

‘More Than Sufferers’: Digital Boundary-Making and Belonging Through Work Among Ukrainian Forced Migrants in Finland



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ABSTRACT

Following Russia's initiation of full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian forced migrants in the EU, including Finland, were granted immediate access to the labor market under the Temporary Protection mechanism. This paper examines what online discussions within the Ukrainian community in Finland reveal about their adaptation strategies. Specifically, it explores how work is instrumentalized in Ukrainians' adaptation process, how they negotiate conditions for belonging, and how they simultaneously engage in boundary-making. Drawing on discussions in one of the largest Facebook groups of Ukrainians in Finland, and using the concept of community of value, the findings reveal that Ukrainian migrants use work to establish a sense of belonging in Finnish society and, in doing so, create symbolic boundaries within their own community. In this context, belonging is framed through a deservingness lens, and they construct work as means of asserting worthiness and dignity.

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Work and labor market participation are often positioned as the ultimate goals of integrational pathways for migrants, becoming key metrics of their value to the host society. At the same time, developing a sense of belonging represents another dimension of their adaptation and integration (Haapajärvi 2023), with the latter contingent to a great extent on economic contribution (Sotkasiira & Haikkola 2024). This economic framework is an example of what Anderson (2013) refers to as communities of value, where economic contributions, common values, and beliefs shape a sense of identity and belonging. In such communities, symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár 2002) based on these values are drawn by both citizens and migrants, creating conditions for inclusion and exclusion.

Particularly in Finland, migrant integration and belonging are often viewed through the value migrants bring to the host society and their alignment with shared values (Masoud 2023; Pulkkinen 2023). It directly links to how integration in Finland is oriented at economic participation, constructing an idealized ‘well-integrated’ migrant as a hardworking taxpayer (Bodström 2020; Pulkkinen 2023). Given that work holds an utmost place among Finnish values (Sinnemäki et al. 2019), it becomes a cornerstone in forming Finland’s community of value. Navigating it in its turn requires adopting its values and contributing economically.

For forced migrants, whose arrival is initially about humanitarian protection, the integrational pathways laid out by the state similarly lead to the goal of economic engagement. The success of their adaptation and terms of belonging are then to be measured likewise against labor market participation. However, what happens when migrants, especially those forcibly displaced, internalize this economic logic, using it not only to negotiate their place with the host society but also to draw boundaries within their own communities?

This article explores how the meaning of work is debated and mobilized by forced migrants to negotiate and define their conditions of belonging in the receiving society and how such is reflected in intra-community migrant dynamics and boundary-making. Specifically, it looks into the unfolding of this meaning-making in the digital space. The latter has become essential for migrants in seeking information, securing support, and creating communities (Alénkar et al. 2018; Dekker et al. 2018; Merisalo & Jauhiainen 2017), while providing a real-time window into their everyday experiences, struggles, and realities. Drawing on the concepts of symbolic boundaries and communities of value, this study looks into the case of Ukrainian forced migrants who arrived in Finland after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Temporary Protection (TP) Directive, implemented in the EU in response to this migration influx, offered these migrants a distinct status, separating them legally from refugees.¹ It gave Ukrainians immediate access to the labor market (Council of the European Union 2022), which placed economic participation at the center of their adaptation experience from day one.

To date, the reception and adaptation challenges of Ukrainians in European countries, including Finland, have been explored in extensive research (e.g., Alho et al. 2023; Andrews et al. 2023; Bauvois & Pyrhönen 2024; Krivonos 2022; Mijić et al. 2024; Näre & Tkach 2023; Tarkhanova & Pyrogorova 2023). However, while access to work is a defining feature of their status, the ways in which Ukrainian forced migrants themselves navigate, interpret, and use work to negotiate their place in host societies remains underexplored.

This article shifts the analytical focus from state-driven frameworks to migrants' own meaning-making processes. Specifically, it asks: What do online discussions around work reveal about negotiating conditions of belonging among Ukrainian forced migrants within the Finnish community of value? Drawing on a netnographic approach and thematic analysis of discussions in the 'Ukrainians in Finland' Facebook group that offers unique glimpses into the realities and concerns of Ukrainians living in Finland, this paper argues that these migrants use work to establish a sense of belonging in Finnish society and, in doing so, create symbolic boundaries within their own community. In this context, they frame belonging through a deservingness lens, taking the tools of adaptation and turning them into instruments of intracommunal boundary-making.

