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Bricolentrepreneuring: A comparative phenomenological study of Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial bricolage practices in the UK and Romania

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ABSTRACT

Uncertainty, discrimination, and socioeconomic marginalization in host countries lead many refugees to entrepreneurial bricolage. Understanding their bricolage practices is crucial to designing policies and programmes to support refugee entrepreneurship, yet little is known about how refugees enact bricolage practices where institutional support is lacking, resources are constrained and where they contend with war trauma due to displacement. In the first study of its kind, we use interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and draw on the concept of 'bricolage' to investigate Ukrainian refugee practices in the UK and Romania. Our findings affirm the importance of understanding the contexts which shape these refugees' practices. Importantly, they draw much-deserved attention to how the war trauma that refugees carry with them influences their bricolentrepreneuring journeys. We state our theoretical contributions and explore the implications for effective policy making to support 'entrepreneurship at the margins'.

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Introduction

Over 6 million Ukrainians have fled the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with over 200,000 in the UK and 160,000 in Romania (UNHCR 2023). Refugees contend with language barriers, unemployment, deskilling, and lack of institutional support in their new societies (Adeeko and Treanor 2022). They often turn to entrepreneurship to overcome socio-economic marginalization and poverty (Bruton, Ahlstrom, and Si 2015). In recent years, researchers have considered this activity, demonstrating how refugees engage with formal and informal forms of entrepreneurship (Refai and McElwee 2023). Entrepreneurial bricolage has emerged as a central concept, understood as an activity where entrepreneurs creatively use available resources to address challenges, take advantage of opportunities and achieve their entrepreneurial goals (Baker and Nelson 2005).

There has been a tendency to regard refugee entrepreneurship as a subset of migrant entrepreneurship (Abebe 2023; Newman, Macaulay, and Dunwoodie 2023). However, refugees contend with specific challenges, including lack of institutional support, effects of resource constraints and war trauma which has been largely overlooked (Abebe 2023; Wauters and Lambrecht 2006, 2008). A 'one-size-fits-all' approach impedes the understanding of refugee entrepreneurship in the context of displacement (Abebe 2023; Bizri 2017) and encourages programmes and policies that are exclusionary. These shortcomings need to be addressed before the human and socio-economic potential of millions of refugees is inadvertently lost 'at the margins' of society (Zalkat, Barth, and Rashid 2023).

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We address this gap in the research by presenting the first cross-cultural, comparative study on the experiences of Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial bricolage practices in the UK and Romania. We consider how context shapes refugees' entrepreneurial bricolage practices, specifically, institutional voids, resource limitations and war trauma. Our structure is as follows. We, first, discuss the distinctive challenges encountered by refugee entrepreneurs in host societies. Next, the concept of entrepreneurial bricolage is discussed. Our research methodology and method follow. We then present and discuss Ukrainian refugee's experiences and their entrepreneurial bricolage practices in the UK and Romania. We spell out our theoretical findings and research on refugee entrepreneurship bricolage, outline the practical and policy implications of our findings, and suggest future areas for investigation.

Literature review

Refugee entrepreneurship in context

For more than two decades, the conceptual ambiguity between refugee and migrant entrepreneurship (Abebe 2023; Harima and Harima 2022; Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020) has stemmed from the broad definition of a migrant (Ram et al. 2022), which emphasizes a person's residency outside of their place of origin but ignores the reason for their departure (King and Lulle 2016). There are major distinctions between voluntary migration (migrants) and involuntary migration (refugees) (Abebe 2023; Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020; Ram et al. 2022).

Wauters and Lambrecht (2006, 2008) were the first to highlight refugees' limited resources, loss of skills, restricted ability to move between countries, and war trauma as obstacles to employment and entrepreneurial endeavours in host countries. Lyon, Sepulveda, and Syrett (2007) identified the distinctive challenges refugees encounter in host countries, including limited finance, difficulties in marketing and business development, and a lack of information and advice. Others emphasize limited access to financing as a barrier to refugees' entrepreneurial endeavours (Alrawadieh, Karayilan, and Cetin 2019; Wauters and Lambrecht 2008). Labour market discrimination and regulatory hurdles further force refugees into occupations and entrepreneurial niches (Obschonka, Hahn, and Bajwa 2018). Many rely on social networks to find jobs or pursue entrepreneurial aspirations, which potentially results in downward mobility (Campion 2018). Singleton and Salmon (2023) explained how institutional, financial and social barriers create distinct challenges to refugee entrepreneurship, requiring inclusive and intersectionally informed policies to support refugees in their entrepreneurial activities. Finally, Papadopoulos and Shea (2018) drew attention to the emotional trauma accompanying refugees, emphasizing the importance of psychological support that is both compassionate and culturally appropriate.

Yet, refugees demonstrate remarkable resilience. Zalkat, Barth, and Rashid (2023) showed that the trauma experienced by Syrian refugees in Sweden fuelled their entrepreneurial resilience; refugees approached entrepreneurship as an emancipatory journey and an opportunity to pursue personal and professional growth. Adeeko and Treanor (2022) contended that, despite adversity, refugees possess the resilience to move beyond their traumatic pasts and use their expertise, experience, and know-how to take advantage of business opportunities in their new countries. de la Chaux and Haugh (2020), when studying refugee entrepreneurship in the Dadaab refugee camps, Kenya, showed how, even in the most difficult contexts, refugee entrepreneurs sought to reclaim economic agency and self-determination. They were strategic in overcoming the impediments to entrepreneurship; towards donors, they acted as vulnerable victims, thereby endorsing the need for humanitarian aid. They paid facilitation payments (bribes) to the police and local authority employees, who in recognition of the wealth the refugees generated for the community, condoned their ventures even though their ventures were unauthorized. Indeed, despite the multiple and distinctive constraints refugees face (Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017; Lee et al. 2020), the number of refugee-turned-entrepreneurs is on the rise, referred to as 'the paradox of refugee entrepreneurship'.

Collins, Watson, and Krivokapic-Skoko (2017) remarked that, 'while refugees face perhaps the greatest barriers to entrepreneurship of any immigrant group, they have the highest rates of entrepreneurship of any immigrant group, in some contexts, such as in Adelaide, Australia' (p: 33).

Refugees are more likely to undertake entrepreneurial endeavours in countries with favourable environments (Santamaria-Velasco, Del Mar Benavides-Espinosa, and Simón-Moya 2021). The UK stands out as pro-entrepreneurial. It scored strongly across several index dimensions in its National Entrepreneurial Context Index (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2024), with favourable physical, commercial and professional infrastructure as well as ease of access to finance. It is suggested that 67% of UK entrepreneurs perceive entrepreneurship as a vehicle for generating wealth, not as a means to alleviate job scarcity. In comparison, Romania's weaker economy, communist past and dependence on EU assistance have contributed to decreased entrepreneurial engagement (Bunduchi et al. 2023). Its entrepreneurial rate has fallen steadily since 2021, due to a lack of commercial and professional infrastructure, regulatory burdens and difficulty in accessing entrepreneurial financing. Nearly 90% of new entrepreneurs cite job scarcity as their primary motivation for starting a business (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2024).

Entrepreneurial bricolage

For almost six decades, Lévi-Strauss's definition of the term 'bricolage', as 'making the most of available resources' (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 17), has informed entrepreneurship research. Baker and Nelson (2005) subsequently defined bricolage as the process of 'making do by creatively combining available resources to address new problems and opportunities' (p. 331). They expanded the concept of bricolage by introducing several key components. Firstly, there is *'making do'*, which involves creatively utilizing and reconfiguring existing resources to address new possibilities and align with new goals, regardless of the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes. Secondly, comes using *'resources at hand'*, which refers to accessing and utilizing available resources without incurring high costs. Lastly, they identified *'refusing to enact limitations'*, which entails trying out solutions, observing the results and dealing with potential resource scarcity and the risk of market exit.

