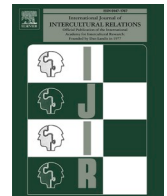




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“Bridging cultures through food”: A qualitative analysis of food dynamic between Italian host families and Ukrainian refugees

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the Russo-Ukrainian War, many Ukrainians were forced to migrate, with 175,000 settled in Italy. Following this, several Italian families have offered to host refugees in their homes. The cohabitation of these two cultures has presented challenges and opportunities. In this context, food and culinary practices can represent a means of intercultural exchange. The present study explores the dynamics arising from the coexistence of Italian hosts and Ukrainian refugees, with a focus on food-related interactive exchanges. A qualitative approach was adopted involving semistructured interviews with 24 Italians who hosted Ukrainian refugees in their homes between December 2022 and May 2023. The interviews were analyzed using grounded methodology. The study identified several themes, including differences in eating habits, issues related to the eating habits of refugee children, food as an intercultural exchange, and the opportunities and challenges presented by commensality. In addition, significant challenges emerged regarding the eating habits of refugee children and dietary differences between the Italian host families and the Ukrainian refugees. In light of this, it became clear that adopting a flexible and open approach to different eating habits is crucial for facilitating family coexistence and promoting mutual understanding between the Italian host families and the Ukrainian refugees. In conclusion to promote harmonious and inclusive intercultural cohabitation, several targeted actions were suggested, such as educational programs, psychosocial support services, and food sharing initiatives.

Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which escalated into armed conflict in February 2022, has had significant repercussions for both nations and the global community. This conflict has led to a substantial exodus of Ukrainian citizens, who have either been internally displaced within the western regions of Ukraine or have sought refuge abroad (Aktas et al., 2024; Podgórska et al., 2023; Migliorini et al., 2023). Consequently, Europe is experiencing the largest wave of migration since World War II. Over 25% of Ukrainians left their homes in the initial 6 weeks of the conflict, resulting in 8 million refugees registering across Europe by March 2023 (Statista report on Russia–Ukraine conflict 2021–2022-statistics & facts, 2023). Despite the extensive media coverage of this crisis, there remains a pressing need to understand its long-term implications, particularly with regard to the reception and integration of

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displaced populations in host countries (Su et al., 2022; Javanbakht, 2022). As of the latest available information, Italy has become an important destination for Ukrainian refugees. Since the beginning of the war, 175,000 individuals, mostly women and children, owing to the conscription of men into the conflict, have sought refuge in the country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024). Although many displaced Ukrainians have sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Poland and Germany, Italy's attractiveness as a destination is likely to be influenced by the significant pre-2022 presence of Ukrainian nationals. By 2021, the country had become the second largest in the EU for Ukrainian citizens (Bolzoni et al., 2023; Migliorini et al., 2023). Recognizing the urgent need for support, the Italian government as well as various local voluntary organizations, such as Caritas, have collaborated to provide essential assistance to Ukrainian refugees, encompassing housing, legal aid, and integration initiatives. Furthermore, Italian families have shown solidarity by actively providing material resources, services, and hospitality to the arriving refugees, especially during the first few months after their displacement (Bolzoni et al., 2023).

In this context, the present study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature on the experiences and challenges faced by Ukrainian refugees in Italy, in order to explore the dynamics of integration and reception (Birger et al., 2024), also in the light of the country's historical ties with Ukraine and its evolving migration policies. Indeed, a key challenge for refugee-hosting countries lies precisely in their physical and social capacity to receive and host refugees, while at the same time addressing challenges that may affect their quality of life and well-being as highly vulnerable individuals (Altinay et al., 2023). This study is therefore important for several reasons. First, this study aims to explore hospitality through a unique and particular lens: that of food and shared eating practices, recognizing the potential of such practices to promote social cohesion and emotional well-being among refugees and host communities. Moreover, this study adopts an unconventional perspective by focusing on the host rather than the refugee differently from previous work (e.g. Olcese et al., 2024a). This innovative approach allows for a complementary and contextualized examination of the impact of hospitality on daily life and interpersonal relationships, thus offering new perspectives on the dynamics of refugee reception and the role of host countries in promoting integration and psychosocial well-being. These distinctive features give our study significant theoretical and practical relevance, helping not only to fill a gap in the scholarly literature, but also to inform more inclusive and effective policies and practices toward refugees and host communities.

