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In Her Multimedia Words: Ukrainian Women in The Netherlands, Belonging and Temporary Protection Status

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Abstract

Recent research in digital migration studies analyzes both refugee populations' social media use and so-called integration outcomes. Against the backdrop of digitalization, we argue for understanding belonging as part of an ongoing process in physical, virtual and hybrid continuities, where material aspects cannot be divorced from imagined constructions. We take the case of Ukrainian women arriving in the Netherlands following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, in 15 semi-structured interviews from 2023. Adopting an intersectional lens, our research asks the following questions: How does social media use mediate or inform a sense of belonging? How do observations correspond to or differ from previous studies on refugees and social media, given this population's temporary protection (TP) status? As participants leverage digital platforms differently in evolving situations, they navigate connectedness to the new community; we argue this may be linked to distinct TP status and other characteristics of difference, including educational levels and digital literacy. Conclusions indicate that an intersectional lens could be applied in understanding Ukrainian perspectives in other Member States—or beneficiaries of differing origin—to better account for how intersectional dimensions like legal status can be mutually constitutive of virtual connectedness versus material, physical rootedness or vulnerability.

Keywords: social media; digital platforms; intersectionality; belonging; Ukraine; Temporary Protection Directive

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1. Introduction

The integration[1] of beneficiaries of international protection has remained a decades-long policy debate and priority, as well as a subject of academic interest. More recent research dedicated to "digital migration studies" (Leurs and Prabhakar 2018) informs the topic; the digital space is identified as a local and global space in which forms of belonging operate. Such transdisciplinary studies posit that social media or digital mediums can facilitate so called "integration" processes on and offline, with a proliferation of studies examining digital technology (and specifically social media) use among refugee populations en route to or within the EU (Alencar 2018; Benton and Glennie 2016; Witteborn 2018). These expand beyond former studies limited to population categories like labor and family migrants or students (Dekker et al. 2016; Thulin and Vilhelmson 2014).

Many of these works emphasize the role of social media in destination choice or in informing prospective mobility to the EU (Alencar 2020; Ennaji and Bignami 2019; Zijlstra and Van Liempt 2017). Some explore social media in relation to "integration" upon arrival

in the EU (Kutscher and Kreß 2018; Borkert et al. 2018). While we propose to examine this latter phase, we argue that belonging is part of an ongoing process (i.e., does not remain static upon arrival) in physical, virtual and hybrid continuities (Marlowe et al. 2017).

Intersectional difference is another important aspect to consider in the increasing literature on social media and connectedness among mobile subjects, including upon arrival at a chosen destination. Exclusion or access to and use of digital tools can be influenced by a combination of many factors, including socioeconomic status, employment, education, migration or legal status, gender, race or ethnicity, generation, personal networks, individual characteristics like personality, or psychological and physical health (Aaltonen 2019; Crenshaw 1989). Some authors have begun to highlight how the digital sphere can both perpetuate inequality and exclusion and allow space for empowerment and belonging at the same time (Henry et al. 2022; Gray 2015).

This research incorporates the migrant perspective via an intersectional lens due to a continued need for individuals' lived experiences to inform knowledge production, which previously undervalued these perspectives and marginalized groups along lines of race, gender, class, immigration status and sexuality and other lines of difference (Crenshaw 1989). Some work has already pointed to how the virtual space can allow for feminist spaces or agency and tactical engagements by women with intersectional difference or disadvantage (Gray 2015; Witteborn 2018). As further described below, this analysis is not limited to gender as a characteristic of difference, but also emphasizes legal or migration status, educational levels, multilingual skills and digital literacy.

Indeed, in the wake of the recent Russian aggression in Ukraine, the EU Temporary Protection Directive has been implemented in EU Member States, including the Netherlands. This temporary protection (TP) status offers different conditions than refugee status, arguably more favorable, including in terms of access to employment, for example (Bosse 2022). In understanding Ukrainian beneficiaries of international protection in their positioning as a digital diaspora, the Netherlands is a salient case study, given the current visibility surrounding refugee and asylum policies and its decentralized system of "integration" measures (Damen et al. 2022). While historically tolerating difference and embracing multiculturalism, the current sociopolitical climate and Dutch policy towards asylum seekers could be described as resistant to or restrictive of the welcome and so-called "integration" of newcomers (Bakker et al. 2016). Recent work illustrates marked intersectional factors at play when considering this case study: on the one hand, Ukrainian individuals' changing linguistic use as potentially underlying colonial dynamics, and on the other, the racialized nature of beneficiary policy or attitudes towards Ukrainians (Constantin 2022; Jackson Sow 2022). A third observation we later note is that while TP has been argued to facilitate employment and offer other advantages, the uncertainty behind the duration of temporary protection status (and its varying implementation in different Member States) could be understood as a condition of vulnerability, rather than a more favorable legal status.

