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Deema Refai, John Lever & Radi Haloub

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# Entrepreneurship in constrained immigration contexts – the liminal integration of Syrian refugees

Deema Refai<sup>a</sup>, John Lever<sup>b</sup> and Radi Haloub<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Management, School of Business, Education and Law, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK; <sup>c</sup>Global Business School for Health, UCL, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on a qualitative study of Syrian refugees in constrained immigration contexts in the North of England, this article explores refugees' perceptions of integration and social exclusion through entrepreneurship. By exploring refugee experiences as they engage in entrepreneurship programmes or business start-ups, our findings highlight a divide among refugees with the means to start-up businesses successfully and those without. The article contributes to understanding entrepreneurship as a tool for refugees that indicates dyadic outcomes of *idiosyncratic integration* among equipped refugees and *liminal integration* among vulnerable refugees. The article extends our appreciation of the nuance in entrepreneurship, and develops liminality debates by stressing the transformative nature of refugee journeys that involve cross-domain transitions characterized by multiple separations. We call for the acknowledgement of refugee heterogeneity in neoliberal economies in ways that encompass holistic views of integration beyond the current focus on economic contributions at the expense of all else.

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## KEYWORDS

Constrained contexts; entrepreneurship; immigration; integration; liminality; Syrian refugees

## Introduction

Overall international migration levels have not dramatically increased over the last two decades, but the contexts of international migration have changed significantly to include changes in composition (i.e. growth of 'survival migration' as a consequence of environmental, political and economic crises (Betts 2015)) and changes in distribution (i.e. higher levels in Europe (86.7 m) and Asia 85.6 m (IOM 2020)). It is thus unsurprising to see European countries placing more constraints on refugees in line with growing economic concerns about supporting them. Principally, this is more in line with the arrival of growing numbers of vulnerable refugees, who are less able to fend for themselves in neoliberal economies (Mayblin 2017, Goodfellow 2020, Griffiths and Yeo 2021) than it is with refugees with the means to support themselves. In this article, we consider refugees and asylum seekers in this context, focusing in particular on the United Kingdom (UK). We position this as a constrained immigration context, where tight immigration controls, restrictive measures and 'red tape' institutions (Refai and McElwee 2022) have been put in place to expand the State's control over immigration policy (Consterdine 2018, Griffiths and Yeo 2021). These constraints are compounded by European Union's obsession to 'keep refugees out', rather than investing resources to support their integration (Crawley et al. 2018). As we unravel this constrained immigration context, we explore the extent to which it is evident in the realm of entrepreneurship.

**CONTACT** Deema Refai  [D.Refai@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:D.Refai@leeds.ac.uk)  Leeds University Business School, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

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We position entrepreneurship as an integration tool, and view those who succeed in starting-up businesses as being integrated. We acknowledge the confined integration view adopted here, yet align it with the aim of this research and with Turner's (2020, 143) argument that the refugee regime is being reimagined:

... not around restoring the link between the state and citizen through resettlement, integration into host societies, or voluntary return to the country of origin, but rather around neoliberal notions of "resilience", "adaptability" and "entrepreneurship of refugees".

As a consequence of rising expectations from the UK State and from refugees themselves that they must fend for themselves, calls to promote entrepreneurship programmes as a means of facilitating integration have grown in the last decade (Home Office 2019, Home Office 2021). As Smith et al. (2019) confirm, the UK seeks to overcome unemployment-based social exclusion of marginalized communities through entrepreneurship, self-employment and business start-ups. However, lingering questions persist about the suitability of entrepreneurship as a way of addressing the contextual elements of diversity, equality, unemployment and poverty, where on the surface entrepreneurship appears to be a useful way of facilitating integration, whilst in reality this might not always be the case (Williams and Williams 2011; Smith et al. 2019; Danson, Galloway, and Sherif 2021). The situation is compounded by the fact that local support services are fragmented by geography and do not consider the complexity of the problems that specific groups of refugees and asylum seekers face, which reduces their access to support services and undermines the impact of provision.

This article tackles these ambiguities around entrepreneurship by exploring the experiences of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers as they engage in either entrepreneurship programmes and/or actual business start-ups, with an aim of understanding their perceptions of integration and social exclusion through entrepreneurship. Whilst engagement in such activities can facilitate integration, we argue that they can also lead to social exclusion – defined as the cumulative social disadvantages resulting from low resource provision (Lewis et al. 2015) and the low social capital of refugees, including skill-deficiencies, poor networks, lack of cultural cohesion and unemployment (Blackburn and Ram 2006, Bizri 2017, Refai et al. 2018). Our main question is:

In light of constrained immigration contexts that refugees and asylum seekers face in the UK, what are their perceptions of integration and social exclusion through entrepreneurship?

We use the term 'refugee' to refer to both refugees (i.e. those with refugee status) and asylum seekers (i.e. those waiting for decisions as to their eligibility for refugee status in the UK). We acknowledge that each group is subject to different legal requirements in relation to business start-ups and that, as opposed to refugees, asylum seekers are not permitted to start a business. However, these legislative restrictions are not central to our argument, which focuses on the perceptions of integration and social exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers as they engage in entrepreneurship programmes or business start-ups. Indeed, despite legal restrictions, some refugees are not necessarily deterred from pursuing 'sub-entrepreneurial' routes (Refai and McElwee 2022). In fact, this was the case for some of the participants involved in our study, who were engaged in informal business ventures for survival purposes. Furthermore, legal restrictions do not prevent asylum seekers from accessing entrepreneurship training programmes offered by local authorities and charities that set out to promote integration.

We therefore argue that the duration of stay in the UK is more relevant to integration and social exclusion, particularly considering the increasing timelines for approving asylum applications, which now average between two to three years. We thus focus on the experiences of refugees' and asylum seekers' in the years after their arrival in the UK, when the need for integration is high, and do not view the status of refugee or asylum seeker to be reflective (by itself) of the possibility of achieving integration through entrepreneurship (Refai and McElwee 2022).

Our exploration is underpinned by Victor Turner's work in anthropology (1987), whose conceptual framework revolving around '*rites of passage*' and the notion of '*liminality*' has proved particularly insightful for exploring the experiences of migrants and refugees in recent decades, including refugee

entrepreneurs (Haynes 2011, Lever and Milbourne 2017, Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018, Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022). Drawing on a qualitative study of Syrian refugees in West Yorkshire in the North of England, UK, it is our contention that the growing focus on refugee entrepreneurship in immigration policy cannot be explored in isolation from the UK's constrained immigration context, which has rendered refugee integration ever more difficult. The article contributes to the literature on liminality and entrepreneurship. In particular, we contribute to understanding entrepreneurship as an integration tool with potential dyadic outcomes of *liminal integration* in the case of vulnerable refugees (those *without* the means and skills to succeed) who are let into the country for moral reasons, and *idiosyncratic* integration in the case of what we refer to as equipped refugees (those *with* the means and skills to be successful). We develop this distinction conceptually through an original framework that stresses notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees (Sales 2002, Haynes 2011, Jones, Gunaratnam, and Bhattacharyy 2017).

