Article

Social Inclusion of Gen Z Ukrainian Refugees in Lithuania: The Role of Online Social Networks

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Abstract: Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Lithuania, a country of barely 3 million inhabitants, has welcomed more than 85,000 refugees, mainly minors and young people. This research focuses on the youth segment, members of Gen Z, which exhibits a marked gender bias, as the majority are women. The purpose of this study is to determine the role played by online social networks in the process of social inclusion in the host community. Methodologically, this research conducts a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with open code content analysis. The results point to changes in their behavior as social media users, such as using new online social networks, and greater attention to practical topics such as knowing necessary services and leisure opportunities in their new environment. Among the conclusions, the positive effect of online social networks in the social inclusion process of these young refugees stands out: being members of the local virtual community facilitates new social interactions in the physical world of the host country.

Keywords: online social networks; social inclusion; Ukrainian refugees; Gen Z; Lithuania

1. Introduction

In recent years, the global landscape has been markedly shaped by an increase in migration, prompted by conflicts, economic disparities, and environmental changes. Since Russia launched its unjustified invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe and the world have been gripped by a humanitarian crisis that has forced millions of people to flee their homes in search of safety. Lithuania, a Baltic country of around 3 million inhabitants, was one of the countries that opened its doors to refugees, hosting more than 85,000 people (Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinė Apsaugos ir Darbo Ministerija 2024), most of them minors and young persons (Oficialiosios Statistikos Portalas 2024). Notably, a significant proportion of these refugees belong to Gen Z: individuals born between the late 1990s and 2010 (Duffett 2020; Thomas et al. 2020). This generation is distinct not only for their youth, but also for their native digital fluency and unique sociocultural characteristics. Gen Z has been variously referred to by researchers as the digital generation, the children of the virtual environment, the generation of the future, and the indigenous digital generation (Soengas-Pérez et al. 2019; Palomo-Domínguez et al. 2023). The attributes of Gen Z, also known as centennials, are cited differently around the world, but it is acknowledged that it is the most diverse of all generations, growing up in the "golden age" of new technologies and communication tools (Targamadzė 2014; Kocai 2018). Due to the digital environment, this generation shows different behavioral patterns compared to previous generations, which creates new opportunities and challenges. In the Lithuanian context, Gen Z has not been studied in detail so far, especially in the light of the recent wave of migration from Ukraine. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how Gen Z refugees from Ukraine use online social networks (hereinafter, OSNs) in their social inclusion journey in Lithuania and revealing what specific opportunities and challenges arise in this process.

Thus, the relevance of this research is based not only on the current geopolitical situation and migration waves, but also on the changes in contemporary society, where

digital technologies and social networks are becoming increasingly important aspects of social life. The purpose of this study is to determine the role played by social networks in the process of social inclusion in host communities. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of OSNs in social inclusion in host communities, with a particular focus on Gen Z refugees from Ukraine in Lithuania.

In addition to this general goal, this research pursues the following specific objectives (SOs):

- SO#1. Describe the behavior of Ukrainian Gen Z refugees in Lithuania as OSN users.
- SO#2. Investigate the purposes that move them to use social networks and the topics of most interest to them.
- SO#3. Discover their self-perception of OSNs' influence in their social inclusion process.
- SO#4. Estimate the degree of social inclusion they have achieved in Lithuania.

1.1. Social Inclusion in the Context of Migration Studies

Migration studies have a long-standing history, and the most recent overviews show their inter- and multi-disciplinary diversity and plurality (Scholten et al. 2022). They introduce a wide range of possibilities but, at the same time, controversiality and confusion of concepts. Returning to the beginning of migration theory and research, the turning point represented by Gordon's (1964) works should be mentioned. His studies fostered the discussion about differences in assimilation, acculturation, and integration. All such concepts have been widely criticized, arguing that they deny either migrants or host countries perspective (da Lomba 2010; Strang and Ager 2010; Rytter 2019). Such discussions have led to a shift from functionalist and historical-structural approaches to more subjectively oriented aspirations-capabilities frameworks (De Haas 2021), along with elaboration on the concept of inclusion, which emphasizes creating an environment that values and respects all individuals, regardless of their differences, and guarantees the necessary opportunities and resources for full and equal participation (Dobson et al. 2021; Omanović and Langley 2023). Later studies have gone even further and have called for a reflexive, self-critical approach in migration research (Gray 2008; Borrelli and Ruedin 2024) and suggested new terms such as, for example, super-diversity, for capturing the social complexity of migration-related diversities (Vertovec 2007), or demigrantization, which calls for avoiding the naturalization of migrants in relation to all sorts of issues and problems (Dahinden 2016).

Social inclusion relates to a multidimensional process that sees new members of a community being able to fully participate in social, economic, and political activities (Strang and Ager 2010; Ha and Lyras 2013; Spaaij 2015). Castles (2002) argued that successful inclusion requires adaptation on the part of both the individual and the host society. Successful inclusion rests on social relationships (Doidge et al. 2020). It has a direct impact on an individual's well-being and can mitigate the trauma of previous exposure (Hynie 2017; Miller and Rasmussen 2016). Most theories define successful inclusion as equal opportunities and resources, participation in the community and society, and a sense of security and belonging (Hynie 2017). While often focusing on the motivation of people themselves, successful inclusion requires an appropriate social context that supports it (Hynie 2018). It should be noted that in the process of inclusion, both host communities and newcomers change and alter each other (Ager and Strang 2008).

In the context of migration research and inclusion, refugee studies compose a specific field as they investigate forced migration. Similarly, in broader migration research, refugee studies also focus on the various personal and socioeconomic characteristics of refugees (van Tubergen et al. 2024), the context and opportunities of host countries (for example, Ager and Strang 2008; Phillimore 2021), and mutual refugee and host country relations (for example, Strang and Ager 2010). Talking specifically about refugees from Ukraine, comprehensive research work has shown that alongside other characteristics, such as living in the most conflict-intense areas in Ukraine, being without (young) children, being single,

being educated, having financial resources, and speaking English, those aged 26–35, e.g., Gen Z, were more likely to leave their homes (van Tubergen et al. 2024).

1.2. The Social Network Concept and Its Influence in Migration

Social scientists have widely studied social networks. From the perspective of sociology, the term social network refers to "a series of direct and indirect ties from one actor to a collection of others, whether the central actor is an individual person or an aggregation of individuals" (Davern 1997, p. 288).

Far from being a new reality, social networks are as old as human history. In the year 20,000 BC, when homo sapiens emerged in Africa, the first social networks were built around the family, clan, or tribe to help the survival of the group.

Later, other types of social networks would come in more sophisticated societies, such as the Chinese Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BC), which expanded its social networks for bureaucratic purposes by establishing correspondence with other governments. The Ancient Greek Olympics constitutes another remarkable case study, as the games were conceived as an opportunity for social networking of the different polis that made up Magna Graecia. Since then and until today, there have been countless examples characterized by the needs and interests of the participating members of these networks (Barnett 2011).

Defined as groups of actors who are connected to one another through a set of different relations and ties (Daly 2010), social networks play an important role in various aspects of social life (Fraser and Dutta 2010; Asio and Khorasani 2015), including migration (Munshi 2020).

Various research has proven the importance of social networks. They can provide emotional comfort, financial or other material aid, information or advice, assistance, or instrumental help, and enhance self-esteem. Additionally, they could enhance social learning (Kyndt et al. 2016). Individuals' trust, opinions, and behavior are influenced by their social networks: perceptions and beliefs that are communicated during social interactions have an influence on social behavior (Chang et al. 2017; Di Pietro and Pantano 2012; Arregui-García et al. 2024). Interactions among individuals shape societies and structure the social organization of communities (Ubaldi et al. 2021).