Therefore, this study involves 15 semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian women residing in the Netherlands analyzed according to the following research questions: In what ways does Netherlands-based Ukrainian women's social media use mediate or inform their sense of belonging? Do observations differ from previous studies on refugees and social media, given their temporary protection (TP) status?

Regarding our contributions, we argue that when investigating this topic among beneficiaries of international protection, the literature often focuses on the use of social media at origin and in transit. As will be demonstrated later, navigating social media and the digital space factor into belonging to new physical communities and virtual communities upon arrival and in maintaining connections with former communities. Secondly, we contribute

to the literature in that an intersectional perspective is still underdeveloped in related studies, particularly as regards legal certainty in the context of new implementations of beneficiary status like TP. We emphasize this aspect of legal status, alongside other individual characteristics like language ability and educational status (and perhaps interlinked socioeconomic advantage that can translate to digital literacy).

This work is timely and relevant given both the dynamic and evolving nature of digital migration studies in general and the Ukrainian case study (with the TP status) in particular. It mainly draws upon the theoretical work of sociologists and cultural scientists that has informed migration studies in recent decades. It also incorporates more recent work in the fields of digital and communications studies to grapple with the "problematization" of digitally mediated belonging in hybrid spaces.

In sum, this research examines how social media mediates or informs a sense of belonging in the Netherlands among recently arrived, self-identifying women from Ukraine who hold TP status. As part of this, it explores intersectional dimensions that relate to legal status, educational level and digital literacy. We note that a sense of belonging can refer to a new physical (in the Netherlands) or former physical (in Ukraine) community, or a (new or former) virtual community. Ultimately, our findings indicate an overall notable connection to the new community: digital literacy, perhaps informed by educational attainment, and the particular TP status afforded to Ukrainians in the current context are key intersectional dimensions at play.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Firstly, we would like to frame the discussion within migration studies theory related to belonging and vulnerability, as well as more recent sociolegal migration studies on the "temporary turn" in asylum. Then, by way of context, we provide an overview of recent studies approaching themes of concepts of (virtual) social networks, belonging and beneficiaries of international protection, largely within Europe, but also globally, if pertinent.

Feeling valued by others in a community can be synonymous with a sense of belonging, and it is argued that a sense of belonging can be used in a simplified way to measure social capital[2] (Ahn and Davis 2020). Another argument is that economic stability (i.e., incorporation into the economy of residence via workforce) adds to an individual's material security and sense of belonging (Antonsich 2010). Here, we adopt Christensen's focus on the intertwined nature of territorial or physical anchoring in things like material belonging, alongside virtual or imagined communities explored (Christensen 2012). In the Ukrainian case, we explore further how language identity is socially constructed and relates to belonging (Arel 2017; Nawyn et al. 2012).

On this note, and importantly for our research question, is the "temporary turn" in asylum management, or as Sandberg et al. (2025) describe it, "the interaction between return-oriented asylum policies and conditionalities imposed for more secure forms of legal status embeds a protracted temporariness in the refugee protection regime." Until recently, migration studies focused on the precarity of legal status, or "uncertainty and risk produced by diversified migration categories" (Schultz 2025), as largely associated with temporary or regular migration. However, it is currently being expanded to other categories, including those of beneficiaries of international protection, as in the case of TP afforded to Ukrainians (Schultz 2025). Experiences of legal uncertainty among those with TP status remain inextricable from the negotiation of belonging.

As part of understanding belonging and legal uncertainty, the migration literature treatment of "vulnerability" comes to the fore. While it remains contested (due to crit-

icism that it may be utilized as a concept or term that is discriminating, patronizing or disempowering, fostering control, exclusionary or reifying), we attempt to avoid these critiques via employing Gilodi et al.'s (2024) conceptual model. We seek to describe a condition of vulnerability that can be, in different points of the life trajectory of a mobile subject, "related to an innate characteristic, related to a specific situation, and/or related to structural conditions" and "a multi-layered, dynamic, and embedded concept" (Gilodi et al.'s 2024). Here, in the case of uncertain legal status, it is most related to a specific situation and a related structural condition.

For these reasons, we work with the concept of belonging (including virtual) and how it is navigated, while acknowledging the physical and territorial aspects with which it interplays; uncertain legal status, in turn, remains a structural condition shaping it. Indeed, in their study of transnational families and communities and ICT (information and communication technology) communication and co-presence, Baldassar and colleagues note that physical and virtual co-presence are not exclusive (Baldassar 2016). Networked technologies provide an experience that is one of "globally networked life-words, is glocal, has become a synthesis of home and non-place" (Beck 2002). Ponzanesi's definition of a digital diaspora is also useful: "The old notion of diaspora which accounts for the interruption of the unity between territory, nationhood and state is now remediated through new forms of 'diasporic digitality' that allow people to keep in touch with the homeland but also establish new connections across diasporas through multiple affiliations and intersections provided by cross-media platforms" (Ponzanesi 2020). Diminescu in turn offers an account of the "connected migrant," one characterized by multi-belonging and a hypermobility that moves along three modes of physical, imaginary and virtual (Diminescu 2008). Drawing on this work, our study falls under the paradigm of digital migration studies that Leurs and Prabhakar (2018) identify as taking a "digital-media-centric ethnographic approach" to "everyday digital migrant life," considering online–offline relationships in our analysis.