In resource-constrained environments, entrepreneurs lack the legal, socio-economic and financial resources needed to sustain and expand businesses (Cunha et al. 2014). As such, the bricolage scholarship emphasizes 'improvisation'; the ability to use trial-and-error methods to adapt available resources to overcome problems and seize opportunities (Di Domenico, Haugh, and Tracey 2010). Entrepreneurs identify opportunities, reinvent company models and resources, using their expertise, experience, and social networks to overcome difficult situations and precarity (de la Chaux and Haugh 2020).

Bricolage practices take multiple forms (Mateus and Sarkar 2024). Entrepreneurs may engage in *individual bricolage* by creatively utilizing what is available to overcome obstacles or achieve goals, without resorting to traditional resources or external support. In *collective bricolage*, multiple bricoleurs combine their skills, knowledge, and resources informally or formally, as needed (Tasavori, Kwong, and Pruthi 2018). Entrepreneurs may combine resources found in pre-existing personal and professional networks, to enact *network bricolage* (Di Domenico, Haugh, and Tracey 2010).

Entrepreneurs engage in *selective bricolage*, by carefully selecting which 'limitations to counteract and which to enact' (Baker and Nelson 2005). In *parallel bricolage*, they engage in 'multiple ongoing projects relying on bricolage' (Baker and Nelson 2005) or ' … in multiple bricolage projects at the same time' (Baker and Nelson 2005, cited in; Mateus and Sarkar 2024, 7). Meanwhile, entrepreneurs can utilize resources and knowledge from multiple geographical locations (*transnational bricolage*) to solve problems across national and cultural boundaries (Liu et al. 2021).

While Lévi-Strauss's (1966) idea of bricolage centred on the bricoleur's capacity to draw on their own set of skills and knowledge, new research shows the value of networks and collaborations on entrepreneurial bricolage (Yu and Wang 2021). However, it is important to note that networks are

Table 1. Entrepreneurial bricolage practices highlighted in literature.

Bricolage practices	Examples of entrepreneurship research
External/Network bricolage	By engaging in internal/individual bricolage, bricoleurs combine resources derived from established personal and professional networks (Tasavori, Kwong, and Pruthi 2018). They can be dominant, complementary, inactive, or collaborative, depending on how much cooperation is used through these networks. This suggests that networks are not always usable resources just because they are created or already established (Liu et al. 2021).
Internal/Independent bricolage	This is the most basic and first documented form of bricolage (Baker, Miner, and Eesley 2003). It alludes to the bricoleur making do by recombining resources on his/her own without relying on collaboration (Tasavori, Kwong, and Pruthi 2018)
Parallel bricolage	Bricoleurs take on many bricolage projects at the same time. This type of bricolage has been linked with entrepreneurial survival rather than expansion (Baker and Nelson 2005).
Financial bricolage	Bricoleurs access small-scale, informal financial resources from family, friends, and acquaintances rather than from conventional financial institutions (C. C. Y. Kwong et al. 2019).
Collective bricolage	*Familiar-based bricolage*, when multiple bricoleurs merge and use informally their repertoires of skills, knowledge and resources when needed (C. Kwong, Tasavori, and Cheung 2017) *Convention-based bricolage*, when multiple bricoleurs formally negotiate bricolage conventions, leveraging their skills, knowledge and resources to support the partnership (Tasavori, Kwong, and Pruthi 2018)
Selective bricolage	In contrast to 'parallel bricolage', bricoleurs selectively engage in bricolage for specific enterprise processes rather than continually across the enterprise (Baker and Nelson 2005). This type of bricolage has been related to enterprise growth (Yang 2018).
Transnational bricolage	Entrepreneurs can utilize resources and knowledge from multiple geographical locations (transnational bricolage) to solve problems across national and cultural boundaries (Liu et al. 2021).

Source: Researchers' own based on: Baker, Miner, and Eesley (2003); Baker and Nelson (2005); C. C. Y. Kwong et al. (2019); Liu et al. (2021); Mateus and Sarkar (2024); Tasavori, Kwong, and Pruthi (2018); Yang (2018).

not necessarily resources simply because they exist. While collaborations among entrepreneurs can enhance the efficient use of combined skills and resources (Liu et al. 2021), excessive collaboration can impede business creativity through resource overload, dilution of enterprise focus, increase in complexity, and mismanagement of resources (Anzenbacher and Wagner 2020).

Table 1 provides an overview of variations of bricolage practices in entrepreneurship research.

Building on the research, we offer an understanding of entrepreneurial bricolage as practices determined by context (Mateus and Sarkar 2024). Our goal is not to report a complete list of all bricolage practices, but rather, to respond to Mateus and Sarkar's (2024) call for a more in-depth look at the entrepreneurial bricolage phenomenon as contextual practices. With this objective in mind, we investigate how institutional voids, resource constraints and war trauma that refugees experience shape their entrepreneurial progress. We draw on Baker and Nelson's (2005) concept of bricolage, which emphasizes adaptability, a refusal to conform to limitations and improvisation.

Method

Research context

We focus on Ukrainian refugees in the UK and Romania. They have unique demographic characteristics and have received 'preferential' treatment from EU member host countries (OECD 2023). This treatment has granted them unrestricted access to the host labour market and support from sponsors, distinguishing them from other refugee communities (De Coninck 2023). The majority of Ukrainian refugees (76%) were in full-time jobs before the war, while 20% were entrepreneurs (Panchenko 2022). In 2021, 1.57 million Ukrainians received EU residency permits, making them the largest non-EU community in Europe (Eurostat 2021).

The UK and Romania were selected for our study since they host some of the largest communities of Ukrainian refugees in Europe (OECD 2023). Romania provided temporary protection to more than 160,000 Ukrainian refugees who have crossed its borders since the war began, while the UK became

a temporary home to more than 200,000 Ukrainian refugees through the Ukrainian Family Visa and Sponsorship Scheme (UNHCR 2023).

Sampling

Following the World Bank's (2023) definition of refugee entrepreneurs as 'all those who left their country of birth to escape persecution or conflict, are unable to go back, and have established a business, whether or not, in the country of refuge' (World Bank 2023, 21), we selected study participants using the following inclusionary criteria. (1) s/he is a Ukrainian citizen who has voluntarily consented to share their experiences; (2) s/he self-identifies as a refugee; (3) s/he is living in the UK or Romania at the time of the interview; and (4) s/he is engaged in entrepreneurship, whether formally or informally.

Due to their geographical dispersion and vulnerability, researchers used multiple convenience sampling methods, such as traditional and social media e-snowballing, to access these hard-to-reach participants (Chitac and Knowles 2019). E-snowballing via Facebook and LinkedIn is a unique sampling method that uses subscribers' publicly available social media to invite potential participants via private messaging (Chitac and Knowles 2019). This iterative approach mitigated selection bias and gatekeeper dependency, whilst also ensuring that the 'right' participants were included (Rockliffe et al. 2018) to reach empirical saturation. Our sample size of seventeen participants aligns with IPA practice (Alase 2017) and interpretative tradition in refugee entrepreneurship research of one to seven participants (Bizri 2017; C. Kwong, Tasavori, and Cheung 2017), which prioritizes depth over generalization (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2019).

We interviewed nine Ukrainian refugee entrepreneurs in the UK and eight in Romania using semi-structured interviews and first-person narratives of ideographic experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 40 and 70 minutes, were conducted online from July 2023 to May 2024. Two interviews conducted in-person with refugees in Romania were followed up using online interviews, because we wanted to clarify further questions with the participants. The questions raised in the in-person interviews were repeated in the online interviews, and both verbatim transcribed texts were analysed. The participants were offered the choice of face-to-face or online interviews. Due to their professional and familial obligations, online interviews were preferred. The researchers prioritized the wellbeing of the participants by accommodating their preferences for the time of interview.

The lead researcher/interviewer used probes to encourage in-depth narratives about the refugees' 'everyday experiences' of entrepreneurial bricolage (Steyaert and Katz 2004). Phenomenological principles guided the open-ended interview questions, encouraging first-person descriptions of Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial experiences and presenting them as unique, subjective ones (Høffding and Martiny 2016).