CONNECTING THE DOTS: FROM REFUGEE STUDIES THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF VALUE TO BOUNDARY-MAKING

In recent years, one of the focuses of refugee studies has been on the issues of belonging (e.g., [Enbuska 2024a](#); [Fuchs & Scheve 2023](#)). Nordic welfare states like Finland link this concept to integration policies that make successful adaptation dependent on labor market participation. Employment thus becomes the main stage for social inclusion ([Sotkasiira & Haikkola 2024](#); [Breidahl 2017](#)). The Finnish Integration Act ([Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2010](#)) in particular mandates individualized plans that prioritize language and vocational training, constructing 'integratable' migrants through 'correcting' them and 'fixing' their skills ([Masoud 2023](#); [Ndomo & Lillie 2022](#)). The expectations of migrants in Finland are thus often linked to their economic contributions. For instance, [Dahl et al. \(2021\)](#) discuss how migrants are viewed as assets in the Nordic countries, emphasizing that Finland tends to frame those as contributors to the economy rather than a cost. This illustrates a clear expectation that migrants should participate economically to be valued within Finnish society.

At the same time, [Yijälä and Luoma's \(2019\)](#) study of skilled Iraqi refugees in Finland found that employment accelerated adaptation, providing not only income but also 'cultural bridges' to Finnish society. Similarly, rural migrants linked belonging to workplace relationships and language acquisition ([Enbuska 2024a](#)). Yet, refugees in Finland are facing systemic exclusion and structural barriers from meaningful employment where their prior qualifications and skills are systematically undervalued and positioned in conflict with their ability to successfully integrate ([Kärkkäinen 2017](#); [Masoud 2023](#); [Masoud et al. 2023](#); [Ndomo & Lillie 2022](#)). At the same time, the 'migrant hierarchy' in Finland privileges highly skilled, Western migrants over racialized refugees, with some migrants aware of this dynamic and the 'valued Otherness' ([Koskela 2014](#)). As a result, employment can enable belonging, but on an 'exclusionary inclusion' basis ([Masoud 2023](#)) and only for those deemed 'deserving' by dominant norms.

The concept of community of value, introduced by [Anderson \(2013\)](#), directly speaks to this notion of 'deservingness' and highlights how belonging to a community depends on individuals meeting certain ideals and values, particularly those tied to economic contributions. It also emphasizes the role of shared values and beliefs. [Clark et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that refugees often reproduce these expectations, conditioning their own sense of belonging on their ability to project the image of a 'good refugee'. This operation of the community of value is fundamentally a process of boundary-making that creates distinctions separating the population into a valued 'us' and a devalued 'them' ([Yuval-Davis 2006](#)). For migrants, this means they must constantly attempt

to climb the ‘invisible fences’ (Gullestad 2002) erected by the host society to gain acceptance. As Gullestad (2002) argues, these fences are particularly high in Nordic countries, where an emphasis on equality is conceived as sameness. These fences are not physical but symbolic boundaries—conceptual distinctions used to categorize and define people (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Communities of value function by actively creating and maintaining these symbolic boundaries to determine who is worthy of inclusion. This means that belonging is not a static status but a continuing negotiation, shaped by power dynamics and social boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2011). In the context of a community of value, this sense of belonging is earned through navigating community’s boundaries and proving one’s worth.

One of the arenas where migrants assert agency, engage in meaning-making, and negotiate their identities and belonging is digital spaces, in particular social media. The first and foremost function of such spaces is providing practical support and social capital, the latter of which acts as an adaptation facilitator for newcomers (Alénkar et al. 2018). In the Nordic context, social and other media have been exemplified as one of the primary ways of both maintaining bonds with the country of origin and creating connectivity with receiving society for migrants (Hoffmann et al. 2022). Social media affects migration decisions and adaptation strategies by providing access to vital information, helping to build and maintain social relationships, open job opportunities, etc. (Anderson & Daniel 2020; Dekker et al. 2018; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021). Such digital interaction is also important in creating community bonds while navigating the challenges of a new country. Mapelli’s (2019) study of South Americans in Italy, for instance, showed how Facebook groups function as transnational social spaces that reinforce solidarity and help form a shared collective identity. Similarly, in Finland migrants, including asylum-seekers, consider social media an important tool that makes their adaptation in the host country easier and helps in creating and maintaining their social relationships (Merisalo & Jauhiainen 2017).

