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Making sense of youth-led social action with, and for, young people from refugee backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

Within Western resettlement countries, leisure has been positioned as a tool for achieving top-down policy goals. Yet, minimal attention has been directed towards understanding how young-forced migrants make sense of and experience leisure within the daily physically, psychologically and socially repressive regulations and processes of the UK asylum system. This novel paper examines how young people from refugee backgrounds engage in and make sense of the leisure domain, social action, whereby individuals and communities seek to generate change on issues that matter to them. The paper draws on a 3-year-long participatory action research (PAR) project in London, UK, seeking to co-develop a leisure-based, youth-led social action programme with, and for, young people from refugee backgrounds. Participant observation was used alongside photo voice methods to explore the young peoples' entangled motives and meanings of social action. Our findings critically examine the complex ways that young people understood the social action programme in relation to (i) relational and emotional dynamics, and (ii) identity, culture, and religion. These findings offer a new way to thinking about how young forced migrants experience and negotiate leisure amid the migration-welfare nexus.

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Introduction

To deter asylum seekers from entering the UK and encourage voluntary return, the UK Government has enacted restrictive and punitive asylum policies and legislations. These measures have created an acclaimed 'Hostile Environment', whereby asylum seekers are denied their fundamental human right to protection (Goodfellow, 2019). The safest and most legal routes to refugee resettlement in the UK have been removed (Home Office, 2023), forcing asylum seekers to use irregular and dangerous means to claim asylum. However, the widely criticised Illegal Migration Act (2023) has effectively illegalised irregular migration, meaning that 'illegal' asylum seekers will be detained and removed to their home country or a safe third country (UK Parliament, 2023). Additionally, through long and uncertain asylum processes, placement in unsafe and unsuitable housing, minimal welfare support, and dehumanising age assessments, young forced migrants are repeatedly denied the freedoms to lead a life that they value (Chase & Allsopp, 2020). Set against this backdrop, leisure has gained traction from policymakers, researchers, and practitioners as a tool to

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support Western-driven policy goals for forced migrants, including integration, health and well-being, and social inclusion (Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Spaaij et al., 2019). Yet, limited attention has been directed towards examining the role of leisure in understanding the lived experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds and how they make sense of and negotiate their leisure experiences within the wider socio-cultural-political context (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021; Nunn et al., 2022).

This paper draws from a 3-year-long participatory action research (PAR) project, where the first author collaborated with young people at a refugee charity in London, BelongHere (pseudonym), to co-create a new leisure programme 'Action Club' focused on youth-led social action, and explore their experiences. Social action involves voluntary action to improve the individual's life, help others, and generate change on issues that matter to them (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015), and encompasses diverse activities including volunteering, community organising, advocacy, and co-production. We aimed to understand how the young people engaged in and made sense of social action activities, and how multiple meanings of youth-led social action were shaped, negotiated, and contested through complex power dynamics, emotions, and identity within the hostile socio-cultural-political environment. We make an important contribution to the growing literature in forced migration, leisure studies, and social policy through offering original insights into the relevance, meanings, and experiences of leisure as social action, within the everyday lives of young forced migrants.

We contextualise this paper with an examination of social action in UK policy, before exploring the approaches, motivations, and meanings in social action, leisure and forced migration research. Our project and methods are then detailed. The findings focus on how the young people understood social action through two overlapping themes: (i) relational and emotional dynamics; and (ii) identity, culture, and religion.

Social action in UK policy

Social action involves practical voluntary action to improve the individual's life, help others, and generate social change (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015) and encompasses a range of activities such as volunteering, community organising, advocacy, and co-production. Social action involves diverse relationships and shifting degrees of power among citizens, professionals, and organisations (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ho et al., 2015). Volunteering and peer-support are forms of social action often controlled by professionals within formalised structures, with pre-determined roles and outcomes, resulting in decision-making and direction from professionals and delivery by volunteers. In co-production, the work includes power-sharing between those delivering social action projects and those creating the strategic agenda via collaboration. Community organising and advocacy, which has minimal influence from strategic decision-makers, perhaps represents a power shift to community members.

Prior to the 1980s, social action was synonymous with radical social movements and the building of collective power. In the UK in the 1980s', conservative neo-liberal ideology centred individual responsibility for driving free-market economics and growth; hence, social action was framed within an agenda of self-determination of life chances. Volunteering served as a core form of social action reflecting political imperatives to fill gaps in welfare provision and promote self-reliant citizenship (Holmes, 2009). In the late 90s, New Labour similarly adopted volunteering as the preferred type of politically supported social action as a means of widening democracy and fostering a more just society (Holmes, 2009). More recently, social action was positioned as a key policy framework in the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's 'Big Society' initiative, which aimed to roll back big government through austerity measures and give communities more power by encouraging people to take an active role in their neighbourhoods (Cabinet Office, 2010). The UK Coalition Government conceptualised social action as practical action in the service of others which is done voluntarily for the good of individuals and/or society to bring efficiency to public services and foster social change through empowering local people to develop solutions to

community issues (Cabinet Office, 2010, 2015). Yet, academics contest social action policy, arguing that the acclaimed benefits to individuals, communities, and society mask the ideological framework of active citizenship and neoliberalism through shifting welfare responsibility from the state to citizens (Holmes, 2009).