To ensure the quality of the interviews, the researcher-interviewer briefed the participants and discussed the phenomenological semi-structured interview method with them before the interview. Additionally, the researcher-interviewer's questions fostered 'an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an area in which the interviewee has substantial experience' (Charmaz 2014, 85).

Following common practice in cross-cultural research, participants were invited to select the language for the interview (Harima and Harima 2022); UK participants chose English. The majority demonstrated good language proficiency. In contrast, Romania-based participants wished to be interviewed in Ukrainian, so an interpreter was recruited to translate and assure accurate verbatim transcripts. However, in both cases, the interview communication context might have affected interview quality, this being a common limitation of cross-cultural research (Harima and Harima 2022). Table 2 provides an overview of the Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurs interviewed.

In line with a recent OECD report (2023) on the skills and demographic profiles of Ukrainian refugees, the majority of participants interviewed in the UK and Romania were women (six women and three men in the UK, and six women and two men in Romania), typically holding a bachelor or

Table 2. Participants' demographics in the UK and Romania.

Participant code	Education level	Pre-war business sector & model home country & years	Business sector & model-Host country	Primary market	Arrival in host country	Gender
LavUK	Bachelor	IT recruitment/hybrid/ 8 years	IT recruitment/ online	Ukrainian/European	22-Jun	F
LiaUK	Bachelor	IT recruitment/hybrid/ 6 years	IT recruitment/ online	Ukrainian	22-Jun	F
TiaUK	Master	Travel agency & Wellness/ 'brick & mortar'/8 years	Travel services & Wellness/ online	Ukrainian	22-May	F
HanUK	Bachelor	Interior design/ 'brick and mortar'/4 years	Interior design/ online	Ukrainian	22-Jun	F
LexUK	Bachelor	IT recruitment/ hybrid/4 years	IT recruitment/ online	Ukrainian/European	22-Jun	M
DanUK	Bachelor	Software Developer 'brick and mortar'/6 years	Software Developer/online	Ukraine/International	22-May	M
TinUK	Bachelor	Software Development/ 'brick and mortar'/10 years	Software Developer/online	Ukraine/International	22-May	M
NaUK	Bachelor	None	Business Club & Candle/Hybrid	Ukrainian	22-Apr	F
AyaUK	Bachelor	IT recruitment & Software Development/ 'brick and mortar'10 years	IT recruitment & Software Development/ online	Ukraine/International	22-May	F
LerRo	Master	English Teaching & Translation/ 'brick and mortar'/1 year	English Teaching & Translation & Sales/online	Ukrainian	22-Mar	F
AkaRo	Bachelor	Business Consulting/'brick and mortar'/3 years	Business Consulting & Project Management & Sales/ hybrid	Ukrainian & Republic of Moldova	22-Mar	F
SylRo	Bachelor	Pathology Centre ('brick and mortar') & Hairdressing products (online)9 years	Selling hairdressing products online & Hairstyle salon ('brick and mortar')	Ukrainian & Republic of Moldova	23-Jun	M
GhiRo	Bachelor	Manufacturing/ 'brick and mortar'/20 years	Investments & Construction/online	Ukrainian & Romanian	23-Mar	M
EnaRo	Bachelor	None	Photography & graphic designer	Ukrainian & Romanian	22-Mar	F
AyaRo	Bachelor	Selling gold & silver jewellery 'brick and mortar'/6 years	Custom Jewellery/online	Ukrainian & European	23-Apr	F
ToriRo	Bachelor	Entertainment Centre for kids/ 'brick and mortar'/10 years	Career & Business Consulting Centre/ online	Ukrainian	23-Jan	F
YnaRo	Master	Mobile Phones Business & Nutrition Consulting/ 'brick and mortar'/12 years	Nutrition Consulting/ online	Ukrainian	22-Mar	F

Source: Researchers' own.

master's degree, and having an average of over six years of entrepreneurship experience in pre-war Ukraine, except for two participants (one residing in each host country), who declared themselves as being first-time entrepreneurs. All participants sought refuge and protection in the host countries within the first year of the war and started their 'entrepreneurial projects' during the first three to six months of their arrival. Despite women constituting the majority of refugee participants we interviewed, as evident from the narratives in the findings section, we concluded that gendered analysis of refugee entrepreneurship was outside the scope of this paper.

All participants interviewed in the UK continued operating their businesses from before the war and were primarily in IT recruitment and software development. They continued to provide services to Ukrainian customers although three stated that they were expanding their businesses to Europe and internationally. The majority of participants interviewed in Romania (seven of eight) reported that they had modified their business model from before the war. This included shifting their entrepreneurial focus from being an 'entertainment centre for kids into career and business consulting' (ToriRo) or from 'manufacturing to investment and construction' (GhiRo) or incorporating 'project management and sales' into their pre-war 'business consulting' businesses (AkaRo). The majority of participants interviewed in Romania also continued to serve a Ukrainian client base, with two also providing their services to Romanians. One expanded her business to serving the European market via an online custom jewellery shop (AyaRo). In both cohorts, the majority of participants had transformed their original 'bricks and mortar' or 'hybrid' businesses into online enterprises (LavUK), while one participant, in addition to his online shop, had also established a 'bricks and mortar' hair salon in Romania (SlyRo).

Data analysis

The researchers followed Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) phenomenological principles of data analysis and prioritized amplifying participants' voices regarding the constraints experienced in host countries and how this shaped their bricolage practices.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) enabled a thorough understanding of Ukrainian refugee entrepreneurial bricolage experiences shaped by context. By incorporating phenomenology and hermeneutics, we give value to the participants' perspectives of their lived subjective experiences as refugees within their specific host contexts, acknowledging the researchers' outsider status here. The researchers' proficiency in IPA analysis enabled them to discern both individual uniqueness and similarities among the refugees' experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

Specifically, a Ukrainian interpreter who participated in interviews transcribed and translated all recordings into English, preserving participants' meanings of their experiences and the meaning embedded in these experiences (Alase 2017). The interviews were reviewed numerous times, with and without fieldnotes, and annotations were made to 'break the data' into first-order themes, namely financial, institutional and resource constraints. Next, we identified convergence and divergence between participants from the same country and across the two countries. We connected their lived-in experiences to appropriate theoretical frameworks by finding theoretical second-order codes (i.e. financial, network bricolage practices). This 'iterative and inductive cycle' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 79) identified intra- and inter-interview thematic patterns using polarization (considering differences rather than similarities), contextualization (clustering of common cross-interview experiences) and abstraction (pattern identification and subordinate themes) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The hermeneutic circle method was used to interpret the participants' contextual experience in the light of its parts, going back and forth between words and whole sentences, particular extracts and the whole interviews (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 3). The holistic process of engaging with the data, from interviews to participant-centred (first-order themes) and theory-centred (second-order codes), ensured a good standard of 'interpretative research', which mirrors Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton's (2013) methodology.

To ensure scientific rigour, the researchers followed the assessment criteria in Smith (2011) and prioritized authenticity, context sensitivity, transparency, and trustworthiness. Use of semi-structured interviews and direct excerpts from participants' stories preserved their authenticity. Empowering participants to use their preferred language and share their host context understanding has strengthened this study's context sensitivity. Formal ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committees at the University.

Research findings

The emergent themes are organized following Mateus and Sarkar's (2024) framework and presented as an IPA, three-layered analysis, which highlights Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial journeys in their own words, including (a) narratives of the constraints they experienced in their respective contexts that help us to understand *when* and *where* their entrepreneurial journeys took place; (b) their entrepreneurial bricolage practices that facilitate understanding *how* they engaged in bricolentrepreneuring; and (c) outcomes and their meaning for the participants, which provide a deeper understanding of *what* and *why* these journeys took place (see Tables 3 and 4 for additional supporting quotations).

Ukrainian refugee entrepreneurs' experiences in the UK

Participants' narratives draw attention to their entrepreneurial journeys within the context of institutional and resource constraints as well as the impact of war trauma (Abebe 2023; Wauters and Lambrecht 2008).