Social network analysis is essential for understanding migration movements. In recent years, researchers have emphasized that social networks have supported the movement of their members (Munshi 2014), enhanced migrants' access to information (Dustmann et al. 2016), and acted as a safety net by providing material or social support (Munshi 2014; Comola and Mendola 2015).

Recently, attention has shifted from destination social networks to the connection between origin networks and migration (Munshi and Rosenzweig 2016; Morten 2019; Munshi 2020). These questions have also been addressed in the research in the context of the Ukrainian war (González-Leonardo et al. 2024). Another study defined two types of social networks relevant to the Ukrainian refugee movement: pre-war and newly established. The findings also show that not only the size of pre-war communities of Ukrainian migrants, but also pioneer refugees has played a role in facilitating Ukrainians' migration (Hierro and Maza 2024).

1.3. A Brief Panorama of Online Social Networks

Faced with the ancient history of what we could call "real-space social networks" (Cavanagh 2013, p. 170), OSNs barely occupy the last three decades of our existence. Their beginning dates back to 1997, when the first OSN, SixDegree, appeared (Boyd and Ellison 2007). Since then, they have proliferated and now constitute a broad and diverse panorama.

Understood as information systems, OSNs are digital platforms on which users from anywhere in the world can be in contact and congregate. They constitute virtual communities of people with the same interests, activities, origin, or ties of friendship. On these platforms, each user creates a profile that defines them and can share multimedia content, including text, images, and videos (Heidemann et al. 2012).

Social networking services gather information from all users, including their characteristics, interests, and contacts. Thus, the platforms offer each user the possibility of expanding their connection ties with other users who share geographical proximity, sociodemographic characteristics, psychographic interests, or online behavioral attitudes. In this way, they represent an expansion of the traditional sociological concept of social networks transferred to the online scenario (Adamic and Adar 2005; Hruska and Maresova 2020).

In addition, from a communicative and media perspective, OSNs represent a paradigm shift from traditional media. They offer instantaneity, universality, and infinite storage capacity, breaking the barriers of space and time. The hypertextuality of OSNs allows users to enjoy a personalized communicative experience without constraints (Marugán Solís and Critikián 2022).

The multinational digital marketing agency We Are Social publishes an annual report that provides global figures on the phenomenon of OSNs and their implementation and development. According to the 2024 edition, there are more than 5.4 billion OSN users worldwide, corresponding to 62.3% of the total population. The same report presents the following ranking of the twelve OSNs that are most used daily globally, ordered in descendent level of use, in the age range of 16 to 64 years: WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Line, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, X (formerly Twitter), Snapchat, Telegram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn. Specifically, in the Gen Z cohort globally, the five favorite OSNs are Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, WeChat, and Facebook (We Are Social 2024).

Focusing on the Ukrainian scenario, social media users rose to 26.70 million in 2023, equivalent to 74% of the population (Datareportal 2023). The most popular OSNs on which to receive news, in descending order of importance, are Telegram, Facebook, and YouTube, if we refer to data from 2023. However, if we refer to data from 2021 (before the outbreak of the large-scale invasion), Facebook was the top channel, followed by YouTube and Telegram (Statista 2024a).

Regarding the OSN landscape in Lithuania, this country registers the highest number of users compared to the other two Baltic republics, reaching more than 2 million in 2023. The most popular platform is Facebook, followed by YouTube and Instagram. The age group with the most users includes older Gen Z and younger Gen Y individuals (from 25 to 34 years) (Statista 2024b).

1.4. Literature Review on Related Research Topics

Recent studies have addressed the analysis of the role played by OSNs in migration and social inclusion processes. Some prior migration processes have been approached from different points of view. Such is the case with the Syrian migrant community.

Some authors have analyzed the effect of OSNs on the social inclusion of Syrian refugee migrants in Germany (Köster et al. 2018), or in other host countries such as Belgium (Imani Giglou et al. 2022) or the Netherlands (Alencar 2018). Another study, with a psychological approach, reflected on how using mobile phones could serve as emotional support for Syrian refugees to overcome their dramatic experience (Alencar et al. 2019).

Furthermore, it has been studied as to how mobile phones and all the information accessible through OSNs could be a tool for strategic decision-making about the migration process: where to migrate, along which roads, how to avoid conflict points along the way, etcetera. The term "smart refugees", alluding to the double meaning of the word "smart" (connected + intelligent), was coined in the context of this research (Dekker et al. 2018).

In the case of the war in Ukraine and its consequent migration process, there are not many studies that focus on the effects that OSNs have had on these refugees, or the opportunities they have provided. However, the existing literature does address very varied topics.

Among them, a study was performed based on geolocation data from X (formerly Twitter) to track the mobility and discussion topics shared by migrants amid their fleeing trips to the host community (Lemoine-Rodríguez et al. 2024). Other research has observed

the correlation between the entry of Ukrainian refugees into Poland and Germany and the increase in Facebook and Instagram users in those territories (Jurić 2022).

In turn, Pavlova et al. (2023) addressed the relationships between OSNs and media communities in two host countries, Germany and Lithuania, analyzing three dimensions experienced by Ukrainian refugee women: physical adaptation, civil inclusion, and cultural well-being. Lithuania was once again included as a contextual part of the study in the work of Dapkūnaitė (2022), which analyzed the image that Ukrainian refugees project on social networks to the Lithuanian audience.

Focusing on the research works that have analyzed OSNs in the context of Ukraine in the last ten years, the predominance of political topics is significant. Along these lines, Onuch (2015) reflected on the influence of OSNs as an amplifying factor of real-space social networks to mobilize the population in the EuroMaidan demonstrations. These pro-European, pro-independence, and nationalist protests began at Independence Square in Kyiv on 21 November 2013.

The scholars Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) delved into the visual framing of Eastern Europe on OSNs, comparing the perspectives of pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian communities. Their analysis revealed a stark contrast in the visual narratives, potentially fueling the conflict between these two groups.

Other studies have analyzed the role of OSNs in the 2019 electoral process through which Zelenskyy came to power. Kutsyk and Golovei (2020, p. 119) highlighted the function of OSNs as catalytic agents of political change, propelling "new practices of public participation, consolidation, and self-organization of Ukrainian civil society". At the same time, Alberti and Serio (2020) emphasized that Zelenskyy owed his electoral success to the intelligent use of OSNs as a means of communication that provides new propaganda opportunities and requires other strategies different from those of conventional mass media.

When changing the scene and focusing on the research of OSNs in Lithuania, the variety of topics is greater. Among them, as an example from the field of education, Pribeanu et al. (2015) studied the influence of OSNs, particularly Facebook, on the learning processes of young university students. From the social inclusion perspective, Viluckiene (2015) analyzed how OSNs can help people with physical disabilities have greater social participation in the community.

In politics and diplomacy, OSNs have been studied for their ability to enable dialogue between politicians and a broader audience and to know citizens' opinions on important issues (Dumčiuvienė 2016). Additionally, OSNs are seen as a marketing communication instrument capable of strengthening B2B (business to business) or B2C (business to consumers) relationships (Davidavicienė et al. 2017).

The topic of social networks has also been addressed from the point of view of psychology, investigating uses of social networks that are problematic and constitute a detriment to mental health (Brailovskaia et al. 2021).

2. Materials and Methods

This research was conducted from a qualitative approach. Qualitative methodology, widely applied in social sciences, omits counting how many people think or act in a certain way; instead, it delves deeper into the analysis to explain why these people think or act the way they do. It explains aspects of daily life and research objects characterized by multidisciplinarity or the complexity of confluent factors (Mohajan 2018). These characteristics make the qualitative approach suitable for the present research, which aims to initiate reflection on a study topic where sociological and communicative analysis come together, and where we study the daily behavior of a migrant population in a sensitive context influenced by personal, social, and political tensions, as well as identity, emotional, and practical needs, among others.

