisis' featuring the photograph of a child in the crowd of refugees, 2015 (source: Tagesschau Mediathek) https://www.daserste.de/information/nachrichten-wetter/tagesschau/videosextern/tagesschau-20-00-uhr-2608.html

"In principle, it is not possible to experience forced flight in exactly the same way as the refugees themselves experience it" – that's how some respondents summarised the fact that "the reality of refugees can never be reflected by what is shown on television."

This implies that only the refugees themselves can tell and fully understand how dangerous the flight was and that images on news will never be able to grasp those feelings in a way that it gets tangible for the German citizens watching e.g. the Tagesschau (the biggest German TV news service, broadcasted by ARD). To dig deeper into that issue, one respondent mentioned that the news talk about sinking ships and dinghies, but as a German citizen you never see exactly how it happens and what incredible danger and angst the refugees are facing at that moment. Moreover one of our respondents noticed that only crises are shown on TV, e.g. by recordings of "bombed-out cities and angry people". This hinders the viewers of the news to remember that "that people [shown on the news] had normal everyday routines and that their problems and experiences are not too different from ours".

When replying to this question, most participants referred to "mass media" or "mainstream media" covering "newspapers and the news", while criticising that the media reporting is perceived as "one-sided and insufficient" by "obstructing a lot of facts" and being particularly "selective". As the reports are only done from the "German side", it presumably becomes impossible for the citizens to know "the full picture", unless they follow "alternative media" and watch documentaries or movies on this topic or read books written by authors who experienced flight themselves.

Another point that our respondents noticed is that the news mostly talk about refugees who died and they make numbers and statistics based on that. In that way, "after a while people don't realise that these numbers correspond to people, each one has a story [..] and fears, joys and dreams." They are often generalised as "the refugees" or "a stream of refugees" as well; the individuality gets lost here and "parents, partners, friends, siblings and children" are merged into a generalised mass of people.

One last respondent notes that the news convey a rather negative image of refugees, so that the stereotype of the "lazy migrant who is only in Germany for social welfare" is still existent, which shows that further "empathy and understanding" must be developed.

What do you think about the conditions in the refugee accommodation in Berlin? Did it surprise you in any way?

As there are a few respondents that are familiar with refugee accommodations either through personal experience or through stories of their friends, they stated that they were not surprised at all by the conditions in the Berlin Tempelhof hangar. One of them summarised it as "just sufficient, [but] not in any luxurious way" while the other respondent shared that "the situation in Greece is much worse". With the arrival in the accommodation, bureaucratic hurdles are looming that were also classified as being close to reality. A German respondent shared the point of view that German cities are already densely populated and therefore such asylums are "unfortunately [...] the only way to accommodate them". Moreover, our viewers noted that "the conditions were better than those on the run or in outdoor accommodation".

Picture: the refugee accommodation in the hangar of the airport Berlin Tempelhof, 2016 (source: Deutsche Welle)
https://www.dw.com/en/berlin-to-stop-housing-refugees-in-tempelhof-hangars-in-theory/a-19415068

One respondent summed up the living conditions with the word "terrible". Others were very surprised by the living situation, while some were not surprised at all. All of them agree that there is "no privacy and it was way too crowded, loud and messy" and without "adequate hygiene", which makes the accommodations not fit for human beings. All in all the "living conditions weren't up to the mark" and are therefore only "temporary accommodations".

Nevertheless there were also some positive voices highlighting that the Berlin refugee accommodation was "organised and structured" in means of everyone having a bed assigned to them and that the organising team made sure that everyone can hear announcements by installing airport-like loudspeakers.

Do you think that the family reunification process should be easier for refugees? Under what conditions should it be easier to bring the family to the destination country?

This question was discussed by our respondents, highlighting arguments for and against adding some conditions, but also giving concrete examples on what exceptions could look like. After seeing the struggles that Sarah and Yusra faced when trying to bring their family to Germany, the majority of our respondents agreed that there need to be additional regulations to make the process both easier and quicker. One of the simple arguments is that "seeing your family is important" and therefore a certain flexibility in the family reunification process should be provided for "children and women", while another person proposed to include "parents and spouses" here as well.

