**Social Inclusion**
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12013
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.12013

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Open Access Journal

# Professional Inequality in Exile: Digital Precarity Among Skilled Syrian Refugees in Germany

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**Submitted:** 27 January 2026 **Accepted:** 11 May 2026 **Published:** 3 June 2026

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue "Mobility and Relationships in Digitally Saturated Social Worlds" edited by Aija Lulle (University of Eastern Finland) and Ieva Puzo (Riga Stradins University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i536

## Abstract

Highly skilled refugees are often assumed to possess forms of social and human capital that facilitate labour market integration in host societies. However, forced displacement disrupts not only professional trajectories but also the institutional and social infrastructures through which skills, qualifications, and professional identities are recognised and converted into employment. This article develops the concept of *connectivity without convertibility* to explain how digitally mediated social ties among highly skilled Syrian refugees in Germany remain socially active and emotionally meaningful while failing to generate institutional recognition or stable professional mobility. Drawing on 24 qualitative interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography conducted between 2022 and 2024, the study examines how Syrian professionals use Facebook and WhatsApp groups to reconstruct professional networks, access information, and maintain occupational identity after displacement. The findings show that digital platforms provide emotional support, visibility, and symbolic forms of professional continuity, yet these forms of connectivity remain institutionally non-convertible. Rather than facilitating labour market integration, digital networking often reproduces prolonged waiting, downward mobility, and professional precarity. The article argues that *connectivity without convertibility* represents a broader structural condition of forced migration in which refugees remain digitally connected but excluded from the institutional mechanisms required for professional recognition and career restoration. Digital platforms therefore function less as pathways to integration than as fragile infrastructures of survival that sustain hope, identity, and social participation under conditions of structural exclusion.

## Keywords

digital migration; Germany; highly skilled refugees; professional precarity; social capital; Syrian refugees

## 1. Introduction

After several failed attempts to meet Ahmad, I finally visited him at his home following repeated calls. I had first met Ahmad and his wife, Rama, at a Contact Café, where Syrian refugees gather to practice German and get support. Our initial encounters were brief and formal, and it took time before Ahmad invited me into his private space.

On a cold evening, I stood at their doorstep, unsure how to approach someone long withdrawn from social interactions. He had postponed this visit several times, offering different reasons each time, as if reluctant to reveal a vulnerability he carefully kept hidden behind delay and distance. Ahmad, 48, a Syrian engineer, had arrived in Germany in 2018 with his wife and three children, hoping to rebuild a stable life. Rama, 42, had been a mathematics teacher in Syria, and their children, aged 7 to 13, sat quietly in the living room.

Ahmad sat at the small kitchen table, scrolling through his phone. He greeted me with a brief nod and exhaled smoke into an overflowing ashtray. Rama moved silently between the counter and stove, while the children watched television. The scene was calm yet emotionally dense, marked by hospitality, restraint, and a distance reflecting Ahmad's prolonged isolation.

On his screen, several Syrian Facebook groups were open. Ahmad explained he had joined nearly every group he could find, seeking someone with a shared professional background or information on engineering work, recognition procedures, or employment opportunities. He was not used to social media before; in Syria, professional life unfolded through offices, colleagues, and direct connections rather than screens. Here, however, these platforms had become his only window into a world of information otherwise inaccessible. Through these spaces, Syrian refugees in Germany shared detailed advice on jobs, qualification recognition, and bureaucratic pathways. This digital routine had become a quiet daily search to reconnect with a professional world that once defined him, offering hope and symbolic connection but rarely concrete results:

> Every day I open Facebook and I search. Not because I like it, but because I don't know where else to go. In Syria, I knew who to call, who to visit. Here, I only have this screen. Sometimes I feel I am an engineer only inside my head.

What appears as casual scrolling is, in fact, a form of sustained professional labour. Facebook has become a space where displaced professionals attempt to reconstruct lost networks through fragile digital ties, substituting institutional relations with dispersed online connections that rarely produce tangible outcomes:

> It became a daily habit. I scroll through these pages unconsciously. Sometimes hours pass while I am looking at this small screen. Even at night, I wake up to check notifications, hoping there might be something for me.

As he spoke, Ahmad showed me his Facebook feed, filled with posts from Syrian professional communities in Germany: job ads, questions about diploma recognition, short-term contracts, and long threads of advice in Arabic and German. These digital spaces had become his main contact with a professional world once structured by offices, colleagues, and institutions.

He explained he had sent his CV dozens of times through these groups, seeking feedback, recommendations, or guidance on employment channels matching his qualifications. Sometimes he received encouragement, often no response, and frequently comments from others facing the same difficulties. Instead of opening concrete opportunities, these exchanges often intensified his frustration and sense of professional despair:

> In Syria, one phone call was enough to solve any problem. People knew me, they trusted my work. Here, I am sending myself into a void. Everyone sees me, but nobody really knows me.