The chosen method was semi-structured interviews, which are suitable within the social sciences in studies of descriptive scope. Furthermore, this method is supported by the academic guarantee of other previous research works that have opted for this method

to address the study of refugees and their use of media, as is the case of studies on Syrian refugees and their use of mobile phones during their migratory journey (Alencar et al. 2019), or about refugees of different origins and use of social networks (Alencar 2018).

The study population included Gen Z Ukrainians who had migrated to Lithuania as a host country due to the war situation in their country, in particular since the large-scale invasion that began on 24 February 2022. The research focused on analyzing a sample of 10 individuals who met these characteristics. Concerning the criterion of belonging to Gen Z, the cohort comprised participants born between the 1990s and 2010 (Duffett 2020; Thomas et al. 2020).

The sampling method combined purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Silverman 2011), again following the steps of previous qualitative research focused on refugee populations (Alencar et al. 2019).

In purposive sampling, participants are selected according to the researchers' criteria, i.e., the researchers decide which interviewees will be valuable informants for the study. Therefore, the quality or lack of quality of the sample is closely related to the researchers' degree of success or error. For this reason, purposive sampling is recommended only in cases where researchers have a high degree of knowledge or prior experience working on projects or with similar populations (Babin et al. 2020; Hair et al. 2017). Regarding this requirement, it should be mentioned that the authors of the present study have fruitfully practiced the same method in previous works with other participants from the same study population, Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania (Pivorienė et al. 2022; Pivorienė et al. 2023).

On the other hand, this is a small population in which individuals, in some cases influenced by the political and dramatic conditions of their refugee situation, present a certain reluctance to share their personal stories. This underscores the need for a sensitive approach, which is why snowball sampling was especially indicated (Babin et al. 2020; Hair et al. 2017). Participants were able to facilitate contact with other individuals who had the same profile, and upon receiving information through a person in their circle, they became more open to participating, without fear or distrust of attending the interview.

Table 1 describes the characteristics of the individuals that made up the sample. There was a significant gender bias, since 9 out of the 10 interviewees were women. However, this bias can be explained by the reality that characterizes the Ukrainian refugee population in this age segment, which is eminently female, since the Ukrainian state requires young men to remain in their country waiting to be called up to join the army or for other defense tasks. Homogeneity also predominated in the rest of the sociodemographic traits, with similar ages and the prevalence of higher education levels. All interviewees were studying or had studied at a university in Lithuania. Only some of them had worked or were currently working in Lithuania. Regarding their arrival date in Lithuania, there was greater variety. However, most of them migrated in 2022, following the outbreak of the full-scale invasion.

Table 1. Participants.

Code	Gender	Age	Arrival	Studies	Job
P#1	Female	20	March 2022	X	
P#2	Female	20	January 2023	X	
P#3	Female	21	January 2024	X	
P#4	Female	22	March 2022	X	X
P#5	Female	21	January 2023	X	X
P#6	Female	22	March 2022	X	X
P#7	Male	19	March 2022	X	
P#8	Female	22	March 2022	X	
P#9	Female	20	March 2022	X	
P#10	Female	24	March 2022	X	X

Created by the authors (2024).

The set of interviews was carried out during the months of March and April 2024, with an average duration of 25 min per interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed

verbatim. English was the language used to conduct the interviews. The participants and researchers were not native English speakers, but they were accustomed to going about their daily life speaking English, and had a high level of communicative competence. No language barriers or difficulties in expressing complex realities or emotions were found.

From the deconstruction of these interviews, categories and subcategories were identified following an open coding model in a qualitative content analysis method (Boeije 2010; Krippendorff 2018; Selvi 2019). It is preferred to use content analysis instead of thematic analysis (Boeije 2010; Lawless and Chen 2019) because the former, even from a qualitative approach and with the relevant caution of the researchers, allows for reflection on the prevalence of the responses in the entire sample (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). Table 2 shows the categories and subcategories identified.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories.

Categories	Subcategories
1. OSN User Behavior	1.1. Usage time 1.2. Activity 1.3. Platforms 1.4. Changes after migration
2. OSN Support in the Migration Process	2.1. Context 2.2. Relevance 2.3. Other Support Sources
3. Purposes in using OSNs	3.1. Contacting Relatives and Friends 3.2. Finding Practical Information for Daily Life 3.3. Making Friends in Lithuania 3.4. Being Updated with News 3.5. Supporting the Ukraine Cause 3.6. Sharing Emotions 3.7. Recreational and Vocational Activities
4. Main Topics of Interest	4.1. Related to Ukraine 4.2. Related to Lithuania 4.3. Miscellaneous
5. Social Inclusion in Lithuania	5.1. Studies 5.2. Employment 5.3. Personal Relationships 5.4. Language and Cultural Immersion 5.5. Self-Perception

Created by the authors (2024).

The categories considered correspond to the research's specific objectives (SO): Category #1 with SO#1; Category #2 with SO#3; Categories #3 and #4 with SO#2; and Category #5 with SO#4.

3. Results

The analysis of the participants' responses was carried out following the categories and subcategories presented in Table 2.

3.1. OSN User Behavior

Within the Social Network User Behavior category (#1), four subcategories were analyzed: Usage Time (#1.1), Activity (#1.2), Platforms (#1.3), and Changes After Migration (#1.4). Table 3 summarizes the main findings schematically. The following subsections offer more detailed information on the results and fragments of the most representative and illustrative participants' responses.

Table 3. Main findings under Category #1, OSN User Behavior.

Subcategories	Main Findings
1.1. Usage time	Daily and prolonged. Some considered it to be an excessive time.
1.2. Activity	The majority mostly consumed and occasionally created content. The minority expressed a genuine interest in creating content.
1.3. Platforms	Eleven OSNs were spontaneously mentioned. Four were more popular and widespread: Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp.
1.4. Changes after migration	Not many changes. Telegram is not the dominant platform in Lithuania; instead, Facebook is.

Created by the authors (2024).

3.1.1. Usage Time

Concerning the usage time, all participants claimed to be regular users of OSNs. For them, OSNs constituted a family environment. They know the formats and communication strategies of these digital platforms with which they began interacting in their pre-adolescence. The following response, extracted from the interview with Participant #3 (from now on P#3), represents the unanimous response the group of interviewees gave:

I've been using social media for . . . I don't know, but really huge time. I think for eight years or more, yes . . . Maybe from when I was 12. [P#3]

It is worth noting that all participants, without exception, reported engaging in daily and prolonged use of OSNs, underscoring the integral role these platforms play in their lives. Again, one participant's response, in this case P#8, illustrates the situation of most interviewees:

I like using social media every day, so I'm a big user. [P#8]

Some participants showed concern about how much time they spend daily on OSNs, considering that it may be excessive. This has led them to create some self-control strategies to limit daily use time. This was not a majority position, but it should be highlighted as a sign of maturity in their online behavior. Fragments of the testimonies of P#1 and P#3 are quoted below:

I get so much information from Instagram and I spend there maybe three . . . yes, three hours per day. Yes, I do, and . . . that's a lot. [P#1]

I even have a tracker on my phone which tracks how much time I spend on different social programs, and I check it. [P#3]

3.1.2. Activity

Regarding the activity that the participants carry out on OSNs, everyone declared that their content consumption rate was higher than their content creation rate. However, they presented three degrees in their activity:

A small minority adopted an 'invisible profile' attitude, using social networks primarily as information sources rather than active content creators. The testimony of P#1 illustrates this position:

I'm not so a social network person, so I have zero photos in my profile or something like that. I don't trust people in social networks. [P#1]

The attitude of casual content creators was predominant: their main aim in regard to activity on OSNs was to receive information, but occasionally, they shared or created some posts. The responses of P#3 and P#8 are representative of the majority of interviewees:

I'm not so massive content creator. But . . . some stories . . . I post, from time to time, but I didn't do some massive influencing. [P#3]

I mostly scroll the content, but sometimes, when I have 'musa', she comes to me. So, I can create. Yes, it happens like this . . . with motivational videos or philosophical thoughts. [P#8]

Other participants approached content creation as a more conscious and planned activity, with significant quantitative and qualitative impact on their activity as users. Below are the responses of the participants who showed the most determined attitude in creating content:

I can say that I see content, but I also have my Instagram. I have a lot of long posts because it was my dream to be a journalist. [P#4]

I have, like, maybe not the biggest audience, but still, it's like 1400 followers, and I know that, like, approximately 300 or 200 or from them are international students. [P#7]

3.1.3. Platforms

The participants, as a collective, shared their experiences with a diverse range of eleven social media platforms. In alphabetical order, they are as follows: BeReal, Bubble, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Telegram, TikTok, Viber, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube.