Thus, social media and digital spaces serve as tools for practical adaptation in Finnish society while also enabling the maintenance of diasporic identities and communities. It is within these digital arenas, like the Facebook group examined in this study, that the contemporary ‘dirty work of boundary maintenance’ takes place, offering a window into how belonging is constructed and contested today.

SETTING THE BACKGROUND: UKRAINIANS, FINLAND, AND WORK

For Finland, with its population of five and a half million, the arrival of an estimated 46,000 Ukrainian forced migrants with about 84 000 applications for TP (as of July 2025) marked an unprecedented migration influx. It was managed under the EU’s TP Directive, which offered Ukrainians a distinct legal status separate from that of asylum-seekers (Council of the European Union 2001, 2022; Ministry of Justice 2022). A crucial feature of this directive was that it granted beneficiaries immediate access to the labor market, as opposed to the prolonged waiting periods previous asylum-seekers faced. The significance of this provision is underscored by the fact that 70% of Ukrainians in Finland were of working age in 2023, making employment a central factor in their adaptation from the very beginning (Koptsykh & Svyynarenko 2024).

While providing immediate rights, the directive’s other key feature is in its name—the protection is temporary. Initially, the mechanism was designed to last for up to three

years, but it has been prolonged due to the ongoing war. Finland has extended its effect until March 2027 (as of September 2025). This temporality makes beneficiaries' long-term prospects dependent on political decisions and creates a context of precarity for them. The framework of TP emphasizes work access, which aligns with Finland's broader policy toward migrants, articulated in the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration that positions employment and inclusion into the labor market as a core component of integration ([Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2023](#)). The combination of the TP directive and Finnish domestic policy establishes employment as the key instrument through which adaptation and belonging are expected to be pursued.

At the same time, Ukrainians have been a part of Finland's agricultural sector as seasonal workers since the 2010s. For example, in 2021, more than 15,000 of the 16,500 total seasonal work permits were granted to Ukrainians ([Alho et al. 2023](#)). According to Alho, these prior connections helped some of the arriving Ukrainians in the aftermath of the war, as they could leverage existing networks to find employment and assist others.

Despite the immediate availability of the labor market, many Ukrainians face multiple barriers in the Finnish labor market and remain unemployed or underemployed. Lack of Finnish language skills (as many employers require some fluency, and many arriving Ukrainians don't initially speak any foreign languages) and difficulties in the recognition process of foreign qualifications (especially in fields like education and healthcare) are some of the challenges faced by Ukrainian migrants. Moreover, some employers are reluctant to hire not only non-Finnish speakers but also foreign citizens in general due to cultural bias, devaluation of previous work experience, and concerns about communication challenges ([Ahmad 2020](#); [Nshom, Sadaf & Ilkhom 2022](#)). The overall state of the Finnish labor market further impacts migrants' employment prospects. As of January 2025, Finland has one of the highest unemployment rates in the EU at 8.9% ([Statistics Finland n.d](#)). These challenges affect migrants' ability to adapt to Finnish society and shape the scope of efforts they put into their adaptation process.

As work is central to Finnish culture, which reflects Protestant work ethics that value diligence, honesty, and education ([Sinnemäki et al. 2019](#)), securing employment enhances social status in Finland. This impacts the perception of migrants, who are often evaluated based on their ability to find employment and contribute to society, which, in its turn, shapes public discourse around migrants. Ukrainian migrants are frequently portrayed as 'good migrants' and not as part of a 'migration crisis' to some extent because of their perceived industriousness and active positioning as job-seekers or contributions to Finland's labor market (e.g., [Yle 2023](#)). This contrasts with the media portrayal of earlier influxes of migrants, who were often depicted less favorably in the public discourse ([Näre, Abdelhady & Irastorza 2022](#)). At the same time, for Ukrainians, hardworkingness is also one of the central values in their national self-imagery, which I argue to be one of the key components in Ukrainians negotiating the rules of their belonging in the Finnish community of value. The poll held in Ukraine by the Razumkov Centre in May 2023 showed that Ukrainians consider hardworkingness as one of the most common characteristics among them, which only was outpaced by one quality—liberty-loving ([Razumkov Centre 2023](#)). During the full-scale war, its importance only grew: in the 2017 poll, the hardworkingness characteristic gained 7.7 points; in 2023, the number grew to 8.8 out of 10. This commonality might be influencing the levels of solidarity with Ukrainians in the Finnish society traditionally valuing work.