In "digital diasporas," individuals may participate in digital social networks facilitating transnational social capital, which can allow for establishing cross-border communities (Ponzanesi 2020). We posit this may not only benefit the mobile individual in terms of the relationships they create in their new environment, but also may offer added value for the host community. Social connectedness in the online space can play a key role in achieving social capital outcomes, including emotional support, facilitating offline participation and networking benefits (AbuJarour et al. 2019).

We narrow the study to social media (out of other internet applications); in referring to social media, we adopt Dekker et al.'s (2018) conceptualization: online applications containing user-generated content, which are part of an open (or semi-open) network infrastructure enabling social networking. While social network sites are primarily centered on individuals, other social media applications cater to "communities of interest" (Boyd and Ellison 2007); our study pertains to both.

Finally, we would emphasize the intersectional lens we incorporate into our study. In this study including self-identifying women on the move, with international protection and largely all with tertiary education, we seek to highlight how migration and settlement patterns play out from an intersectional perspective and linked power dynamics, particularly given legal status, multilingual contexts, education, employment, race and ethnicity (Candidatu et al. 2019). Studies on the digital realm via the lens of intersectionality have argued how digital systems are embedded socially and culturally and can reproduce, strengthen or resist preexisting inequalities (Tsatsou 2021). Here, we note that digital literacy also remains inseparable from the dimension of difference; for example, socioeconomic advantage in terms of educational level can translate to digital literacy or illiteracy that perpetuates or supersedes the inequalities discussed here (Aaltonen 2019; Tsatsou 2021). As

we are discussing belonging, often discussed in migration studies in relation to the "host" society, we note how it is very much constructed along these differing lines (Scuzzarello and Moroşanu 2023). In the case of our self-identifying migrant women here, they negotiate and transform certain characteristics that affect their territorial rootedness as well as physical and virtual belonging in arguably different ways from other populations with contrasting (including more certain) legal status, background and individual characteristics.

2.2. Literature Review

Against this backdrop, we offer an overview of work examining digital media by beneficiaries that touches on such themes. To begin, evidence-based studies relating to social media and refugees in general note that it can provide a cost-effective, readily accessible, and multimedia-rich means of long-distance communication; digital resources can expand migration networks beyond existing connections and the diversification of available information pertaining to migration routes and destinations (Dekker et al. 2016; Madianou and Miller 2012). For our purposes, it is important to review the less abundant literature examining connections established at the so-called "arrival" stage, or when the individual reaches their (supposedly final) physical destination. Albeit outside of the European context, Veronis et al. (2018) observed that the use of ICT was shown to empower refugees, offering them greater control over their well-being and participation in society. Also outside of the European context, Marlowe's (2020) study is useful in that it goes beyond how social media facilitates transcultural interaction and exchange; it notes that refugee youth's behavior with social media complements rather than replaces face-to-face interactions. Moreover, Pottie et al. (2020) argue that ICTs and social media link refugees to host communities, granting them access to programs, community resources, and health services. Through information accessibility, refugees could engage in various social, economic, and political activities while maintaining a connection to their cultural identity.

Moving on to the literature specific to the Netherlands, Damen et al. (2022) also argue that migrant networks play a positive role in the "integration" of forced migrants, driven by shared linguistic, cultural and religious connections and support from migrant-led initiatives and groups. Moreover, Smets et al. (2021) highlight how social media can aid asylum seekers in understanding and utilizing governmental procedures and facilities, as well as in fostering horizontal relationships with locals. Alencar (2018) argues that informal refugee networks online were closely tied to the efforts of local organizations and communities in the Netherlands, reshaping refugees' integration experiences.

Finally, in their study of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, Dekker et al.'s (2018) highlight various advantages of social media related to belonging, including that social media networks can bolster the preservation of strong familial and friendship bonds; address weaker ties that play a pivotal role in organizing migration and integration; establish a novel infrastructure characterized by latent connections; and serve as a valuable source of insider knowledge on migration, which is often discreet and unofficial. However, they also note the digital divide (Ibid.).

In that sense, while perhaps not specific to studies of international beneficiaries upon arrival, or to the European context, scholarship has pointed to the pitfalls and fissures created by social media with respect to belonging and mobile subjects. Zijlstra and Van Liempt (2017) argue that social media does not necessarily equate to being better informed. As social media can facilitate the expansion of one's social network to include weaker and latent ties, there can be uncertainties regarding the credibility of the information disseminated online (Misztal 2000). While migrants are often cognizant of the dubious nature of information on social media (Burrell 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012), they may remain heavily reliant on this type of unverified information, particularly given their marginalized

status. Moreover, Chib and Ang's (2023) work, which examined Syrian beneficiaries in the Netherlands, identified "low vulnerability–high uncertainty corresponded to anxiety-expunging non-use." That is, Syrian participants found themselves in a less vulnerable position in the Netherlands than in Syria and consequently decreased social media use that connected them back to the community in Syria.