Policy focus has now broadened from volunteering to more diverse forms of citizen-led social action, including citizen advisory groups, peer support programmes, and community campaigns. The UK's Cabinet Office's Centre for Social Action was formed in 2012, distributing £36 million (2013–2019) towards initiatives that tackled key social issues including youth mobility, unemployment, and ageing populations (Cabinet Office, 2015). Between 2016 and 2022, an additional £66 million was specifically invested in youth social action initiatives through the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the National Lottery #iWill fund (The National Lottery, 2022). Whilst there appears to be a policy focus on shifting degrees of control to citizens, issues of power are highly contested in social action and unequal power hierarchies and dominant ideologies are often reproduced (Ho et al., 2015).

Approaching forced migrant social action and leisure

Reflecting wider discourses of neoliberalism, integration, and active citizenship, social action, and leisure more broadly, have been positioned by UK policymakers as an effective tool for forced migrants to take responsibility for their own integration. While integration can be defined as a 'two-way process that places demands on both the refugee and the resettlement country' (UNHCR, 2013, p. 8), the responsibility for integrating into existing structures and overcoming unemployment, poverty, and racism in the resettlement country is typically perceived by the Government and public as resting solely on the shoulders of forced migrants (Uheling, 2015).

Formal volunteering within third-sector organisations tends to be the dominant type of social action for forced migrants. Such action is promoted in policy and practice as a way to develop desirable qualities of self-sufficiency and active citizenship and gain skills and experience convertible in the labour market (Home Office, 2022). These neo-liberal discourses have been popularised in politics to justify funding cuts to asylum seeker welfare provision (Uheling, 2015). Formal volunteering fulfils the Government's dual goals of filling gaps left in asylum seeker welfare provision and fostering social control through strengthening dominant discourses (Yap et al., 2010). Whereas, migrant-led social action may seek to challenge these dominant discourses, expose systemic oppression of forced migrants, and transform deeply rooted power hierarchies (Vickers, 2016). The research agenda has focused heavily on narrow-acclaimed outcomes i.e. employment, integration and social networks that can be derived from formal volunteering (see Yap et al., 2010), and there is a paucity of research exploring diverse forms of social action led by forced migrants, e.g. community organising and advocacy. Further, limited research has examined forced migrant youth social action. To our knowledge, only one study (Carlton, 2015) has examined refugee youth volunteering.

Leisure has been positioned as an effective means for forced migrants to take responsibility for their welfare and integration (Kataria & De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). Sport, physical activity, art and music programmes (see De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021; Spaaij et al., 2019) have been delivered to foster outcomes such as health and wellbeing, social inclusion, and integration. In the UK's Home Office Indicators of Integration Framework (2019), leisure is explicitly recognised as a means and marker of integration (Ndofor-Tah et al., 2019). Despite their well-intentioned nature, these programmes and research often reproduce deficit-based narratives through positioning forced migrants as being 'vulnerable', 'at risk', and thus in need of 'integration' through leisure interventions (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021). Scholars have made calls to move beyond examining the policy-driven outcomes of forced migrant leisure to explore the lived experiences and emotional and embodied aspects of leisure (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021; Spaaij et al., 2019).

Asylum regimes create a 'gradual wounding' effect in which forced migrants experience a kind of slow personal violence through the asylum system (Mayblin et al., 2020). De Martini Ugolotti and Webster (2023) emphasise that everyday leisure with other forced migrants provides a space for the emotional, temporal, and relational negotiation of such difficult and traumatic asylum processes through fostering positive emotions, social interactions, and momentary belonging, and re-defining time spent in liminality during the asylum process. They also highlight how lateral practices of care, reciprocity, and solidarity among forced migrants can be enacted through leisure, challenging unequal power hierarchies within humanitarian discourses. Within the context of music and dancing events (Lewis, 2015) and weekly music-making sessions (De Martini Ugolotti, 2022), the embodiment of novel and nostalgic sounds and movement and the relationality of sharing these practices and spaces with others who have shared experiences of displacement, fostered a sense of freedom and an escape from the boredom, powerlessness, and loneliness that is derived from, and shapes, everyday experiences within the UK asylum regime. Similarly, Webster (2022) found that participation in a grassroots football initiative enacted multiple pleasures for forced migrant men, which was perceived as political as it provided the opportunity for participants to exercise agency over their bodies and temporarily escape from past, present and future pain. These readings of leisure for forced migrant communities speak directly to our discussion of youth social action, and how the meanings and experiences of social action are re(shaped) by relational dynamics, emotions, and identity within the wider socio-cultural-political environment.