Our argument is that *liminal integration* (which is characterized by social exclusion) traps many vulnerable refugees – who represent the vast majority of refugees – in low-value entrepreneurial venturing characterized by hopelessness and frustration under precarious conditions, where refugees exist on the edge of what they do not know as '*neither one thing nor the other*' (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018, 376). Conversely, for the minority of refugees who succeed starting-up businesses, we emphasize the notion of *idiosyncratic integration* and 'emotional reflexivity' (Muhr et al. 2019), which help refugees to deal with trajectory changes and moments of truth (Henfridsson and Youngjin 2014) imposed by their challenging journeys. Here, refugees' perceptions of their business activities largely focus on meanings that hold significant personal value around thriving and succeeding, which is why they are often viewed and treated more favourably in neoliberal societies.

The article proceeds in the following way. Initially, we explore ways in which Turner's (1987) notion of liminality has been employed in entrepreneurship research. This is followed by a discussion of the rise of the UK's constrained immigration context. We then explain the research context and methods employed, before turning to an in-depth analysis of our findings. This is followed by a discussion where we propose an original framework that conceptualizes entrepreneurship as an integration tool for refugees in constrained immigration contexts. We conclude by highlighting our contributions and some recommendations.

## Liminality and entrepreneurship as rites of passage

Building on the work of van Gennep (1960), Turner (1987) explores the '*rites of passage*' through which all outsiders pass on their journey from an old world to a new. Turner's conceptualization is based on the idea that all immigrants experience separation from a 'fixed state'; entry into state of 'limen' (or marginality) before they are 'reaggregated' into a new state or context. In the 'transitional' stage (or phase), it is argued that the self often becomes unsettled. Transitions often encompass social and institutional forms of invisibility for outsiders, which can involve a process of '*structural meltdown*' within which new values, symbols and institutions must be adopted while those learnt in other worlds must be left behind (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018, 378). Indeed, Turner (1987) suggests that the final stage of 'reaggregation' in a new context – what van Gennep refers to as 'incorporation' – is rarely achieved, and that newcomers often remain marginal members of society, existing '*betwixt and between*' (Turner, 1977, 37) the realities of everyday life in a permanent state of *limen* (see Haynes 2011, Lever and Milbourne 2017). Temporal and transitional periods thus often become institutionalized, as liminality becomes a structurally imposed condition (Howard-Grenville et al. 2011) for what may be an 'indeterminate' period (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022, Chakraborty 2022).

Previous studies have considered liminality as a transitional stage of identity development through which actors cope with structural uncertainty in ways that reduce cognitive and emotional loss (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014). Anderson (2005) positively highlights liminal entrepreneuring, which potentially leads to spaces of creativity and pastiche unbounded by laws and social rules (Boland 2013, Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018), where the actors involved can imagine and experiment to reconstruct self and context or uncover their true selves (Garcia-

Lorenzo et al. 2018). A number of studies utilize liminality to show similarly how actors intentionally craft liminality to introduce cultural changes (Howard-Grenville et al. 2011), whilst others show how it is utilized to handle trajectory shifts, or moments of truth, where emotional reflexivity plays a pivotal role (Henfridsson and Youngjin 2014). As a 'paradoxical state of transition', Garcia-Lorenzo et al. (2018, 376) argues that liminality can be equally experienced as a space of unbounded creativity or as a frightening void (Boland 2013). Whilst this paradox stresses notions of ongoing or *perpetual* liminality vis-à-vis *transitory* liminality, less attention has been given to understanding the ways in which actors manoeuvre in a longer-lasting, potentially endless state of liminality, which is often the case for refugees (Johnsen and Sørensen 2014, Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022, Chakraborty 2022, Refai and McElwee 2022).

The paradoxical state of liminality highlights the significance of liminality as a lens for our study of refugee entrepreneurs, where ongoing experiences of *perpetual* liminality (which can be aligned with social exclusion and structural invisibility) can be positioned vis-à-vis *transitory* liminality (where refugees are able to escape and become successful and 'integrated' through entrepreneurship). Although reductions in agentic control (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022, Refai and McElwee 2022) often prolong liminality (Mason 2020) through restrictive legislative, emotional and material dimensions (Martinez-Aranda 2020), research has also outlined ways in which refugees mitigate such constraints through implicit skills (Refai and McElwee 2022), identity work and homemaking practices (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022). Despite these insights, however, little is known about the usefulness of entrepreneurship as an integration tool that allows refugees experiencing liminality to mitigate constrained immigration contexts (Refai and McElwee 2022). In this article, we look at these issues in the UK's constrained immigration context by drawing on a study of Syrian refugees.

## Constrained immigration contexts in the Global North

There is long-standing assumption in humanitarian discourse that international agencies work closely with welfare states in the Global North to provide vulnerable people with access to support and protection (Turner 2020). More recently, the policy landscape has changed somewhat as overburdened host states have been encouraged to treat vulnerable refugees as economic development opportunities (Betts and Collier 2017, Gürsel 2017, Goodfellow 2020). Growing calls for the integration of refugees through entrepreneurship in the Global North can be linked to narratives in refugee camps in the Global South, where Syrians have been marketed by humanitarian actors to Western donors as '*natural entrepreneurs*' (Betts cited in Turner 2020, 154). In parallel, countries such as Australia, Turkey and the UK (Osman 2020) are welcoming small numbers of educated middle-class Syrians for the potential contribution they can make to neoliberal economies. This is very much the case in Turkey, Gürsel (2017) argues, where small numbers of enterprising refugees are warmly welcomed, whilst the majority – living under precarious conditions – are more unwelcome and viewed simply as a resource to be channelled economically. In our contention that this situation is also evident in the UK.

This situation intensified greatly in 2012 when the then UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, announced the enactment of a '*hostile immigration environment*' (Goodfellow 2020). This was widely seen as an attempt to prevent illegal immigrants from accessing benefits, employment and public services, and to decide on whether and how existing immigration policies could be tightened (ICIBI 2016). Since then, this narrative has developed to reflect state-led marginalization of immigrants as a policy approach that impacts various Acts and regulations across diverse policy arenas (Mayblin 2017, Griffiths and Yeo 2021). Assumed socio-economic stability has become a core defence in arguments against increasing the number of asylum seekers, who are blamed for causing structural pressures in relation to housing, health systems and education, for example (Betts and Collier 2017). This agenda has been reflected in the media. In the run up to the EU referendum in 2016, a study of almost 15,000 newspaper and

magazine articles found that immigration was the most prominent referendum issue, and that media coverage was overwhelmingly negative (Dorling and Tomlinson 2018).