Ahmad's experience illustrates a central paradox of digitally mediated life in exile. Like many highly skilled Syrian refugees in Germany, he arrived with expectations of professional continuity through formal institutions but instead encountered fragmented recognition systems and bureaucratic barriers. In this context, Facebook and WhatsApp became primary infrastructures for maintaining contact with a professional world that no longer existed in institutional form.

This article introduces the concept of *connectivity without convertibility* to describe how digitally sustained ties remain socially active yet fail to produce institutional recognition or professional mobility. Despite constant engagement, checking posts, sending CVs, and seeking advice, digital connections rarely lead to stable employment or recognition. Instead, they generate visibility and episodic encouragement without providing the trust, legitimacy, or institutional validation required for professional reintegration.

Skilled refugees are often framed as privileged actors in migration processes, assumed to integrate quickly due to their education and professional experience. However, forced displacement disrupts not only individual careers but also the social and professional infrastructures through which skills are recognised and converted into employment (Goodson & Phillimore, 2008; Strang & Quinn, 2021). Professional reputations, institutional affiliations, and long-standing networks of trust become partially or fully inaccessible, leaving individuals formally qualified yet structurally excluded.

Digital platforms are frequently presented as tools that can bridge these ruptures. Social media and messaging applications enable refugees to maintain transnational ties, access information, and reconstruct a sense of belonging (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Diminescu, 2008; Leurs & Smets, 2018). Facebook groups and WhatsApp networks created by Syrian professionals in Germany function as spaces where expertise is symbolically acknowledged and where professional identity is partially sustained. However, this recognition remains largely informal and does not translate into institutional validation.

This article examines how highly skilled Syrian refugees in Germany, including engineers, teachers, doctors, and lawyers, attempt to reconstruct professional and social ties through digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024 and 24 in-depth interviews, it explores how digital environments become central infrastructures for navigating professional loss, displacement, and uncertainty.

The findings challenge the assumption that digital connectivity enhances social capital in migration contexts. While social capital theory emphasises the role of networks in facilitating mobility (Bourdieu, 2018; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973), this study shows that under conditions of forced displacement, connectivity does not automatically translate into institutional outcomes. Instead, digital networking

produces connectivity without convertibility: Social ties remain active and meaningful but fail to generate access to stable employment or professional recognition.

In this context, digital platforms function as fragile substitutes for disrupted professional infrastructures. They sustain visibility, information exchange, and emotional support, but cannot replace the institutional, legal, and organisational systems required for professional recognition. Responsibility for navigating fragmented integration pathways is increasingly shifted onto individuals, often intensifying uncertainty and exhaustion rather than resolving it (Maletzky de García, 2021).

This dynamic contributes to what can be understood as an amplification of structural precarity. Rather than reducing barriers, digital platforms often redistribute them into individualised forms of labour, where success depends on continuous engagement without guaranteed outcomes.

The analysis engages debates on weak ties and social capital in migration studies. While weak ties can facilitate access to opportunities in stable labour markets (Granovetter, 1973), this study demonstrates that their effectiveness is structurally constrained in contexts of forced displacement. Without institutional recognition, weak ties remain socially present but economically non-productive.

Digitally mediated ties therefore do not replace disrupted professional networks. Instead, they operate as survival infrastructures, sustaining identity, hope, and connection while simultaneously exposing the structural conditions of exclusion. For displaced skilled refugees, professional recovery unfolds within a persistent tension between digital engagement and institutional absence.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in interconnected literatures on social ties and social capital, forced migration and precarity among skilled refugees, digital migration and platform-mediated sociality, and digital labour. Together, these bodies of literature explain why digital platforms become central for displaced professionals, while also showing why digitally mediated ties remain insufficient to restore professional stability, recognition, and emotional security.

### *2.1. Social Ties and Social Capital*

Social ties are a central resource in shaping access to employment, mobility, and social integration. Granovetter (1973) distinguished between strong and weak ties: Strong ties, such as close family or long-term professional collaborations, are characterised by trust, emotional depth, and durability, while weak ties, such as acquaintances or loose professional contacts, function as bridges to new information and opportunities. In labour markets, weak ties are often crucial for connecting individuals to jobs beyond immediate networks.

Later research expanded this insight by conceptualising social capital as resources embedded in social relations (Bourdieu, 2018; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). For Bourdieu (1986), social capital is inseparable from power and recognition; it is accumulated through long-term participation in social fields and depends on institutional certification. Professional networks are thus structured systems of trust, reputation, and symbolic legitimacy.

In skilled professions like medicine, engineering, and law, employment access is closely tied to institutionalised networks, professional bodies, and shared standards of competence (Evetts, 2013).

Migration scholarship has long emphasised the importance of social networks in facilitating labour market integration, housing access, and emotional support (Massey et al., 1993; Portes, 1998). However, this literature often assumes continuity of social capital across borders. For voluntary migrants, professional mobility is frequently planned and supported by pre-existing networks. For refugees, displacement ruptures these networks: Professional recognition embedded in them is often lost, leaving connections emotionally meaningful but practically ineffective. For refugees like Ahmad, digital ties may preserve visibility and hope, but weak ties alone cannot compensate for disrupted institutional recognition.