Meanings and motivations in forced migrant social action

Studies have examined how forced migrants make sense of social action through their values and norms, the socio-cultural-political context, and dominant discourses, yet minimal literature examines migrant-led social action.

Cultural and religious values and norms have been found to shape the types of social action that forced migrants engage in and the meanings they assign to these. The participants in Agergaard et al. (2022) and Ramachandran and Vathi (2022) grew up in communities whereby altruism was a deeply embedded cultural value, and informal helping towards neighbours was the norm. Thus, volunteering in the resettlement country was understood as a meaningful activity as it aligned with altruism and provided the opportunity to engage in familiar helping behaviours. For the refugee participants in Agergaard et al. (2022), volunteering within Danish sports clubs was understood as a hybrid form of social action, combining the dominant practice of organised volunteering in Denmark, with helping behaviours prevalent in their home countries. Further, social action may align with the religious values held by some migrant groups. For Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in an Athens-based squat, distributing and sharing food was a means of neighbourliness and a practice of solidarity informed by Islamic ethics that surpassed secular notions of citizenship and Western humanitarian discourse (Zaman, 2020).

The socio-cultural-political environment in the resettlement country has also been found to shape meaning-making in social action. Based on challenging resettlement experiences, many forced migrants desired to volunteer or provide peer support to other forced migrants through voluntary organisations (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022; Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2010). Ramachandran and Vathi (2022) found that volunteering was understood as a means of survival in the UK hostile environment through supporting subsistence and material needs, reducing boredom, and fostering purpose. Studies also suggest that volunteering can foster solidarity amongst forced migrants, supporting the development of bonding social capital and collective identities (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022; Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2010). Vickers (2016) found that bonding social capital may foster collective resistance and facilitate entry into community organising. Yet, such migrant-led social actions are more likely to occur among refugees with secure immigration status (Yap et al., 2010) and require reflection on oppressive systemic structures (Vickers, 2016).

Motivations and meanings in forced migrant social action are shaped and negotiated through dominant discourses around integration, neo-liberalism, and active citizenship. Forced migrants may understand volunteering as a dominant cultural practice in the resettlement country, and thus a rational means of achieving integration through developing human, social, and cultural capital valued in the resettlement country (Agergaard et al., 2022; Yap et al., 2010). Participants perceived that the skills and experience gained through volunteering would be convertible capital for the labour market and thus utilised volunteering to position themselves within the neo-liberal discourse (Ramachandran & Vathi, 2022; Yap et al., 2010). Through a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Yap et al. (2010) contend that volunteering was constructed as a technology of self and a means to demonstrate autonomy, 'active citizenship', and challenge negative representations of refugees. Yet, such discourses ultimately maintain unequal power hierarchies as the onus is placed on the forced migrant to self-govern and earn their citizenship, not the Government to uphold their humanitarian responsibilities (Yap et al., 2010).

There is a need for further work on understanding the lived experiences of forced migrants who engage in social action. Moving beyond examining the narrow politically acclaimed outcomes that can be derived from volunteering activities and instead providing rich insights into the complex nature of migrant-led social action is central to this need.

Methods

In this project, we embedded the key principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) including valuing local knowledge, building trusting relationships, democratising the research process, and a commitment to social justice (Fals-Borda, 1987). PAR aligns with the key principles of social action, as this methodology supports the democratic process of shifting degrees of power to young people and values their agency to identify and act upon issues that matter to them (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020). Following the principles of PAR, the first author collaborated with young people at BelongHere, a refugee charity in London, England, to co-create and collaboratively evaluate the leisure-based, youth-led social action programme 'Action Club'.

The young leaders and researcher

Action Club was situated within the youth division at BelongHere, which provided support services alongside sport and leisure programmes to over 200 young people aged 12–25 years old from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds who hold refugee, asylum seeker, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC) status. The first author was a staff member within the youth division and collaborated with staff and young people during her PhD to co-create community sport, leisure, and wellbeing programmes, one of which was Action Club. Fourteen young leaders aged 14–19 years old from Middle Eastern and North African countries and Albania were Action Club members. They were all interested in social justice issues, engaged in further education, and had lived in the UK for at least 1 year. Thirteen young leaders identified as Muslim and one as Christian. The first author is a white, British, Queer, young woman who has engaged in social action in sport contexts since her teenage years. For an in-depth analysis of our reflective thinking and practices, see Smith et al. (2022).

The social action programme

The young leaders first expressed interest in establishing a social action programme during a co-design session. They noted few opportunities to engage in social action and were keen to support others while developing skills/experiences to support their personal goals. BelongHere applied for, and was awarded access to, a scheme which supported voluntary organisations through training, funding (£3000) and guided support, to embed youth-led social action within existing services. Following the key principles of PAR, the young leaders and first author worked to co-design the

programme to reflect their needs and interests (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Over two co-design sessions, the young leaders discussed what they understood by 'social action' and a consensus was reached that it was a 'group-based, youth-led' activity, which was distinct from volunteering due to young people holding greater degrees of power in determining goals and directing processes. In the meeting, the group articulated that social action involved 'having a common goal to help people in need', 'developing skills for the future', and 'making a positive impact in their communities'. Relatedly, the young leaders perceived social change as a desired outcome from social action and articulated they were most interested in changing relationships, interactions, and structures within their community. Reflecting these understandings, young people decided upon the programme name 'Action Club' and to self-identify as 'young leaders'.