The UK government has arguably courted such sentiments to garner support to reduce immigration and deliver on its Brexit promise to reduce immigration (Consterdine 2018). The impact of these developments was evident at the start the Syrian crisis in 2011 when, instead of receiving refugees directly from Syria, the UK Government decided to provide humanitarian aid to countries bordering Syria (i.e. Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Turkey). This was controversial, and in an increasingly constrained immigration context in which the UK would eventually leave the European Union (EU), anti-immigration rhetoric grew significantly. Consequently, whilst those with the means to leave Syria started arriving in the UK to seek asylum almost immediately, it was only after a three-year-old Syrian boy was found dead on a Mediterranean beach in 2015 that the UK agreed – after considerable political, public and media pressure – to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable Syrians by 2020 via the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement programme (VPRS) (Home Office 2015).

More recently, the National Migration Bill further strengthened the UK's hostile immigration environment, and concerns have been expressed that it will ameliorate UK's power over asylum seekers and refugees, challenge the legitimacy of their humanitarian aid agreements, intensify precarious conditions, stoke social division and tension, and fuel anti-asylum seeker movements (Migration Yorkshire 2023). A report for the human rights organization Liberty (2019, 39) confirmed the potential negative impacts of this all-encompassing policy approach. The report argues that the wider agenda will force migrants and refugees into *'the shadow markets for housing, employment and other services, leaving them vulnerable to destitution and exploitation as they struggle to find alternative means to survive'* (2019, 39). These policy developments have stimulated scholarly research on refugee entrepreneurship across the Global North, highlighting the constrained contexts and challenging conditions within which refugee entrepreneurs operate (Osman 2020, Harima 2022, Refai and McElwee 2022). This article contributes to these debates and sets a clearer foundation for assessing refugees' perceptions of integration and social exclusion through entrepreneurship.

Our exploration is timely considering the high influx of refugees into Europe over the last 15 years (following the Arab uprisings in 2010, the Syrian Crisis in 2011, the Afghani conflict in 2014, and the ongoing war in Ukraine). Throughout this period, refugee entrepreneurship has become more central to the UK Government (i.e. Home Office) initiatives (e.g. the Home Office (2021)), various local and regional authority-led integration programmes (e.g. Migration Yorkshire 2022), and activities of social enterprises and non-profit organizations (e.g. The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network (TERN)). So far, however, there has been no clear evidence of the value of such programmes (Home Office 2019, Richey et al. 2021) and the extent to which they do or do not lead to integration.

## Research context and methodology

With a population of over 2.3 million, West Yorkshire is one of the most densely populated urban regions in the UK. It is also highly diverse, with around 20% of the population being comprised of ethnic minorities. Although it is difficult to get figures for the exact numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, the region has taken significant numbers in recent years, both as dispersed asylum seekers and through UNHCR supported refugee resettlement programmes such as Gateway Protection Programme (GWP) and Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). In June 2020, there were more than 3,700 asylum seekers receiving support across West Yorkshire (out of a national total of 19,768) and approximately 1,000 Syrians had been resettled in line with VPRS quotas (Refugee Council 2020).

Data were collected over two years from across all five local authorities in West Yorkshire: Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield (Figure 1 above). Considering the restrictions and the dependency and isolation that refugees endure, recruiting participants for the study was challenging. Whilst concerns about voluntary participation and the nature of consent can present challenges, questions posed by researchers can also add to the burden of recalling traumatic



**Figure 1.** Map of West Yorkshire.

experiences (Refaï et al. 2018). Such concerns were noted in ethical approvals and consent forms, and the challenges associated with data collection were reduced to some extent by employing a multi-method qualitative approach involving multi-level analysis, which is seen to be useful within constrained contexts (Elkafrawi, Roos, and Refaï 2022).

Using purposive snowball sampling via personal and professional contacts, we eventually conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugee entrepreneurs from Kirklees, Calderdale, Leeds and Wakefield, whom we coded as REK, REC, REL and REW respectively (see Table 1). All interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. We also worked closely with the regional migration partnership, Migration Yorkshire,<sup>1</sup> and conducted nine semi-structured interviews with individuals working for local authorities, the Refugee Council in West Yorkshire, and social enterprises working with and supporting refugees. Those interviews

**Table 1.** Interviews with refugee entrepreneurs (developed by authors).

Name	Gender	Family*	Status*	Type of business*	Educational/professional background	Region*
REW1	Male	Single	VPRS	Food	Engineer	Wakefield
REC2	Female	Married, 4 children	Asylum seeker	Syrian Food	BSc	Calderdale
REK3	Male	Married, 2 children	Asylum seeker	Hairdresser	BA	Kirklees
REK4	Male	Single	Asylum seeker	Hairdresser	Barber	Kirklees
REK5	Female	Married, 2 children	VPRS	Arabic language school	BA & MA	Kirklees
REK6	Male	Single	Asylum seeker	Café/Takeaway	School teacher	Kirklees
REK6a	Male	Single	Asylum seeker	Café/Takeaway	Chef	Kirklees
REK7	Male	Married, 3 children	Asylum seeker	Mini market	Owned and ran his own shops	Kirklees
REW8	Male	Married, 2 children	Asylum seeker	Syrian Food	PhD	Wakefield
REC19	Female	Married, no children	VPRS	Arts and crafts	BA	Calderdale
REL10	Male	Single	VPRS	Giftshop	Left Syria at school age	Leeds
REW11	Male	Single	Asylum seeker	Hospitality	Hospitality	Wakefield
REW12	Male	Married, 2 children	Asylum seeker	Books and crafts	BA	Wakefield

\*At the time of research.



**Table 2.** Interviews with refugee support workers.

Name	Position*	Place*
SW1	Council Officer	Bradford Council
SW2	Council Officer	Bradford Council
SW3	Council Officer	Wakefield Council
SW4	Refugee Support Agency Worker	Bradford Council
SW5	Refugee Support Agency Worker	Bradford Council
SW6	Council Officer	Calderdale Council
SW7	Council Officer	Kirklees Council
SW8	Refugee Support Worker	National Refugee Agency
SW9	Council Officer	Migration Yorkshire

\*At the time of research.

**Table 3.** Focus group participants.

	Gender	Route	Skills
Kirklees			
FGK1	Male	VPRS	Joiner
FGK2	Female	VPRS	Beautician
FGK3	Female	VPRS	Sewing & Arabic teaching volunteer in women societies in Syria
FGK4	Male	Asylum seeker	Electrician
FGK5	Male	VPRS	Accountancy Manager (+ joinery skills)
FGK6	Male	VPRS	Household maintenance
FGK7	Female	VPRS	Accountancy manager/BA graduate
FGK8	Male	VPRS	Tiler
FGK9	Female	VPRS	Agriculture
Wakefield			
FGW1	Male	VPRS	Joiner
FGW2	Male	VPRS	Mechanic
FGW3	Female	VPRS	Cleaner
FGW4	Male	VPRS	Tailor
FGW5	Male	VPRS	Teacher
FGW6	Male	VPRS	Tiler
FGW7	Female	VPRS	Tailor

helped us to understand support workers' experiences of working with refugees on entrepreneurship programmes, and the extent to which they perceived these programmes to support the integration of refugees. We refer to these interviewees as 'Support Workers', whom we code as SW (see Table 2).