3. Background on Refugee Integration in The Netherlands, the TPD and Ukrainian Displaced

Following this literature review, the context of the legal status of the population under study is important to understanding the experiences of participants. Before establishing how the Ukrainian case is different, it is useful to briefly overview the sociopolitical climate towards refugees (or international beneficiaries) and migrants in the Netherlands. Historically a multiculturalist integration model, Dutch civic integration policies began at the turn of the century, with accompanying critique and public perceptions linking migrants with social disorder (Duyvendak and Scholten 2012). Bonjour and Duyvendak claim political discourse beginning in 2007 has contributed to the exclusion of the "migrant with poor prospects," at the intersection of race, gender and class (2017). Such narratives and accompanying public perceptions associate specific ethnic groups (conflating migrants, refugees and asylum seekers) with societal problems in the Netherlands (Svensson and Saharso 2014). Meanwhile, the Linking Act of 1998 barred migrants from a range of public services, and still affects denied asylum seekers to date (Pitkänen 2014).

The Dutch migration control system, led by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Services (IND), holds the authority to process and decide asylum claims. In 2019, the IND was compelled to pay high penalties to asylum seekers whose application had not been decided upon within the legal time frame of six months; in this same year, records indicate that the regular asylum procedure took an average of 27 weeks for asylum claim assessment, with extended procedures taking an average of 44.5 weeks (AIDA 2021). Moreover, as described earlier, Dutch asylum policy initially took on the language of inclusion and multiculturalism; however, by the turn of the century, and particularly in recent years, asylum and integration policies could be described as policies of deterrence (Bakker et al. 2016; Damen et al. 2022). The sociopolitical climate (or at least some factions) has shifted in favor of restricting migration and asylum flows (Damen et al. 2022).

In light of this approach to asylum and migration, one new development represents a sharp contrast. Following the European Council decision after the Russian invasion of Ukraine to activate the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) on 4 March 2022, the Netherlands has offered temporary protection status to Ukrainians. While other refugee groups faced a shortage of housing and services in the country, Dutch authorities responded to implement this Directive in the Netherlands, making housing, education and labor market access available to those displaced persons from Ukraine (Geertsema 2023).

As of April 2023, 91,000 Dutch municipalities had registered displaced individuals coming from Ukraine (Geertsema 2023). Importantly for this investigation, the Dutch implementation of the TPD waives the requirement of a work permit for TP beneficiaries that find salaried employment (this waiver does not apply to self-employment) (Geertsema 2023). It also waves the requirement for a labor market test by the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Geertsema 2023). By November 2022, almost half of these beneficiaries were employed, a percentage much higher than that for other refugee populations in the Netherlands (OECD 2023).

In the refugee context, some studies argue that gaining employment serves as a catalyst for refugees to achieve economic independence, fostering the improvement of their language skills, boosting self-esteem and overall well-being, and promoting self-

reliance (AbuJarour et al. 2019). Despite these potential benefits, numerous barriers hinder refugees from entering the local job market. For asylum seekers from backgrounds other than Ukrainian, navigating the job market faces various challenges. These include formal restrictions, including a recognized asylum status before entry into the job market, as well as other obstacles that Ukrainians may face, like language barriers or local community resistance to non-Dutch workers.

Regarding the former, the standard refugee and asylum-seeker regulation does not afford permission to work until six months after the date of asylum application; when these six months have passed, the permission is only applicable for 24 weeks a year, with the permit at the request of an employer (Geertsema 2023). Technically, while Ukrainians with TP have been waived of the work permit requirement, the application for TP qualifies as an asylum application (Ibid.) The technical distinction is that the asylum applications are on a "hold status" for the duration that an individual has TP. This raises questions as to how things will work out administratively when TP ends and TP beneficiaries are subsumed into the asylum system (Ibid.). This relates to the earlier theoretical framework speaking to the "temporary turn" in asylum and the precarity of legal status (Sandberg et al. 2025).

Of course, the TPD is implemented differently across different Member States, and further comparative analysis as data becomes available is necessary. For example, a survey of beneficiaries of international protection from Ukraine in Germany finds that the high level of rights afforded to displaced persons from Ukraine via the TPD has resulted in better integration outcomes, to the point that there are accusations of a "two-class refugee system" (Mantu and Zwaan 2023). For our study's purposes, we wanted to examine the connectedness of Ukrainians to their chosen destination of the Netherlands, taking into account these higher levels of protection and rights (including the waived work permit).