Social action activities

Between March 2020 and September 2021, Action Club delivered three social action activities, which reflected how they understood social action. The young leaders took responsibility for all aspects of planning and delivering the activities and the first author supported their capacity through facilitating discussions, supporting problem solving, and providing support. To collectively decide upon activity aims, the group participated in guided discussions to critically reflect on their lived experiences and identify issues that mattered to them and their communities. The Food Support activity involved delivering food parcels to 115 young asylum seekers across London at the onset of the national COVID-19 lockdown during March 2020. The Eid Gift activity entailed distributing gift bags to 250 asylum-seeking children and families across London during the Islamic celebration of Eid-al-Fitr in May 2020. Finally, the Social Worker Video activity spanned September 2020-September 2021 and involved co-creating a 3-minute-long animated video on how social care professionals can support the wellbeing of UASC. The Eid Gift and Food Support activities can be defined as 'Community Organising' as young people identified an area of social inequality and took action to address this issue (Delgado & Staples, 2007). The Social Worker Video activity can be defined as community organising with an element of 'advocacy' as the young people mobilised to improve a public service (Ho et al., 2015).

Making sense of the social action programme through collaborative evaluation

Young leaders engaged in collaborative evaluation to understand their experiences within Action Club and how they made sense of social action. All Action Club young leaders aged over 16 years old were invited to join the collaborative evaluation, with seven agreeing to do so. Four young leaders were males with UASC status from Chad and South Sudan and were classed as looked after children. The three female young leaders were from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, lived with their families, and held refugee status. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity.

Reflecting the key principles of PAR, the participatory methods employed in the collaborative evaluation sought to shift degrees of power and participation to the young leaders to enable them to share their experiences in a way that was meaningful to them (Volpe, 2019). The young leaders co-designed and employed two participatory methods, WhatsApp Photo Challenge and Photo Voice interviews. Reflecting their capacities and priorities, they chose how and which methods to engage in. Four young leaders engaged in both participatory methods, while the other young leaders chose to participate in either method. This iterative and flexible participatory process was supported through submitting individual ethics applications to the College of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences ethics board after each method had been co-created.

Five young people co-developed and employed a WhatsApp photo challenge, a bespoke visual method drawing from elements of digital diaries (Volpe, 2019) during the Eid Gift activity. Over 3 days, five young leaders took daily photographs/audio-visual footage to capture the embodied and emotional dimensions (Volpe, 2019) of this social action activity and answered reflection questions about their experiences and how they understood this activity in relation to their culture and

religion. The young leaders then re-created the findings into a 5-minute-long digital story for dissemination.

Six young people then participated in a photo voice interview. The unstructured interviews were held over Zoom, lasted between 56.03 and 111.45 minutes, and involved using participant-generated photos to elicit discussion and critical reflection around their experiences in the BelongHere community sport and leisure programmes, in which Action Club was situated. Within these participant-directed interviews, all young leaders shared photographs from their social action activities and approximately a third of each interview involved reflection and story-sharing on what social action meant to them and what worked/could have been improved in Action Club.

Participant observation

To gain in-depth understandings around the relational and emotional dynamics in the social action activities over time, the first author engaged in participant observation at Action Club for approximately 120 hours between March 2020 and September 2021. As an 'active' participant (Spradley, 1980), the first author supported programme facilitation and immersed herself in the group's day-to-day activities. She took detailed fieldnotes after any meetings, activities, or social interactions related to the social action programme.

Data analysis

Data collection produced rich qualitative data in the form of fieldnotes, transcripts of audio reflections, photos and video, and interview transcripts. The photo voice interviews, audio reflections, and videos from the WhatsApp Photo Challenge were transcribed, catalogued with corresponding photos, and organised by social action activity for each individual. The first author then conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After (re)reading all data, coding and theme development were inductively directed by the data. The research team coded data in relation to the types of social action, relational and emotional dynamics, motivations for engagement, and subjective meanings. Our findings critically examine how the young people engaged in and understood the social action programme in relation to two overlapping themes: (i) relational and emotional dynamics, and (ii) identity, culture and religion.

Relational and emotional dynamics in social action

The relational and emotional dynamics within the social action programme were complex and connected to the contested power dynamics within both the asylum system and the political ideology and practice of social action. Power is always relational; it is exercised, challenged, and sought by individuals operating within wider institutional structures and involves a negotiated and contested struggle over resources and outcomes (Tomlinson, 1998).