Institutional environment, resources constraints and war trauma

The ability to maintain a means of living was a dominant concern emerging from the interviews. TyaUK highlighted the decline in living standards caused by relocation to the UK, where the cost of living is high: 'Here, we live like students who can hardly afford anything. It is a game of survival'. NaUK discussed the hesitance among Ukrainians to invest their benefits money to grow their businesses, due to financial insecurity: 'When you live on benefits as a refugee, this could be a problem if the business does not make enough money'.

Participants highlighted significant challenges in the institutional environment, which hindered their enterprise operations. They were frustrated by attempts to open bank accounts and secure access to resources. DanUK emphasized this was because he was not able to prove a good credit history: 'As a refugee, it's difficult to open a bank account for my company with a High Street Bank. Credit history in this country is a difficult challenge to solve even right now, even after two years of living here'. TinUK had trouble renting an office due to his refugee status: 'As a refugee here, it is hard to rent a place, an office or a home. So, I end up either living and running my business from my caravan, an Airbnb or a hotel'. He struggled to take advantage of what a pro-entrepreneurial environment offered, because of his refugee status. He explained the challenges of running a software development company as a refugee in the UK: ' … although I create many algorithms and fully understand how I can make money being an entrepreneur, when you are a refugee, this proves not to be enough anymore to survive (…)'. LiaUK's struggle with language barriers and lack of market knowledge demonstrate that refugee entrepreneurs also contend with a lack of human capital: 'I want to know English better and how this market works, to make money here'.

For many participants, the emotional and psychological impact of war has left severe scars, affecting their livelihoods and integration in the UK. DanUK contemplated his loss: 'Leaving all behind and packing the lives of five people in four suitcases is so traumatic'. He went on to describe the emotional pain of family separation and the unfairness of watching others live normally, while his life seemed to be turned upside down: 'It is not fair (…) Not being able to see my two boys for a

Table 3. Data structure (Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial bricolage in the UK).

Illustrative examples	2nd order themes	1st order codes	Aggregated dimension
'So, language barrier and especially cultural barriers (…). Here, we could not have our American Express; we couldn't even open a bank account with the top 10 High Street banks. ' (TyaUK)	Bureaucratic and legal challenges Lack of financial support Institutional misalignment	*Institutional constraints*	Refugee entrepreneurs' constrained contexts (WHEN)
'(…) as we relocated, we lost everything, leaving behind really high salaries, we were well established and high earners. (…) Here, we live like students who can hardly afford anything. It is a game of survival'. (TyaUk)	Financial constraints Human capital constraints Lack of market and cultural knowledge	*Resources constraints*	
'So, the first challenge is the language, and the second is knowing this market, the rules, as it was for me (…) But most Ukrainians don't have enough money to open their business, and some businesses require lots of money or big investors. Maybe, also, some people do not have confidence in their dreams. I was afraid that this wouldn't work. How much money do they need to spend? Living on benefits as a refugee could be a problem if the business does not make enough money. You are worried about how much money you would have left to live here. So, some people hold back from starting their business, or at least formally. ' (NaUK)			
'My life … ., you know? I had dreams I wanted to achieve that were reasonable and achievable. But right now, it's not clear to me how to achieve them'.(TinUK)			
'So, technically, my skills in recruitment are applicable in any country, but it is a question of cross-country differences and how useful your expertise is where you are or how you will assign the tasks you are less familiar with. (…) ' (LavUK)			
'Yeah, you live with this chronic disease spread by the war, and you can't do anything about it, no matter how hard you try (…). Many of us lost brain clarity, we lost everything. We are worried about everything". (NaUK)" When we arrived in Slovenia, I was frustrated to see how others enjoy life whilst we were forced out of our homes. It felt so unfair how that border separated two different worlds. I cannot talk about that moment. ' (DanUK) 'I sometimes live in my caravan in Ukraine, and sometimes I drive it here to the UK to calm down from the rackets (…) I am missing the drive and energy to achieve my dreams. It is like I am out of balance in the middle of the highway (…). I feel that need and the struggle to connect with people and to interact with people, just like before the war'. (TinUK)	Psychological issues Lack of social connections Feelings of profound loss and unfairness	*War trauma*	

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Illustrative examples	2nd order themes	1st order codes	Aggregated dimension
'I am still serving my clients from Europe and Ukraine. (…) In Ukraine, there are still many projects that I could take on (.) And I have several requests from them (my collaborators from Ukraine, before the war)'. (LiaUK)	*Making do with resources at hand*	*Collective bricolage*	Entrepreneurial bricolage practices (HOW)
'And when we relocated here, almost all of us, our clients, I mean, we handed over most of our contracts with our overseas clients to our British partners, as they are our legal interface in the UK (…) To avoid expensive workers and ensues the required IT skills, we partnered with four other entrepreneurs like us and thus we now have four companies in one, like recruitment business, software development and two product development. I partnered with two other Ukrainian entrepreneurs who are in similar situations: one who does IT recruitment, one for business strategy and product development and me with the software. ' (DanUK)	*Recombining resources at hand strategically* *Resorting to network and partnerships* *Working 'remotely' to build competitive advantage*		
'Although many of our employees are still working from Ukraine. This is important to us, as they are very good and cheap compared to whom we could hire here. How can you compete if most of your money goes to pay salaries?' (TyaUK)			
'I want to get involved in both commercial business projects, as well as social projects and art projects. I met my former colleague in London, who actually relocated a bit earlier, at the beginning of the war (…), and who shares an interest in building this venture studio with me. ' (TinUK)			
"We look for creative ways to avoid paying such high taxes here, such as by deciding to pay ourselves lower salaries and to pay dividends so we could save some money to pay our rent and cover our employees' salaries (…). So, we were still using revolut (virtual money platform) yeah, because we did not have access to a good, high street bank to do business here. This is a disaster for our business. You know, you feel unworthy, even if we would like to pay taxes here". (TyaUK)		*Financial bricolage*	
'It is like I am out of balance in the middle of the highway (…) Being a refugee prevents me from being fully, you know, committed to the UK and moving my business from Ukraine and my employees or developing my business here. But to bring my employees here, because they are very good and cheap, means also to make sure they all get visas so that they could be legal in the UK. But then again, they won't be cheap anymore'. (TinUK) 'Sometimes, we even ask for money from people who know people. So, we could pay our people, and although we looked to borrow capital from different agencies and brokers, it is impossible for us to pay it back on top of a 30–40% commission'. (TyaUK)			
'So, we work on different software projects, one for HR and the other for Canadian aviation, clients we have had for a long time. I still hire Ukrainians in the UK. But I need to hire a British sales guy and maybe one for marketing. I need someone who knows this market (…) '(DanUK) 'This partnership with my friend here in the UK could help me open my venture studio and maybe find start-ups that bring a good income stream needed to pay salaries for those left in Ukraine and pay my duties to the army, maybe. ' (TinUK)		*Selective bricolage*	
'I used to be an interior designer in Ukraine and now in England. I did some small jobs like that to put my experience to good use (…) Umm, I have some work in a village nearby (for Ukrainians), but it's small, a consulting project or a floor plan with furniture or electrical design. All for a small amount of money, just enough to buy some sweets or chocolate for my son, but not enough to make a living here'. (HanUK)		*Network Bricolage*	
'I'm officially self-employed in the UK, and right now I'm doing technical recruitment (…) for IT companies as I've been doing before coming to the UK (…) mostly working with the United States, and not too long ago, I started recruiting Ukrainians living in the UK and Germany'. (LexUK)			
'We started to organize events for Ukrainians arriving here, and I officially opened the first Ukrainian Business Club here (…)' NaUK)			

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Illustrative examples	2nd order themes	1st order codes	Aggregated dimension
'We want to do everything by ourselves and prove that we are not just refugees and scammers, and, yet. (…) But we keep pushing forward, together with our Ukrainian team as well. Our developers are still there, mostly men; almost all of them need to earn money to look after their families. So, for us, it is challenging. How can you fire these people because we are not profitable, have no margin, etc? (…) The main focus remained on recruitment, but we also partnered with other Ukrainians, and we started to create our own products in HR Tech and took on projects outsourced by others, developing a software development dimension in our company'. (TyaUK)	*Refusal to enact institutional and resources constraints* *Seeking pro-entrepreneurial opportunities* *Enterprise survival and potential future growth*	*Socio-economic independence & enterprise growth*	**Outcome & Meaning (WHAT & WHY)**
'But I am always thinking of having another business and another one. I was thinking of doing something else besides recruiting. I love cooking, so I thought I should open my cafe with coffee, tea and pastry. Or maybe I should try to become a nail artist because I also like this stuff. So, there are lots of things which I would love to try here'. (LavUK)			
'I appreciate the British support, and to be honest, despite being very expensive to hire lawyers and impossible to get credit, still the British business system is easy to use and trustworthy". (DanUK) " There are lots of business opportunities now in the UK for Ukrainians, and to get started, they need to join our community to realize these opportunities, as they can see examples of how it is done from our club members'. (NaUK)			

Source: Researchers' own based on interviews data.