Key to our analysis, in addition to legal status, is the use of language, given its role in social media use, connectedness; there is a particularly unique context in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian refugees come from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including those whose first language is Ukrainian, Russian, or both (Spencer 2008; Arel 2017; Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019). Some of the literature argues that the Russian invasion has placed Ukrainians in a culturally subordinate position in their own homeland, creating complex linguistic and identity dilemmas (Spencer 2008).

Before the war, work has noted political and identity contestation around Russian and Ukrainian language policy or practice in Ukraine (Arel 2017). In light of the war (we stress to date only), anecdotal evidence in the media speaks to an increasing pattern of Russian-speaking (or dual Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking) Ukrainians expressing conscious decisions to switch to Ukrainian in communication (Higgins and Mazhulin 2023). Therefore, language choice for Ukrainian refugees during the Russian invasion and even before this event can be understood as a very sensitive and multifaceted process influenced by various factors, including political, sociolinguistic, linguistic, psychological, pragmatic and situational elements. In sum, both the Temporary Protection status afforded to participants and the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine influencing mobility constitute important background for their accounts.

4. Results and Discussion

The methodology for this analysis involved conducting semi-structured interviews in English[3] with 15 self-identifying Ukrainian women who were beneficiaries of international protection under the TPD in the Netherlands. They were between the ages of 18 and 77, and almost all had found employment in the Netherlands. The demographic data and numbers assigned in Appendix A do not correspond to the numbering of participants in the text, to preserve anonymity and prevent the identification of information in a participant pool

from a small community. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. The lead author co-conducted several interviews and supervised (via regular check-ins, debriefings and transcript reviews) a research assistant referenced in the acknowledgements, the latter of whom leveraged existing networks and relationships in volunteer positions at Dutch asylum reception centers (COA) to reach individuals who met the study's criteria. Finally, researchers determined the number of 15 interviews for multiple reasons: in light of saturation in responses to topics, with an aim not to overburden the population, and given consensus in the literature and other qualitative studies conducted among similar populations (Guest et al. 2006; Mangrio et al. 2019).

The interviews explored themes such as their choice of the Netherlands as a destination, their use of social media (and its evolution since arriving), their sense of belonging, and their employment and educational status. For example, questions included ones along the following lines: Why did you come to the Netherlands and not another country? Do you use social media? Are you employed or in school in the Netherlands? Do you find information on social media accessible? Has your social media use changed since you came to the Netherlands? Do you feel welcome in the Netherlands? The interviews were then deductively coded in ATLAS.ti 25 with a codebook of 56 codes based on the research questions and themes by the two authors; they conducted test consensus coding to refine the codebook before proceeding to split coding.

Initial general observations could be identified among the majority of participants. Social media emerged as a key factor, with participants averaging three to four hours daily (excluding messaging apps) and viewing it as vital for accessing information and staying connected to both home and the new community. All participants had used social media prior to arrival in the Netherlands. They indicated they viewed social media as important, with eight considering it "very important." Participants demonstrated high digital literacy, all but two possessed higher education degrees, most had multilingual skills (varying combinations of Ukrainian, Russian and/or English), and the vast majority of participants were employed in the Netherlands. These findings underscore the intersectional dimensions of, inter alia, education level, language ability, digital literacy and legal status that can facilitate paths to employment.

More specifically, in light of the research questions, we encountered several patterns in the perspectives and responses of participants. The first observation included a combined shift in social media use alongside leveraging language skills to facilitate connectedness to participants' new community. From an intersectional perspective, many of the participants explained they had selected the Netherlands because they could speak English, illustrating higher education levels and multilingual skills; this could also perhaps indicate socioeconomic background, but given the lack of information in that regard, this work cannot speak to that.

Secondly, we note participants' changing social media patterns in maintaining connectedness to the Ukrainian community (at origin or diasporic) and context-specific conflict on the one hand, or in distancing from the conflict on the other. Thirdly, in light of intersectional individual characteristics and differences, we observed a shift in language use in this population, as noted earlier in the background section. Fourthly and finally, the vast majority also articulated a sense of belonging or connectedness to their new community, which could again be reflective of intersectional characteristics like higher education and national origin; again, the question as to the role of temporary protection surfaces among these dynamics.

Before further delving into these patterns, the following graphic illustrates the prominence of platforms in participants' communication and connectivity strategies across all

aspects of their journeys and connectedness (Figure 1). Telegram, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp emerged as the key and frequently used platforms among participants.

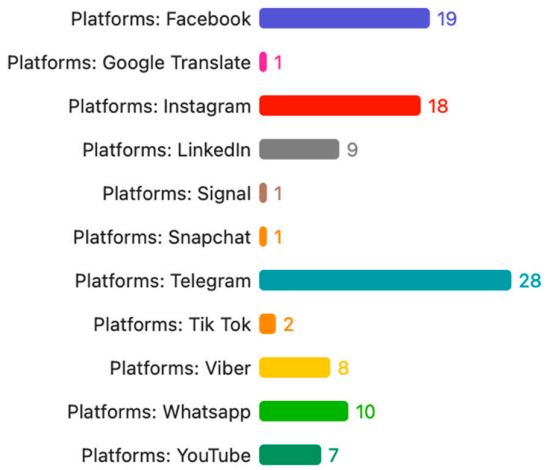

Figure 1. Authors own elaboration.