The relational dynamics in the social action programme were shaped by the contested political ideology of citizen-led action, which led to an entanglement of complex meanings of and motives for social action. The programme funders stipulated that young people should take control of planning, budgeting, and delivering their social action activities, while being supported by staff. These funding stipulations aligned with the UK Coalition Government's agenda on youth-led social action which sought to reduce the role of big government and give young people more power and responsibility to foster change on local issues (Cabinet Office, 2015). The young leaders similarly understood social action through this neo-liberal lens, perceiving it as their responsibility to provide basic support for other young refugees in their community, where the state had failed to do so. Yet, social action was additionally perceived as a means of micro-resistance against asylum policies. Considering that the young leaders' ability to exercise agency day-to-day was inhibited by the

asylum system, with decisions often made for them by social care professionals and the Home Office (see Chase & Allsopp, 2020), they valued the autonomy to define the goals for their activities in line with what mattered to them and their communities and make decisions around the means and modes to achieve their goals. In a planning meeting, Elhaim noted: 'outside, the social workers and Home Office make all decisions for me, here we can make decisions and have control'. While the young leaders held agency in defining their action goals and making decisions, the outcomes of their social action activities ultimately aligned with that of the neo-liberal policies.

This politically appealing notion of youth-led social action often oversimplifies the contested and negotiated power dynamics between adult service providers and young forced migrants as service users. Through their migratory journeys and the hostile environment, the young leaders had adapted to not holding power and internalised the narrative that they did not deserve it or it may lead to harmful consequences (Smith et al., 2023). To support capacity and foster empowerment, we embedded 'cycles of fading' wherein we gradually shifted power to the young leaders (Kirshner, 2006). In the first social action activity (Food Support), the young people generated the idea, budget, goals, and planned the activity, but looked to the first author to direct tasks during delivery. As the activities progressed and the young leaders developed confidence and capacity, they gradually took control in all tasks such as project management and leading others. However, notions of participation and empowerment are highly contested within leisure programming for forced migrants (Nunn et al., 2022). There were instances when senior staff reproduced hegemonic adult-youth power hierarchies and asserted their authority through shifting activity goals and restricting the young leaders' abilities to make decisions to achieve their goals.

In acknowledging that their individual power and capacity to bring about social change was restricted by hostile asylum policies and deficit-based discourses, the young leaders understood that mobilising as a collective unit in social action was necessary to achieve their goals. They aspired to develop larger scale activities underpinned by community organising and advocacy to positively impact their communities and improve systems. Through the programme, the young leaders could mobilise financial resources from funders, combine their individual skills, social networks, and knowledge, and access the social networks at BelongHere (e.g. relationships with local mosques, charities, small businesses, and volunteer networks), to support their goals. A fundamental aspect of marginalised groups mobilising in social action involves perceiving themselves as part of a collective (Delgado & Staples, 2007). Developing a collective identity as 'Action Club' was supported through having shared aspects of identity such as language, religion, and culture; collective experiences of displacement and oppression within the hostile environment; similar goals and values; and strong pre-existing friendships built on trust, care, and solidarity (De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). For young forced migrants who experience non-belonging in multiple domains (Nunn et al., 2022), this sense of collective identity as Action Club represented a significant space of diasporic belonging. Through mobilising as a group, Action Club enhanced their collective agency, their freedom to define and act upon their goals (Stewart, 2005).

Group dynamics that centre democratisation can foster individual and collective agency in social action (Stewart, 2005); however, such processes were, at times, contested. Recognising the heterogeneity of young forced migrants and the diverse power they hold in relation to their intersecting characteristics (Spaaij, 2015), unequal power hierarchies were sometimes reproduced within Action Club. Young leaders who had been in the UK longer, had stronger English language proficiency, wider social networks, and thus perceived to be more integrated, were typically nominated by others to lead the activities and held the strongest influence in shaping social action goals. Further, staff initially put eligibility criteria in place restricting membership to 'longer-standing' youth participants and the young leaders wanted the group to remain small to 'make it easier to make decisions' (Mohammed). This closed-group setting at times reproduced power hierarchies within BelongHere between young people who were newcomers and those who were more settled, and as discussed by Yap et al. (2010), reinforced ideologies around the desirability of, and individual responsibility for, integration. As highlighted by Spaaij (2015), these findings demonstrate how the boundaries of belonging can be (re)negotiated through leisure. For the young leaders who were so often denied

belonging in the UK, through Action Club they could negotiate belonging through granting, and at times, denying membership to others.