### *2.2. Forced Migration and Precarity Among Skilled Refugees*

Forced migration fundamentally challenges traditional understandings of skilled mobility. Research on refugee professionals shows that displacement produces a condition of "de-skilling," in which education and experience lose their exchange value in host-country labour markets (Bauder, 2003; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Kofman, 2014). This is not primarily due to a lack of competence, but to non-recognition, bureaucratic barriers, and the loss of embedded professional networks.

Erel (2010) and Liversage (2009) argue that qualifications are evaluated through nationally embedded systems privileging locally produced knowledge and credentials. Refugees, whose mobility is unplanned and frequently accompanied by interrupted documentation or prolonged displacement, encounter particularly restrictive recognition processes. Professional capital therefore becomes formally present but practically inaccessible. Careers built over decades through institutional affiliations, trusted networks, and professional reputations are destabilised through forced migration. Skilled refugees consequently become formally qualified yet structurally marginalised.

The consequences of this disruption are not solely economic or occupational but also deeply emotional and symbolic. Professional identity is closely tied to dignity, social recognition, and personal coherence. As van Riemsdijk and Axelsson (2021) demonstrate, prolonged exclusion from professional systems destabilises refugees' sense of self as competent professionals. The longer professional interruption persists, the more difficult it becomes to reclaim legitimacy and confidence. Rebuilding social ties therefore becomes more than an instrumental strategy for employment—it becomes a struggle to restore dignity, recognition, and continuity of selfhood.

This condition generates a broader form of precarity characterised by instability, uncertainty, and prolonged waiting. Skilled refugees often experience downward mobility despite residing in countries with formal integration infrastructures (Ager & Strang, 2008). Employment trajectories become fragmented, professional futures uncertain, and long-term planning increasingly difficult. Precarity thus extends beyond unstable labour conditions and encompasses legal insecurity, emotional exhaustion, and symbolic displacement.

### *2.3. Digital Migration and Platform-Mediated Sociality*

Digital technologies have become central infrastructures of contemporary migration. Research on digital migration highlights how smartphones and social media platforms facilitate transnational connectivity, access to information, and emotional support (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Diminescu, 2008; Leurs & Smets, 2018). These platforms enable migrants to maintain family relations, navigate bureaucratic systems, and create digitally mediated spaces of belonging across borders.

For skilled refugees, Facebook groups, WhatsApp networks, and online professional forums emerge as important sites of hope and orientation. They allow displaced professionals to reconnect with peers, circulate professional knowledge, and sustain a sense of occupational identity. In these spaces, professional expertise is often acknowledged symbolically, producing a temporary sense of recognition and belonging (Alencar, 2018; Ruan et al., 2020). Digital diasporas further reinforce these dynamics by reproducing shared language, experience, and collective identity in online environments (Keles, 2015).

At the same time, these forms of connectivity remain structurally fragile. Information circulating in such networks is often uneven, informal, and not institutionally validated. Advice is frequently produced by peers without formal authority, while official knowledge remains fragmented or inaccessible. As a result, digital engagement can generate ambivalence: It sustains participation and emotional support but also produces frustration and uncertainty when expectations of mobility are not met (Leurs & Smets, 2018; Madianou, 2019). This reflects connectivity without convertibility.

This limitation becomes particularly evident when digital platforms are understood through the lens of social capital. Classic weak-tie theory suggests that loose and diverse networks can expand access to opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). However, in contexts of forced displacement, this mechanism is fundamentally constrained. Weak ties do not automatically translate into opportunity when institutional environments are fragmented or exclusionary. Following Bourdieu (2018), social ties only become effective capital when they are recognised and validated within institutional structures. Digital platforms may increase connectivity, but they do not provide the institutional conditions necessary for converting that connectivity into professional mobility or recognition.

Institutional barriers, credential recognition regimes, and labour market segmentation further restrict this conversion (Erel, 2010; Liversage, 2009). As a result, digitally mediated ties remain socially active but structurally non-productive: They circulate information, emotion, and identity without generating stable pathways into professional systems.

Building on these debates, this article develops the concept of *connectivity without convertibility*. The concept refers to a condition in which digital ties remain emotionally meaningful, socially active, and continuously reproduced while failing to translate into institutional recognition, professional legitimacy, or labour market mobility. In contexts of forced displacement, social connectivity is therefore not absent but structurally suspended from conversion into economic and professional capital.

For displaced professionals, digitally mediated ties therefore offer symbolic repair rather than structural restoration. They sustain professional identity, provide emotional support, and generate hope, yet cannot

reconstruct the institutional, legal, and social infrastructures required for professional recognition. Ahmad's case illustrates this paradox: Digital networks maintain connection and visibility while simultaneously revealing the limits of recognition under conditions of displacement.