Table 4. Data structure (Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial bricolage in Romania).

Illustrative example	2nd order themes	1st order codes	Aggregated dimension
'We need funds to open an office. Some social support options will be welcomed because now you know all the money goes to rent our apartment'. (YnaRo)	*Bureaucratic and legal challenges*	*Institutional constraints*	Refugee entrepreneurs' constrained contexts (WHEN)
'To open a business is very quick and easy in Ukraine, and the main thing is that you do not need a big investment (… .) Here in Romania, it is more difficult. I need a permanent residence permit and address to register my company here. I don't have that. I definitely need an accountant here. Of course, I have difficulties because I do not understand Romanian; it is difficult for me. I need to hire someone to explain or do all the documents for me. I need to understand how it all works to pay taxes as I do at home. I don't understand it here why, when I want to do everything right and on my own, like at home, I was told that I couldn't do it myself, so I need money to pay an accountant, money I do not have. Taxation is scary here'. (AyaRo)	*Lack of financial support* *Oppressive tax environment*		
'When I opened my hairdressing salon (in Ukraine), we did it there from scratch, from the search for premises to the first customer (…), all in 2 weeks (…) even with bespoke furniture, (…). Here, it is unreal (…), tomorrow will be two weeks, (and) we are waiting for basic furniture, and this is with the help of a lawyer' (SylRo).			
"Well, first of all, one of the biggest challenges is the Romanian language (…), the required level of professional proficiency, and I do not have it (…) The lack of recognition of previous experience and competencies complicates our lives here/. (…) 'People, although they had financial sources, they had the knowledge and experience as entrepreneurs, back in Ukraine, but they have a lack of knowledge of how it's done here: the whole business process, where to start, where to go, how to find a translator, how to communicate, it's hard to open a bank account, to do anything if you do not know Romanian (…). And the lack of recognition of previous experience and competences complicates our lives here'. (LerRo)	*Financial constraints* *Language barriers* *Lack of market and cultural knowledge* *Undervalued and untransferable skills*	*Resources constraints*	
'I don't even know how it could work now (…). I do not have enough financial confidence to rely only on my business projects here to feed my family. That's why I also have a job and run the two in parallel'. (ToriRo)			
'Language barriers, although I study Romanian every day, I have a translator, and I practice every day' (AkaRo)			
'And now the situation is a little different psychologically. How to say it? (…) and, this situation forces me to develop my business at a slower pace; I need to focus on getting well psychologically. Yes, my son and I need time to calm down and overcome this *post-traumatic syndrome* (…) the fact that I can now see flowers and draw them after two years is huge. '(YnaRo)	*Psychological issues* *Feelings of profound loss*	*War trauma*	
'The greatest loss was that I lost everything at once. I lost my country, I lost my identity, my home'. (EnaRo)			
'Many have this fear that "the thing" (war) will repeat and they will lose everything again, and it is impossible to live through it twice'. (LerRo)			

(*Continued*)

Table 4. (Continued).

Illustrative example	2nd order themes	1st order codes	Aggregated dimension
'I offer consultations on nutrition, and nutrition is important, and I am selling Ukrainian supplements that I know are good from back home. But due to limited money, people (Ukrainian refugees) still need to choose between whether to buy candy for their kids or get these supplements'. (YnaRo)	*Making do with resources at hand*	*Individual bricolage*	Entrepreneurial bricolage practices (HOW)
'Social networks are my bridge between Ukraine and my business (…). I offer consulting through social networks, earn money using them and look for new clients. If it weren't for these social networks, I wouldn't have survived here, and I would have to stay in Ukraine under bombing now. (…) I have these connections and the ability to make and form these connections, which helped me survive here. Because I had no information about how to live here'. (AkaRo) 'Social media networks probably make up 90% of my clients. I do what I learned in Ukraine, and although I try to learn new skills, they don't specifically bring me new clients'. (EnaRo)	*Engaging in multiple micro-entrepreneurial projects* *Resorting to network and collaborations* *Working 'remotely' to void legal and financial constraints*	*Network bricolage*	
'Most of my projects come from Ukrainians who live here, in Romania (…), they are connected with business and recruiting: from a person who is opening an online consulting agency in Ukraine (…) and wants to find people online to an entrepreneur seeking commercial space here but does not speak any English or Romanian (…) to resume writing, or translating resumes (…) and documents which do not require the certification of a professional translator (…)' (LerRo)		*Parallel bricolage*	
'I now have three projects. My first job is online consulting for my Ukrainian clients. This is my base, and I pay for my house with this money. There are also the teams I train in project management, from which I make very little money. My third project is working on my marketing project. I am always looking for multiple such projects, for my family and little so-called business to survive. Here, people seem to have less money than in Ukraine in the good days. Maybe in other countries is different, but not here. ' (AkaRo)			
'It is difficult to open an SRL (LLP) here, that it is almost impossible. Taxation is scary here. But I need to spend this money on opening and maintaining my business, so why would I use these huge funds and take on such risk? Maybe one day, when I make enough money and have enough resources. Until then, my Ukrainian business model is enough. (…) My business is still registered in Ukraine, and now I run it from here; I have my own online store, which sells different products and jewellery, and more recently, we switched only to costume jewellery (…). ' (AyaRo)		*Financial bricolage*	
'And everything I put into my business comes purely from my earnings; I have no other income. I don't have any other jobs. And, of course, if I don't have enough money to purchase equipment or something else, I simply don't buy it. It will purchased only later when I make more money. We cannot take credit, collateral, or loans in Romania. Therefore, everything is purely from your pocket, and you struggle to earn it'. (EnaRo)			
'There are (…) Ukrainian entrepreneurs (…) they run their business from here, let's say a little remotely; their business is still in Ukraine, or do some business projects here, but they don't want to register and pay taxes at all here because it is too complicated, too expensive, here. Just like me'. (GhiRo)			
'Because I offer consulting for businesses (online), so I don't have all these overheads, and since Romanians decided that I needed to pay higher taxes, around 60% of my income in taxes, I think this is unfair. That's why I would choose taxation in Moldova or Ukraine, not Romania'. (AkaRo)			

(*Continued*)

Table 4. (Continued).

Illustrative example	2nd order themes	1st order codes	Aggregated dimension
'Having my business dealings here is more of a way of survival rather than the goal of life. Because I know that it is quite difficult for Ukrainians to find work here due to the language barrier and probably due to financial illiteracy. I wanted to avoid this, and I wanted to be able to provide for my child right away. So, I started looking for customers interested in what I knew, photography and graphic design, since the first week of our arrival here (…) I immediately made it clear that I did not need to be given money or any help, such as food or material assistance, but I asked people to support my little business and buy my services. I want to earn this money. ' (EnaRo)	*Refusal to enact institutional and resource constraints* *Create an income stream for their family*	*Personal socio-economic independence*	Outcome & Meanings (WHAT & WHY)
'For the last two years, we tried to promote our family business (…). I am used to relying on myself to cover all my basic needs; I can hardly afford the cost of living here now, that is, the cost of an apartment, food in a supermarket, gasoline, and so on. But, no matter how hard it is for my family, it is important to be independent'. (ToriRo)			
'We do more with little that we have and know, from our experience in Ukraine, here in Romania (…), and we try to work with what we have'. (GhiRo)			
'What is nice is that I could finally create something that could potentially last longer than my life in Ukraine for the sake of my child's wellbeing. This seems to give my family some stability, and as a single mom, this is so important'. (EnaRo)			

Source: Researchers' own based on interview data.

whole year, because they could not travel from Cyprus to the UK is very hard'. TinUK's extreme bewilderment, isolation, and lack of social connection revealed the depth of this trauma, as he described: 'feel(ing) that need and the struggle to connect with people and to interact with people, just like before the war'. NaUK described the psychological effects of war-forced exile as a 'chronic disease spread by the war'", indicating a severe and long-lasting impact on mental health and daily life.