With support agencies and local authorities, we also organized what we refer to as 'fact finding focus groups', which involved piggybacking our research activities on weekly 'refugee drop-ins' at local authority venues. We ran two focus groups in Huddersfield (in Kirklees) and two in Wakefield involving more than 40 Syrians in total. The vast majority of focus group participants had arrived from transit countries bordering Syria with their families and children via VPRS/UNHCR. Some were single, both males and females. A very small number of participants were asylum seekers who claimed asylum in the UK after arriving at ports of entry or through illegal networks. None of the participants had lived in the UK for more than six years at the time of research. Whilst focus groups helped in minimizing challenges of recruitment, it was still difficult to get participants to disclose personal information. In our analysis, we therefore focus on participants who spoke in detail, which we code in the same way (see Table 3). We add further contextualization to the analysis to protect the identity of research participants where appropriate. This process of anonymization follows the EU definition on avoiding potential identification and reidentification of participants by using reasonable techniques (DPWP 2014); it also follows from specific ethical approvals for this research.

**Table 4.** Eight themes identified in development of Turner's 'rites of passage' (developed by authors).

Turner's 'rites of passage'	Developing Turner's 'rites of passage' through eight themes
<b>Stage One: Separation from the old world, arrival in the new.</b> Here we identify the skills and knowledge that Syrian refugees possessed when they arrived in the UK, and the challenges they encountered	<b>Theme One:</b> Emerging differences between equipped vs. vulnerable refugees
<b>Stage Two: Exploring entrepreneurship in liminal spaces.</b> Here we examine refugees' reasons for engaging in entrepreneurship as a means of escaping liminality	<b>Theme Two:</b> Emotional, cognitive and geographical reality checks, with multiple separations
<b>Stage three: Escaping the liminal phase through entrepreneurship (or not).</b> Here we examine the extent to which refugee engagement in entrepreneurship can lead to integration and/or social exclusion	<b>Theme Three:</b> Hopes for transitioning through entrepreneurship
	<b>Theme Four:</b> Frustration and helplessness
	<b>Theme Five:</b> Low value venturing
	<b>Theme Six:</b> Observing a widening gap among refugees
	<b>Theme Seven:</b> 'Idiosyncratic' value perceptions by refugee entrepreneurs

## Coding and analysis

Focus groups and interviews with refugee entrepreneurs were conducted in Arabic by members of the research team. Interviews with local authority and other support workers were mainly conducted in English by members of the team, and occasionally in Arabic. Data collected in Arabic were translated, transcribed, coded and analysed in English, the common language of the research team. The coding process was three-fold, using open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Arabic and English-speaking research team members were present throughout the analysis to minimize bias. In open coding stage, we read through data transcripts several times, identifying key issues and events, which were compared and given conceptual labels (e.g. arrival, skills, expertise, qualifications, barriers, knowledge, employment, entrepreneurship). Other topics (e.g. looking for work; the need for validation/recognition; being asked to move around the UK; wanting to make a difference; supporting families) were then assembled into categories and subcategories in axial coding stage to identify relationships and connections between the open codes. Finally, data were selectively coded and clustered to identify eight overriding themes. Throughout this coding and analysis process, we employed 'hurricane thinking' where categories were compared, cross-referenced, and analysed for their proximity and relationship to the article's research question (Denzin and Lincoln 2005) and the 'rites of passage' conceptual framing as detailed in Table 4 and the following analysis.

### Stage one: separation from the old world, arrival in the new

#### *Theme one: emerging differences between equipped vs. vulnerable refugees*

Many of the first Syrians arriving in West Yorkshire at the start of the crisis were equipped; most were from middle-class backgrounds and had professional skills and/or university education. Support workers confirmed that the majority of this group – which included, architects, pharmacists, teachers, dental technicians, and civil engineers – arrived first because they had the resources and networks to leave Syria quickly when the conflict started. Most could also speak good English, and therefore had the skills to put themselves forward for any opportunities that emerged. As a support agency worker confirmed:

So certainly, the early Syrian refugees we got in the early days were a lot more highly skilled ... A lot more professionals ... [with] a better understanding of English. (SW4)

A small number of this first group of refugees became successful entrepreneurs, as detailed later in our analysis. Unlike this equipped group, however, many Syrians arriving in the following years through VPRS (or illegal networks) were vulnerable; they had more limited education and English

language skills and were therefore less confident about accessing support and presenting themselves for opportunities. As some focus group participants stated:

Even when you have the skills, you do not have the ability to communicate (FGW7).

I'm here since 2.5 years. I arrived from Lebanon through UNHCR. I used to work in sewing, in large factories, at a professional level. I told them about my experiences when I arrived, I tried, but it's not possible to find me a job because my English is very weak ... I'm asking around; I can't stay home and do nothing. (FGW4)

These problems were often the basis on which other problems emerged, as we shall see.

### ***Theme two: emotional, cognitive and geographical reality checks, with multiple separations***

For many participants, the realization that some refugees were 'equipped' and some were 'vulnerable' was a reality check that reinforced various cognitive and emotional losses experienced during separation from Syria and the loss of social status and capital entailed (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014, Bizri 2017, Harima 2022). Most refugees had experienced unwanted and unplanned journeys, leaving behind everything they knew to escape war and terror. On arrival in the UK, many reflected on their journey and new situations:

Everything happened very quickly. I was only focused on one thing and that is to arrive at a safe place where I can bring my fiancé and start my family. Once I arrived, I realised that, despite being safe, I don't know anyone, I'm unfamiliar with the language, culture, rules and everything. It's not like I didn't know, but I was shocked how big the gap actually was. Focusing on survival I guess, I didn't think much about these things, I realised I had to start from scratch again. (REK3)

Refugees also found the experience of settling into a new life traumatic, which was often compounded by multiple geographic separations once they arrived in the UK. Negative sentiments were often expressed about dispersal processes through which UK regions are allocated set numbers of refugees for resettlement (Lewis et al, 2015). Before arriving in West Yorkshire, some refugees had been dispersed to distant corners of the UK in line with VPRS quotas:

I spent the first two years doing absolutely nothing. We were deported to an Island in Scotland called "Island of Death"! There, it took me hours every time I needed to go and shop at a decent supermarket for my family ... particularly halal shops. It didn't support any form of life; no colleges no nothing! (FGK5)

Others who were resettled in West Yorkshire also endured multiple separations. This included cognitive separations as Syrians realized that they could not employ their qualifications or expertise in the UK due to language barriers (Refai et al. 2018), with many subsequently being encouraged to apply for jobs below their skill level.