Domestic hospitality in the context of forced migration

In the context of forced migration, domestic hospitality can be a relevant strategy for showing solidarity. Recent research points to the positive role of hospitality in promoting social inclusion while mitigating loneliness, thereby helping to reduce psychological distress among host refugees (Altinay et al., 2023). Indeed, the study demonstrates the importance of being able to make refugees feel welcomed by their hosts through the creation of a shared family culture to foster social inclusion. The initiative to host in one's own home is often employed as an alternative strategy to state reception programs (Merikoski, 2020). This phenomenon took hold in Italy following the start of the Balkan wars in the 1990s and does not follow a national regulation, depending on the voluntary initiative of individual municipalities, which encourage the activation of individual citizens to offer hospitality. (Boccagni & Giudici, 2021). Private refugee hospitality is an innovative and cost-effective approach to hosting refugees, which can facilitate their resettlement and integration process in the host country (Ran & Join-Lambert, 2020). Motivations for providing hospitality can be diverse and include the desire to assist those in need or promote altruism or empathy toward migrants (Doidge & Sandri, 2018). Cohabitation with people from the country to which one migrates offers tangible benefits to refugees, enabling them to actively participate in social life and establish meaningful interactions with their hosts, thereby fostering a sense of integration (Estrin, 2016). Cohabitation facilitates bureaucratic support and daily management, which is especially relevant considering the language gap (Bassoli & Campomori, 2018). Moreover, it has a positive effect on the well-being, sense of belonging, and stability of refugees (Bassoli & Oggioni, 2017). However, the experiences of hospitality can be diverse: in some situations, there was a sharing of everyday life, including having lunch or dinner together, whereas in other cases, there was a clear separation in the domestic environment of the host and refugees, wherein the domestic boundaries were not redefined and the difference between the native and migrant was emphasized (Boccagni & Giudici, 2021). Although living together has its advantages, it can also present challenges, particularly in terms of mutual adaptation between families with different routines and belonging to different cultures (Darling, 2013). In fact, routines in migration have value in that they are useful for managing and reducing stress and for maintaining the connection with one's culture of origin; thus, these routines must also be maintained within the home environment (Migliorini et al., 2016). Mutual expectations between refugees and their hosts can create tensions, which may negatively impact the privacy and autonomy of refugees (Ran & Join-Lambert, 2020). The cohabitation of families with different habits is a multifaceted issue that involves various social and cultural dimensions. This process requires a redefinition of roles, relationships, and habits within the household, which can disrupt pre-existing balances (Bartholini & Pascoal, 2021). Providing hospitality to refugees necessitates a mutual commitment from the families involved, with a focus on managing differences and interpersonal dynamics (Alrawadieh et al., 2023). Hosts are responsible for providing a secure and stable environment for refugees, assisting them in their integration into the local culture (Campomori & Feraco, 2018). Sharing household items, such as kitchen utensils, is one of the advantages of living together and helps establish strong relationships as it communicates a sense of sharing and trust in the other (Mahieu & Van Caudenberg, 2020). Strategies such as exploring unfamiliar foods and celebrating holidays can contribute to mutual understanding and recognition of others' identities, which promotes relationships and intercultural exchange (Rabikowska, 2010). Food practices can thus play a crucial role in intercultural coexistence, providing opportunities for sharing and dialog. In summary, hosting can be a crucial element in the integration of refugees and fostering well-being and cultural ties (Alrawadieh et al., 2023). However, it exposes individuals to various challenges and expectations daily; hence, targeted strategies including redefining one's boundaries and being able to open to others in terms of food practices must be practiced (Boccagni & Giudici, 2021).