Entrepreneurial bricolage practices

Ukrainian participants refused to enact these constraints. On the contrary, they strategically (re) combined the resources at hand, using whatever materials, resources or ideas that were readily available to address challenges and capitalize on opportunities.

Where lack of access to finance posed significant challenges to their business endeavours, participants improvised, creatively and resourcefully. Strategies included 'paying ourselves in dividends when we need it, and if we have it, so we don't pay so many taxes' (TyaUK) or by 'look(ing) for creative ways to avoid paying such high taxes here (…)', "making business transactions using Revolut (online money transfer platform) … or 'reinvest all the money we make [into our businesses] because we need to have working capital…' (DanUK). These *financial* bricolage practices illustrated how Ukrainian refugee bricolentrepreneurs adapted to limited resources, to ensure liquidity and survival; even expansion of their businesses.

At times, participants combined different bricolages. For example, hiring local workers can be costly. DanUK relayed his practice of 'hiring Ukrainians to work from Ukraine, because they are very good and cheap'. His hiring of skilled Ukrainians still residing in war-torn Ukraine is a combination of *financial* and *transnational* bricolage, enabling him to (i) overcome financial constraints experienced in the host country, and (ii) mobilize low-cost, high skilled workers in Ukraine to work on his IT development projects. LexUK. too, drew on resources across borders to better withstand economic, political, or institutional challenges in the UK: 'I started recruiting Ukrainians living in the UK and Germany … to build a supportive professional network'.

Other participants combined *collective and selective* bricolage practices to ensure enterprise growth. LavUK provided a strong example of collective bricolage by creating collective convention-based partnerships with other Ukrainian bricoleurs, who complemented her entrepreneurial expertise: 'I have [Ukrainians refugee entrepreneurs] as partners, and we collaborate to find best-case scenarios for dealing with all the ongoing situations here and in Ukraine. But these collaborations happen because we know each other well, and we can combine our skills and thus, continue doing business here, despite limited access to resources that we face as refugees. It feels like a family business, if I can say that"'. TinUK, who was looking to diversify his entrepreneurial portfolio, explained how his practice of 'get(ing) involved in both commercial business projects, as well as social projects and art projects (…) and (partnering with) my former colleague in London … who shares an interest in building this venture studio with me'.

Finally, DanUK described his practice of collaborating with other Ukrainian entrepreneurs, but hiring British nationals, to undertake enterprise operations requiring local knowledge, such as marketing and sales (*selective bricolage*). He explained: " … we partnered with four other entrepreneurs like us and thus, we now have four companies in one, like recruitment business, software development and two product development … But I need to hire a British sales guy and maybe one for marketing. I need someone who knows this market (…) ". The hiring of local workers in the UK who were familiar with the local market dynamics is testament to DanUK carefully choosing elements that best served his purposes in an environment which was still unfamiliar to him.

Ukrainian participants' bricolage practices (financial, network, selective, transnational) aligned with the needs of a fast-paced, entrepreneurial climate. They enabled them to strategically overcome financial and market access barriers, thus allowing for their businesses to survive and grow. Their bricolage practices reflected their determination in planning for future growth and exploiting

entrepreneurial opportunities. Despite facing significant systemic barriers, participants were determined to leverage their skills, networks and limited resources to create businesses.

Outcomes and embodied meanings of Ukrainian refugee's entrepreneurial journeys

Our participants defied institutional and resource constraints in their pursuit of entrepreneurship and refused to become 'true refugees, who are uneducated, dependent on benefits' (LavUK). Their socioeconomic survival and the upscaling of their Ukrainian business models were achieved through strategic engagement in multiple bricolage practices. They recycled their pre-war entrepreneurial expertise, which allowed their enterprises in the UK to survive despite their psychological struggles and the complex web of constraints they encountered. Our participants not only engaged in entrepreneurship, reinforcing the relevance of the 'entrepreneurship paradox' debate, but also shared their optimism about the future growth of their enterprise:

'We want to do everything by ourselves and prove that we are not just refugees and scammers, and … keep pushing forward, (…) to earn money to look after their families' (TyaUK). DanUK explained that despite difficulties in securing financing, … still the British business system is easy to use and trustworthy". NaUK was encouraged that ' … there are lots of business opportunities now in the UK for Ukrainians'. These participants' entrepreneurial journeys reflect a strong aspiration to regain their socio-economic autonomy by overcoming the difficulties they encounter as 'refugees' and a desire to take control of their lives as educated entrepreneurs rather than as 'uneducated victims' or 'scammers'.

Ukrainian refugee entrepreneurs' experiences in Romania

We similarly discover a web of challenges posed by the institutional environment in Romania.

Institutional environment, resource constraints and war trauma

The table below explains how Ukrainian refugee participants navigated the Romanian context and the bricolage practices they adopted in response to it.

Many participants contended with a complex tax system and overwhelming bureaucracy, which influenced their decision to keep their Ukrainian entity and delay business registration in Romania. AyaRo described this struggle: 'to open an SRL (LLP) here, and it is almost impossible. Taxation is scary here'. ToriRo pointed out: 'There are many restrictions – more stringent legislation. It is very problematic for small entrepreneurs like us Ukrainians'. AkaRo's critique of Romanian tax regulations reflected a personal grievance against the tax and legal constraints: 'Romanians decided that I needed to pay higher taxes, around 60% of my income in taxes, I think this is unfair'.

Secondly, despite their strong educational qualifications and pre-war entrepreneurial experiences, many participants reported financial scarcity, language barriers and a lack of transferability of their Ukrainian credentials as barriers to starting their businesses in Romania. For example, YnaRo and LerRo explained that: 'There is no financial support from Romania, unfortunately, and everything becomes expensive when you start from scratch' (YanaRo). Language barriers hindered access to information and market, because 'People… have a lack of knowledge of how it's done here: the whole business process, where to start, where to go, how to find a translator, how to communicate. It's hard to open a bank account, to do anything, if you do not know Romanian' (LerRo).

Thirdly, participants' accounts showed coping with war trauma as a significant challenge; the deep psychological scars and material and human losses crippled their personal and entrepreneurial lives. GhiRo emphasized the material and emotional ruin of losing everything built over decades: 'Time spent (over 20 years to build our business in Ukraine) is the biggest loss; our people are dying'. YnaRo discussed how war trauma affected her personal and professional life and her need for psychological healing: 'this situation forces me to develop my business at a slower pace; I need to

focus on getting well psychologically'". LerRo explained how a fear of war recurrence and loss due to forced displacement added another layer of anxiety to her psychological burden, which ultimately impacted upon socio-economic decision-making: 'Many have this fear that "the thing" (war) will repeat and they will lose everything again and it is impossible to live through it twice'.

Entrepreneurial bricolage practices

Participants refused to enact the constraints they encountered. Like their UK counterparts, they also strategically (re)combined their resources at hand, many engaging in network and financial bricolage, while others described how they addressed the complexity of the interwoven institutional and resource constraints by adopting parallel and individual bricolage practices.

Financial bricolage was utilized by participants to overcome scarcity of financial capital and ensure survival. They stretched resources and minimized expenses to sustain their operations. YnaRo shared that having ' … no other income, so I invest all my earnings in my firm. I don't have any other jobs. And of course, if I don't have enough money to purchase equipment or something else, I simply don't buy it'.