Refugees also spoke about being offered jobs far away from West Yorkshire where their families were settling (e.g. in Southern England and Wales). A refugee mentioned:

After a long journey I managed to start a life with my family here in this town; it's been tough, and now I am expected to start working at a job somewhere else. I can't move again! (FGK6)

Others tried to build on cultural insights and skills they arrived with in the UK. This again highlights the discrepancies and challenges that refugees need to work-around to succeed. A refugee stated:

My expertise is in tailoring "Balto" [a conservative dress for women, which is famous in Syria]. That's what I know! I tried to make and sell Baltos, but no one is interested in buying them here. I have to start thinking about something else. (FGW4)

The multiple reality checks encountered by refugees on arrival meant that a state of limen soon became pervasive and inescapable.

## Stage two: exploring entrepreneurship in liminal spaces

### Theme three: hopes for transitioning through entrepreneurship

Given the UK's constrained immigration context, there was often very little local authority support for refugees on arrival in West Yorkshire. Support was often piecemeal and dependent on activities of individual organizations. When Syrians started arriving in the region in greater numbers in 2014, Horton Housing<sup>2</sup> in Bradford played a key role introducing support programmes. They had been resettling refugees through the Gateway Protection Programme (GPP) since 2008 and were subsequently approached by the World Jewish Relief organization<sup>3</sup> to support Syrians into employment. This led to the emergence of Specialist Training and Employment Programme (STEP)<sup>4</sup> in 2016 to support refugees arriving through VPRS into employment, which was rolled out with help of other agencies in local authority areas across the region.

Despite approaching several large employers, those running STEP programme soon realized how difficult it was to find employment opportunities for refugees. These challenges became more apparent as more 'vulnerable' refugees started to arrive in the UK. Negative sentiments were expressed by some participants about the lack of opportunities:

I work in tiling, but I can't do it here! I was told I need a special qualification to work formally, and I can't get that qualification because of the language barrier. (FGK8)

It's great to see these opportunities. I was in full employment in Syria, and very keen to do something here, but so far I haven't been able to find any job (REC19).

In line with thinking in national policy, STEP subsequently commissioned the Entrepreneurial Refugee Network (TERN)<sup>5</sup> to run a series of entrepreneurship workshops. During this period, support agencies actively encouraged refugees to engage in entrepreneurship. Being low on resources to support refugees, entrepreneurship was arguably used as a tool of last resort. This often involved encouraging refugees to draw on their knowledge of Syria to start a business, as a number of interviewees from support agencies acknowledged:

There's a chap who wants to sell cotton items, there's also the chap who makes leather handbags ... I mean they're so knowledgeable on, you know, who's got the best quality and ... where about in the country ... where you get the best cotton from, and so on. (SW4)

Challenges nevertheless surfaced. A support worker highlighted the complexities refugees encountered around the expectations and desires of Syrian refugees:

You had some people who were interested in setting up their own businesses, but didn't necessarily know what they wanted to do, so just wanted to find out a little bit more. And then ... you've got people who had their own businesses in Syria, so they knew exactly what they want to do, but just don't know how to do it here in the UK. (SW2)

As a research team, we also faced financial pressure to support refugees. Some refugees initially agreed to take part in focus groups in hope that they would be able to access financial support, but quickly changed their minds when they realized that this was not the case. The question of *'How much money will you give us to start a business?'* was common. This issue was also raised by a support agency worker:

One of the main challenges we face when running refugee entrepreneurship programmes is recruitment. They seem to believe that offering them start-up funding will solve their problems, but this isn't the case. (SW9)

Whilst STEP programme undoubtedly presented opportunities for many early Syrian refugee arrivals in the region, refugees were deeply constrained by their inability to access finance, and many struggled to survive on limited benefits. Nevertheless, entrepreneurship still seemed like a good option for many, despite the challenges involved. Some interviewees and focus group participants suggested that there should be more financial support for refugees to start up in business:

Instead of giving benefits to refugees, use that money to support them in setting up small projects ... joinery, electricity, bakery. (FGK1)

This would be a good starting point. Recent analysis suggests that making business support available for all 20,000 Syrians' arriving through VPRS could potentially save UK taxpayers £170 m over a five-year period (CFE 2018). However, given the vulnerability of refugees arriving through VPRS, this is not as straightforward as it appears, and our work found that refugees who set-up businesses and became integrated were the exception rather than the rule.

#### **Theme four: frustration and helplessness**

Refugee vulnerabilities became more evident as STEP and TERN programmes were expanded geographically across West Yorkshire to accommodate refugees arriving through VPRS. A support worker in Bradford highlighted the problematic nature of this geographical transition as agencies attempted to support more vulnerable groups:

The other areas, when they first started setting up were saying, 'oh no, we're not getting anybody that's professional', but that's, kind of, what's happened to us ... So, we're now ... getting people who haven't finished school, you know, have left school at 14. And then obviously, that brings ... more challenges. (SA4)

This more vulnerable group of refugees arrived with a wider range of problems, and we were informed that, during the wider roll out of STEP across the region, support workers had encountered '*refugees who were illiterate in their own language*' (SW6). There were also amputees and single women with large families who had lost their husbands in the conflict.

Some support workers thus raised questions as to why, given these vulnerabilities, the UK Government agreed to resettle only the most vulnerable Syrians through VPRS. As one stated:

Britain deliberately chose to take the most vulnerable, which may be to some extent very good, but it may also bring with it problems, you know. (SW8).

In this context, the whole notion of entrepreneurship took on a new direction. As we observed earlier, Syrians were often encouraged to use their traditional skills and knowledge to engage in entrepreneurship. Indeed, previous work in Jordan (Refai et al. 2018) found that this approach often worked very well in and around refugee camps, where Syrians could sell food and provide other services at community events. In the UK, however, things were very different. As a female focus group participant stated strongly when asked about the possibility of selling food she could make in her kitchen:

No! who would I sell it to? I can't sell only to my friends, that's not going to bring in money. (FGK2).

Unable to utilize their skills and knowledge to find employment, refugees found this situation difficult and frustrating. In many instances, they found themselves moving backwards and almost restarting their lives completely. As such, our exploration of entrepreneurship in these liminal spaces further enhance the multiple separations raised earlier and reinforce a sense of 'indeterminate' liminality (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022, Chakraborty 2022). Stuck between and betwixt the realities of everyday life, several focus group participants suggested that they would prefer to return to transit countries such as Jordan to escape their vulnerable position in the UK:

Why don't they allow us to go back to Jordan, I'd love to go back there. My neighbours are giving me a very hard time, calling the police and getting me in trouble. I'm unable to go out to my garden or let my children play out. (FGK9)

This difficult situation also raised the prospect, for many refugees, of engaging in low value venturing, which is explored next.

### **Stage three: escaping the liminal phase through entrepreneurship, or not?**

#### **Theme five: low value venturing**

Despite the challenges they faced, numerous vulnerable refugees we spoke with engaged in business start-ups and became trapped in low-value ventures. Some had travelled around the

North of England looking for suitable locations to start-up businesses. After arriving in the UK to seek asylum, a young refugee in his late twenties (REK6) signed up for college to learn English and enhance his employment chances. However, as he mixed with other refugee students, the difficulties of succeeding via this route soon became apparent, and he decided to improve his chances of becoming integrated and starting a new life by setting up a small café and takeaway with a fellow Syrian (REK6a).