Another factor contributing to this positive perception may be Finland's geographic and historical background with Russia. Finns shared similar experiences as Ukrainians, first being a part of the Russian Empire, then carving their independence for it to be challenged by an aggressive war led by the Soviets in 1939–1940. This might have created higher levels of solidarity with Ukrainians in the aftermath of the start of the Russia–Ukraine war and raised security concerns for the country, affecting its decision to join NATO in 2023. Such circumstances may be shaping how Ukrainians perceive themselves and creating perceived expectations for Ukrainians to meet.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This study builds on qualitative methods to explore the experiences of Ukrainian migrants in Finland through social media data ([Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz 2022](#)). In recent years, social media has increasingly become a resource for studying migrant identities and belonging, including through analysis of interactions taking place on Facebook ([Chen & Zamani 2023](#); [Damian & van Ingen 2014](#)). The latter is widely used by Ukrainians for sharing opinions and experiences, seeking advice, and fostering solidarity.

This research centers on one of the largest public Facebook groups for Ukrainians in Finland, 'Ukrainians in Finland' ('Українці у Фінляндії'), originally created for seasonal workers, labor migrants, and diaspora members. With the inclusion of Ukrainians arriving in Finland after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the group significantly increased its numbers and grew to host more than 49,000 members as of March 2025, the majority of whom are post-war arrivals.

The group's membership is diverse and includes people of different ages (mostly adult users, judging by the discussion participants), genders, class backgrounds, and regions of origin. Members are also geographically dispersed across Finland, making the group a source of insight into the lived experiences of Ukrainians in the country. Although not all members are recent arrivals or forced migrants, the discourse is largely shaped by post-2022 migrants, whose presence has redefined community dynamics. Long-term residents, including earlier labor migrants and seasonal workers, often provide guidance, while new arrivals seek support. Over time, early forced migrants also started taking on advisory roles, which reflects that positions within the group are not static and evolve with the changing context. Overall, the group discussions cover a variety of topics: from everyday challenges and bureaucratic issues to deeper reflections. Such discussions offer a valuable window into how Ukrainians in Finland navigate adaptation and construct belonging. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis, the specific identity of any individual speaker is less significant than the fact that they are all participating in a discourse now dominated by the post-2022 reality. The conditions of belonging being negotiated exist in this new forced migration-defined context.

The study employs netnography, a qualitative research approach that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to study online communities ([Kozinets 2010](#)). Netnography allows for the study of social interactions online by documenting the explicit language of participants without the risk of disturbance ([Addeo et al. 2019](#)). However, this study uses netnography in what [Kozinets \(2010\)](#) terms a 'supporting role'. The primary focus is not on the online community in and on itself but rather on the Facebook group as a 'window' into the offline realities of Ukrainians in Finland. The analysis is less concerned with group-specific online dynamics and more with what

the discussions reveal about the lived experiences of adaptation and belonging. A key strength of this approach is in the naturalistic quality of the data. The discussions analyzed were not prompted by the researcher but were spontaneously generated by the community members themselves. While this created the challenge of finding relevant parts in vast data, it also offered methodological strength since key themes emerged unprompted in everyday discussions.

Data were collected through scraping between May 2023 and June 2024 and further filtered to find posts and comments containing the keyword ‘робота’ (the Ukrainian root for ‘work/labor’). From an initial pool of 4,000 posts, 1,315 items (64 original posts and related comments) were manually selected for analysis based on their relevance to themes of adaptation and belonging. This means that posts that, for example, simply advertise job opportunities without eliciting any discussions weren’t included in the data set. Posts and comments included in the analysis revolve around experiences and practical advice regarding life and work in Finland, conditions of acceptance of Ukrainians in Finland, integration routes, and peculiarities of Finnish society and life in it. To protect users’ privacy, all identifying information was removed, which limited the ability to apply an intersectional lens.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022) was employed to identify latent themes in the data, focusing on underlying meanings in discussions about work and their connections to broader issues of belonging and adaptation. Using Atlas.TI, the texts were coded iteratively, starting with 67 open codes (e.g., ‘pride in success’, ‘professional downgrading’, ‘language as a barrier’) and refined into 30 umbrella codes (e.g., ‘good vs. bad’, ‘work as adaptation’, ‘structural barriers’). The codes and conversations were grouped thematically according to the analysis points and reflecting similar sentiments, indicating three themes discussed in detail in the section below.