Food in the experience of refugee's hospitality

During the migration process, refugees can also preserve their cultural identity through their food practices, which act as custodians of their ties to their homeland (Bailey, 2017). Food plays a crucial role in maintaining a tangible link to cultural roots throughout this journey (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Schnettler et al., 2013). Moreover, food is a powerful tool for cultural exchange and can facilitate interactions and exchanges between host and migrant communities (D'Antuono & Bignami, 2012). In addition, food can help create a sense of intimacy in the new host country (Miranda-Nieto, 2020). The relation between migration and food is a complex phenomenon as displacement considerably influences food practices, shaping them through the filter of social context (Bowen et al., 2011); however, relatively few studies in the literature have focused on this relation. The interaction between different cultures shapes a dynamic process that substantially affects the identity and eating habits of refugees (Pérez-Escamila et al., 2001). Understanding food practices influenced by life experiences and context is important as this has global implications for people's well-being and adaptation to the new country (Terragni et al., 2014). In addition to analyzing food access in the new country in terms of food safety and security, examining the symbolic and relational dimensions of food practices from a social and community perspective is relevant (Charmaz, 2014). Indeed, food practices may have different meanings for refugees in the host country. Being able to prepare traditional dishes from one's own culture has significance in terms of expressing cultural identity, regaining autonomy, and connecting with the past and social experiences of one's home country (Vandevoordt, 2017). Moreover, the literature highlights the importance of food spaces as areas for intercultural exchange, daily belonging, and citizenship (Duruz et al., 2011). Food practices serve as a means of symbolic exchange and transmitting traditions, history, and cultural values. Food can be a starting point for fostering intercultural dialog based on cultural differences due to its communicative and cultural characteristics (Brown & Paszkiewicz, 2017). Migrant communities often use food to preserve their identity and connect to their roots in new and sometimes hostile environments (Janowski, 2012). Preparing and sharing traditional dishes thus becomes a cultural act that allows individuals to maintain a tangible connection to their history and original culture (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020). Furthermore, whether the host community is receptive to new foods from the migrant's ethnic culture can be perceived as either a challenge or an opportunity for growth; this can indicate the style of acculturation and the potential presence of prejudices (Arcadu, 2023; Kreienkamp et al., 2023). Finally, sharing food preparation can promote resilience among refugees by fostering flexibility, that is, openness to the host country while maintaining their own ethnic culture of belonging (Olcese et al., 2024b).

In terms of domestic hosting, food has significant relational value as a means of communication and connection. It facilitates interaction between hosts and guests, promoting mutual understanding and fostering a sense of belonging and caring (Sirriyeh, 2013). Sharing food and providing opportunities to refugees to cook food that is meaningful to their culture can be a way of opening to them and allowing the migrants to act freely within their domestic space (Boccagni, 2021). Frequently, migrants desire to share their traditional food and this can generate a sense of autonomy and dignity by creating familiarity in an environment that feels unfamiliar (Vandevoordt, 2017). However, eating habits can also generate explicit conflicts within the domestic context. For example, food-related odors can fuel tensions (Bonfanti et al. 2019).

Food practices have different meanings in forced migration, with studies in the literature mostly focusing on understanding these in terms of migrant perceptions while neglecting host perceptions (Abbotts et al., 2016; Burns, 2004). Moreover, the food habits of the Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking communities are little known in Italy compared with those of other communities; despite this, there is a growing tendency for interaction between Italian and Ukrainian cuisines (D'Antuono & Bignami, 2012), which could further increase because of the war owing to the presence of Ukrainian refugees and their culture and traditions in Italy (Migliorini et al., 2023). Thus, it is important to focus on the perspective of hosts to fully understand the dynamics and implications of food in the context of hosting refugees.