Emotions that emerge through leisure are intrinsically connected to wider power relations in the asylum system, and can thus reveal and temporally disrupt hegemonic power relationships (De Martini Ugolotti & Webster, 2023; Norrito, 2024). Mayblin et al. (2020) highlights that systematic destitution is a key element of the migration-welfare nexus designed to maintain and reproduce poverty and social exclusion, all the while ensuring that asylum seekers are 'kept alive but in a state of injury' (Mbembe, 2003, p. 25). The Food Support and Eid Gift activities were conceptualised during the UK COVID-19 national lockdown, a period that exacerbated social inequalities experienced by forced migrants. The pandemic revealed how welfare policies neglected the vulnerabilities of, and sustained violence against, forced migrants, leaving them disproportionatly affected in comparison to the general population (Mengesha et al., 2022). Young leaders' struggled with food insecurity, digital inequalities, unsuitable accommodation, and social exclusion. Reflection on these struggles through Action Club sessions evoked intense individual and collective emotions of sadness, powerlessness, and fear. The collective intensity of these painful emotions represented a 'shared ecology of emotion' (see Rosen & Crafter, 2020, p. 235), which fostered group solidarity, enabling them to locate their struggles within the wider context of their community and motivating action. While young forced migrants are often perceived as beneficiaries of care (Darling, 2011), as highlighted by Zaman (2020) and De Martini Ugolotti and Webster (2023), Action Club was a space for re-definining relationalities of care, as young people cared for each other and other young refugees.

Compassion is a significant moral emotion in motivating action to reduce the suffering of others (Deneulin & Ritchie, 2011). Compassion shaped how the young leaders understood social action, which motivated them to act upon key issues that affected their local community during this time (Deneulin & Ritchie, 2011). Compassion and reciprocal care co-exisited alongside the young people's religious and cultural values, as well as neo-liberal ideologies of active citizenship as the young people felt responsibility to support the local refugee community where the UK Government had failed to meet basic needs. In the Food Support activity, in response to urgent community struggles with food insecurity at the onset of the lockdown due to panic buying and limited welfare support, the Action Club delivered emergency food parcels to local young refugees. Reflecting in his photo voice interview, Mohammed said:

> This is why this [activity] was important because later maybe we can help with other things but now they need food, in that time that's why we choose.

However, scholars caution that social action activities which provide essential services, such a food bank, may reinforce systematic destitution through reproducing neo-liberal ideologies and demonstrating that the third sector and citizens will take over responsibility for basic welfare provision when the state fails to do so (Vickers, 2016).

We found that the community-orientated and youth-led nature of these social action activities elicited feelings of pleasure and pride. For Aina in the Eid Gift activity, she expressed in her photo voice interview:

> Seeing the smiles on the kids' faces, when they didn't know what was inside the bag and they were so happy and enthusiastic and I was like I am feeling really happy.

As highlighted in De Martini Ugolotti (2022), amongst the slow violence experienced in the asylum system, positive emotions, such as the ones described above, were often inaccessible within the young leaders' everyday lives. Thus, leisure can play a powerful role in enacting multiple pleasures through providing opportunities for participants to exercise agency over their bodies and temporarily escape/resist the everyday experiences of slow violence (De Martini Ugolotti, 2022; Webster, 2022). For the young leaders, handing food parcels and gift bags to community members and seeing their smiles and positive emotional responses, was tangible

evidence of achieving their goals and elicited feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. Further, the young leaders could directly attribute goal attainment to their own individual and collective efforts, eliciting feelings of pride. In his WhatsApp Photo Challenge, Mohammed said: 'We all decided together this project and we proud of what we're doing'. Pride characterised how the young people understood the community organising element of social action as a meaningful activity, and motivated future social action.

While the community-organising element of social action revealed in the Eid Gift and Food Support activities were driven by compassion, elicited positive emotions, and led to lateral practices of care, in the Social Worker Video activity, anger and injustice motivated the young people to engage in advocacy, whereby they desired to use their lived experiences to change the systems causing suffering (Ho et al., 2015). During project planning, the group reflected on and shared the injustices they experienced at the intersection of migration policies and welfare systems as young people with UASC status. While UASC are entitled to the same welfare support as other 'looked after children', they are subject to de-humanising age assessment procedures, discrimination and mistrust from social workers, and given minimal autonomy (see Chase & Allsopp, 2020). Reflecting upon and sharing their experiences within the social care system evoked strong individual/collective emotions such as anger, betrayal, and powerlessness. In the planning meeting, Elhaim said:

> It all up to the social worker, make all decision, where you live, whether you stay [in the UK], they even say how old you are. Your position depends on them, is it fair? Your life in their hands . . . it makes me so angry.

Elhaim, alongside others, had been stripped of their autonomy to make decisions in everyday life and to feel and act on their intense emotions. In our planning meeting, you could see and feel the embodiment of these painful emotions through clenched jaws and raised voices. Herein, the programme provided a space for the 'gradual wounding' (Mayblin et al., 2020) produced by the asylum system to be felt and shared with others who understood (see De Martini Ugolotti & Webster, 2023). These shared negative emotions, which directed blame towards a common target (the social care system) strengthened solidarity and collective resistance (Vickers, 2016). This collective resistance encouraged the young people to widen their goals for Action Club; it motivated the progression from place-based community organising, to advocacy through challenging social care policies and practices for young people with UASC status. Jerad expressed: 'it is not enough to support them. . .. We need to get to the social workers, let us teach them about refugees, we can tell them so much'. Relatedly, for Vickers (2016), emotional solidarity among asylum seekers supported the development of collective resistance, which encouraged participants to progress from formal volunteering to activism against the Government's hostile asylum policies. However, the young leaders were also cognisant of the unequal power hierarchies with social care professionals and their precarious immigration status, which shaped their social action activity and the decision to create an animated video, rather than engage in protest or political action.