Interestingly, a twelfth platform, Tinder, was mentioned in the interviews, but only in response to the researchers' questions. This unique addition was not a spontaneous statement, but rather a suggestion.

Four of the social media platforms mentioned stood out as being more popular and widespread among participants. They were Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

- Telegram: the participants unanimously presented Telegram as the most popular OSN among Ukrainians. They used it for direct messaging with family and Ukrainian friends. P5's response summarizes what the group of interviewees unanimously expressed:

  Telegram is used for personal communication with my friends, with my family. As well as for video calls. [P#5]

There are also groups of Ukrainian refugees living in Lithuania who constitute an essential source of practical information for daily life in the host country. The following quote summarizes what the vast majority of interviewees shared:

Well, the Telegram group was helpful to get information in the beginning [the arrival in Lithuania]. *Yeah, I think we use it still now, because I have it on Telegram.* [P#4]

No less important is its function as a news channel, where even official Ukrainian government sources disseminate information. This aspect was spontaneously highlighted by the vast majority of interviewees, who expressed themselves similarly to P#2:

There are news channels on Telegram. Yeah, actually they are made on behalf of some ministers, even police, or like . . . It's different. So yeah, you can you can read like, I don't know, not 100% true information, but at least you know that it's checked and it's not fake. [P#2]

- Instagram: a vast majority of the participants described Instagram as their preferred social media platform, where they spent the most time. The participants shared that they primarily use this platform to receive inspiration or express their ideas, but also to exchange direct messages with other users, as shown in the response of P#7:

For sharing my personality, for sharing my thoughts and for sharing uh information about war. [. . .] Also for messaging people that have my same interests. [P#7]

- Facebook. Most participants agreed that they use Facebook as the platform that best allows them to be in contact with Lithuanians or receive information about Lithuania. They highlighted the importance of private groups on Facebook and the possibility of speaking through direct messaging with contacts (Facebook Messenger). Most interviewees described uses and contexts very similar to those expressed in the responses of P#8 and P#1:

I used Facebook several times when I had the Lithuanian courses for learning languages. Yes, because they did prefer to post all information and speak with teacher in Facebook. [P#8]

I have some groups in Facebook, I can see also some events about my studies. Yes, it's like a free space to speak with someone. Also, to send congratulations on birthdays. [P#1]

- WhatsApp. Participants used this platform only for direct messaging with other foreigners living in Lithuania, as can be read below in the response of P#3. However, in the case of native Lithuanians, it is more common to use Facebook Messenger.

Well, I use WhatsApp now, but only for communicating with Erasmus foreign students and with some locals. [P#3]

Of the rest of the OSNs mentioned, most were familiar to all participants, even those who declared that they do not use them.

- X (formerly Twitter): X is not a OSN that was widely used among the participants in this study. However, some claimed to be X users, mainly motivated by the full-scale invasion of their country; they highlighted the opportunities that this OSN offers to disseminate and access information and opinions about the conflict. The testimony of P#3 illustrates this perspective:

Before the war started, I didn't have Twitter, but later yes. Because with Instagram, for example, if you share a post, it is visible only to your audience. But with Twitter, the more text you get, the more you can try like to reach a broader audience. Even if you don't follow this person, that's why I had to download Twitter, to share like posts and to make tweets for the audience to see it. And so yes, I use it like, for example, anytime when we [Ukrainians] have some incident. That happens like the huge bombing of some city or something connected to attacks or anything. Then, we all get messages in our news channels. Then, you go to Twitter to post this tweet and yes. Also, I check the news, not only the news but mainly the opinions of some political people. Also, from the army, just to see the statement, the stories from the frontline and also not the news. [P#3]

- LinkedIn: some participants declared that they use LinkedIn to search for employment and improve their professional profiles online, as is the case of P#8:

LinkedIn is social media to find some jobs and seeing what my friends have a jobs and so.. [P#8]

- YouTube: few participants spoke spontaneously about YouTube. From their perspective, they saw this platform mainly as a news channel to receive information about the conflict situation in their country and its consequences. The answers of P#7 and P#10 serve as an example of these spontaneous statements:

I also use YouTube to follow the news. Just a few YouTube channels that I can trust because I know the sources and that are maintained by followers or donations. [P#7]

It is like on YouTube, where you see a video and want to watch it, but usually it's not about war, it's something more about the psychological situation of people due to the war or something like this but not about tactic and war strategy. [P#10]

- TikTok: not all participants were users of the TikTok network. For those who were, it was used as a recreational social network platform. On the other hand, some

participants warned about TikTok's capability to generate addiction, and stated that they prevented themselves from using it to avoid wasting time. Below are some responses that allow us to understand why the use of TikTok was not so widespread in the study sample:

I'm in TikTok and just for entertainment myself like before, going to sleep for example. [P#3]

I spend so much time on social networks. I don't want to spend more time in TikTok, for example. So I even didn't register to prevent. [P#1]

People waste a lot of time on TikTok. [P#4]

- Viber: few participants mentioned Viber. They described it as a widespread OSN in Ukraine a few years ago and that it is currently used mainly by older people, as seen in the comment of P#6:

  I have Viber but because this is how I communicate with my grandmother. [P#6]

- Tinder: after being asked if they were Tinder users, many participants declared they were or have been Tinder users. However, most of them did not report successful experiences, so they showed little interest in this dating platform, as P#4 expressed:

  Uhm . . . My friend came to me and she said "OK, let's have Tinder". But we didn't have a result. We didn't find someone . . . So . . . [P#4]

Two other social networks were mentioned in the interviews, but in a very minor proportion: Bubble and BeReal. The first, Bubble, is a platform to build personalized social networks. The second, BeReal, is a social network that promotes massive image posting, almost in real-time, without filters. For one of the study participants, BeReal helps her feel closer to her loved ones, feeling she knows and follows their daily lives:

BeReal is a social network for people posting like one photo every, every day. I started to use it before coming to Lithuania. I asked my friends to download it and my sister to do it so . . . if we don't even call each other like every day, at least we can exchange photos. And yes, when I came here, some Erasmus students saw that I used it and then they started, hehehe . . . [P#3]

3.1.4. Changes after Migration

In general terms, participants did not notice significant differences in their use of social networks between when they lived in Ukraine and what they do now in the host country, as stated by P#5:

Well, there is no big difference. [P#5]

However, all participants mentioned a specific change concerning platforms: Telegram is a prevalent OSN in Ukraine, but not in Lithuania. Upon arrival, to better connect with the Lithuanian community, they were forced to increase their use of Facebook (which has a high penetration rate in the Baltic Republic) or to join WhatsApp for direct messages with Lithuanians or other foreigners living in Lithuania. In their responses, some participants showed particular difficulties in the adaptation period, which they later overcame with success. Below are some of these testimonies:

When I was living in Ukraine, all our groups or chats with my classmates were in Telegram. But when I asked here, most of the people didn't know anything about Telegram and they used WhatsApp. But it took time for me to understand what was "that" WhatsApp and to download and start using it. I think I also use Facebook more. Facebook is more popular here. Yes, definitely among the Lithuanians. [P#1]