Present study

This study aims to explore the dynamics arising from the cohabitation of Italian hosts and Ukrainian refugees, focusing on the interactive exchanges related to food. The perception, management, and negotiation of food dynamics within a specific Italian host family context will be examined by analyzing food-related practices, including food preparation, and eating practices, including food consumption habits, preferences, and frequency, as well as the use of food as a tool of intercultural exchange. Previous research on migration processes has often neglected the perspective of the host (Schmidt & Palutan, 2018). To fill this gap, we examined the perspective of Italian hosts, as their food practices are relevant for facilitating intercultural exchange in the context of cohabitation between two different cultures. This is in line with the findings of previous research that emphasize, from the perspective of migrants, the importance of food practices in promoting intercultural exchange (Abbotts et al., 2016; Bailey, 2017; Miranda-Nieto & Boccagni, 2020). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to report on the experience of hosting Ukrainian refugees in Italy.

Method*Participants*

The study analyzed the experiences of 24 Italian adults who hosted Ukrainian refugees after the start of the war. The participants' ages ranged from 31 to 77 years old ($M = 52.2$ years) and they hosted the refugees between February and December 2022 (Table 1). Most of the participants were women and had a higher education or degree, with many being married (71%). Most participants reported hosting refugees in their homes for 2–9 months. Finally, most participants hosted children and adults almost equally.

Procedure

The Research Ethics Committee of the University of XXX approved the project (prot. 2022.50). The study was conducted between December 2022 and May 2023, during the post hosting period. The authors created a semistructured interview that focused on hospitality and food-related interactive exchanges between Italian hosts and Ukrainian refugees. The inclusion criteria of the study included adult Italian volunteers who hosted Ukrainian forced migrants in their homes following the conflict. The research employed purposive and snowball sampling. Participants were invited to take part in the study through the voluntary associations they were in contact with, such as Caritas. These participants, in turn, referred to other participants who wished to participate in the interview. The interview comprised two parts. The first part collected sociodemographic information, including that regarding sex, age, education level, occupation, and marital status. The second part focused on hospitality and food and eating practices, with open-ended questions designed to elicit reflection regarding the participants' experiences of hosting Ukrainian refugees. The semistructured and open-ended format allowed for focused and in-depth conversation. The participants could express their responses at any level of detail, and the interviewer could choose to move on to the next question area or elaborate on the current question. The interviews were conducted face to face in Italian and lasted an average of 40 min. The respondents could choose a convenient time and place for the interviews. All participants provided informed consent before the interview, which was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis

The textual materials were examined using the grounded theory methodology (GTM) (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2019) with the aid of NVIVO11 software during analysis. Following GTM procedures, two researchers conducted initial open coding independently to generate a set of concepts. To ensure the comprehensive coverage of the core characteristics of the interview data, the concepts were subsequently grouped into smaller thematic categories using axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The NVIVO11 software was instrumental in organizing the statements into initial codes and forming an initial thematic map. The map was developed and scrutinized to ensure its accuracy in representing the dataset. Continuous adjustments and refinements were made through an iterative process until a consensus was reached on the final thematic map. This systematic approach facilitated the organized understanding and categorization of the social situation being studied (Charmaz, 2006).

Results

Four main themes emerged from this study: differences in eating habits, food-related issues, food as a means of intercultural contact, and commensality. Fig. 1 presents the map of themes that emerged.

Differences in eating habits

The initial theme that arises from Italian host narratives focuses on the differences in eating habits between the Italian hosts and the

Table 1
Participants profiles.

Participants (N = 24)	Gender	Age	Marital status	Educational level	No. of Guests (Adults)	No. of Guests (Children)	Duration hospitality
P1	Woman	77	Married	Graduation	2	1	5 months
P2	Woman	75	Widowed	Graduation	1	1	3 months
P3	Woman	50	Married	Graduation	2	1	6 months
P4	Woman	49	Married	Graduation	1	/	9 months
P5	Woman	46	Single	High school diploma	2	2	10 months
P6	Woman	50	Married	Graduation	1	1	3 months
P7	Woman	52	Single	High school diploma	2	2	11 months
P8	Man	77	Single	High school diploma	1	1	2 months
P9	Man	69	Separate	Graduation	2	2	6 months
P10	Woman	67	Married	Graduation	1	2	3 months
P11	Woman	65	Widowed	High school diploma	1	/	7 months
P12	Man	62	Married	High school diploma	1	1	3 months
P13	Woman	31	Married	Graduation	1	2	2 1/2 months
P14	Man	40	Single	Graduation	1	2	9 months
P15	Woman	51	Married	High school diploma	1	1	3 weeks
P16	Man	60	Married	High school diploma	1	2	2 months
P17	Woman	52	Married	High school diploma	1	2	2 months
P18	Woman	57	Married	High school diploma	1	2	More than one year
P19	Man	49	Married	High school diploma	1	1	2 months
P20	Man	50	Married	High school diploma	2	2	3 weeks
P21	Woman	58	Married	Middle school diploma	1	1	5 months
P22	Woman	44	Married	Graduation	1	1	4 months
P23	Woman	59	Married	Graduation	2	1	6 months
P24	Woman	56	Married	Graduation	2	/	More than one year