4.1. Leveraging Social Media in Connectedness to the New Community: Digital Literacy

Firstly, shifts in social media usage in order to connect with their new communities illustrate how participants leveraged social media and digital skills in navigating belonging upon arrival in their (for now) chosen destinations. Again, while all had used certain platforms before arrival, there was a noticeable shift towards using WhatsApp upon arrival, an application they had used less if at all in Ukraine. They spoke about how this shift was particularly for connecting with the Dutch, as it is a more widely used social media platform in the Netherlands. As one participant explained: "I use Telegram to connect with my mother, my friends. Viber, sometimes I use Viber. And in the Netherlands, I started using WhatsApp as many people use this platform" (P4).

This corresponds to other current studies noting the social media strategies of protection beneficiaries in connecting to local populations (Smets et al. 2021; Pottie et al. 2020). Moreover, we highlight that these shifts in online use took place alongside face-to-face interactions with the local community, again as reflected in other studies (Marlowe et al. 2017).

While shifts in platform selection took place, participants also maintained the use of former platforms. For example, some continued frequent use of Telegram to maintain ties to networks back in Ukraine, while also creating new networks on the platform in order to attempt to establish themselves in their new community.

> "Telegram I use, of course, for Ukrainian news, updates—but also when a lot of Ukrainians started to live here, some of the people created channels called "refugee help," in the Netherlands. . . discussing all types of questions from IND stickers to language courses to insurance and medicine" (P2).

The shift to WhatsApp to connect to the new host community, as well as maintaining links via Telegram to connect to the community back in Ukraine, were observations also found in a recent study in Germany (ECPMF 2023).

4.2. Social Media Use Patterns in Maintaining Links or Distancing from Origin Community and Digital Diaspora: Demonstrative of Vulnerability?

Secondly, in relation to the chosen platforms (particularly Telegram) to maintain connectedness to the community at origin, news consumption patterns among the new Ukrainian community in the Netherlands were predominantly facilitated through Telegram and YouTube. It is noteworthy that trust in news sources was not consistent (Gillespie

et al. 2016). However, the skepticism towards news disseminated through social media platforms was often mitigated if the information originated from familiar contacts, or could be corroborated through such associations; again, this has been observed in other studies with beneficiaries (Borkert et al. 2018; Gillespie et al. 2016). Participants explained how they felt they were best informed about events in Ukraine through personal contacts and conversations. For example, one woman explained: "I speak to my friends and family. They live in Ukraine. They have truthful news" (P4).

At the same time, dynamics of belonging related to social media use among participants as pertained to the origin community or digital diaspora manifested in a pattern of a loss of interest in or intentional avoidance of maintaining connectedness. While several participants initially trusted the main public Ukrainian channel (rather than more unofficial social media sources), this trust or interest declined as they spent more time away from their original community. As one woman noted: "...from time to time I still check the news in the channel 24/7 and 24/7 and Zelenski on Instagram and Telegram. I'm checking the news from Ukraine less and less...and now prefer getting updates from my husband and dad" (P15).

This may perhaps be reflective of Chib and Ang's (2023) findings. It could be posited that participants in this study found themselves in a low-vulnerability situation in the Netherlands, but found the high uncertainty back in Ukraine, which generated anxiety and connectedness to the community there.

4.3. Shifts in Language Use on Social Media in Light of the Conflict: Educational Level or Belonging

A third pattern related to the language choices of bilingual and multilingual participants in their social interaction and social media. While some participants consciously avoided using Russian to distance themselves for reasons related to the aggression in Ukraine, they still utilized Russian at times due to their higher proficiency. The interviews also indicated that participants made a deliberate choice to speak Ukrainian with family and friends. However, participants occasionally employed Russian when searching for information or sources online. For example, one woman described how, "I prefer not to use Russian and I don't want to... [...] I look for information online in Ukrainian like the news and others in Russian because there are more options and it is easier for me" (P2).

In this vein, several participants articulated how they could not separate the Russian language from the Russian invasion and Putin's political agenda. As one participant explained: "I am bilingual, but if you speak in Russian it is like you accept what Putin is doing [...] I don't understand why some people still want to speak the language of the enemy..." (P10). Similarly, one individual expressed, "We have a problem with the Russian country now. Now at all times I say to my daughter, "stop speaking Russian, we speak only Ukrainian'" (P9). Another described how, "I grew up speaking Russian, studying in Russian; only after the war started did we decide to always speak in Ukrainian·" (P3). Other participants indicated that they do not use Russian communication applications anymore (P3 and P7), or that some applications did not function in Russian or Ukrainian; they thus had to use English on social media (P4).