Opting out of welfare support that asylum seekers receive, REK6 and REK6a set up their business in partnership with a fellow Syrian who had refugee status, which enabled them to bypass legal restrictions. The café was set in an urban neighbourhood on the outskirts of a large town, where rentals were less expensive than in cities. As REK6a stated, with limited access to finances they had to ask for financial support from friends and family:

I got financial support as a loan from friends overseas to start my café. The money was obtained through a third person. I should of course re-pay them. They expect a share from the business outcome until the loan is re-paid. It's difficult as profits are already low (REK6a)

It took 12-months to refurbish the property and there were many difficulties, including understanding complex building regulations and hygiene requirements. This was particularly challenging as REK6 & REK6a only had experience in food production:

*Our experience was limited to food, which is the core of our business really, but this was not enough as we came to understand other legal requirements as we started the project. We had to move in very small steps; sometimes moving backward before we can move forward again.* (REK6)

These experiences illustrate the difficulties of moving out of the liminal phase through entrepreneurship. Even after they set up their business, REK6 & REK6a were still unsure (given that their applications for asylum were ongoing) that they would be allowed to stay in the UK to pay off their loan, develop their business and become integrated.

Another example is REW1 who was encouraged by a support worker to set-up a mobile food business, without fully considering legal and regulatory implications. After arriving in the UK to seek asylum, REW1 was stimulated to buy and convert a second-hand caravan to start an authentic Syrian food business. After refurbishing the van, this 70-year-old refugee entrepreneur was advised on suitable locations, but without a licence to trade he found himself in a difficult situation:

Some people are unkind, especially restaurants who asked me to remove my caravan. I initially refused until police came. I've been in this place only 2 days now, although the council didn't give a place [or licence], I've managed to set here and will see how it goes. God will help me! this place is good because there're some good restaurants around and people want to buy sandwiches. (REW1)

The cultural aspects of this refugee's situation are revealing and illustrate his determination to support himself and succeed. Even at 70 years old, REW1 preferred to work and set up a business rather than accept benefits.

### **Theme six: observing a widening gap among refugees**

With a growing focus on entrepreneurship as a tool for refugees to support themselves, stories of refugee entrepreneurs who succeeded in starting-up businesses were often used as examples of what refugees could achieve by local authorities and national media. Much as vulnerable refugees stated that there was a big difference between themselves and the equipped refugees, so this latter group viewed themselves as hard working with the will to succeed. For example, when a refugee who started-up a successful enterprise (whilst also being employed) was asked about his status, he replied: *'Well, I am a refugee, but not a refugee, you know'* (REW11). The suggestion was that whilst his legal status was 'refugee', he believed he should not be viewed as a vulnerable person or someone seeking refuge

because he was actually supporting himself. Another refugee who started a successful enterprise reflected similarly that:

I'm against the narrative that a young and healthy person cannot fend for him/herself. It depends on the person and how dedicated and hardworking they are. Focus on what you do best, and with patience, confidence and hard work, you will succeed (REW8).

This narrative also reflects the challenging journeys that refugee entrepreneurs faced (yet managed to go through) to start-up a business. Indeed, our data indicates that the expectations of all refugees, including the equipped, are challenged from the moment they arrive in the UK, where the skills and knowledge required to find employment or be successful in entrepreneurship are very different to those required in Syria. REW8 reflected on the challenges faced when starting a business, including accessing financial support:

We applied for so many sponsors including charities . . . councils, company house . . . they all praised the initiative but said . . . we can't support it financially. (REW8)

These challenges were also evident in the case of REC2 who fled Syria with her husband and children. Despite having a bachelor's degree in science, REC2 struggled to find suitable employment in the UK. Eventually, with concerns about the future of her family growing, she began to explore possibility of starting up a business for the first time. There were various false starts, but when a close family friend informed REC2 about a business closing nearby, an opening emerged, and with the help of her husband and a small support grant she opened a small food business.

REC2 explained the challenging nature of her journey since starting the business and her struggle to become integrated through entrepreneurship:

So all these five years, we've been working intensively and manually and that restricted us, actually, from increasing our profits. But in business, I always say, it's like we are hamsters just going through these wheels. Yeah, get in and start to run over and over. And you need to accept working for no profit for a while. (REC2)

This situation was more difficult for vulnerable refugees and many thus struggled to escape the liminal phase and become integrated through entrepreneurship. This was evident in the narratives of refugees themselves. Whilst the more 'equipped' group of refugees saw entrepreneurship as an outcome of determination, hard work and skills, the more 'vulnerable' group were often unsettled by feelings of unworthiness or inability to perform, which often fuelled negative sentiments around who can succeed through entrepreneurship and who cannot. When asked about their opinions of successful refugee entrepreneurs, refugees' negative sentiments and frustrations often surfaced:

I hope you are not referring to . . . [naming a successful refugee entrepreneur]. That's a completely different story to mine (FGK2)

The growing gap between 'equipped' and 'vulnerable' refugees was also noted by a support worker, who drew attention to the problematic nature of the wider role-out of refugee entrepreneurship as a policy tool, and expectations that *all* refugees can become entrepreneurs:

We all know very well that the circumstances of that group [equipped refugees] are completely different from the majority, so in a way it's not really fair to expect the same from everyone (SW7).

As Lever and Milbourne (2017) noted in their work on migrant workers, immigration policy often imposes a process of divide and rule, creating divisions and tensions among competing groups.

### **Theme seven: 'idiosyncratic' value perceptions**

Alongside this, equipped refugee entrepreneurs often reflected on personal feelings of what their businesses meant to them in terms of becoming integrated. Unsurprisingly, feelings of contentment were widely noted. For example, whilst entrepreneurship was not REC2's first career choice, she viewed it as a way of recovering from her recent experiences:

I always think that to create an idea you need different factors. Like, firstly, when you change your circumstances, you'll look at things differently ... It's maybe a matter of the need to thrive, and wanting to recover. It's exactly like when you are about to sink, then somebody just gives you a hand. (REC2)

Also, REW8 was ultimately able to start a successful venture of which he was proud. Although entrepreneurship was not initially something he considered, it reinforced his feelings of pride and belonging, and giving something back to the community that helped him through rough times:

I consider myself privileged to have come from an educated background. This route [entrepreneurship] is probably not one that I would've chosen, but now that I've taken it, I'm proud of what I'm achieving and would do it again ... My journey allowed me to focus on what I love ... I see my achievement today as a way to payback everyone who supported me in this country, which I consider now to be my home (REW8)

Such perceptions demonstrate how cognitive and emotional loss can be reduced (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014, Henfridsson and Youngjin 2014) through start-ups. Yet, similarly, the 'emotional reflexivity' that refugees experience as a result of various emotional and materialistic dimensions (Muhr et al. 2019) can somehow leave them emotionally attached to the limen within which their fellow refugees remain trapped. This was noted in refugee entrepreneurs' reflections on their business start-ups as means for spreading hope and inspiration to vulnerable refugees whose struggles they understand:

I travelled between different areas, London, Birmingham, Coventry and Wakefield. I went through many ups and downs. The experience I had running a business back in Syria was helpful, but very much different. I hope today I can be an inspiration to other refugees as I know many of them are struggling (REW12)

These reflections are important and demonstrate that, despite attempts to fragment and disperse the Syrian community through policies of divide and rule, the community simultaneously tries to support itself from within.