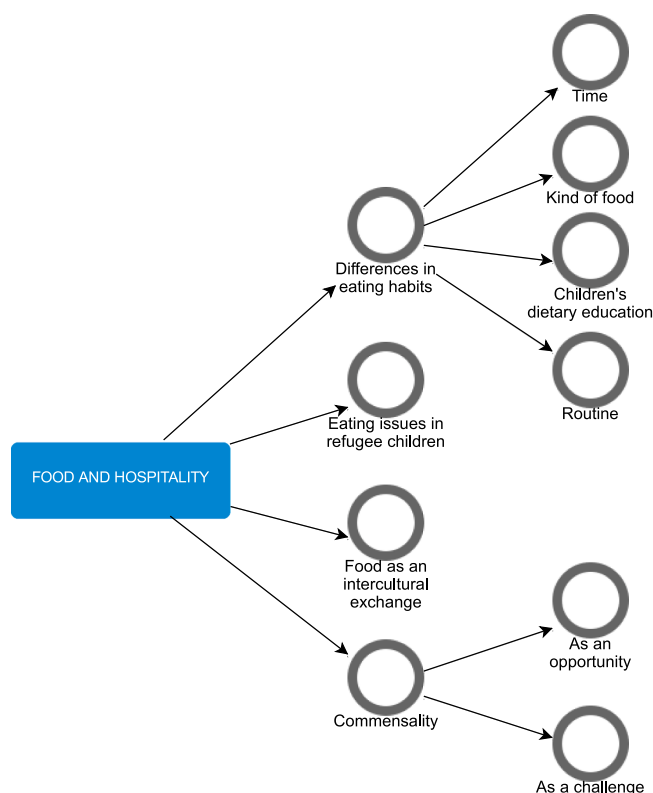


Fig. 1. Thematic map.

Ukrainian refugees. The interviews revealed that Italians perceive considerable differences between their own food habits and those of Ukrainian refugees. The first subtheme pertains to differences in the time devoted to meals, as one participant stated: *“We gave them the keys and the use of the kitchen. At first we tried to involve them at dinner, but gradually we realized that the schedules were really very different. They used to have some kind of brunch at eleven o’clock and some kind of dinner around five o’clock. Whereas we would have dinner at eight-thirty and they would basically go to sleep”* (Italian woman host, 52 years old). The second subtheme pertains to the difference in the type of food consumed. The respondents reported adopting a dissimilar diet compared with the refugees who tend to favor premade or traditional meals: *“Maybe we ate together sometimes, but their diet is different. It happened that they would prepare borsch from morning to night and sometimes they would invite us downstairs to eat their borsch, but then we would go upstairs to eat something else”* (Italian woman host, 59 years old). The third subtheme explored differences in the dietary education of Ukrainian children. Italian mothers reported feeling a difference between their education and that of their Ukrainian counterparts: *“For my taste the meal management (by the mothers) was too messy, next to the soup also junk food. They arrived with a bag full of junk food but we blamed it on the fact that they arrived here by bus. However, an Italian mom would have also put bread and ham...anyway, we had no problems because she was their mom”* (Italian woman host, 59 years old). Finally, the fourth subtheme was regarding differences in routine related to food consumption. The Italian hosts reported feeling different from Ukrainian refugees in this aspect: *“But how they would eat it, it’s not like they would sit...they would come home at four o’clock, open the fridge and take it. The very Italian routine of saying I eat at 12:30, put it away and take it back after dinner. With them, on the other hand, the kitchen was always in the mix, she would come back, the child would get up at 10 a.m. and eat the fried egg with onions, then at 4 p.m. she would heat up the borsch, get her things ready”* (Italian woman host, 58 years old).