Another proposal was to make being a resident in the country and having a full-time job a stricter condition that should make it possible for a refugee to request a family reunification. Furthermore there was the idea to add the criteria that there must be accommodation available in the desired country, in means of the family having a place to reside when they arrive. Moreover, someone added that the refugee requesting reunification should also have some basic language knowledge of the desired country, so it's possible for at least one family member to communicate for the family in their everyday life. Also, "[respecting] the rules and values of the country" is necessary in the opinion of one respondent.

There were also several people thinking about an age limit for when the family can be reunified, considering either 18 or 20 years old as the maximum age for the child or young adult that requests it. Both respondents wrote that Yusra's case should have definitely been an exception, as she was just a few months older when the bureaucratic process finally finished. One argument for setting the age limit to 20 was that being 18, so of legal age in Europe, "doesn't mean [the person] can do everything on [their] own in a foreign country". A common point was also that the process should already start with the arrival of the child and that the length of the bureaucratic processing time should not matter as long as the application was done before 18 or 20.

Going further, we had some respondents thinking about political factors that should make that whole process quicker or even prioritise people who face "War in the home country" or "political persecution" in order to save them from immediate life threats. One last respondent concluded that "it's wrong to differentiate who has priority and to make distinctions as to the conditions under which it should be easier and when it shouldn't be" as the conditions and situations of the families are completely different and there will always be some exceptions that weren't covered by the rules.

Were there instances where you felt the film perpetuated stereotypes or misconceptions about Syria and/ or the Middle East? How could these have been addressed differently? And what were your thoughts on the portrayal of the Muslim community's values and traditions in the film?

The film effectively challenges stereotypes about Syria and Middle Eastern culture by depicting two young girls who defy traditional expectations. Contrary to the common image of a conservative Muslim society, the movie showcases a more relaxed and vibrant lifestyle, with the girls attending parties and swimming in swimsuits, which only cover the torso. One viewer noted, "The potential of two young girls who have no hijab, go to parties, do not follow [community] rules, and even wear swimsuits and swim is far outside the Syrian/middle eastern stereotypes." This portrayal sheds light on a different perspective of life in Syria.

The film also addresses the portrayal of women in Syrian society, confronting stereotypes that women are undervalued. A scene on a bus highlights the challenges women face, yet the film surprises viewers by showing women swimming in light clothing. A viewer remarked on the stereotype that women are "worth nothing," but noted surprise at seeing women allowed to swim lightly dressed.

Regarding the portrayal of the Muslim community, the film offers a nuanced perspective. One viewer commented on the normalcy of the family dynamics, noting that the girls, while not typical conservative Muslims, embody core qualities of their faith. This contrasts with Hollywood's usual portrayal of Muslim countries, offering a more realistic and positive image. A viewer noted, "I found the portrayal of Muslim countries different, in a positive sense, from the normal image of Muslim countries that is portrayed in Hollywood movies, which is often only about the radical Islamists."

The film's realistic portrayal, especially the family's approach to faith, resonated with many. The characters live out their faith in their own way, making it easier for non-Muslim viewers to connect with them. A viewer observed, "The family lives out their faith the way they want to. To me, this makes it easier for non-Muslim viewers to connect with the characters because they look, talk, and dress in a more Western way." This fresh, relatable narrative challenges the often one-dimensional depiction of Muslim societies.

From your perspective, how did the film address the issue of identity for Syrian migrant Muslims in a new country?

The survey responses reveal diverse opinions on how migrant experiences are depicted in the film. One respondent praised the film's innovative approach, calling it "out of the box" and "presented in a positive way," indicating a favourable portrayal. Another described the film as "dramatically visualised," highlighting its impactful storytelling.

The character Nizar, who dreams of becoming a DJ, elicited mixed reactions. Some viewers appreciated the film's attempt to portray his aspirations, but noted that Nizar was often ridiculed, reflecting societal attitudes towards unconventional careers.

A significant observation was made about the depiction of immigrant challenges. One respondent related to a scene with the graffiti "foreigners out," acknowledging it only partially captures the immigrants' experiences. This comment pointed out the stereotyping issue, especially against Muslim migrants, who are often perceived as "dangerous for society and difficult to integrate."