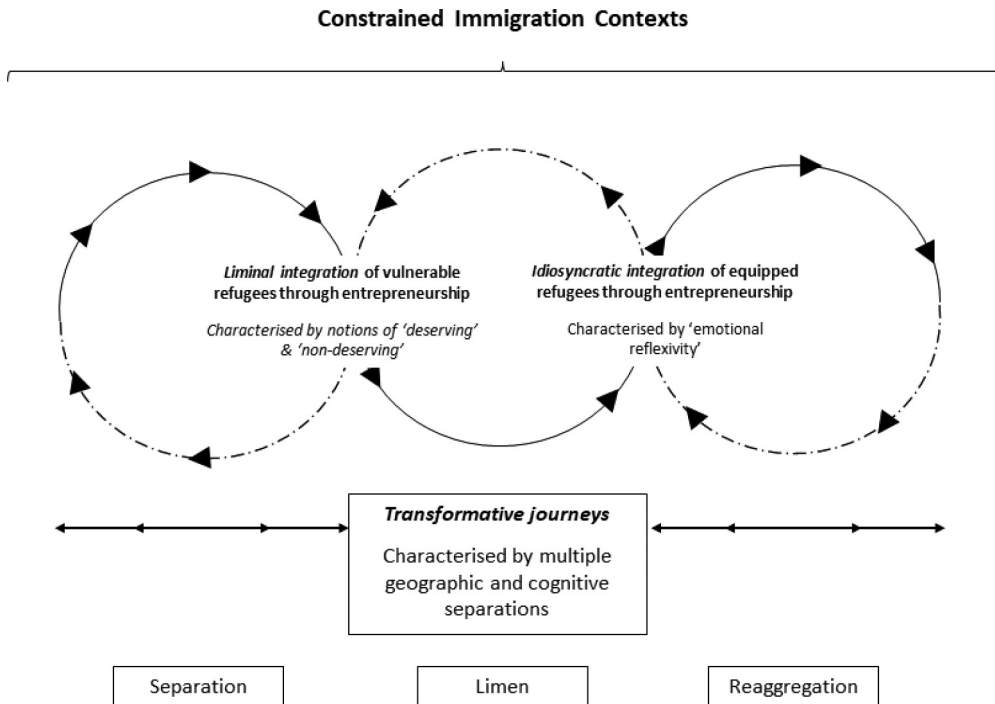
## Discussion

Through its findings, this article explores refugees' perceptions of integration and/or social exclusion through entrepreneurship in the UK's constrained immigration contexts. Whilst entrepreneurship is increasingly positioned as an integration tool within neoliberal economies, our findings contribute to literature debates around potential outcomes of social exclusion through entrepreneurship (Williams and Williams 2011; Smith et al. 2019; Danson, Galloway, and Sherif 2021). More particularly, our findings indicate dyadic outcomes of entrepreneurship as a means of integration of equipped refugees through what we term as *idiosyncratic integration*, and social exclusion of vulnerable refugees through what we term *liminal integration*, respectively.

As illustrated conceptually in Figure 2, for those refugees who manage to reaggregate through entrepreneurship, liminality can be experienced as a positive state of creativity (Anderson 2005, Boland 2013). Such outcomes were, however, only observed for a minority of refugees whom we refer to as the equipped. For this minority, entrepreneurship is perceived as a tool for *idiosyncratic integration*, where integration is not merely viewed as a way of making economic contributions. In this context, perceptions of integration are full of emotion and meaning connected to thriving, recovery, pride, belonging, inspiring and paying back to supportive communities. *Idiosyncratic reaggregation* therefore emphasizes Kapasi and Stirzaker's (2023) arguments around 'idiosyncratic value' in entrepreneurship as a way for thriving and succeeding through meanings that hold significant personal value. Here, perceptions of refugee entrepreneurs' true selves become focused on successes that go beyond confined economic contributions (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018), where surrounding meanings and contexts must be fully considered (Welter et al. 2017).

Idiosyncratic value perceptions are often connected directly to the limen state from where successful refugee entrepreneurs escaped, and the sentiments they left behind (Martinez-Aranda 2020). This is unsurprising for refugee entrepreneurs considering the extreme hardships embedded





**Figure 2.** Conceptualising entrepreneurship as an integration tool for refugees in constrained immigration contexts (developed by the authors building on van Gennep (1960) Turner (1987)).

in refugee journeys (Crawley et al. 2018), and the fact that many fellow refugees – whose journeys they can empathize with – remain trapped there. The hardships that refugees experience embody 'emotional reflexivity', which can help refugees reduce the hardships of their liminal phase, deal with moments of truth during trajectory shifts (Henfridsson and Youngjin 2014) and reconcile multiple contradictions and challenges by mobilizing 'promises and hopes about new selves through offering a feeling of possibility of agency and capability' (Muhr et al. 2019, 570) – here, through entrepreneurship.

To some extent, this emotional attachment of refugee entrepreneurs to liminal spaces relates to Turner's (1987), Mortland's (1987) and Haynes (2011) discussions around newcomers, who never fully reaggregate in host countries. For refugees who could *not* engage in entrepreneurship and escape the liminal phase, despite their best efforts, our findings uncover the downside of entrepreneurship, where living '*betwixt and between*' (Turner 1977, 37) the realities of everyday life on the fringes of society is pervasive and all encompassing. Efforts to integrate vulnerable refugees through entrepreneurship are often positioned as a way of supporting positive outcomes. However, in constrained immigration contexts with growing concerns around the socio-economic contributions of refugees, we argue that entrepreneurship often leads to the *liminal integration* of vulnerable refugees. These refugees are often encouraged – although they have little chances of success – to engage in entrepreneurship by drawing on their knowledge of (in our case) Syria.

Considering their vulnerability, our findings demonstrate that for this group entrepreneurship renders liminal spaces a 'frightening void', which disables any sense of transformation and renewal (Boland 2013). Despite the fact that liminality can offer entrepreneurs an opportunity to find and develop new structures of their own (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018), this becomes extremely difficult when refugees realize the huge gap in a host country's culture, business structures and expectations (Refai et al. 2018, Howard-Grenville et al. 2011). For the vast majority of vulnerable refugees, entrepreneurship is therefore perceived as a precarious low-capital venturing experience that

traps them in a permanent state of limen, whereby isolation and marginalization are reinforced (Lever and Milbourne 2017). Thus, as we can see in Figure 2, liminal integration is not a transitory stage; it is, we contend, a long-term phase where refugees are forced to 'navigate conditions of crisis and austerity' (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2018, 39) on the fringes of society, rendering their integration (re-aggregation) extremely difficult. Such experiences show how 'uncertainties, precarities, and suspended temporalities of refugee liminality persist in socio-spatial contexts beyond state-controlled sites' that characterize the hopelessness and frustrations of perpetual (Johnsen & Sørensen 2014) and 'indeterminate' liminality (Chakraborty 2022, 1209). These insights extend Villares-Varela et al.'s (2022) argument that stresses the economic potential of migrants alongside labour market exclusion, which – whilst driving migrant entrepreneurship – can limit the aspirations and capabilities of refugees significantly.