Even though participants may have expressed active avoidance of Russian language use, some explained how they privately use Russian as compared to Ukrainian: "[I use] Ukrainian with my family and friends, but sometimes I look for information in Russian. I don't feel good about it, but it is easier" (P8). This reflects the interplay of the participants' individual characteristics and agency, including language ability and digital literacy, as well as cultural or ethnic identity. Again, despite the historical dominance of the Russian language in certain regions, studies have already pointed to how the ongoing political circumstances have led many Ukrainian refugees to choose Ukrainian over Russian (Arel

2017). Other (anecdotal) evidence also points to fluctuating use of language among mobile Ukrainians during the current conflict, including maintaining Russian, given the bevy of complex and sensitive factors implicated in the circumstances (Higgins and Mazhulin 2023). Here, in their virtual networks and engagement with social media, the intersectional characteristics of participants were implicated in strategies for achieving belonging or negotiating identity.

4.4. Sense of Belonging as Related to Social Media and TP

Finally, the vast majority of participants expressed a sense of belonging in their new communities. This could be interpreted as leveraging combined individual characteristics of digital literacy, high education levels or language skills. It also could be related to the acceptance of this demographic by the new community described earlier in the context section, as compared to other refugee or beneficiary groups. For example, one participant noted, in terms of acceptance from the community: "I found a group of Ukrainian people in the Netherlands on Facebook and posted that I was looking for a place to stay. A woman . . . responded, and that's how I ended up here" (P3). On the one hand, it could be argued from an intersectional point of view that the characteristics of education, professional background, social media and digital skills or multilingual skills could inform how they navigate belonging in the new physical community. On the other hand, it could also be observed that groups with similar class traits, but differing ethnic or racial background (i.e., phenotypical characteristics), experience belonging and inclusion differently (Jackson Sow 2022).

However, the TP status explained in the earlier background could also be at play, in that connectedness could be linked to the employment access this status affords. For instance, one participant explained, "Yes, I found my current job through social media. . .two months after we arrived. I saw an advertisement on WhatsApp. . .in May 2022" (P14). This experience highlights the importance of considering the TP status of Ukrainian individuals benefiting from international protection. These participants leveraged social capital, community support and connections to establish physical ties (and material security) like employment, or a sense of belonging in a new country. There were fewer legal or administrative barriers to employment than for those with regular refugee status. At the same time, the fact that there is such heavy reliance on social media networks and digital skills may be interpreted as compensation, as the participants' status remains precarious and in flux.

Again, in sum, we found that the interplay between belonging, social media use and TP status was variable but also informed several broad observations. Firstly, participants shifted social media use according to intersectional characteristics of language ability, educational and employment qualifications, among others, in order to connect with their new community. We noted that this may be related to the demographic profile of this population. Secondly, we found participants navigated social media differently to maintain connectedness to the Ukrainian community. At the same time and relatedly, participants distanced themselves from the physical or digital Ukrainian community, or altered social media use in order to withdraw from such connectedness. Thirdly, as related to connectedness in the ongoing conflict, we emphasize the changing language use of this population on social media; a preference for using Ukrainian instead of Russian in public had implications for how the group negotiated their connectedness and identity in their journeys. Finally, we observed an overall sense of belonging to the new community that could be reflective of intersectional characteristics of this specific demographic, illustrative of the privileges of TP status, or—in contrast—a manifestation of redoubled efforts given the precarity of TP status.

5. Conclusions

The Ukrainian women participants in our study leveraged digital literacy skills in combination with high educational levels or professional qualifications and language skills in navigating connectedness to the Ukrainian community at origin, the new community in the Netherlands, or the Ukrainian diaspora and online communities. Regarding the unifying factor of their legal status, on the one hand, it could be argued that the rights and conditions of temporary protection could have facilitated belonging in terms of finding employment without the barrier of obtaining a work permit. At the same time, the precariousness of temporary protection status, in that it is essentially limbo, also acts as a condition of vulnerability (situational and constructional) that may inform how they turn to social media use to contend with the reality of their situations. Social media use facilitated support networks, emotional connection and access to resources, as participants leveraged digital platforms to maintain ties with both their old and new communities.

These observations are linked to the limitations in our study. While we selected a purposeful sample so as not to overburden our target interviewees, we understand it is a small qualitative foray, and the findings cannot be extrapolated to a great extent. Moreover, there seems to be clear sample bias in terms of the educational and employment status of the individuals interviewed. Still, this group's advanced digital literacy in combination with high levels of connectedness to the new community begs the question as to how the level of digital skills is linked to belonging: it ushers in the opportunity to conduct an investigation among other populations that contrast in terms of the combination of intersectional differences. Digital literacy perhaps informed participants' connectedness not only to the new community, but also to all aspects of their connectedness throughout physical and virtual mobility.