### *2.4. Digital Labour and the Maintenance of Professional Visibility*

Digital labour provides an important analytical lens for understanding how displaced professionals attempt to maintain visibility, recognition, and hope under conditions of precarity. For highly skilled refugees, this labour is not limited to formal job seeking; it includes monitoring online groups, circulating CVs, responding to messages, maintaining professional presence, and remaining available for possible opportunities. These practices are shaped by broader conditions of insecurity, instability, and vulnerability, which Butler (2004) conceptualises as precarity.

Digital platforms intersect with this precarity ambivalently. On the one hand, they provide access to information, emotional reassurance, and professional networks otherwise unavailable to displaced individuals. On the other hand, they normalise informality and shift the burden of integration increasingly onto refugees themselves. Refugees become responsible for continuously searching, networking, responding, and remaining digitally visible in order to maintain the possibility of opportunity.

Within this context, digital engagement itself becomes a form of labour. Maintaining visibility, monitoring online groups, circulating CVs, responding to messages, and sustaining professional presence constitute ongoing affective and informational work. Soronen and Koivunen (2022) argue that platform-mediated environments intensify forms of emotional and professional self-management by requiring constant engagement under uncertain conditions. Digital networking therefore becomes embedded within broader conditions of precarious labour and social insecurity.

In such contexts, opportunities emerge unpredictably and disappear quickly, while failure becomes individualised. Digitally mediated ties sustain professional identity and hope, yet they cannot restore the institutional legitimacy necessary for stable professional futures. Precarity is therefore intensified not only through unstable employment but also through the continuous maintenance of connections that cannot be converted into institutional outcomes.

### *2.5. Rethinking Weak Ties in Contexts of Forced Displacement*

Taken together, these bodies of literature provide an analytical framework for understanding why digitally mediated social ties are simultaneously central and insufficient in contexts of displacement. Social capital theory explains the importance of networks for access, mobility, and recognition. Forced migration scholarship shows how displacement disrupts professional biographies, institutional belonging, and the convertibility of previously accumulated skills. Digital migration studies highlight how platforms sustain information exchange, emotional support, and forms of belonging. Finally, the concept of digital labour draws attention to the continuous work displaced professionals perform to remain visible, responsive, and professionally present under uncertain conditions.

This article therefore builds on, but also critically revises, classical weak-tie theory. While weak ties may facilitate access to opportunities in relatively stable labour markets (Granovetter, 1973), their effectiveness is significantly constrained within fragmented and exclusionary institutional environments. Following Bourdieu (1989), social ties only function as effective capital when they are institutionally recognised and legitimised. Digital platforms may make professional ties visible, but they cannot independently guarantee legitimacy, certification, or stable career trajectories.

For displaced professionals, digitally mediated ties consequently offer symbolic repair rather than structural restoration. They help sustain professional identity, emotional belonging, and collective support, yet they cannot reconstruct the institutional, legal, and social infrastructures required for professional recognition. Ahmad's case exemplifies this contradiction: Digital networks sustain connection and hope while simultaneously revealing the emotional and structural limits imposed by forced displacement.

## 3. Historical and Structural Disruption of Skilled Syrian Careers

Since the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, one of the most devastating consequences has been the forced displacement of a highly educated and professionally experienced population. Syria, once home to a strong public sector and established professions such as medicine, engineering, education, and law, lost a significant portion of its skilled workforce (Tigau, 2019). For many, displacement did not merely interrupt individual careers—it dismantled the professional and social infrastructures built over decades.

For highly skilled Syrians arriving in Germany, professional identity was grounded in years of education, practice, and embeddedness in networks of colleagues, institutions, and clients—networks essential for recognition, stability, and career progression. Displacement ruptured these structures. A prolonged "frozen phase," often spent in Syria or neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, or Lebanon, limited legal access to work and consumed several years of professional life (OECD, 2016).

When return became unrealistic, further delays emerged through migration trajectories marked by uncertainty, bureaucratic barriers, and family relocation. Even after arrival in Germany, integration processes—language acquisition, residence procedures, and qualification recognition—extended this interruption. As a result, many experienced gaps of 10 to 15 years, during which knowledge became outdated, professional confidence weakened, and opportunities for re-entry diminished (Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020; van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021).

This prolonged disruption produces not only occupational displacement but also a destabilisation of professional identity. Rebuilding social ties becomes more than a strategy for employment—it is a struggle to restore recognition, dignity, and a coherent sense of self.

Unlike voluntary migrants, who often mobilise networks strategically, displaced professionals must reconstruct them under conditions of fragmentation and loss. Networks that once sustained careers are scattered or dissolved, making their reconstruction a central yet uncertain process. Ahmad's trajectory—years of interrupted professional life, regional displacement, and prolonged bureaucratic delays—reflects these broader structural challenges.