I cannot understand how they [Lithuanians] don't use Telegram here [. . .] I have been using Facebook for a lot of time, but really until now I cannot understand all algorithms of Facebook. How it works, where they find news . . . I don't understand why for them [Lithuanians] Facebook is just the main social media. [P#4]

I use Telegram mostly only with Ukrainians or Belarusian people as well, not with Lithuanians, because Lithuanians are using Messenger in Facebook or WhatsApp. [P#5]

I think Telegram is used only like uh, in countries like Ukraine, Russia, Belorussia . . . Something like this, because I have some friends from other parts of Europe, like Italy or Germany and they all, I don't know why, but they used WhatsApp only. [P#8]

Some participants also reported changes in usage time. On the one hand, some stated that their daily time using social networks was lower in Lithuania, while others declared that it was higher. The responses of P#6 and P#2 illustrate these two opposing angles:

Maybe it's less because here it is a very intense life. In Ukraine, it was COVID period. So we were stuck home and it was also influenced by this factor. Maybe on the COVID influence and for example here I'm studying and working in person. But in Ukraine everything was online so I was stuck with gadgets at home. [P#6]

I didn't use much social networks in my country, but when I moved, yeah, I cannot say I needed to, but yeah, it was kind of like obligatory [. . .] I started using some of social networks platforms and on social media. Uhm . . . I think it was also because of age, it was two years ago and then I was 18. [P#2]

3.2. Social Networks Support in the Migration Process

Within the Social Networks Support in the Migration Process category (#2), three subcategories were analyzed: Context (#2.1), Relevance (#2.2), and Other Support Sources (#2.3). The main findings are briefly presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Main findings under Category 2, OSN Support in the Migration Process.

Subcategories	Main Findings
2.1. Context	When the armed conflict broke out, technical problems and the urgency of leaving the country complicated access to OSNs.
2.2. Relevance	OSNs were of great help in planning migratory trips, receiving institutional support upon arrival in Lithuania, and mobilizing the international population for the Ukrainian side.
2.3. Other Support Sources	Institutions and physical social networks: Lithuanian government and institutions, universities and student dormitories, and the Ukrainian Center.

Created by the authors (2024).

3.2.1. Context

Some participants, especially those who began their migration almost immediately after the outbreak of the war (24 February 2022), described a context characterized by uncertainty and extreme urgency. Some did not have the opportunity or time to decide where to migrate. Others faced a complicated journey where access to the internet or electricity was not guaranteed. Below are several testimonies that describe the experience and the added difficulties:

We never made the decision about where to move, we didn't compare options. My city was partially occupied and basically we really had to flee, to escape, because it was occupied and there was no electricity, no Wi-Fi at the time they cut it out, so . . . it was like after two weeks the worst started, then when it was. We decided so to leave city but we didn't know where to go because we didn't have any Internet. [P#3]

Yeah, it's kind of strange, but I just moved very, very quickly. So I just packed all my stuff and went to Lithuania but I didn't have time to get any information about that country at all. [P#8]

I'm from Kharkiv region, it's East Ukraine [. . .] It was a very long trip [. . .] We stopped every hour because there were lots of bomb attacks. It took us around two days to get to Poland border from Kharkiv, yes. Internet was good when we stopped at big cities, but it was like maybe once in four hours, so we had long periods without connection, not even like phone connection to call like without Internet just to call. And also were afraid of using telephones. Because of battery charge like not a lot of people had power banks [. . .] so we tried to not to use it so much. [P#9]

3.2.2. Relevance

Despite the difficulties in accessing the Internet mentioned in the previous point, those participants who did not have such adverse situations when they left the country (especially those who travelled not immediately after the outbreak of the armed conflict) considered that OSNs were a crucial source of information to plan their trip, choose destination possibilities and start their life in the host country. The testimony of P#7 illustrates this experience:

Before travelling, I used social networks for gathering information about the country. To find different university opportunities, when I had to apply . . . it was a very useful tool. [P#7]

For most participants, OSNs were not just a means of communication but a lifeline. Since their arrival in Lithuania, these platforms had played a pivotal role, often serving as a reinforcement or a bridge to access other aid institutions. Among the interviewees as a whole, testimonies similar to those of P#8 and P#3 predominated:

Yes, actually, from the start, I think even before we went somewhere, we met some volunteers from Lithuania; I think we found them on some digital platforms, and they gave us their phone numbers [. . .] They told us to get to cross the Polish border, and then they would meet us. [P#8]

So yeah, I did use Instagram or I just Google to search about universities. [. . .] It was not my main way of choosing the university, but at least it gave me some kind of understanding how universities look, their specialties . . . [P#3]

Other participants also highlighted the relevance of the support offered by social media and digital platforms. They reflected on the help provided, in general, to the migration process and reception of Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania. Among other interviewees, P#3 and P#4 described this help and named examples of those platforms:

There are organizations as Blue/Yellow on social media to collect funds to support Ukraine. [P#4]

Through social media, we share fundraisers for the army and for helpers, and we shared them also share some news that was happening now back at that time. It was really, really very helpful to have social media support. Also, you can find hotlines for mental help. [P#3]

3.2.3. Other Support Sources

Given that all the participants were young university students, the university had been an extraordinary source of support for them in their migration and reception process, not only because of the information disseminated, but also because of the physical or real-space social network that dormitories constitute.

The university helped me to solve my papers. [P#2]

The university offered us the opportunity to continue our studies, they helped us with free dormitory, and also they gave us some scholarship. [P#9]

On the other hand, some participants had family or friends who are Lithuanians or had been living in Lithuania for a long time. Those personal contacts work as another physical social network that serves as support. P#5 and P#10 describe this experience:

> *Mostly, I received advice from people who was already here [in Lithuania]. So, I came and did things following them.* [P#5]

> *My best friend from school in Ukraine had come to study to Lithuania. So, when I arrived, she helped me with a lot of things.* [P#10]

At the level of associations, many participants highlighted the role played by the Ukraine Center, which operates as a hub for connecting Ukrainians in Lithuania, not only providing information but also leisure activities and opportunities for socialization. P#6 spontaneously used the term "social networks" when referring to the concept of physical social networks:

> *I visit Ukrainian Center. It is also somehow social network, especial for Ukrainians, where you can also attend some workshops, singing, dancing. Yes, there is space for use and, frequently, Erasmus students come [. . .] Ukrainians and Belarussians, especially refugees, come.* [P#6]

Participants also highlighted the Lithuanian government official information channels, websites, and printed information (posters and brochures) at the migration office. The following responses highlight this aspect:

> *We went to the Internet and search "support for Ukrainians in Lithuania" [. . .] And we found some official sites to contact asking for help.* [P#4]

> *I think that Lithuanian Government gave us everything they could, so we could adapt quickly. When we arrived in Lithuania, we went to the center and started to do our documents, they gave us information on brochures, on paper.* [P#9]

3.3. Purposes in Using Social Networks

The third category analyzed, Purposes in Using OSNs (#3), includes seven subcategories: Contacting Relatives and Friends (#3.1), Finding Practical Information for Daily Life (#3.2), Making Friends in Lithuania (#3.3), Being Updated with News (#3.4), Supporting the Ukraine Cause (#3.5), Sharing Emotions (#3.6), Recreational and Vocational Activities (#3.7). Table 5 summarizes the main findings synthetically.

Table 5. Main findings under Category 3, Purposes in Using OSNs.

Subcategories	Main Findings
3.1. Contacting Relatives and Friends	This was considered the main purpose of OSN use for the vast majority. Mainly through Telegram.
3.2. Finding Practical Information for Daily Life	More important during arrival and first moments in the host country. Mainly through Telegram groups, or on Facebook and Instagram.
3.3. Making Friends in Lithuania	Combination of OSNs (Telegram, Facebook, Instagram) and physical social networks (student dormitories). Low use of dating apps (Tinder) due to not obtaining positive results during initial attempts.
3.4. Being Updated with News	Most feel the need to know the news about their country 24/7. They do not consume news on mass media, only on social media. The main source was Telegram channels.