Still further research avenues are inspired by insights from this study. Other studies have pointed to the perceived difference in phenotypical characteristics of Ukrainian beneficiaries offering them a level of privilege, advantage or preferential reception in new communities in Europe and in the Netherlands, in comparison to other populations and demographics; for example, Shmidt and Jaworsky (2022) note the (re)production of Whiteness in Austrian and Czech public politics in light of the Ukrainian conflict, and Jackson Sow (2022) argues there is racial tiering of refugee status in this conflict. It was not possible to capture such assertions here, as participants did not speak to feeling more accepted due to their phenotypical characteristics; however, further evidence fleshing out these claims in empirical, qualitative research at the individual level would be important.

In this line, as mentioned earlier, preliminary findings as to the 'privileged' temporary protection status in various studies indicate that the rights afforded under this status can better facilitate connectedness and settlement in the community, as compared to more restrictive rights or preventative policies surrounding the traditional refugee status in certain Member States (Mantu and Zwaan 2023). At the same time, temporary protection has no end date and remains a moving goalpost among Member States, which also speaks to legal uncertainty and conditions of vulnerability.

The fact that our participants navigated social platforms for inclusion and expressed a sense of belonging, as well as (for the large part) encountering employment, leads us to ask whether their individual characteristics like educational level and digital literacy allowed them to supersede legal precarity, or whether the conditions of temporary protection better position them to negotiate belonging than traditional refugee status. Given these points, conducting a comparative study with individuals with different educational levels (and varying socioeconomic backgrounds), and perhaps interlinked digital literacy, could be illuminative.

In conclusion, the present investigation offers various insights into the intricate nexus between social media utilization and a sense of belonging among female Ukrainian beneficiaries of international protection residing in the Netherlands, based on grounded empirical evidence. It is clear that our participants negotiated a sense of belonging to their new communities alongside, inter alia, digital literacy skills and high education levels. However, in thinking about how all intersectional characteristics come into play, several points remain unclear and require more extensive research. Do this group's high levels of employment, as well as educational background and language skills, inform their belonging in combination with a "privileged" legal status? Alternatively, have these combined individual characteristics allowed them to negotiate belonging despite a legal status that, while argued to afford more protections, is also by its very nature temporary, and perhaps constitutes a disadvantage? Or finally, what credence is there to the claim that they may receive a warmer reception from the host community based on their origin country, and would such reception remain the same over time (and in which EU Member States)—and how could this be evaluated? These questions are all particularly important with the "temporary turn" in asylum status and increasing legal uncertainty for mobile subjects.

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Appendix A

Demographic information for all participants with age in years, gender identity, highest education level, whether they were employed and position if stated in the Netherlands (NL), and months residing in NL.

Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Education	Employment in NL	Time in NL
1	43	Female	PhD	Professor	13
2	24	Female	Higher education master	Customer support	13
3	22	Female	Higher education bachelor	Private English tutor	9

Participant	Age	Gender Identity	Education	Employment in NL	Time in NL
4	32	Female	Higher education bachelor	Lawyer	15
5	45	Female	Higher education master	Confirmed employment	13
6	77	Female	Higher education bachelor	Confirmed employment	13
7	34	Female	Higher secondary education	Marketing	14
8	18	Female	Currently completing higher education online	Kitchen help	15
9	39	Female	Higher education bachelor	Not clear	14
10	40	Female	Higher education bachelor	Head of accounting and own company	13
11	42	Female	Higher education master	Confirmed employment	14
12	29	Female	Higher education bachelor	Confirmed employment	10
13	34	Female	Higher education master	Administrator	14
14	26	Female	Higher education master	Confirmed employment	14
15	37	Female	Higher education bachelor	Florist	12

Notes

[1] A relevant aside at this point is to note how scholarship consistently argues that social networks allow for "integration" and can connect to other identified aspects of integration within the policy field (Dekker et al.'s 2018). While we recognize the utilitarian value of the term "integration" in policy-making, academic debate has identified it as conceptually flawed and part of neo-colonial knowledge production (Schinkel 2018).

[2] Approaches to social capital initially carried an economic connotation and could remain broadly defined, but here we focus on its normative value: Nawyn et al.'s definition of social capital then builds upon Putnam, defining social capital as "social networks that have the potential to provide either material or nonmaterial resources (including achieving physical and mental health, a sense of personal safety, and feeling integrated into a community and valued by others in that community)" (Nawyn et al. 2012).

[3] As noted in the analysis, shifts in language use between Russian and Ukrainian among the largely trilingual participants as a result of the complex surrounding the invasion of Ukraine (and even predating it) was an object of study; in this case, English was chosen in order to maintain neutrality (Arel 2017; Spencer 2008). On the other hand, conducting interviews in English allowed for more consistent data collection and reduced the potential for translation loss or misinterpretation, given the research team and authors' lack of Russian or Ukrainian competencies; it is noted that all respondents demonstrated ample proficiency in English; this also may constitute selection and/or sample bias (Squires 2009).

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