The study adheres to ethical guidelines set by The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) and has received the ethical approval from the University of Helsinki Research Ethics Committee in the Humanities and Social and Behavioural Sciences (statement 43/2024). My own position as a Ukrainian forced migrant and my fluency in Ukrainian and Russian allowed for a more nuanced reading of the material. Following best practices for social media research (Franz et al. 2019), while individual consent was unfeasible, the group moderator was informed of the research. In addition to depersonalization of data, the quotes used in this study were translated into English and slightly modified to prevent traceability.

MAKING AND BREAKING BOUNDARIES IN THE FINNISH COMMUNITY OF VALUE THROUGH WORK

This section analyzes the meaning-making around work in the online discussions of the post-2022 Ukrainian community in Finland. Based on discussions within the ‘Ukrainians in Finland’ Facebook group, the analysis demonstrates that, in the group, work is constructed as a dual mechanism. This study finds that securing employment serves as a primary path of adaptation in Finnish society, but work simultaneously becomes a boundary-making tool within the Ukrainian community in Finland. I argue that the aspiration to embody the values of the Finnish community of value, particularly a strong work ethic, is mirrored internally and used as a metric to define ‘deservingness’ in belonging. This process exposes how external pressures from Finnish societal structures are mirrored from the inside of the migrant community, shaping the community’s internal dynamics. The analysis is structured around three themes that

emerged from the data: (1) the framing of work as the essential tool for adaptation in Finnish society, (2) the use of work as a mechanism for internal boundary-making, and (3) the use of work as a strategy to assert agency and resist the 'victim' identity.

WORK AS A THRESHOLD FOR BELONGING AND A TOOL TO EARN IT IN THE FINNISH COMMUNITY OF VALUE

The group discussions tend to frame work as the main requirement for gaining acceptance in Finnish society, rather than just being an economic necessity. It is particularly visible when newcomers ask for advice. For instance, when a young man with no formal experience asked for help finding work, he received blunt assessments of his chances. One user stated flatly that 'without experience and education, you've got zero chances', while another added, '...without the language and a profession, you've got very bad prospects [in Finland]'. The same high stakes are reflected in another thread, where a participant linked employment to the very right to remain: '[In Finland], if you lose a job—you should] be ready to pack and leave'. These direct responses function as more than guidance; they establish and enforce community norms about succeeding in Finland.

Such sentiments make sense when viewed alongside what the community considers the ultimate reward for success: not just an income, but full social and legal belonging. As one long-term, 'well-integrated' migrant explained, stable employment is synonymous with a rich social life: '...not only we've been here for a long time, we are also well-integrated... we live and work here, we have relatives, loved ones, [and] friends who live in this system'. This link between work and belonging is also concrete and legal. Members point out that a permanent contract is the key to long-term security, as it 'will allow you to switch to a type A permanent residence permit sooner'. These examples reveal that the prize behind engaging with work in Finland is a secure place in its society's structures.

The sentiments shared in the discussions suggest a belief that one's place in Finnish society must be earned. Such perspective is rooted in how members view the Finnish state itself. For example, one participant captured this understanding of the social contract, describing the country's welfare system as a direct product of citizens' labor rather than as a right:

'And all this [the welfare state] Finnish people achieved themselves, with their hard, honest, transparent (taxed) work. And they did it in such a way that they can also share their achievements with those who are suffering, like us now'.

This comment establishes a binary: on the one side there are Finns, whose right to the welfare state is legitimized by their 'hard, honest, transparent (taxed) work', and on the other, there are Ukrainians positioned as 'sufferers'. The implication is that one must eventually become a 'hard-working taxpayer' to transition from the passive role of a 'sufferer' to that of an integrated peer. A community of value that bases belonging on economic engagement and a common work ethic is reflected in this logic (Bodström 2020; Sinnemäki et al. 2019). This aligns with the concept of the worker citizen (Anderson 2024) that constructs active participation in the labor market as the primary threshold for social inclusion.