Digital platforms have emerged as one avenue for reconnecting with professional communities. Facebook groups and WhatsApp networks provide access to information, emotional support, and limited forms of solidarity. However, they rarely generate stable pathways into professional employment. Instead, they expose the fragility of digitally mediated ties and the persistence of structural barriers, leaving displaced professionals navigating between symbolic recognition and material exclusion (Soronen & Koivunen, 2022).

By tracing the trajectories of three highly skilled Syrian refugees—a male engineer, a female lawyer, and a male dentist—this article illustrates how forced displacement reshapes the meaning of skill, experience, and professionalism in exile. These cases highlight how long-term interruption, institutional barriers, and fragmented networks undermine professional continuity and complicate efforts at reintegration.

## 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using methodological triangulation to capture the complexity of how highly skilled Syrian refugees reconstruct social and professional ties through digital platforms. By combining data sources, methods, and analytical perspectives, triangulation enhances the credibility of the findings and enables a multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick et al., 2004). Given the emotional, social, and institutional layers of displacement, a single method would be insufficient to capture the interplay between professional biographies, digital practices, and experiences of precarity.

The research integrates in-depth interviews, offline and online participant observation, and qualitative analysis of digital environments such as Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities. It combines data triangulation, method triangulation, and researcher positionality as an interpretive resource, allowing the study to examine not only participants' accounts but also how they act and interact within digital and social fields.

### *4.1. Research Design and Fieldwork*

The research is grounded in long-term qualitative fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024 in several German cities with significant Syrian refugee populations. The central focus was on highly skilled Syrian refugees who had completed university education and accumulated professional experience in Syria before displacement. Participants included doctors, engineers, teachers, lawyers, dentists, and academics. The study is not concerned with representativeness in a statistical sense, but with analytical depth and theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Qualitative research is particularly suited to examining processes of professional identity, social rupture, and digital coping strategies, as these are deeply subjective, relational, and emotionally embedded (Creswell, 2007). The aim was to understand how displaced professionals interpret their own experiences and how digital platforms are woven into their everyday struggles for recognition and stability.

### *4.2. In-Depth Interviews*

The core of the empirical material consists of 24 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews lasted between 90 and 150 minutes and were conducted in Arabic and translated into English. This linguistic

flexibility was crucial for enabling participants to articulate complex emotional and professional experiences in a language that felt safe and precise (Temple & Young, 2004).

The interview guide was organised around four thematic blocks: first, professional life in Syria, including education, career trajectories, professional networks, and the meaning of professional identity and social recognition; second, displacement and interruption, covering experiences during the war, waiting phases, regional displacement, and the loss of networks, status, and institutional belonging; third, arrival in Germany and navigation of bureaucratic processes, including recognition of qualifications and experiences of de-skilling and downward mobility; and fourth, digital practices, including the use of Facebook, WhatsApp, and online professional groups, as well as experiences of networking, hope, disappointment, and exhaustion.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), through iterative coding cycles across interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and digital observation data. Coding was carried out manually without qualitative analysis software, allowing for close engagement with the material and reflexive comparison across cases. Initial codes were progressively refined into higher-order themes, which directly informed the structure of the findings section. Accordingly, the sub-headings in the findings reflect the analytically derived themes emerging from this process.

### *4.3. Participant Observation in Offline and Online Spaces*

To complement interview narratives, participant observation was conducted in both physical and digital environments. Offline observation included informal meetings, professional events, language courses, and community gatherings where highly skilled Syrian refugees exchanged information and support. These encounters provided insight into how professional identity is negotiated in everyday interactions and how frustration, hope, and exhaustion are collectively experienced.

In addition to offline observation, digital participant observation was conducted by joining Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities used by Syrian professionals seeking employment. The focus was on groups identified by participants as central to their networking practices and observed over extended periods. Attention was given to job advertisements, advice and mentorship exchanges, emotional expressions (encouragement, despair, solidarity), circulation of CVs, and patterns of silence. Active engagement in discussions and information exchange enabled real-time observation of networking dynamics and facilitated connections with potential participants, many of whom were later interviewed. This combined approach made it possible to trace patterns of support and exclusion and to examine how professional identity is performed, recognised, and contested in digital spaces.

Digital ethnography enabled the analysis of sociality within platform-based environments (Hjorth et al., 2017). These spaces were treated not merely as technical tools, but as social fields in Bourdieu's sense, shaped by power relations, hierarchies of recognition, and emotional labour.

Observation notes were systematically documented and compared with interview data, allowing identification of discrepancies between narrated experiences and actual practices—an important element of triangulation.

### 4.4. Digital Data as Social Practice

Rather than treating online content as isolated texts, this study conceptualises digital data as situated social practice. Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages, and interaction patterns were analysed as expressions of collective coping, professional aspiration, and structural constraint. The analysis focused on recurring themes: hopeful self-presentation, informal recruitment practices, circulation of uncertainty, and emotional support and burnout. This approach aligns with scholarship viewing digital migration as embedded in everyday survival strategies rather than a separate technological domain (Leurs & Smets, 2018; Madianou, 2019).