AkaRo leveraged his *networks* and collaborations to gain access to new markets in Romania. ' … by creating this business community here, formed of 90 Ukrainian businesspeople living in Romania due to war so that I could sell my business consultations here (…)'. AkaRo explained 'If it weren't for these social networks, I wouldn't have survived here, and I would have to stay in Ukraine under bombing now. (…) these connections … helped me survive here. Because I had no information about how to live here'. Creating a supportive business ecosystem was also important to EnaRo, who operated a micro-enterprise and was anxious to acquire new customers. She explained that she was keen to expand her networks on social media, which constituted 90% of her clients.

Some participants shared how they handled multiple entrepreneurial projects simultaneously (*parallel bricolage*) to stay afloat. ToriRo said, 'Not hav(ing) enough financial confidence to rely only on my business projects here to feed my family. That's why I also have a job and run the two (business and the job) in parallel'. AkaRo managed 'three projects: my first job is online consulting for my Ukrainian clients. This is my base, and I pay for my house with this money. There are also the teams I train in project management, from which I make very little money. My third project is working on my marketing project' (AkaRo).

This short term, survivalist mindset was shared by GhiRo, who 'made do' with limited resources. He had just small funds to grow his business, in an environment which discouraged entrepreneurship. He made the most of what was available, as he knew it would be challenging to rely on external support or formal structures. He, thus, focused on his pre-war construction skills: 'I had a real estate and construction business for 20 years, but here, I do renovations only (…) I find customers online, so I don't spend too much. The main goal is to do it better than Romanians, quickly and so that it is not expensive … ' (GhiRo)

Outcomes and embodied meanings of Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial journeys

Like their counterparts in the UK, Ukrainian participants showed determination to overcome the different institutional, resource, and psychological constraints they faced as refugees. For many participants, starting their own businesses in Romania was ' … a way of survival, rather than a lifelong goal' (EnaRo). They recognized the challenges that prevented refugees from thriving as entrepreneurs in Romania. Exceptionally, however, one participant saw bricolentrepreneuring as a transformative journey towards achieving socio-economic independence, aspiring to transition from being 'powerless dependent refugees' to becoming an independent entrepreneur:

> "(After two years of being refugee) there is already a natural need to become independent. Well, just like a kid who, you know, is experiencing puberty and transitions from demanding: 'Give me some pocket money!'

> towards finding ways to make his own money. Just as we do now when we go from being given shampoo as refugees to producing or selling the shampoo in our businesses, as entrepreneurs (…) " (ToriRo)

Nevertheless, the lack of support for entrepreneurship in Romania, together with bureaucratic regulations, held back their optimism regarding future growth potential of their enterprises. This shaped their bricolage practices to prioritize short-term survival.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

Our study offers a significant contribution to research by drawing attention to the influence of context in shaping refugees' entrepreneurial journeys (Wauters and Lambrecht 2008; Baker and Welter 2020). It is a major theoretical advance in understanding refugee entrepreneurship in constrained environments, where refugee entrepreneurs contend with institutional voids, resource limitations and war trauma (Abebe 2023; Singleton and Salmon 2023). It further emphasizes the necessity of distinguishing between refugee and migrant entrepreneurship (Abebe 2023; Harima and Harima 2022). The experience of refugees differs from that of migrant entrepreneurs, who voluntarily choose to migrate and thus, can select host countries which best suit their entrepreneurial plans and skills (Chitac 2023). Our findings reaffirm the need to look at refugee entrepreneurship separately, instead of a subset of migrant entrepreneurship (Abebe 2023; Harima and Harima 2022).

War trauma has compromised the outlook and aspirations of our participants (Papadopoulos and Shea 2018). Refugees' experience of war trauma distinguishes them from any other migrants (Abebe 2023). In Romania, the proximity to the war zone led Ukrainian participants to be fearful of further conflict, which could directly affect Romania as a neighbouring country. They described how this fear affected their daily decision-making, slowing their entrepreneurial progress and exacerbating the temporariness of their lives as refugees (Yeshi, Harima, and Freiling 2022). Their emotions transcended the physical; they were personally and professionally debilitating, echoing the social, psychological and economic burdens faced by Ukrainian entrepreneurs in Denmark (Klyver, Steffens, and Honig 2022) and those by Syrians in Sweden (Zalkat, Barth, and Rashid 2023). In contrast, while Ukrainian participants in the UK also experience war trauma, their distance from the conflict zone and sponsorship under a UK Home sponsorship programme facilitated better integration and reduced language barriers (OECD 2023). They experienced the burden of war trauma, which, although continually weighing on their mind, motivated them to engage in transnational bricolage, as a means to support their workforce and relatives left behind. Entrepreneurial research seldom focuses on entrepreneurs originating from conflict zones. Our findings suggest the need for exploration of the intersection of war trauma and entrepreneurship in order to expand our understanding of entrepreneurship in extreme conditions and inform the design of support systems and policies (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022).

Our second theoretical contribution to refugee entrepreneurship studies is through the lens of entrepreneurial bricolage (Baker and Nelson 2005). We have shown how Ukrainian refugees 'make do' and creatively recombine resources (C. Kwong, Tasavori, and Cheung 2017; Liu et al. 2021). We have also offered fresh insights into how these refugees adapt their bricolage practices to navigate cross-cultural contextual constraints. Our study, thus, makes an important contribution to the currently underdeveloped stream of comparative and cross-cultural studies in refugee entrepreneurship (Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). We see, in the bricolage practices of our participants in the UK and Romania, their individual personality traits, a determination to succeed in their new societies and their enterprising mindsets (de la Chaux and Haugh 2020). Their combination of resources, opportunities, skills, and networks has led to them achieving a remarkable level of institutional immunization (McMullen, Ingram, and Adams 2020).

Ukrainian refugees employed a variety of bricolage practices to navigate the contextual constraints they faced in the UK and Romania; some of which were similar, such as *financial* and *network*

bricolage, others differed because of specific institutional settings, such as *individual* and *parallel bricolage* in Romania and *collective* and *selective bricolage* in the UK.

Financial scarcity was a critical barrier to entrepreneurship activity in both countries, as confirmed in the wider refugee entrepreneurship research (C. C. Y. Kwong et al. 2019). Additionally, our participants had advanced educational qualifications and entrepreneurial experience prior to the war. Yet, their knowledge, skills, and expertise were not adequately recognized in their host country, thus reflecting similar findings by Harima et al. (2021). Meanwhile, the lack of networks hindered entrepreneurial growth, limiting access to resources and reducing market opportunities. They also struggled with the psychological consequences of war.

Despite these challenges, Ukrainian refugees described engaging in a variety of bricolage practices. We found that some were common in the UK and Romania. Our participants practised *financial bricolage* (resorting to alternative financial vehicles (e.g. Revolut, a global neobank and financial platform) and tax optimization strategies (e.g. payment of dividends to themselves, instead of salaries) to avoid being excluded from financial services (Shepherd, Saade, and Wincent 2020). They utilized network connections and striking collaborations with fellow Ukrainian bricolentrepreneurs to complement or maximize their skills, knowledge, and resources (Tasavori, Kwong, and Pruthi 2018). It is interesting to note, in relation to *network bricolage*, that participants in the UK utilized social and professional networks, with a view to ensuring business growth (LavUK, TinUK). Networks were regarded as gateways to growth, innovation, enhanced knowledge and resources. In contrast, networks were leveraged in Romania to serve simultaneously as collaborators and customers 'formed of 90 Ukrainian businesspeople living in Romania due to war so that I could sell my business consultations here' AkaRo; and 'Social media networks (which) probably make up 90% of my clients' EnaRo. This risks refugee entrepreneurs being restricted in their entrepreneurial endeavours and operating solely within limited networks.