Several respondents critiqued the film's treatment of identity issues. One felt Yusra's journey lacked depth in exploring migrants' identity struggles, suggesting the film missed an opportunity by not delving into her choice to join the refugee team instead of representing Syria. Others echoed this sentiment, stating the film did not sufficiently address the complexities of Muslim identity. While one respondent appreciated the focus on Syrian youth escaping war rather than religion, another felt it provided "too little" insight into the identity of Syrian Muslim migrants, leaving a narrative gap.

What were some notable differences or similarities between the cultures portrayed in the film and your own cultural background? Were there any cultural or personal elements of migration depicted in the film that resonated with you personally?

The responses from the survey participants reveal a deep emotional connection to the themes of family, cultural identity, and the struggles faced by migrants, as depicted in the movie. Many respondents highlighted the strong family bonds portrayed in the film, noting the critical role these relationships played in the sisters' survival. The closeness between family members, even as they age, was seen as a vital element, with one respondent pointing out the "solidarity within the family and between individual members" as a notable similarity to their own experiences. The roles of the strict father and gentle mother, as well as the parents' desire for their children to have a better life, resonated with many, reflecting common familial dynamics across different cultures.

While some respondents found cultural similarities between their own backgrounds and the movie, such as the connection between Syrian and Turkish family cultures, others noted significant differences. One participant mentioned that their cultural and religious background was "completely different from what is shown in the film," while another observed that the family in the movie seemed less religious than expected, possibly due to their constant movement and struggles.

The film's portrayal of the challenges faced by migrants, including racism, discrimination, and bureaucratic hurdles, struck a chord with many viewers. One respondent related to the frustration expressed by a character in the film, who lamented that Europeans enjoying the sea "have no idea that people are dying in this sea." This sentiment echoed the personal experiences of those who had witnessed or lived through similar hardships. The strength and resilience of the young women in the film, their love for each other, and their determination to overcome adversity were particularly impactful.

Several respondents were moved by specific moments in the film, such as the emotional farewell at the airport, which brought some to tears. The depiction of families with small children hoping for a better life, and the sacrifices made during their difficult escape, resonated deeply. One participant emphasised the difficulty of leaving family members behind, a reality poignantly portrayed in the movie. Overall, the responses reflect a profound connection to the film's themes of family, sacrifice, and the pursuit of a better future amidst the harsh realities of migration.

In your opinion, what made *The Swimmers* a unique addition to the genre or the world of cinema (Biography, film on the subject of migration)?

Many of our respondents were impressed that the movie is based on Sarah's and Yusra's real story; the storytelling is perceived as being excellent in a way that the viewers felt "like [they are] along for the ride" and sometimes even "forget that the content in the movie actually [really] happened." Moreover, it was easy to connect

to the characters of the "emotional and moving film" and feel with them, as it was "narrated from a personal perspective". One respondent added that it was a story full of hope and hopelessness that "even let us viewers lose hope, but not Yusra and Sarah." This implies a strong emotional bond that the movie manages to create by using two exceptional actresses for the main roles, but also by good and captivating camera work. One person also praised that there is a "diversity of nationalities" in the story that makes the movie "easily relatable for many people from different backgrounds."

In more general words, our respondents concluded that the movie deals with a "sensitive topic" by showing a story of illegal immigration. It also "presents the refugee situation well and objectively" and is perceived as a "unique" addition to the genre by following the protagonists "from the very beginning to the arrival at the destination". Shortly said, "the reason [of flight], the life, the fears" are presented in a way that feels "so real". It also included a complex web of emotions by showing "grief, gratitude, disappointment, anger, fear, hope".

Two respondents tried to summarise the takeaway of the story and wrote that the choice to produce and release this movie shows that "a refugee also has a message for the world" and that "although you're a refugee, you can make it far with hard work and ambition, not just out of pity".

Lastly, what is the main takeaway from the movie for you? (max. 3 aspects)

The survey responses revealed a profound impact of *The Swimmers* on its viewers, highlighting several key themes and lessons. Many participants emphasised the harsh realities of migration, with one noting that "Migration is not an arbitrary decision and many things have to be sacrificed." This sentiment was echoed by another respondent who observed, "That sometimes leaving one's country is not an option but a necessity, that every migrant has a story and the difficulty of being homeless in a new country."