### 4.5. Triangulation Strategy

Triangulation was central to the analysis and was implemented in three ways. First, method triangulation combined interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography to capture multiple dimensions of the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2022), systematically comparing interview accounts with online and offline behaviour. Second, data triangulation collected information across cities, professions, genders, and legal statuses, revealing structural patterns rather than isolated experiences. Third, theoretical triangulation drew on social capital, precarity, and digital migration, enabling a nuanced interpretation of digital networking as both empowering and limiting. Triangulation was not used to "verify truth" in a positivist sense but as a strategy to enrich understanding and expose contradictions (Flick, 2004, 2018).

### 4.6. Positionality and Reflexivity

This research is shaped by my positionality as a Syrian refugee and scholar studying displacement and family transformation. Shared linguistic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds facilitated trust and openness, especially when discussing humiliation, professional loss, and exhaustion. At the same time, this closeness required constant reflexivity to avoid over-identification and maintain analytical distance (Berger, 2015). Throughout the study, I maintained reflexivity about my positionality and ensured participants were supported and respected during offline and online interactions.

### 4.7. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the aims of the study and gave informed consent. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details were removed. Given the vulnerability associated with legal status, employment insecurity, and trauma, particular care was taken to avoid any form of exposure or harm. Ethical research in forced migration contexts requires attentiveness to emotional fatigue, trust, and the asymmetry between researcher and participant (Mackenzie et al., 2007).

## 5. Findings

The findings are structured around emergent themes derived from the iterative coding of interview, observational, and digital ethnographic data, with each subsection representing a distinct yet interconnected dimension of how digital platforms shape the professional and social experiences of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Germany.

The analysis shows that digital platforms occupy a central yet ambivalent role in the professional and social lives of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Germany. Facebook groups and WhatsApp communities provide orientation, emotional support, and a fragile sense of professional recognition. Yet these platforms reveal the structural weakness of digitally mediated ties: They rarely lead to institutional recognition, stable employment, or professional reintegration. For refugees whose pre-war careers and networks were dismantled, online connections offer hope but remain provisional, suspended amid legal uncertainty, bureaucratic barriers, and labour market fragmentation. Rather than restoring disrupted networks, digital platforms sustain emotional resilience and symbolic identity but cannot fully compensate for long-term professional interruption, as seen in Ahmad's experience.

### *5.1. Institutional Substitution Through Digital Emergency Infrastructures*

For most participants, digital platforms became the first point of entry into professional life after arrival. In the absence of accessible institutional guidance, Facebook groups and WhatsApp networks replaced formal advisory structures. In this sense, digital platforms increasingly operated as "survival infrastructures" for displaced populations (Madianou, 2019). Participants described these spaces as indispensable for understanding recognition procedures, language requirements, and possible employment pathways.

Najeeb, a Syrian dentist, explained that Facebook became his "professional office," the only place where he could ask questions that no institution was willing or able to answer. He recounted his experience with digital guidance and institutional obstacles:

> I found a post about a dentist position in a Facebook group and applied immediately. I waited a long time until I was invited to an interview. I bought a new suit, prepared myself, and practised thoroughly before the interview. Yet, they said I was not qualified enough. A few days later, I heard they hired another person. I have more experience than him. I worked for more than eight years and ran my own clinic. But no one acknowledged that.

However, information in these spaces was often contradictory and uneven, reflecting the instability of online knowledge. Advice based on individual experiences required participants to navigate a constant tension between trust and doubt, turning networking into emotional labour that demanded sustained investment and endurance. Digital platforms filled the gap left by institutional absence but lacked the authority of pre-war professional networks. For Ahmad and others, they offered hope and symbolic recognition, yet could not restore professional legitimacy or accumulated social capital.

### *5.2. Affective Governance of Hope and Exhaustion in Digital Migration Spaces*

Digital spaces sustained a fragile economy of hope. Success stories posted in groups temporarily generated collective optimism and reaffirmed the belief that professional recovery was still possible. This resonates with Alencar's (2018) argument that digital platforms can function as spaces of emotional reassurance and collective resilience for refugees. Yet this hope was persistently undermined by the overwhelming number of unsuccessful attempts. CVs were sent, recommendations were requested, and messages were written, often without any response. Sameer, a Syrian refugee, explained:

> When I arrived, I thought life would be much easier for me here. I am an engineer, I hold a strong certificate and a master's degree, and I have been working in this field for more than 15 years. I sent my CV to more than 20 companies and was confident I would get a job shortly after learning the language. Seven years have passed, and I am still sending more CVs every day, but no one is responding.

Participants described this experience as emotionally draining and professionally humiliating. As argued by Soronen and Koivunen (2022), digital platforms intensify affective labour by forcing individuals to continuously manage disappointment while maintaining public optimism. Interviews revealed that participants felt visible but unrecognised, active but powerless, a condition that mirrors Ahmad's experience as an emblematic case of skilled refugee professionals.