Identity, culture and religion within social action

Social rights movements have historically been organised around, and driven by, identity politics, and thus identity politics continue to be a fundamental focus for youth community organising (Delgado & Staples, 2007). Throughout the young people's displacement and resettlement journeys, intersecting aspects of their identities including culture, religion, gender, race, and immigration status were often the basis for discrimination and oppression. Action Club provided the opportunity for the young leaders to organise on the basis of their shared marginalised identities and draw upon and negotiate aspects of their identities to develop meaningful social action activities which addressed the interests and concerns of their communities.

All of the young leaders grew up in societies which were organised through collectivist means, had strong religious ties with Islam, and prioritised the wellbeing of the group over the individual (see Zaman, 2020). As described in Ageergard et al.(2022), the young leaders linked their cultural

backgrounds to values such as community interdependence, collective responsibility, and altruism, and understood such values as morally good, thus signalling a direct and established connection between cultural values and social action. In his photo voice interview, Jerad expressed:

> They are happy in my country [Sudan] because everybody helps each other. If they don't have food, home, or have no money because they cannot work they still will have house and food. In my religion, in my culture, you are family with your neighbours. Everybody help each other.

These values shaped how the young leaders saw themselves within their families, communities, and the world. They were proud of these values and perceived them as fundamental to their individual and collective happiness. The young leaders' values are also reflexive of a civic-religious Islamic culture of 'neighbourliness', emphasised in Zaman (2020) as doing good deeds for individuals, community, and society out of compassion and kindness.

We found a direct connection between these values and how the young leaders engaged in and made sense of social action. In their home countries and the UK, the young leaders routinely engaged in informal helping activities in their communities such as 'babysitting neighbors kids' (Rey) and 'translating Home Office letters' (Aina). Agergaard et al. (2022) and Ramachandran and Vathi (2022) suggest that for forced migrants who grew up in Middle Eastern and North African countries, these values often shape understandings of social action as a meaningful and morally good activity, which can motivate engagement in social action. We found that these shared cultural values motivated the young people to join a youth-led social action programme, so they could express their cultural identities in a safe space with 'like others' who share similar values and develop activities that aligned with what they valued in life.

Reflecting these values, the young leaders wanted to develop community organising-informed social action activities, which took place within their local communities, and involved working collectively to support other young refugees. The young people found meaning in such activities as they aligned with their values and replicated dominant cultural norms in their home country. In his photo voice interview, Jerad notes 'doing these projects feels like family and home, everybody working together to help other people, made me feel less homesick'. For Jerad, these social action activities evoked feelings of home and fostered a sense of connection to his diasporic identity. Similar to how the music and dancing events were a familiar cultural practice for the Leeds-based asylum seekers in Lewis (2015), the embodiment and emotional experiences of these informal helping practices were familiar to the young people and served to reproduce national, religious, gendered and ethnic identities while in exile. For Rey and Roya, who had also volunteered in charity shops and health care settings, they positioned meanings of informal helping behaviours and youth-led social action as distinct from adult-led volunteering. They noted that volunteering did not necessarily align with their cultural values or support the interests and needs of their cultural communities, rather their motivations aligned with neo-liberal and integrationist ideologies including attaining a job and accessing higher education (Yap et al., 2010).

We also found a strong relationship between religiosity and engagement in Action Club. All but one of the young leaders identified as Muslim and had a strong religious identity. Post 9/11, Muslims are a heavily racialised group in the UK and for forced migrants, their identities have been transformed in the public imagination from an emphasis on their 'refugee-ness' to a primary concern with their Muslim identity, which is often equated as a threat to cohesion and security (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Qasmiyeh, 2010). Through their social action activities, the young leaders sought to disrupt these representations and (re)negotiate their diasporic and religious identities. The Islamic belief system centres values of altruism and caring for others, which creates an obligation to do good and be neighbourly (Zaman, 2020) and engage in practices of giving to others in need including 'Sadaqa' (voluntary charitable acts). All young leaders who identified as Muslim perceived that the Eid Gift and Food Support activities would fulfil the duty to help others as set by their religion. When discussing why the Food Support project was important, Jerad said:

> It is important to give to others, most important thing in my religion is giving back to the people . . . Even if people behave really bad, you still giving to them. If you give to them, Allah will open your way as well because it is the right thing to do.