Issues regarding the eating habits of refugee children

The second theme that emerged relates to the perception of issues regarding the eating habits of migrant children. The participants revealed widespread perceptions of food issues associated with migrant children, including behaviors such as food refusal and irregular food handling in terms of frequency, healthfulness, and adherence to a balanced diet. One participant stated: *“...he had a very big problem, maybe more psychological, which was feeding: he wouldn’t eat this child anything. And if his grandmother didn’t feed him...boy, to get him to eat was a big mess. At the summer center he never touched food—never. And he would eat hallucinating things that I didn’t want to give him, then after two days of him not eating I gave it to him. (...) But I was also worried about him wasting away this boy”* (Italian woman host, 75 years old). Another participant further stated: *“However, both of them (the girls) from an eating point of view have had several problems ... so frequent episodes of vomiting”* (Italian woman host, 50 years old).

Food as an intercultural exchange

The third theme that emerged from the interviews relates to food as a means of intercultural exchange, both in terms of preparing typical Ukrainian food and in terms of eating and tasting it. During the interview, an Italian host emphasized this point: *"We also tried to cook their food and tasted it, and there were opportunities for us to taste them"* (Italian woman host, 44 years old). This statement demonstrates the direct involvement of hosts in actively participating in Ukrainian culinary traditions. Another participant further confirmed this dynamic: *"(...) they (Ukrainian refugees), for example, cooked and invited us; they cooked their soups, pil that are similar to ravioli, and when my children came back from school, they told me, 'it smells good'"* (Italian woman host, 58 years old). This testimony exemplifies the positive influence that the act of sharing food had on the host family's perception of the refugees. Additionally, one participant stated that they made changes within the domestic environment owing to the different food culture: *"Their food is just different, they always make borshch, since our house has a garden, we together with them made a vegetable garden...they have a different food culture"* (Italian woman host, 59 years old). Finally, another participant reported having had opportunities to prepare foods from both cultures: *"Then we often ate together, we had times when we cooked, or they cooked Ukrainian typical products"* (Italian woman host, 52 years old).

Opportunities and challenges posed by commensality

The fourth theme that emerged was commensality. The first subtheme was regarding sharing a meal with migrants as an opportunity. Some participants recounted experiencing commensality as a moment of exchange and pleasantness. In fact, one participant stated, *"then afterwards we shared that they came with us to eat, there are 5 of us and we are used to having people, sometimes they came other times they preferred to do their own thing. There was a lot of exchange during the meals, and it was nice, we still kept in touch"* (Italian woman host, 60 years old). In addition, one participant stated, *"the kitchen was unique, so we had to eat together. So, we tried to do it, we always made it"* (Italian woman host, 44 years old). One participant reported a vision of commensality with extended family, including migrants, stating, *"My concern was mainly to make them feel comfortable. I often go on Sundays to eat at my nieces' who stay in Xxx, I also have a niece there. I would invite them to make them feel in community with others. I don't know if I succeeded or not"* (Italian woman host, 77 years old). Sharing meals has positive implications as it generates opportunities for sharing and socializing. However, it can also represent a challenge at the family level. One participant emphasized becoming aware of cultural differences through the practice of commensality, stating that *"at first we all ate dinner together so (we) waited for them and they waited for us; we tried to eat all the things together however then they took their own pace; we discovered that simply by them it was habit, there is no culture of eating together; (...) it was a difficulty let's say a bit cultural"* (Italian woman host, 31 years old). Finally, one participant reflects, *"there is not even so much sharing, whoever is hungry sits down and eats, this thing is very cultural. For those who have had them at home this thing is really very difficult... Because how do you force them to come to the table with us? The first day I took my leave, and we ate pasta together, but we saw that they were suffering"* (Italian woman host, 59 years old).

