

# When money speaks: behind asylum seekers' consumption patterns

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**The goods and services purchased by asylum seekers who were given an unconditional cash transfer demonstrate how their consumer behaviour extends beyond the fulfilment of immediate needs to addressing broader desires for community and belonging.**

Germany has witnessed a dramatic increase in numbers of asylum applications. Aid organisations' resources are stretched thin and they are unable to provide individualised – more targeted – assistance. So we developed a project using unconditional cash transfers to see if better understanding of refugee spending patterns could help aid organisations create more effective aid programmes.

Partnering with two language schools in Munich, we distributed €60 each to 30 participants of diverse demographic backgrounds to spend without constraint over a period of ten days. On average, participants spent about 40% of the cash transfer on clothing and shoes, the largest spending category. The second largest category was food, with average spending of 22%. The third largest was gifts, at close to 9%.

To better understand the nuances in our data, we divided our sample according to three monthly income levels: those receiving social welfare of less than €275, those receiving between €275 and €400, and those receiving more than €400. The level of social welfare received is determined by a recipient's country of origin, the size of their

immediate family within the country, and their employment status. For asylum seekers receiving less than €400 a month, the largest spending category was clothes and shoes. For those receiving more than €400, however, none of the transfer was spent on clothes or shoes. Spending on food was relatively even across all income levels, and there was spending on gifts across all incomes.

Out of the 30 participants, all had lived in camps upon their arrival in Germany but seven now lived in houses, 14 in temporary government flats, and nine still in camps. Furthermore, even though cooked food is provided in most of the camps, there was no significant relation between spending on food between groups.

## Why clothing, food and gifts?

**Clothing:** Participants said that while clothing was not an immediate need, the process of selecting and buying clothes is an important medium for self-expression and empowerment. Many participants received one-off donations of clothing on their arrival in Germany. For some, these donations were essential because they had been able to carry very little with them on

their journeys. However, as the length of time spent in Germany increased, there was a greater need for different clothing options. Limited financial resources for necessities like clothing place a direct limitation on the ability of participants to navigate different settings such as job interviews or changes in the weather. Having to wear the same second-hand clothing every day, participants felt stigmatised and unable to divorce themselves from the label of 'refugee', thus considered in need of charity.

Most participants felt that they had little control over their lives in Germany; they could not control where they lived, worked, what they ate, what they wore or what they studied. In this context, the act of choosing their own clothes and being able to express some individuality takes on an almost exaggerated importance.

*"I received second-hand clothing and it was a strange feeling. So the first thing I did was to go to [named store] and buy some clothes that I could choose and I can dress in and I can feel comfortable in and be happy with."*

The decision of where to shop and what clothing items to buy allowed this participant to share the same fashion choices as people in local social groups, thus providing an opportunity for social mobility and an increased sense of belonging.

Participants expressed how, through purchasing their own clothes, they were given the choice of how they wanted others in the community to perceive them and their status. The stores where purchases are made can have an impact on this perception. For example, some participants spent their unconditional cash transfers at a higher-end clothing store.

*"In my opinion, you always have to be your best self."*

**Food:** Choosing what to eat and who to eat with represents one of the most accessible avenues for fostering community and attaining independence for participants. Yet asylum seekers living in camps have little control over the practices and processes of the food they receive. A key feature of

living in a camp is the catered food. Most camp residents are not allowed to cook for themselves and participants expressed distaste for the catered food because it is neither culturally appropriate nor appetising.

*"We didn't have money, so we were just eating from the camps. And normally, they cook for everyone, not individually. ...I don't like lots of the food provided by the camp, so sometimes we didn't eat... We had doubts about the meat. What is it? Did they cook it in our way, like how we cook? If we had money at that time, we could cook for ourselves."*

Issues like the uncertainty about halal meat fostered tensions between the catering staff and camp residents. The catered food in the cafeteria-style environment of the camp at fixed times of the day means that those who eat there relinquish control over who they eat with and how they regulate their eating schedule. When the participants elaborate on the meanings associated with food, a clear link between eating practices and mental health begins to emerge. In response, rather than eating food provided at the camp, many of our participants chose to use some of the cash to buy their own food.

Given the centrality of food in cultural identity formation, going to the grocery store is a pathway for asylum seekers to integrate and to feel independent. Cooking, and the independence that comes with it, is possible primarily for those living in flats and houses. The absence of this option is one of the many reasons why people would like to move out of the camp. The ability to choose food demonstrates resilience – and freedom from a form of dependency on the state.

Eating is also a social act, a medium used by many participants to form community ties. Participants in our sample used a significant amount of the money spent on food to cook with other people. Even those living in camps with catered food often bought supplies to contribute to communal cooking.

*"I bought these groceries because then I can cook and eat with my friends. We all share... you buy, then I cook and you cook and then we eat all together. For Ramadan we cooked together."*

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Communal food preparation and eating – but also cooking culturally appropriate food – are a source of comfort for a number of participants. Several participants had already identified specialty shops in the city where they could purchase ingredients that are not available in German grocery stores. Frequenting specialty shops promotes a greater sense of belonging in the city, while cooking familiar foods together cultivates a sense of mental and physical well-being.

**Gifts:** For the giver, the act of giving represents an expression of cultural and personal values while strengthening the connectivity the individual has with others. Some participants spent a portion of the unconditional cash transfer on gifts regardless of their income level. For example, Haroon explained that in Pakistan he would give his niece a present for her birthday but this year it was nearly impossible to do so. As an asylum seeker receiving social welfare, he is prohibited by law from sending this money or other items back to his family in Pakistan. To get around these restrictions Haroon used the cash transfer to buy a pair of shoes, which he then gave to his roommate, who then phoned his brother in Pakistan and asked him to send a doll to Haroon's niece on his behalf.

Gifts, whether they be a box of dates for Ramadan or a coffee-maker for a girlfriend, are an avenue through which they can foster supportive communities.

### Recommendations

All the participants used the unconditional cash transfer to enhance individual control over their immediate surroundings, and this finding can inform recommendations for supporting successful integration:

**Develop avenues for independent clothing purchases:** For all asylum seekers with a monthly income of less than €400, donated clothes could be arranged in a

store-like setting and sold at discounted prices. Asylum seekers would then be able to make their own choices. The store could also be managed by asylum seekers. Vouchers to already existing clothing stores could also be an alternative.

**Pair asylum seekers with local families:** We met a number of asylum seekers in Munich who have connected with local German families. Through these relationships, asylum seekers find stability and guidance by spending time with the families in a location that is not the camp, and also improve their German language skills. The local families, in turn, are able to serve as mentors, learn about a new culture, and engage in dialogue.

More relationships like these could be created through a formalised 'host family' programme.

**Support adaptation to the reality of long-term residence in camps:** Many of the camps where asylum seekers live were originally designed as short-term reception centres. However, the reality is that the camp becomes a longer-term home and, as such, its physical infrastructure as well as arrangements such as catering should be adapted to this reality if asylum seekers are to maintain their physical and mental health. Service providers should, for example, recognise the dual roles of cooking, buying and eating food both as a way for maintaining previous cultural practices and simultaneously as a basic way for learning to navigate and belong in a new place.

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*"I didn't come from poverty, I wasn't hungry. I am only fleeing because of war. ... We aren't all here just to eat. We want to do more with our lives."*

(Hisham, from Syria, 25 years old)