For the young leaders, religious beliefs shaped the subjective meaning of social action as a morally good activity and the social action activities provided the opportunity to feel proud of their religious values and practices. In comparison, the Syrian and Palestinian forced migrants who self-organised a soup kitchen for newly arrived migrants in Zaman (2020), did not speak of an explicit religious duty underpinning their motivations. However, their findings similarly demonstrate that practices of neighbourliness are important aspects of living life by Islamic ethical precepts.

The youth-led nature of the social action activities supported the young leaders' autonomy to integrate religious practices, embrace their racialised identities, and stand in solidarity with other Muslims. The Eid Gift activity was conceptualised during Ramadan, a significant time for reflection upon the suffering experienced by others and 'making the community happy' (Roya), thus often a period of high Muslim engagement in social action Reflecting upon the reality of celebrating the end of Ramadan, Eid, with social distancing restrictions in place and separated from family, evoked sadness, a sense of disconnection from their diasporic and religious identity, and a longing for home. When planning their social action activity during this context, the young leaders were passionate about integrating religious practices such as giving gifts during Eid and reflecting upon the suffering of others. Recognising the needs of their community at this time, they decided to distribute gift bags to asylum-seeking children and families across London during Eid. The idea was inspired by their positive affective memories of receiving gifts during Eid as a child. In his WhatsApp photo challenge, Mohammed explained:

> They are in a hotel now . . . . . and no one can bring them presents and stuff. So if we did that [give gifts] they will automatically remember that they feel like they're in their country. Also, they will think that they are no longer alone here. They think someone is here and cares. I am here.

As can be seen from Mohammed's quote, the young leaders perceived giving these gifts as an act of solidarity with other Muslim refugees who experience oppression; a way of showing that they are not alone and their needs are important. During the gift delivery, the young leaders wore traditional Islamic dress and listened to Arabic music, representing feelings of belonging and pride in their diasporic community (see Lewis, 2015). Developing an activity that integrated religious practices and involved standing in solidarity with Muslims during Eid, fostered connection to their religious and cultural identities.

Through social action, forced migrants may be able to transform dominant cultural representations regarding how they see themselves in the world and how others see them (Yap et al., 2010). Set against the dominant discourse, which positions forced migrants as traumatised and 'subjects of care' (Darling, 2011, p. 413), leisure is increasingly being deployed as a tool to 'fix' forced migrants (De Martini Ugolotti & Caudwell, 2021). These asymmetric norms of care were present between staff and young people at BelongHere. Indeed, when the first author introduced the idea of a youth social action programme to staff, it was initially met with resistance due to the young people being perceived as 'too vulnerable'. Jerad, alongside other young leaders, felt uncomfortable with the asymmetric norms of care. Through social action, he was keen to negotiate the migration-welfare nexus through challenging the perception of being a 'victim who always need help', and positioning himself as an active citizen who could support others (Darling, 2011). BelongHere staff, who initially resisted the idea of the social action programme, later championed youth social action in the organisation. Young people also noted a perceived shift in the perceptions that authoritative adults held of them from 'helped' to 'helper'. In his photo voice interview, Karin noted 'my social worker always helps me, she couldn't believe when I tell we made a food bank and helped all those other people'.

Conclusion

Our work demonstrates that young people from refugee backgrounds have a wealth of capabilities to identify and act upon issues in their communities that matter to them and make decisions about what, when, how, and for whom, social action takes place. How the young people understood social action was shaped through complex power dynamics, emotions, and identity politics within the socio-cultural-political environment. Their meanings and motivations for social action reflected the complex intersections of reciprocal care, cultural and religious values/practices, and neoliberal ideologies of active citizenship and integration, which have not yet been fully explored by researchers in the field. These multiple meanings and motives are not oppositional, but deeply entangled. Caring for others and a sense of collective responsibility were engrained in the young people's cultural and religious values and practices, framing social action as a meaningful leisure activity. The migration-welfare nexus necessitated active citizenship, guiding the young leaders to support their communities' basic welfare needs where multiple Governments had failed. Yet, the diverse social action activities also emerged as a space to challenge deficit-based discourses through enacting mutual care and solidarity based on shared displacements, and resisting slow violence through advocating against inequitable practices of dehumanising age assessments, unequal treatment by social workers, and unsuitable housing.

These findings offer a new way of challenging binary analyses that position social action as soley co-opting neo-liberal ideologies of active citizenship or representing resistance against neo-liberal active citizenship ideologies. We argue there is a much more complex migration-welfare nexus shaped by the intersections of reciprocal care, cultural and religious values/practices, alongside neoliberal ideologies of active citizenship and integration. In doing so, this paper offers a unique contribution to knowledge in forced migration, leisure, and social policy studies, through critically examining how young forced migrants understand and negotiate leisure through the migration-welfare nexus.

We encourage scholars to further explore the entangled and multiple relationships and meanings of social action across diverse types of social action activities, especially migrant-led action. Last, we urge policy-makers and practitioners to create meaningful opportunities for young refugees to engage in community-led social action whereby they can bring their voice and expertise to evidence building and joint decision-making around key issues experienced by forced migrants.

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