However, this drive to adapt through work clashes with the reality of significant structural barriers. Group participants often discuss the impact of barriers like language proficiency, non-recognition of qualifications, and perceived cultural prejudice. A rhetorical question from one member in a thread about the difficult job market reflects this tension: 'If Finns have no jobs, then what do we expect with Ukrainians?' This reality has Ukrainians facing what Gullestad (2002) would call 'invisible fences', where they are expected to adapt through work, yet the structure of the labor market itself often functions as the most significant boundary to their belonging.

Faced with this paradox, the online group becomes a space for debating practical strategies to overcome these barriers. Participants actively encourage self-improvement, with advice to adapt to the Finnish system repeated in various threads started by forced migrants looking into how to proceed with their adaptation routes and integration plans. In one of the discussants' words:

'Almost the entire labor market in Finland is highly skilled work. It is better to invest in yourself, get a diploma, and work here'.

This is a common sentiment, and an effort to retrain reflects a willingness to accept Finland's values to 'deserve' a place. Another strategy discussed is how to transition from an outsider to an informed participant in Finnish life. As one member explained, securing stable employment is key here:

'Before you live here—that is, learn the language, get a job (not at a strawberry farm where there are only Ukrainians), until you integrate... it will be difficult to objectively evaluate the pros and cons [of the life in Finland]'.

This sentiment that having a job is essential to having a life in Finland is a recurring theme, as another group member noted simply: 'Why would you stay in Finland for long if you can't find a job?' Ultimately, this focus on adaptation through employment reflects an effort to align with perceived Finnish values and meet the expectations of the host society. Work thus becomes the primary tool through which migrants demonstrate their 'deservingness' and worthiness to belong and secure their future in Finland.

WORK AS A BOUNDARY-MAKING TOOL IN DEFINING 'GOOD' AND 'BAD' MIGRANTS

While the drive to seek belonging through work is aimed at overcoming boundaries with the host society, it simultaneously creates symbolic boundaries within the Ukrainian community itself. This is most apparent in discussions where group members express concerns about their collective image. In such threads, work is discussed as a delineator that defines the reputation and moral character of Ukrainians in Finland. For example, in one post, a forced migrant discussant described their neighbors' distressing behaviors using, among other descriptors, a phrase, 'of course no one works there'. The discussion quickly developed into a conversation around Ukrainians' representation in Finland. As another member stated, 'Because of this, locals perceive all Ukrainians negatively'. Such posts reveal a constructed link between unemployment and moral failure, tied to collective reputation and external perception. This is the mirrored community of value in action: participants actively define what it means to be a 'good'

or ‘bad’ migrant, drawing a clear symbolic boundary (Lamont & Molnár 2002) between the two as a strategy to manage external perceptions.

This binary is reinforced by those who position themselves as the norm, the ‘good’ migrants who ‘live normally and work’. Those actively seeking jobs or learning Finnish are also included in this valued group, as they are seen to be on the correct path. At the same time, success stories related to work and shared in the group elicit pride and strong support in the comments, reflecting the group’s eagerness to identify with compatriots who successfully navigate the Finnish labor market. Group members seek services provided by Ukrainians and celebrate success stories shared in the group—both newer and older arrivals. In such exchanges, work becomes a mechanism for creating in-group solidarity and mutual support, reaffirming the internal Ukrainian migrant community of value by emphasizing hardworkingness and mutual pride.

A key symbolic boundary within the community is drawn between established residents and newcomers. Most often, this boundary is reinforced through supportive roles that appear in the group: long-term members of the community act as experienced advice-providers, while new arrivals are guidance-seekers. This creates a subtle temporal hierarchy based on experience and perceived integration. For instance, in a discussion about workers’ rights, one user remarked to a long-term resident:

‘It’s all good, but you are torn from reality. Of course, you’ve been here for a long time, you are sort of Finns yourselves’.

This comment implies that migrants who have worked longer in Finland can claim a deeper, more ‘Finnish-like’ sense of belonging, using time and work status to draw this distinction. In rare extreme instances, however, this boundary-making manifests as ‘gatekeeping’. For example, in a popular thread where a user in Ukraine asked for advice on moving to Finland, comments from some established members were hostile:

‘Aren’t there any countries in the world other than Finland? ... Don’t they accept [Ukrainians] anymore?’