In this sense, digital platforms did not simply facilitate networking. They became spaces where emotions were collectively produced, circulated, and regulated. Hope was sustained, but only through the constant reproduction of effort, which in turn deepened exhaustion and professional self-doubt.

### *5.3. Connectivity Without Institutional Convertibility*

Participants repeatedly emphasised that digital connectivity did not translate into institutional convertibility. They were encouraged, praised, and supported within digital communities, yet their qualifications continued to be questioned or ignored by professional bodies and employers. Mais, a Syrian lawyer, described her experience navigating Facebook groups and online communities:

> I joined all groups for Syrian lawyers in Germany, and people shared advice on how to get my qualifications recognised. I followed every tip, contacted every suggested office. Yet, months passed, and my applications were still rejected.

These dynamics indicate that digital visibility does not accumulate into institutional recognition, but instead stabilises a parallel system of non-convertible professional exchange. They also support the argument that social capital only becomes effective when it is validated by institutional structures (Goodson & Phillimore, 2008). Digital platforms sustained connectivity and visibility without institutional conversion.

### *5.4. The Normalisation of Downward Mobility*

One of the most striking findings is how digital platforms gradually normalised professional downgrading. Posts about low-skilled jobs circulated alongside discussions of recognition procedures and professional aspirations. Over time, this coexistence reshaped expectations. Participants began to describe survival-oriented employment not as temporary deviation, but as a likely long-term reality. Rima, a Syrian teacher, reflected on her experience navigating online professional networks:

> I have been teaching French in language institutes for more than 20 years. When I arrived in Germany, I hoped to continue my career, but the schools here require recognition procedures that are nearly impossible for me to complete. My previous certificates must be re-obtained through legal institutions, and many language schools only hire native speakers. I felt betrayed. I joined Facebook and WhatsApp groups to look for jobs. I read every post, followed all advice, and even reached out to people for mentorship. But nothing changed.

This illustrates conditions of precarity, where uncertainty becomes normalised and stable professional trajectories are disrupted. In this context, digital platforms do not simply reflect precarious realities—they also contribute to their normalisation by circulating accounts of unstable work and fragmented careers. As van Riemsdijk and Axelsson argue, downward mobility among skilled migrants involves not only material loss but also symbolic erosion of professional identity (van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021). Rather than restoring status, digital spaces thus become sites where professional decline is rendered visible and gradually normalised.

Participants described a shift in their digital conversations from professional aspirations toward everyday survival. References to engineering, law, or teaching were increasingly replaced by discussions of warehouse work, cleaning jobs, and other forms of precarious employment. This shift did not reflect resignation, but rather an adjustment of expectations shaped by prolonged exclusion from institutional recognition.

### *5.5. Gendered Experiences of Digital Networking*

Digital precarity was experienced in gendered ways. Women used digital platforms more intensively for emotional support and flexible access to information, particularly when caregiving responsibilities limited their physical mobility. This aligns with Kofman's observation that migration regimes interact with gendered care structures, producing unequal opportunities for professional recovery (Kofman, 2012). At the same time, women faced longer professional interruptions and higher barriers to re-entry, especially in regulated professions such as law and medicine. Mais, a lawyer, reflected on the gap between the hope generated through online professional networks and the continued absence of institutional recognition:

> As a mother, I couldn't attend every in-person workshop. I relied heavily on WhatsApp and Facebook groups to understand recognition procedures and get advice from other women. Sometimes I felt encouraged, sometimes overwhelmed, but these digital spaces allowed me to stay informed and connected without leaving my children alone at home.

Men, especially those who strongly identified with breadwinner roles, described digital networking as a source of humiliation and loss of dignity. Van Riemsdijk and Axelsson note that downward mobility among skilled refugees often produces a crisis of masculinity and professional identity (van Riemsdijk & Axelsson, 2021). In this study, digital platforms became spaces where this crisis was deeply intensified. Requesting help publicly, circulating CVs repeatedly, and receiving no response were experienced as forms of symbolic degradation. Participant Fadi elaborated:

> I kept sending my CV through the Facebook group, asking for guidance. Weeks went by with no response. Each time I saw others getting jobs I was qualified for, I felt humiliated. I used to be the head of my engineering team in Syria; now I feel helpless. Every request for help is a reminder that my skills don't count here.

Thus, digital platforms did not neutralise gendered hierarchies. Instead, they became spaces where shifting gender roles, professional loss, and emotional vulnerability were negotiated in highly unequal ways.

### 5.6. Digital Waiting and Stalled Professional Trajectories

Digital platforms shaped a distinctive experience of waiting. Participants' daily routines revolved around checking messages, monitoring groups, sending applications, and anticipating responses. This waiting was active rather than passive, yet it remained institutionally unproductive, reflecting how migration regimes suspend professional trajectories. In this study, digital platforms functioned as the medium through which this form of waiting was organised, intensified, and sustained. Participant Samer explained:

> Every morning, I check the Facebook group for job posts, reply to messages, send applications, and wait for replies. I feel like I am always busy, but nothing changes. I spend hours online, but my professional life is frozen. It feels like I am moving in place.