The different entrepreneurship perceptions observed here among different refugees are understandable considering their different social locations, agentic abilities and access to institutions (Refai and McElwee 2022, Villares-Varela et al. 2022). Yet, our findings nuance perceptions of integration and social exclusion of refugees through entrepreneurship within constrained immigration contexts – showing how increasing calls for refugee entrepreneurship in these contexts can lead to a widening gap among refugees themselves, thus mirroring the process of divide and rule identified by Lever and Milbourne (2017). Indeed, as in Turkey, a distinction can be drawn between refugees with the means to contribute to economy and those without the means to contribute, who can thus be seen, much as they are in Turkey, as an economic resource (Gürsel 2017). Such distinctions extend debates on 'deserving' and 'undeserving' asylum seekers and refugees (Sales 2002, Haynes 2011, Jones, Gunaratnam, and Bhattacharyy 2017) into the field of refugee entrepreneurship, further contributing to binary distinctions between the worthy and unworthy, the included and excluded, the valuable and less valuable (Mavelli 2018).

Thus, as depicted in Figure 2, liminality for refugees cannot simply be conceptualized in contiguous stages through which refugees move from 'separation' into a 'limen' to 're-aggregation'. Whilst liminality has often been viewed as a transitional stage that allows actors to deal with uncertainties and reduce cognitive and emotional loss (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014), our findings indicate the difficulty of achieving this, particularly for vulnerable refugees. Through idiosyncratic and liminal integration, our findings confirm that the move into entrepreneurship by refugees is often driven by a complex range of overlapping challenges. These challenges underpin the multiple cognitive processes that refugees must experience and acknowledge in their desire for new opportunities (Harima 2022), and the transformative journeys that surely cannot be framed as rational journeys between two destinations, but rather as discrete layered experiences (Crawley et al. 2018, Refai and McElwee 2022). These journeys embody the liminality that accompanies the journeys of refugees from an old world (Syria) to a new world (the UK).

## Conclusions

This article stresses the distinctiveness of entrepreneurial contexts in enabling and/or hindering refugee entrepreneurship (Welter et al. 2017, Refai et al. 2018), with particular focus on constrained immigration contexts where the policy emphasis moves away from refugee rights and protection towards policies that require refugees, like all subjects of neoliberalism, to fend for themselves. Through a contextualized approach, the article contributes to the literature on liminality and entrepreneurship within constrained immigration contexts, and proposes an original framework that offers a platform to research and explore the nuances of integration and social exclusion through entrepreneurship. In particular, we contribute to understanding the dyadic component of entrepreneurship as an integration tool. On the one hand, whilst entrepreneurship is often positioned as a tool for supporting refugee integration in the UK and other

host countries (Home Office 2019, Richey et al. 2021), we observe that only a minority of refugees (mostly the equipped) are able to become integrated through entrepreneurship. Yet, even for this group, perceptions of integration are packed with personal emotions and meanings through *idiosyncratic integration* and 'emotional reflexivity' (Muhr et al. 2019, Henfridsson and Youngjin 2014). *Idiosyncratic integration* stresses the need to embrace wider value perspectives in entrepreneurship beyond neoliberal worldviews, particularly within marginalized groups as refugees (Welter et al. 2017, Smith et al. 2019).

On the other hand, for the majority of refugees, we observe that entrepreneurship promotes *liminal integration*, where vulnerable refugees are encouraged to engage in entrepreneurship, despite the fact that they have very low chances of success. *Liminal integration* develops our employment of liminality as a suitable lens to explore refugee entrepreneurship through extending distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees into the field of entrepreneurship. Such distinctions, we argue, fuel intersecting divisions and inequalities between refugees themselves; i.e. those who are equipped with the education, language and transferable skills required to become integrated, and the more vulnerable who are much less equipped (Lever and Milbourne 2017, Gürsel 2017). The *liminal integration* of vulnerable refugees, by contrast, stresses that refugee entrepreneurship cannot be viewed as a contiguous process, but rather as one through which refugees experience cross-domain transitions (Ladge et al. 2012) characterized by multiple physical and/or cognitive separations. Such separations extend the literature on refugees' transformative journeys (Refai & McElwee 2022) and the 'indeterminate' liminality (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2022, Chakraborty 2022) from which most refugees (particularly the vulnerable) cannot escape.

At practice level, by highlighting distinctions between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees, we do not want to undermine the successes of refugee entrepreneurs who become integrated through entrepreneurship, nor deny their wealth of skills, knowledge and expertise that support their upward socio-economic mobility through entrepreneurship (Refai and McElwee 2022, Villares-Varela et al. 2022), which are indeed worthy of celebration. We neither seek to denigrate integration efforts of local authorities and support agencies, or the use of entrepreneurship as tool for promoting integration, where entrepreneurship continues, quite rightly, to be seen as an important integration tool. Rather, we draw attention towards the dyadic dichotomies embedded in the double-edged value laden perceptions of what counts as refugee integration, stressing the policy implications of this article and indicating that refugees should not be homogenized within entrepreneurship policy, whereby entrepreneurship is proposed as a ubiquitous solution that enables all refugees to support themselves. Similarly, refugees should not be hemmed into narratives whereby integration is pejoratively used to justify antipathy towards refugees, for their apparent inability to integrate into host societies; i.e. focusing on 'integration' that merely covers their foundational needs (Home Office 2019).

We thus call on policy makers to recognize the heterogeneity among refugees arriving in host countries in ways that acknowledge the potential downside of entrepreneurship as an integration tool in the case of vulnerable refugees, where isolation and marginalization can be reinforced (Smith et al. 2019). We acknowledge the limitations of this research focusing on one country (the UK) and on one group of refugees (Syrians), yet considering the universal humanitarian principles of protecting vulnerable refugees in the context of neoliberal policy narratives in the global South and North, we believe that this article's contributions can be far-reaching, setting strong foundations for further research looking at the heterogeneity of refugee populations around notions of cohesion, equality and value-extraction/creation, and how those relate to entrepreneurship.

## Notes

1. <https://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk/>
2. <https://hortonhousing.co.uk>
3. <https://www.worldjewishrelief.org/>

4. STEP ran in Sheffield, Leeds, Kirklees, Calderdale, Bradford, and Coventry.
5. TERN ([www.wearetern.org](http://www.wearetern.org)).

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