Such rhetorical questions signal discouragement: established members appear to enact a logic of exclusion onto their own compatriots. This logic mirrors a sentiment they perceive from the host society, which one discussant summarized as: ‘Finland is first and foremost for Finns; then comes everyone else’.

However, while this narrative of ‘deservingness’ through work is powerful, it is not absolute. There is also recognition of the extreme and precarious position of Ukrainian forced migrants, sometimes stated directly in advice to first ‘take some time off’ and readjust to the trauma of war and displacement. Occasional hostility and judgements in the comments are also pointed out and pushed back by some. For example, one participant, asking for advice, specifically requested ‘no toxicity’, hinting at previous judgmental discussions. In another thread, a member sarcastically remarked, ‘What nice compatriots we are’ in response to criticisms toward Ukrainians perceived as disrupting a positive collective image. These instances reveal that the group is textured, and the community is not homogenous in its views.

While Anderson’s concept of the community of value typically refers to how host societies assess migrants based on their perceived contributions and alignment with dominant values, this study reveals that similar communities of value can also emerge

within migrant groups themselves, mirroring the structures of the host society. In the case of Ukrainian migrants in Finland, the emphasis on work and hardworkingness is already deeply ingrained in their self-perception, as discussed in the background section. However, the analysis suggests that the formation of this internal community of value occurs vis-a-vis the Finnish host society and its perceived expectations of migrants.

WORK AS A TOOL FOR OVERCOMING VICTIMHOOD AND ASSERTING AGENCY AND DIGNITY

Beyond the tools of adaptation (Theme 1) and of internal boundary-making (Theme 2), the final theme addresses the quality and nature of the belonging that Ukrainians seek to construct. The discussions reveal a repeated sentiment that Ukrainians in Finland strive to overcome the victim identity and assert agency and dignity in contrast with a refugee label. Work, in this context, in addition to being a tool for adaptation becomes a vehicle for enacting this desired mode of being. The assertion of agency becomes a strategy for negotiating a more secure and dignified form of belonging in Finland.

This assertion of agency extends to the entire community's image, with members actively working to broaden the perception of Ukrainians in Finland. As one of the group members put it:

'In a country where nothing is known about us, we have an image of sufferers and people who know how to work in agriculture. ... I am sure that we can give the world much more'.

When a news story about Ukrainian scientists in Finland was shared, the comments focused not on the difficulties mentioned in the article but on the importance of this representation. One participant noted, 'It is important to show the Ukrainian community from different sides, and not only as people who are suffering'. Another added, 'Ukrainians are cool, not just "deceived and suffering."' This is a response to the potential for being perceived through a single lens of victims of aggression, showing a conscious effort to perform a more proactive identity, thus claiming belonging on their own terms. Such identity also aligns with the Finnish values where work and self-reliance are central elements (Bodström 2020; Pulkkinen 2023; Sinnemäki et al. 2019). These comments function as acts of collective identity reclamation, expanding the definition of what it means to be Ukrainian in Finland beyond the singular image of a person fleeing war.

This desire for self-sufficiency and proactivity is also captured at the individual level, in a sentiment repeated across many discussions: 'If you sit and whine, nothing will happen. If you go out there [and] try hard, everything will work out'. This aspiration to self-reliance takes on weight in the context of forced migration, functioning as an individual-level rejection of the passivity associated with the victim label. Previous research has shown that some migrants find meaning in 'earning' their place through work and moving intentionally within the labor market (Enbuska 2024b). This approach allows them to build a deeper sense of belonging by exercising agency and, for example, signaling assertiveness and industriousness. Similarly, Berntsen (2016) in a study on how migrant construction workers employ various strategies to negotiate their work conditions, even within oppressive systems, shows how there is a form of agency that allows migrants to adapt in challenging environments.

Such online interactions also expand the definition of what it means to be Ukrainian in Finland beyond the perceived image of a refugee. This falls under the deservingness model developed by Oorschot (2000) if adapted to the context of forced migration, which suggests that those actively working to improve their situation despite hardships tend to receive more support and sympathy. In fact, one of the group participants said that, by working hard and offering more to the world through work, Ukrainians will be able ‘to receive guarantees [from the world] for their children that they will not be threatened by the bloody Russian world’.