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study aimed to analyze how food dynamics were perceived, managed and negotiated in the intercultural contact between Italian host families and Ukrainian refugees after the beginning of the war between Russia and Ukraine. The interviews conducted in this study revealed four themes: differences in eating habits, issues regarding the eating habits of migrant children, food as an intercultural exchange, and commensality as both an opportunity and a challenge.

Related to the first theme, differences in eating habits were not limited to practical meal management but also involved variations in the type of food consumed and nutrition education. With respect to these aspects, the host context plays a crucial role that can foster acceptance and understanding of ethnic-cultural differences (Kreienkamp et al., 2023; Stanciu & Vauclair, 2018). Our study also highlights that in some cases, critical and devaluing words were also used by Italian hosts when talking about differences in eating habits, which may have hindered the acculturation process of Ukrainian migrants. Discomfort in Italian hosts was often caused by misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences in food. Italians saw sharing meals as an opportunity to create family relationships and conviviality, whereas Ukrainians preferred flexibility in food consumption. Food and its associated practices can represent an openness to culture or an aspect that emphasizes differences while also potentially leading to closeness toward the other culture (Reddy & Van Dam, 2020). Therefore, although maintaining food practices can strengthen refugees' connection to their place of origin (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014), it can also cause tension between the Italian hosts and Ukrainian refugees owing to the influence of social context on cultural behavior, such as eating routines and times (Weisberg-Shapiro & Devine, 2015). Furthermore, individuals may have varying taste preferences and culinary customs, and the willingness to embrace traditional foods from cultures other than one's own is contingent upon personal openness to diversity (D'Antuono & Bignami, 2012). Thus, it is important for everyone to have an active role within the household context (Sirriyeh, 2013) and to have the freedom to regulate their own food consumption as this can help create a sense of belonging (Kohli et al., 2010). These aspects are crucial to the cohabitation of two cultures in the experience of hospitality. Everyday practices foster a sense of self-efficacy and self-determination, despite the "forced" migrant status (Bajić-Hajduković, 2013), and, in relation to this, the interviews conducted in this study often revealed the Ukrainian refugees' willingness to cook their own typical dishes and the Italian hosts' readiness to open their food spaces to migrants, allowing them to cook their typical foods, thus adopting a flexible approach. Finally, differing educational food practices toward children may also be

associated with the refugee status. Migrant mothers may feel a sense of insecurity, leading them to gratify their child through unhealthy food consumption (Somaraki et al., 2018). Finally, the refugee status has often been associated with high levels of stress that may be related to unhealthy eating styles (Lytvynenko & König, 2023).

Concerning the second theme, which pertains to issues related to the eating behaviors of migrant children, Italians reported observing difficulties in food management among Ukrainian children. These difficulties included vomiting episodes and avoidance of eating. Such behaviors may indicate psychological and social vulnerabilities, which could be strongly associated with the stress related to their forced migrant status, as has been demonstrated in other refugee populations (Kavian et al., 2020). Migration can impact eating practices in two different ways. First, it can cause stress and difficulties in adapting to a new culture (Caplan, 2007). Second, opportunities can lead to maladaptive eating behaviors (Alidu & Grunfeld, 2018). Difficulties in accessing culturally traditional food or finding it at a high cost can exacerbate the stress levels experienced by refugees, which can potentially lead to issues regarding food habits observed in refugee children (Kavian et al., 2020; Somaraki et al., 2018).

The third theme related to food as a means of intercultural exchange. Other authors (Fishler, 2011; Leonini, 2014) reported that food can serve as a tool for intercultural communication, promoting mutual understanding of culinary traditions, fostering cultural ties between communities, and overcoming cultural barriers. Cohabitation creates opportunities for sharing food with migrants. Food and related practices have enabled individuals to experience the distinctive cuisine of other cultures, which demonstrates a symbolic value of openness to other cultures. In some cases, Italian hosts reported making changes to their homes to adapt to Ukrainian culinary traditions, highlighting the implementation of real concrete actions, such as planting a vegetable garden to grow traditional products. Such actions can contribute to greater adaptation for refugees (Camilleri et al., 2022).