Table 5. *Cont.*

Subcategories	Main Findings
3.5. Supporting the Ukraine Cause	For most, this was the greatest motivation to share and create content. They use the English language to address the international audience.
3.6. Sharing Emotions	For some of them, OSNs have a cathartic function.
3.7. Recreational and Vocational Activities	Scrolling, watching, informal learning... Like any other Gen Z individual.

Created by the authors (2024).

3.3.1. Contacting Relatives and Friends

The first purpose mentioned by the majority of participants was the use of social networks as a means to stay in touch with their family and friends who are still in the Ukraine, or are refugees/displaced in other countries. P#4's words illustrate a unanimous motivation expressed by all the participants.

I use the social media at first because I need to speak with my parents with my friend because they are far away from me.[P#4]

3.3.2. Finding Practical Information for Daily Life

During the first days in the host country, refugees urgently needed to access practical information such as how to complete administrative paperwork, get accommodation, access medical services, find a job, etcetera. Most participants declared that the Telegram groups of Ukrainians in the same situation represented an excellent communication channel where refugees shared the information they received, resulting in a virtual bulletin board. Participants also highlighted similar groups on Facebook and Instagram, mainly composed of Ukrainians but frequently supported by Lithuanian organizing entities. Progressively, when the migrants' stay in the country became more consolidated, those groups lost their initial importance. Nevertheless, they remained operational and provide support in situations of need or doubt. The following responses describe that experience:

Yes, there are Telegram channels and Facebook channels too. To have groups with Ukrainians, for example, to get information about the documents. [P#1]

When I came, I used those groups for some urgent situations, like hospital, or like police [...] They have some experience and you can communicate in your native language, which is making everything much more easier for you to understand and to explain, yeah ... [P#2]

I can say that social networks were the primary resource for that [...] Even to get some clothes, because we left without anything and we thought that maybe with Facebook groups we could find something ... [P#3]

I think we use those groups until now because we have them in Telegram, in Instagram also. We have a lot of groups with Ukrainians in Lithuania [...] We can find a lot of information about work, about the documents, and yeah, we use it a lot. Until now, I cannot say that I read it every day because there are a million messages every day. But, I read it and if we need to find some information [...] there are headlines or like the main subjects on the top. [P#4]

3.3.3. Making Friends in Lithuania

Within this subcategory, three main findings were observed. Firstly, most participants stated that they actively try to make friends in Lithuania with compatriots and other Ukrainians in a similar refugee or migration situation to theirs. For these participants, channels and groups on Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram were the most effective tools, as they spontaneously manifested:

I know that there are a lot of like different and groups in Facebook for example for like students in Lithuania or Ukrainians in Ukraine. [P#2]

There are lots of groups, channels, for immigrants in many countries. People can meet and share their problems. [P#3]

There are some Facebook pages, not only Ukrainian Center. For Ukrainians and refugees, to meet, also for some discussions, to have workshops [. . .] Last time, I was in a pottery workshop. [P#6]

Another noteworthy finding was the role of university dormitories as a vibrant meeting point. This physical social network was found to facilitate socialization among fellow Ukrainians and foster a sense of inclusivity and diversity by connecting them with foreigners from diverse backgrounds who have come to Lithuania for educational purposes. For those who work, the physical labor environment was also found to be an important center of socialization. Once trust is established in real life, online communication sustains and strengthens these connections. This idea was recurrently expressed by several participants:

With student communities, it is much more easier, and even with my roommates in the dormitory, they can suggest you go places or introduce new friends. [P#2]

We have new students in dormitory like every half of a year. So we can meet each other, become friends and, after that, we continue to communicate in social media because they come back to their countries. [P#4]

I'm a close person, I usually contact only with people who I know. Sometimes I can meet somebody, for example in dormitory and then we contact. [P#5]

I'm not meeting with people on social media. I have tried like Tinder or another application but it was not successful [. . .] For me the purpose is not just to meet people but to me it was somehow like quality, quality people. Now, I'm working. And work is my social circle too. [P#6]

Finally, participants who used OSNs more proactively to make new friends (locals or internationals) often adopted a mixed strategy. They combined face-to-face interactions with people they know in real life and OSN use to enhance or expedite the relationship-building process. This approach, illustrated by the following responses, highlights the complementary nature of online and offline interactions in fostering social integration:

For dating, I think it's Tinder. Yeah, I have used. For making friends . . . I don't think so. My procedure is like meeting people in the real life and then have a chat, maybe in Instagram. [P#8]

It is half and half. For example, we meet each other in the streets and get to know each other on Instagram or any other social media but [. . .] Half of them was also, for example, from different apps, like Tinder or something like this, because I was trying to find friends, not only people from dormitory. And a half of them are from different apps or from social media. [P#10]

3.3.4. Being Updated with News

One of the purposes for which the study participants used OSNs the most was to stay up to date with the news about their country, specifically about aspects related to the armed conflict. This need to be updated was incessant for the vast majority of them, who declared that they connect several times a day for this reason.

Significantly, all interviewees declared that they preferred OSNs over traditional mass media (press, radio, or television) to access the news. When asked about the benefits they perceive in social networks as news sources, they talked about their immediacy, and even credibility. In most cases, they declared that they take certain precautions to verify the veracity of the content posted and that they trust only known channels, some of which are official. Among them, the Telegram channels stand out, as they became prevalent in Ukraine pre-war. P#4 and P#3's responses are representative of the majority:

I use Telegram for reading news, news from Ukraine. Because in Ukraine, Telegram is like an official, also nonofficial portal [. . .] And this information is very important [. . .] It's faster. In Ukraine, information must be like very, very fast, because if we have explosions, in one minute, you need to know what was, where . . . [P#4]

From full-scale invasion, Telegram has become the main source of information in Ukraine, so I use it mostly. It's our like local social network. [. . .] I do always, every day I'm checking the news. So it's evening, noon and morning [. . .] I following mostly channels which are verified [. . .] From the sources, like from the government can be. It can be leaders of thoughts which are reliable. Uhm . . . and, sometimes, I compare the information. For example, I can tap on the link which is in the post and compare information which is in Telegram post and which is in a newspaper or foreign newspaper. [P#5]

While the study participants almost unanimously considered Telegram channels to be their primary source of information, the minority testimony of a single participant revealed some extreme distrust of the credibility of this source, casting doubt on the political and economic interest of the owners of those channels:

I know that a lot of people using Telegram like a source of news in Ukraine. I think now it's like the most popular [. . .] But I think a lot of people don't have an understanding of how it is. Other people who are, like are entrepreneurship, or businessmen use it [Telegram] for their own needs. Everyone can upload everything that they want. Everyone can pay someone else to write an article. And Telegraph has even a more problematic system because people watch news in some Telegram chats, where the moderator and the manager can mislead and ruin information [. . .] Many people go into the Telegram to find clear information, but, for me, it's very tricky. [P#7]

3.3.5. Supporting the Ukraine Cause

The interviewed participants expressed their firm commitment to portraying the situation in Ukraine on social media on a recurring basis. For them, this is an opportunity to make the reality of the conflict visible to the international community. They feel that their contributions help raise support for their country. As such messages, in most cases, are addressed to the international community, they use English in posts related to this topic. Some responses support this position:

If we are talking about war [. . .] we are using social media and some other platforms for sharing [. . .] what situation is it today or yesterday [. . .] Since I moved, I have a lot of friends from around, around Europe and some of them do not understand clearly what's going on in my country [. . .] And by sharing something I can show them what exactly is going on and a lot of my friends are doing donations [. . .] I explain everything in English and post it. [P#2]