This also broadens the perspective of Alho’s study (2023). Through the interviews carried out in 2022, Alho et al. found out that, for many, work served as a response strategy to manage psychological trauma and a means of adapting to Finnish society. This view of seeing work as a tool to assert agency and do narrative control in the circumstances that challenge dignity in migrants (fleeing to a foreign country without necessarily a desire to do so, lack of agency, going through bureaucracy, staying in reception centers, living on social benefits, etc.) adds to the concept of work as a resilience resource.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study set out to understand what online discussions about work reveal about negotiating belonging among Ukrainian forced migrants in Finland. The analysis showed that the online discussions in the Facebook group serve as an arena where the terms of belonging are constructed and contested through meaning-making around work. Work is simultaneously framed as the tool in adaptation and climbing ‘invisible fences’ of Finnish society and as the metric for an internal process of boundary-making. This internal stratification appears to mirror the Finnish ‘community of value’ and is driven by a collective desire to assert a dignified, agentic identity over the passive ‘victim’ label or negative external perceptions. Work, therefore, functions not merely as a job but as a cultural value and an imperative to uphold in the search for belonging.

These findings both resonate with and extend previous research on migrant belonging. In line with scholars like Fuchs and Scheve (2023), this study provides further evidence that a perceived consensus on values—in this case, the value of work—facilitates the feeling of being welcomed for migrants. This paper also demonstrates how this very process of external adaptation simultaneously fuels a secondary process of boundary-making within the migrant community itself. While divisions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ migrants are often studied as a phenomenon imposed by host societies (e.g., Szczepanik 2016), this research shows how such internal stratification emerges in connection with integration pressures. In doing so, it expands on Anderson’s (2013) concept of the community of value by demonstrating how it is not just a framework of external judgment but a logic that is accepted and redeployed by migrants. This provides a fresh lens on the complex mechanics of adaptation, and in turn contributes to digital and diaspora studies. This research underscores the role of social media as a dynamic social field where community norms are enforced in real-time. The digital arena, therefore, is where the ‘invisible fences’ of belonging are made visible, debated, and either reinforced or challenged.

This paper’s contribution is not to suggest that Ukrainians only learned to value work in Finland. Rather, it demonstrates how the specific pressures of the forced migration context—the need to find a footing, the desire to reject a ‘victim’ identity, and the

perception of Finnish societal expectations—instrumentalized a pre-existing cultural value for a new social purpose in the context of forced migration.

This study is not without limitations that open possibilities for future research. Due to the scope of the article, some of the emerging themes in data were not analyzed in detail. For instance, while this study focused on the present-day negotiation of belonging, the data offered insights into how these dynamics are tied to future aspirations. In the discussions, work is framed not only as a tool for present belonging but as the primary pathway to securing a more permanent residence permit and the right to remain in Finland after TP ends. It provides a powerful motivation to seek employment. Obtaining stable work is also seen as a means of securing future choices. For many, a job transforms their post-war future from a predetermined path (being forced to return to Ukraine) into a choice: the ability to go back if they wish, or the right to stay. Further research is needed to investigate how the assertion of the ‘good worker’ identity is leveraged as a strategy in these long-term calculations.

Further research is also needed to explore mechanisms and tools refugees use in seeking belonging in the communities of value, including other tools Ukrainian forced migrants use to claim belonging and construct their identities. Given the strong connection they maintain with Ukraine (through visits, media, legal ties, and social networks), the transnational dynamics of their identity and adaptation should be studied further. Investigating the capital migrants bring (social, educational, experiential, etc.) and how they convert and leverage it in the host society could offer insights into social mobility and class. A deeper look into liminality and how work informs decisions to stay, migrate, or return would also broaden our understanding of transnational migration patterns and finding belonging amidst those.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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NOTE

- 1 Ukrainians fleeing war since February 2022 have been granted temporary protection in European Union countries, including Finland—a status distinct from formal refugee status under the Geneva Convention. However, while, legally, they are classified as forced migrants rather than Convention refugees, socially, their experience aligns with that of refugees: they are a population displaced by war, seeking safety and stability abroad. In this study, I use the terms ‘forced migrants’ and ‘refugees’ interchangeably to reflect their social positioning rather than their legal designation.

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