The film's ability to raise awareness and foster empathy was widely acknowledged. One viewer expressed, "That there should be more movies of that kind in order to make people more conscious about the 'outer world' as well as the people they deal with every day." Another respondent elaborated on this, stating "The movie motivates us to understand Syrian refugees and feel their pain and it also tells us to be more humane towards them, as they have faced racism beyond measure."

Several viewers drew inspiration from the film's message of perseverance and hope. "Be courageous, have faith and be focused on your goals," one participant summarised. Another emphasised, "To try as much as you can to survive and never give up. You can flourish anywhere and develop your skills regardless of the circumstances." The themes of "Hard work, hope and family" were also highlighted as central takeaways.

The movie's portrayal of sudden life changes resonated strongly with viewers. One poignant response noted, "How quickly and for no fault whatsoever the whole reality

of everyday life and everything you had – home, identity, status, job, social life – can collapse. And that as a result you realise that people treat you differently according to that." This reflection on the fragility of one's circumstances was complemented by another viewer's observation: "Migration can affect anyone. Leaving your own country is often not a voluntary decision. Fulfilling your dreams is not always a direct path, but you shouldn't give up."

The film also inspired gratitude and a call to action among viewers. One respondent advised, "Be grateful every day for living in peace and never take that for granted. Your whole life can change from one moment to another, so live every day to the fullest and follow your dreams. And a bit of help and kindness can mean a lot to the person you're giving it to."

Ultimately, the movie's message of resilience and hope in the face of adversity was powerfully summarised by one viewer: "Always believe in your dreams, as they'll come true at some point and you'll make it, no matter what you plan." Another succinctly captured the film's essence with the statement, "Never give up, always pursue your dreams and war is stupid!"

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Interview questions (English translation)

1. In your opinion, what made *The Swimmers* a unique addition to the genre or the world of cinema?
2. In what ways did the film highlight the resilience or vulnerabilities of migrants?
3. Were there any cultural or personal elements of migration depicted in the film that resonated with you personally?
4. How did the film depict the challenges and obstacles migrants face during their journey?
5. What were some notable differences or similarities between the cultures portrayed in the film and your own cultural background?
6. What were your thoughts on the portrayal of the Muslim community's values and traditions in the film?
7. Were there instances where you felt the film perpetuated stereotypes or misconceptions about Syria? How could these have been addressed differently?
8. From your perspective, how did the film address the issue of identity for Syrian migrant Muslims in a new country?
9. Which moment in the movie impressed you the most? Which one shocked you the most?
10. (A question for our German interview partners): What do you think about the conditions in the refugee accommodation in Berlin? Did it surprise you in any way?
11. If you were fleeing right along with Yusra and Sara, what part of the journey would have scared you the most?

12. Do you think that the family reunification process should be easier for refugees? Under what conditions should it be easier to bring the family to the destination country?
13. (A question for our German interview partners): Looking at the media reports and documentations about flight and migration from the last few years; do you think that it is possible for a German citizen to get a proper view on the conditions and dangers of fleeing your home country or is the media reporting too one-sided?
14. According to you, do the happy or the sad moments of the movie predominate? Which ones left a bigger impact on you?
15. Do you think that the happy ending outweighs the 'sad reality' part of the movie? Should the overall ending be more sad to put a clear focus on how hard flight is?
16. If you were Yusra, would you agree on swimming for the "refugee team" or would you insist on representing your home country in such a situation?
17. What is the main takeaway from the movie for you? (Name max. 3 aspects)
18. Finish the following sentence: "Yusra Mardini's story is a story of/ about _____."

General questions for the beginning of the interview:

– Where are you from? How old are you? Do you have a migration background? Which generation of your family decided to move to Germany (and maybe we can also ask: why?)?
– When did you first get in contact with migration/ migrants? When did you first get in contact with refugees or any situations in the world that caused people to flee their home countries?
– On a scale of 1 to 10, how much did you like *The Swimmers*? (1 = I hated it, 10 = I loved it)