I have a lot of international friends and it's also for me important now that I can share information about Ukraine, about the war, to these international friends because I have friends from all over the world. [P#4]

Among my followers, there are international students. European students or international. That is why I feel responsible to share it, to share real information with them. [P#7]

3.3.6. Sharing Emotions

Some participants also used OSNs as a way to share and express their feelings. This is an activity fostered by intrinsic motivation that may fulfill a catharsis function. It was not a majority response, but was crucial for those who felt this motivation. In this sense, the words of P#7 and P#4 stand out:

I'm posting a bit my life, my childhood as well. I am sharing my personality with audience, sometimes using pictures. With the audio, I express myself, express my feelings. Express . . . I don't know, some energy. [P#7]

So when I wonder something and when I want to share something that is in my mind and in my soul, I can write it and post on Instagram and I feel better. [P#4]

3.3.7. Recreational and Vocational Activities

For most participants, OSNs also constituted a recreational activity. They enjoy scrolling and watching videos. In some cases, social networks serve as a source of inspiration or as a tool to learn hobbies and even develop their talents. In that sense, recreational activity goes hand in hand with vocational learning. Of the many comments, the following two were selected as the most representative:

I can say that from Instagram I learn a lot [. . .] I think because I use it like free courses, for example, someone is a cosmetologist, someone is like neurobiologists, someone is like a trainer in the gym and I can learn something from them for free. [P#1]

Yes, videos on social networks are really wonderful to disconnect, because we also need to disconnect sometimes. Yeah . . . [. . .] I have two pages on Instagram. One is my personal and the second one is for my works because I'm as a freelance photographer and sometimes I post there my work. [P#5]

3.4. Main Topics of Interest

Within the Main Topics of Interest category (#4), three subcategories were analyzed: Related to Ukraine (#4.1), Related to Lithuania (#4.2), and Miscellaneous (#4.3). Table 6 highlights the key findings.

Table 6. Main findings under Category 4, Main Topics of Interest.

Subcategories	Main Findings
4.1. Related to Ukraine	News about the war was the main interest, followed by cultural aspects that evoke nostalgia or reinforce the feeling of identity.
4.2. Related to Lithuania	Apart from practical information for their daily life, most participants did not express interest in Lithuanian topics.
4.3. Miscellaneous	Like any other Gen Z individual.

Created by the authors (2024).

3.4.1. Related to Ukraine

All participants were highly interested in Ukraine-related topics. Most of them focused on news and additional content about the war, as can be read in P#9's response. Furthermore, some participants, among them P#1, declared their interest in cultural aspects, presented from a nostalgic perspective or as reinforcement of national identity:

When full scale invasion started, I was online 24 h to 7. It gave me like some image of control that if I knew everything I could be in control. I know this is not how it works, but it was something to make me more cold. Something that let me sleep just a little bit and currently I'm still more in social media and I still feel like subscribe on more channels because I need actually need to know what happened in Ukraine. I'm searching every day about my hometown [. . .] If anything happens, I need to know it to contact my family. [P#9]

I get some news from Facebook and from Instagram because of my subscriptions and about the fashion things. Yeah, the old Ukrainian style, this national costume. So. That's what I watch about it. Something about the history also from Facebook and Instagram. [P#1]

3.4.2. Related to Lithuania

Apart from the practical information required to meet daily needs in their host country and some socialization opportunities, participants seemed to show little interest in topics related to Lithuania, such as its political situation, history, traditions, or nature. A small minority of participants expressed interest in contemporary culture and the country's artists. This was the case of P#5:

I am interested in the creative sphere. In filmmakers, artists, mostly photographers. Uhm... especially Andrew Miksys, very popular in Lithuania. [P#5]

3.4.3. Miscellaneous

In addition, participants showed interest in a wide variety of other topics.

I watch videos related to cooking, sport, beauty, psychology . . . [P#6]

3.5. Social Inclusion in Lithuania

The fifth category analyzed, Social Inclusion in Lithuania (#5), includes five subcategories: Studies (#5.1), Employment (#5.2), Personal Relationships (#5.3), Language and Cultural Immersion (#5.4), and Self-Perception (#5.5). The main findings related to these subcategories are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. Main Findings under Category 5, Social Inclusion in Lithuania.

Subcategories	Main Findings
5.1. Studies	High level of inclusion.
5.2. Employment	No conclusive results. For some, their work in Lithuania is a source of satisfaction and social inclusion. Others encountered significant job access barriers (OSNs did not help).
5.3. Personal Relationships	Most have established cordial ties but not deep friendships with Lithuanians. Deep friendship is conceived only among other Ukrainians. Making friends with foreigners living in Lithuania is easier than with locals.
5.4. Language and Cultural Immersion	Low knowledge of the Lithuanian language (due to its difficulty). No communication barriers (English or Russian are bridge languages). A minority expressed interest in Lithuanian culture.
5.5. Self-Perception	Lithuania is a family environment close to home. Some participants relate the social inclusion process to their personal maturation phases.

Created by the authors (2024).

3.5.1. Studies

All study participants were studying or had studied at a Lithuanian university since they arrived in the country. They had often taken advantage of opportunities to prolong their studies, sometimes starting a master's degree after completing their bachelor's degree. Primarily, these students had joined international programs, sharing a classroom with students from other nationalities, including Lithuanians. P#1's response represents the experience lived by most participants.

I'm studying at the university. It is my third year here. But second year of studying here [...] I joined the first year and later continued my studies as a full-time student. [P#1]

3.5.2. Employment

Regarding employment, participants discussed diverse experiences. On the one hand, some participants, as P#4 and P#6, declared that they had a job, which had accelerated their integration into the host community:

Now I'm working, so I am 9 h per day in a Lithuanian atmosphere. [P#4]

I'm happy at work. It is my dreamed job. I met some new acquaintances. This is now my social circle too. [P#6]

Conversely, a minority of participants lamented the difficulties they had encountered in their job search; they also declared that social networks had not been of great help in this process. P#2's response illustrates the situation of those who had encountered barriers to accessing a job:

I used LinkedIn and I used Facebook for searching for some part-time job [. . .] but it didn't work. They rejected me at some point because of I am not a citizen of Lithuania, or not a citizen of the European Union or maybe because being a student. [P#2]

3.5.3. Personal Relationships

According to the responses of the participants, the majority of them had not built friendly relationships with locals from the host community. There existed bonds of cordiality that did not tend to evolve into deeper feelings. Some explained this circumstance based on the provisional nature of their situation. P#3's response represents this opinion:

It's a little bit complicated because whenever, umm, we didn't know when are we coming back. [P#3]

The participants had local and international acquaintances but, according to their responses, their authentic friendship relationships were only with Ukrainians due to a deeper emotional connection and empathy. This was an idea that was expressed recurrently, and that is clearly represented in the response of P#4:

My best friends are from Ukraine, refugees like me. Yeah, but from other countries, I have people, but they cannot say that they are friends. Because we live very different lives. This is not just my opinion, I spoke about it with the another Ukrainians, and for us, for Ukrainians, it is easier to communicate with Ukrainians not because of language, but because we feel the same. [P#4]

On the other hand, numerous comments, including those by P#7 and P#10, alluded to friendly relations with international students residing in Lithuania. With this international community, they have some feeling of belonging to the group:

Yes, I like to be with Erasmus people [. . .] It is people from different countries becoming friends or like understanding each other [. . .] Yeah, they connected between themselves and they hung out and like, I don't know, are doing something together. [P#7]

So it was kind of good about friends. It was easy because there were a lot of Ukrainians in our dormitory. So you just can go to the kitchen and hear the Ukrainian language, yeah. [. . .] I have a lot of friends from Ukraine, but I didn't know them before I came to Lithuania for studying. And I have friends all over the world too. Understandably, I should be closer to Ukrainians, but I am also in good relationships with other international people. [P#10]

3.5.4. Language and Cultural Immersion

Participants generally expressed the complexity of the Lithuanian language, even for those who have taken several courses. The following responses represent the majority:

I have received courses of Lithuanian, but it is still very hard for me to understand. [P#4]

I speak only a little bit of basic phrases. [P#5]

However, most participants had not experienced communication barriers, resorting to English as a bridge language to communicate with other students or acquaintances their age, or to Russian to speak with teachers or other adult Lithuanians. A minority expressed initial difficulties with English:

Before, when I came, I had trouble with my English. It wasn't so bad, but it wasn't so flexible enough to explain everything that I wanted and to feel confident. [P#7]

Spontaneously, the participants showed a low interest in learning about the cultural aspects of the host country. However, those who address the topic highlight the role of OSNs as a source of information to understand the country better and make cultural visits.