Constant digital activity created an illusion of movement while actual professional trajectories remained blocked. Madianou argues that digital connectivity can mask structural abandonment by shifting responsibility onto individuals (Madianou, 2019). The findings strongly support this claim. Participants were constantly working on their own integration digitally, yet institutional pathways remained slow, fragmented, and inaccessible. Mais, again, explained:

> As a mother, I couldn't attend in-person workshops or meetings. I relied on WhatsApp and Facebook groups to get information. Even though I was active online every day, the institutional doors remained closed. I felt constantly busy but powerless, and the waiting was exhausting.

### 5.7. Digital Platforms as Symbolic Repair, Not Structural Restoration

Across all cases, including the engineer, the lawyer, and the dentist, digital platforms functioned primarily as spaces of symbolic repair. They helped participants maintain a sense of professional identity, dignity, and social belonging. They allowed them to speak the language of their professions, exchange specialised knowledge, and remain connected to a professional self that was otherwise institutionally denied. Samer told me:

> Even if nothing comes of my applications, writing posts and sharing knowledge online makes me feel like a professional again. It reminds me that I am still an engineer, even if the institutions don't see it.

Digital engagement allowed participants to maintain purpose and professional interaction, even when structural barriers blocked actual employment. Mais reflected:

> In the Facebook group, I can discuss cases, ask questions, and help others. It gives me a sense of purpose and professional identity. But at the end of the day, it does not get me a job or recognition from the authorities.

Despite this sense of symbolic restoration, the repair remained limited. Digital platforms offered visibility and solidarity but lacked the authority to provide institutional recognition, certification, or career advancement, as Najeeb explained:

> I can advise people in the group and feel useful, but my diploma is still not recognised here. Online interactions keep me connected to my profession, but they don't change my situation.

At the same time, the findings show that digital platforms are neither purely empowering nor merely illusory. They function as fragile infrastructures of survival in the absence of institutional support, sustaining connection and emotional endurance while reproducing professional precarity, downward mobility, and prolonged waiting. This illustrates connectivity without convertibility, revealing the structural limits of digitally mediated social ties for displaced skilled professionals.

## 6. Conclusion

This study shows that digital platforms occupy a paradoxical position in the lives of highly skilled Syrian refugees in Germany. Facebook and WhatsApp groups facilitate communication, information exchange, and emotional support, yet they do not translate into institutional recognition or stable employment.

Across the empirical cases, digital engagement sustains participation and professional visibility without enabling access to regulated labour markets or recognition of prior qualifications. These platforms function as spaces of symbolic repair, allowing participants to maintain dignity and professional identity under conditions of exclusion.

The analysis also highlights how digital practices structure the experience of time in displacement. Daily routines organised around searching, waiting, and responding create a sense of activity that coexists with institutional stagnation, contributing to the normalisation of prolonged professional interruption and downward mobility.

Importantly, the findings challenge the assumption that digital connectivity enhances social capital in contexts of forced migration. Instead, they show that without institutional recognition, connectivity remains limited in its effects: It produces interaction and information flows but not professional conversion. This condition of connectivity without convertibility reflects a broader structural feature of contemporary migration regimes, in which the burden of integration is increasingly placed on individuals and informal digital networks.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that addressing these limitations requires more than expanding digital access or informal networking spaces. It depends on strengthening institutional recognition pathways for foreign qualifications and creating clearer links between informal digital exchanges and formal validation processes. Professional associations, universities, and labour market institutions are central in this regard, particularly through structured mentoring, verified guidance systems, and hybrid forms of professional integration.

Ultimately, the study argues that the core challenge lies in the gap between social connectivity and institutional recognition. Digital platforms sustain important forms of social and emotional survival, but they cannot replace the institutional infrastructures required for professional restoration. Bridging this gap is essential for moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive professional integration.

The article's central contribution lies in the concept of connectivity without convertibility. The findings demonstrate that digitally mediated ties among highly skilled refugees can sustain visibility, emotional support, and professional identity while remaining structurally disconnected from institutional recognition and labour market mobility. Digital connectivity therefore does not inherently generate social capital under

conditions of forced displacement; its effects depend on the institutional structures through which recognition becomes convertible into professional futures.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights for this study. Their openness made this research possible and provided invaluable perspectives on the challenges faced by highly skilled Syrian refugees. I also thank my colleagues and mentors for their guidance, feedback, and support throughout the research process. Finally, I acknowledge the institutions and organisations that facilitated access to professional networks and digital communities, which were central to this study.

## Funding

Funding provided by the Open Access Publishing Fund of Hochschule Fulda – University of Applied Sciences.

## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The qualitative interview data supporting this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and to protect participant confidentiality. Anonymised excerpts may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used for language editing and stylistic refinement of the manuscript. Grammarly was used for grammar and punctuation checking. The research design, data analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are entirely the work of the author.

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