Other bricolage practices are adopted in response to particular contexts. UK participants were sponsored under the Ukrainian Family Visa and Sponsorship Scheme (UNHCR 2023). They lived in the UK, which offered a favourable environment for entrepreneurship. Many participants could speak English, allowing for increased market access, stronger networking opportunities and better access to local resources. As they were sponsored, Ukrainian participants felt more socially integrated, which increased their motivation to succeed. Compared to other communities of refugees who relied heavily on ethnic networks for survival (Campion 2018), our participants showed capability for leveraging international alliances to complement their expertise and brought together valuable human capital and financial resources (LavUK, TinUK and DanUK). The example of DanUK showed how low-cost, high skilled workers in Ukraine were mobilized to contribute to business growth in the UK. Entrepreneurs could also strategically pick the resources they believed would bring the most value to their entrepreneurial activity. Yet, whilst *transnational bricolage* is effective in leveraging global resources, it is commonly only documented in migrant, but not refugee entrepreneurship (Liu et al. 2021).

In contrast, Romania is a country which is close to the war zone. Participants residing there saw their stay as temporary and intended to return to Ukraine once the situation allowed them to. As a result, they focused primarily on survival. They lived life 'in limbo' with limited interest in integration, concentrating their efforts on keeping alive their Ukraine-based businesses until they returned home. Consequently, many participants engaged in *individual* and *parallel bricolage*. The absence of a drive to grow his business was evident in GhiRo's narrative, due to lack of finance and institutional support. His approach reminds us of camp-based refugee enterprises operated by the Rohingya in Bangladesh, who did not develop their capabilities or generate income through individual effort and creativity, because of systemic inequalities, which prevented them from engaging in society (Chowdhury 2021). Similarly, *parallel bricolage* practices resulting in 'multiple ongoing projects relying on bricolage' (Baker and Nelson 2005, 349), do not reflect a desire to put down roots or an intention to establish a long-term, stable presence in a new place in Romania (AkaRo and ToriRo). The participants focused on making do to survive, waiting for the right moment to return to Ukraine.

Finally, our participants' narratives offer valuable insights into the ways refugees use entrepreneurship as a strategy to overcome hardship and adapt to their new surroundings (Collins, Watson, and Krivokapic-Skoko 2017). Our findings, like those of African refugees in Israel (Heilbrunn 2019), demonstrate the resilience of refugees who 'make do' with their pre-war skills, business knowledge, and social networks. Their stories reinforce their commitment to overcome conditions of precarity, by 'refusing to enact these limitations' (Di Domenico, Haugh, and Tracey 2010). Our findings challenge the dominant narrative in refugee entrepreneurship, which depicts refugees as passive recipients of their environment, by showing them to have agency in planning their entrepreneurial paths (Refai and McElwee 2023). Nonetheless, it is equally clear from our study that the obstacles faced by refugee entrepreneurs are seldom addressed by host countries. Where government policy is universal in approach and regards all entrepreneurs as the same (Zalkat, Barth, and Rashid 2023), refugee entrepreneurs must seek innovative strategies to overcome the challenges they face. In this paper, we have drawn attention to the many practices they utilize to maximize opportunities for success, in environments which do not offer what they need (Refai and McElwee 2023). Left unaddressed, these barriers most likely entrap refugee entrepreneurs in a state of 'subentrepreneurship' at the fringes of the host society. Our findings should incentivize governments in host countries to introduce specific, targeted interventions to support refugee entrepreneurs to generate economic and social growth.

Practical implications

Our findings demonstrate how participants' pre-war knowledge and skills, pre-existing, trusted networks, and *financial bricolage* helped establish their ghost-like enterprises, many of which are still registered in Ukraine. According to Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner's (2020) perspective on entrepreneurship-as-practice, Ukrainian participants in the UK and Romania have demonstrated their practical understanding of entrepreneurship through hands-on bricolage practices. They mobilized and adapted their pre-war entrepreneurial skills and knowledge, emphasizing practical application over theoretical understanding. This approach allowed them to prioritize actions over words in addressing resource, financial, and institutional constraints (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011).

As such, these bricoleurs understood entrepreneurship-as-practice (i.e. practical know-how, practical skills and relational knowledge). Ukrainian participants, like Pakistani displaced people (C. C. Y. Kwong et al. 2019), emphasized the need for entrepreneurial hubs or ecosystems that value their socio-cultural and professional diversity to help them expand their entrepreneurial endeavours beyond survival to achieve long-term growth and ensure their autonomy, relevance, and competence. Thus, host country authorities could offer refugees training on local entrepreneurial ecosystems and their political, financial, legal, and socio-economic measures; local entrepreneurial network events to share knowledge; and business collaborations to compensate for the lack of entrepreneurial support (Desai, Naudé, and Stel 2021; Mata and Alves 2018). To address the unique challenges refugees face in the context of displacement and their need for self-determination, social awareness programmes of the risk of social stigma and discrimination are necessary to prevent socio-economic tensions and inequality (C. C. Y. Kwong et al. 2019).

Policy implications

While many Ukrainian participants were highly educated, had access to the job markets and enjoyed unrestricted mobility, most EU and non-EU OECD host countries have concentrated on increasing refugee skill fitness and transferability (OECD 2023). It is critical for policymakers to replace homogeneous and generalized policies with those that recognize difference and diversity, and which facilitate favourable environments for refugees' entrepreneurial activities. These policies and programmes should encourage entrepreneurship not only as a vocational alternative for refugees' economic integration, but also, as an opportunity for refugees to create unique socio-economic values that are beneficial for them and host societies (Singleton and Salmon 2023).

Limitations and future research

This study's contributions should be considered in the light of its methodological and empirical limitations, some of which could be used as opportunities for future research. First, the findings of this study represent the unique, situated phenomenological experiences of a small number of Ukrainian refugees living in Romania and the UK. This aligns with the IPA tradition (Alase 2017), as it highlights the subjective authenticity and contextual richness of these refugees' lived experiences about entrepreneurial bricolage practices (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009), instead of making broad generalizations based on these findings (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2019). Secondly, this study's phenomenological dive reveals rich and detailed bricolentrepreneurial experiences lived by Ukrainian refugees in the two host countries, shared as a momentary snapshot. A longitudinal view would capture contextual and time dynamics (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill 2019) as entrepreneurial bricolage practices transform Ukrainian refugees' business experiences in host countries. Finally, despite the profile of our participants (i.e. six refugee women and three refugee men interviewed in the UK and six refugee women and two refugee men in Romania), mirroring the demographics of Ukrainian refugees (OECD 2023), future research would benefit from distinguishing more succinctly the different experiences of male and female refugee entrepreneurs in diverse cultural, social and political contexts. This would not only reveal distinct 'gendered' challenges, but also, identify specific ways to support their entrepreneurial journeys.

Conclusion

This IPA study is the first to compare Ukrainian refugees' entrepreneurial bricolage experiences in Romania and the UK. It has shown that context (institutional environment, resource constraints and war trauma) is crucial to understanding their journeys of bricolentrentrepreuring. Refugees are not a homogenous population, consequently, a deep, phenomenological dive is needed to understand the 'how and why' of their entrepreneurial journeys to address unique challenges in these host countries.

Refugee entrepreneurship research has great untapped potential and requires a comprehensive research agenda that encompasses both the theoretical and empirical (Desai, Naudé, and Stel 2021; Heilbrunn and Iannone 2020). Such research not only distinguishes refugee from migrant entrepreneurship (Abebe 2023; Newman, Macaulay, and Dunwoodie 2023), for it is also essential for tackling the unprecedented 'refugee crises' and the economic and social challenges refugees contend with in host countries (OECD (2023); UNHCR 2023). A knowledge of how context shapes refugee entrepreneurship is essential to support refugees' entrepreneurial journeys and the promotion of inclusive societies that benefit refugee and host societies. Such knowledge is also beneficial for policymakers to create policies that support host countries' socio-economic and legal diversity (Newman, Macaulay, and Dunwoodie 2023).

Tackling the unprecedented 'refugee crisis' and the economic and social issues refugees contend with in their host countries requires evidence-based policies and programmes (OECD (2023); UNHCR 2023). Our findings offer valuable insights into the lives of Ukrainian refugees and their daily struggles and achievements; a tribute to their enduring resolve. Reasoning with De Coninck's (2023) pledge, we hope that while it is unclear when this war will end, the world will not succumb to war burnout, but rather, will continue to contribute towards a welcoming and supportive environment for all.

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