3.5.5. Self-Perception

Participants found it difficult to describe or measure their degree of integration in the country. In general, they all agreed that they felt more adapted, and that some aspects of their context had become something familiar, close to the concept of home. P#2's comment represents the majority position:

When I have been out of Lithuania, and I come back, and I just get out of the airport, I feel like I am at home. Because I know the people, I know the environment . . ., everything is familiar for me. [P#2]

They associated their immersion in the country with personal maturation, through which they have managed to move to an adult and more autonomous phase, as can be read in the following responses:

For these two years I have become more individual, maybe more conscious. [P#1]

Imagine you are like a small lion living with your pride family, and you behave as your parents have taught you. How to live, how to survive . . . But then, it changes a lot, and you have to leave the pride to become a lion. Maybe because of the Lithuanians and being in a new culture and a new country, I started to get acquainted with myself to ask me questions, organize my routine, to be more mature, not like only a teenager. [P#7]

4. Discussion

According to the results, young Ukrainian refugees hosted in Lithuania present characteristics of standard Gen Z OSN user behavior (Duffett 2020). Their usage is daily and prolonged, above the daily time average for which all ages are considered (We Are Social 2024). Additionally, as a characteristic of Gen Z, they show maturity and expertise in digital scenarios. In terms of their activity, even though content consumption is the most widespread behavior, there are significant cases of users who act as content creators, whether casual or with a consistent vocation. Their need to make the Ukrainian point of view visible and support their national cause is one of the main themes that motivates them to post, preferably in English, so that their testimony reaches an international audience.

The most significant transformation in their use of OSNs upon reaching the host community was facing that Telegram, their prevalent platform, was not widespread in Lithuania. They felt forced to make an adaptation effort, which involved not only a change in habits but also divided their OSN community in two. On the one hand, communication with their compatriots continued on Telegram, which became a media channel for social comfort, and a digital shelter to meet Ukrainian 'friends' and feel their support. On the other hand, the other platforms (Facebook and WhatsApp) were reserved for new Lithuanian or foreigner 'acquaintances'. This research has also confirmed previous studies on preference and use of social networks in Ukraine and Lithuania (Datareportal 2023; Statista 2024b).

The participants' responses confirm the strategic function that OSNs can play in planning the migration process, pointed out by Dekker et al. (2018). However, some of the participants stated that the difficulties of accessing the Internet and the extreme urgency with which they left the country made the use of social networks impossible or downplayed their importance. Other sources of support, based on real-space social networks, took on a significant role in the process: government institutions, associations, volunteers, universities, and, of course, personal contacts (family or friends) who already lived in Lithuania. Many refugees knew about them through OSNs. Therefore, in one way or another, online channels played a significant role in those first moments, serving as a platform for discovery and connection, and disseminating information and aid.

Once they arrived in the country and in the subsequent months, OSNs constituted a continuous reinforcement in their journey for integration, a vital tool to foster their social inclusion. However, it was only a part of a mixed process, since the virtual community has always had an offline correlate. In addition to virtual social networks, some offline communities operated as social hubs. Among them, university dormitories played a special role as a meeting point among Ukrainians and for Ukrainians with other foreigners temporary staying in Lithuania. In other words, OSNs served to complement and amplify physical social networks.

The findings regarding the purposes that lead Gen Z Ukrainian refugees to use social networks reveal a remarkable resilience in the face of their migration process. This determination has affected practically all of their reasons to use OSNs, in pursuit of the three dimensions of physical and civil inclusion and social well-being addressed in a prior study (Pavlova et al. 2023).

For the participants, their need to maintain ties with the community of origin and create new ones with the host community is a dominant trend in their activity on OSNs. Through those digital communities, they have kept contact with relatives and friends still in Ukraine, followed the news, supported the Ukrainian cause, and shared emotions about the conflict. They have made new contacts in Lithuania and found practical information about daily life.

On the other hand, OSNs are for the vast majority of them a 24/7 news outlet about the conflict in their country. Following the characteristics of Gen Z, they prefer social networks as sources of information over traditional media (Soengas-Pérez et al. 2019; Palomo-Domínguez et al. 2023). However, in a testament to their discernment, the participants also expressed a caution that led them to question source credibility and discard feared fake news.

Additionally, OSNs also function as a space to evoke nostalgia and exalt Ukrainian national identity. In contrast, the interest that participants seem to express in topics related to Lithuania is limited, almost exclusively related to practical needs for daily life.

When assessing their social inclusion in the country, although all of the participants are studying or had studied at Lithuanian universities and some of them are working, they had not created deep ties of friendship with locals. Occasionally, they had formed closer relationships with other displaced foreigners. It should be noted that although refugees do not encounter communication barriers when using English, the fact that they cannot communicate in the Lithuanian language does not favor this process of full social inclusion. It is crucial to recall the importance of strengthening social relationships, due to their positive effects on the well-being of refugees and the ability to alleviate previous trauma (Doidge et al. 2020).

This research has limitations inherent to pioneering work with exploratory purposes. Based on the findings obtained, possible lines of future research have been identified that would expand the scope and the depth of the research and the validity of its results. Among them is the analysis of Telegram information channels and their credibility as perceived by users. Expanding the research with Gen Z participants who do not belong to the university environment to isolate the possible influence that the educational factor could have, whether for causality or correlation purposes, would also be suitable.

5. Conclusions

This research has contributed to describing the role of OSNs in the social inclusion of Gen Z Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania. From ten in-depth interviews, the research describes not only the observable facts but also the motivations, thoughts, and emotions behind OSN use and designates possible obstacles to overcome.

In pursuit of the research objectives, this article addresses a gap in the scientific literature by describing the social media user behavior of young Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania, differentiating between those aspects that are common for Gen Z and those whose migratory context and social inclusion mark them. It also identifies what the

greatest motivations and topics of interest in OSNs are from the perspective of the studied population.

Furthermore, the paper explores the self-perception that the study subjects have in the role that OSNs have played in their migratory experience. Their responses show that OSNs are a powerful means of communication with multiple channels, viral scope, and extraordinary potential to help in this process of social inclusion. OSNs provide a reinforcement and amplification of the physical social networks, which, far from having been replaced by virtual communities, still play a crucial role in migration and social inclusion.

Finally, when assessing their degree of social inclusion in Lithuania, we conclude there has been significant progress made in the process, although there remains a challenging journey ahead to achieve the successful inclusion of Gen Z Ukrainian refugees in the Southern Baltic Republic. The ultimate goal is to not only ensure equality of opportunities and resources, but also to foster participation in the community and society, and to instill a sense of security and belonging (Hynie 2017).

One of the study challenges involved accessing a small population that needed to trust the research team to share their sensitive experiences.

The findings have a practical application in reflecting on ways to improve the communication strategies of aid institutions in social networks.

In the academic context, this also marks a notable contribution that opens a new line to research on a topic of relevance and poses great significance in the social, political, and geostrategic spheres.

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