The fourth theme that emerged concerned commensality, which the Italian hosts perceived as an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity was related to the possibility of familiarizing with the Ukrainian refugees and exchanging ideas by sharing a meal. Moreover, this provided the possibility of including other members of the host community. In this sense, conviviality represents an openness to the community that is a crucial factor in the migrant's adaptation to the new country (Olcese et al., 2024a). Nevertheless, commensality also represents a familial challenge as it sheds more light on cultural differences and the difficulties of living with and negotiating them. Indeed, the Italian hosts in some cases reported different styles of commensality with the Ukrainian refugees and, after having an initial difficulty in adjusting to this, reported accepting the differences in the lifestyles, thereby highlighting the importance of openness to other cultures.

During the interviews, while the primary focus was on the perceptions and experiences of Italian hosts, it is possible to infer some perceptions of Ukrainian refugees regarding Italian eating habits based on the available data. It is possible that refugees encountered challenges in adjusting to local food practices, such as the meal routine, which differed significantly from their own habits and traditions. Furthermore, some refugees may have perceived the hosts' eating habits as inflexible, particularly with regard to meal times and the expectation of conviviality. Such rigidity may have constituted a source of stress for some refugees, who may have preferred a greater degree of flexibility and autonomy in managing their food and meals. Nevertheless, many refugees may have experienced positive adaptations, incorporating elements of Italian cuisine into their daily diet while maintaining their own culinary traditions. These hypotheses suggest that refugees' perceptions play a crucial role in the process of acculturation and intercultural interaction. Therefore, further investigation of this topic is warranted. An appreciation of these perceptions may facilitate the integration of refugees into their new communities, thereby reducing the potential for conflict and promoting a more harmonious and inclusive context.

Practical implications

The findings of this study have practical implications, including the implementation of educational and awareness-raising programs to address cultural differences in eating habits and promote mutual understanding between host families and refugees. Sociopsychological support services should be provided to address the challenges of dietary differences during cohabitation, paying particular attention to the food habits of children. Initiatives that foster intercultural conviviality through the sharing and preparation of traditional meals and create inclusive spaces for dialogue and cultural exchange should also be promoted. The implementation of these interventions can create more welcoming and inclusive environments for host families and refugees, thereby promoting the harmonious cohabitation and well-being of all involved.

Limitations and future developments

Finally, the study has several limitations. First, it explores only the perspective of the host. Subsequent studies should consider the migrant's perspective as well to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of commensality and food practices in the context of forced migration. Furthermore, the use of a semistructured interview allowed for targeted and detailed discussions. However, there is a risk that participants may alter their answers to conform to social expectations or perceived norms, which could affect the accuracy of the results.

Conclusion

The testimonies collected during this research provide a detailed and profound understanding of the role of food as a cultural bridge in the intercultural dynamics between host Italian families and Ukrainian refugees. Each participant encountered different challenges and opportunities in attempting to share culinary experiences, emphasizing the intricate and delicate nature of shared culinary

practices. Reflection on diversity and otherness can be possible through the lens of food and can facilitate the decentralization of perspectives and promote intercultural dialog. The challenges encountered by the participants can influence relational dynamics, which can lead to either mutual openness or separation. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance of addressing food practices and intercultural dynamics within host communities in the refugee hosting experience.

Approval Statement

We, the undersigned authors, hereby confirm that we have reviewed and approved the final version of this paper for submission. We collectively endorse the accuracy and integrity of the content herein.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Migliorini: Project administration, Conceptualization. **Greta Rovetta:** Methodology, Conceptualization. **Martina Olcese:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Martina Arcadu:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data Availability

The dataset used is currently not openly available in order to guarantee the privacy of the participants involved in the study and not to violate public dissemination of information that could identify participants and violate privacy regulations and ethical standards regarding the protection of personal data.

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