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Work Communities: Sense of Place in the Context of a Single-Industry Arctic City

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to provide a substantive definition of the sense of place among the residents of Norilsk, who constitute an urban working community. The term “working community” is used to refer to the residents of an industrial single-industry town, united by a shared mental conceptualization of those with whom they live, work, communicate, share common values, for whom professional and corporate identities are dominant and determine the nature and directions of the urban community’s sustainability. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the principles of social constructivism, which views social identities as multiple discursive constructs of the modern globalized world, in which the loss of place and ties to communities are consequences of the ongoing changes. As the main concept for identifying the characteristics of the local, we chose “sense of place”, which arises as a result of interaction with the environment and is meaningfully reflected in its interpretation by residents. The methodological basis of the work was the method of qualitative text analysis, specifically narrative analysis. At the empirical level, a detailed description of subjective perception of the city of Norilsk was carried out on the basis of a) text messages, posts and comments to them for 2021–2024 (the total number of posts was 4,511, of which 110 posts with the number of comments exceeding 50 were selected); b) individual in-depth interviews (18 people, employees of the Nadezhda Metallurgical Plant named after B. V. Kolesnikov; the Talnakh Concentrator; the Komsomolskiy Mine). The analysis allowed us to identify the main dominants of the “sense of place” among Norilsk residents as an urban working community: ambivalent emotional attachment to the city; perception of Norilsk as a “place not for everyone” and as a city of an industrial corporation with a special professional profile — heavy labor professions.

Keywords: *urban working communities, sense of place, Norilsk, Arctic Zone of the Russian Federation (AZRF), public discourse, online community*

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Introduction

The spatial structure of modern Russia is represented by a diversity of settlement types, among which industrial Arctic cities occupy a special place, maintaining their high significance as economic, logistical, and strategic centers.

In scientific literature and management practice, urban settlements beyond the Arctic Circle are classified as part of the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation. The history, structure and socio-economic status of Arctic cities (especially industrial ones) reveal many similarities: many of them are artificially created settlements that emerged as a result of Soviet resettlement policies. They are located in harsh natural and climatic conditions, have a distinct industrial structure (most often single-industry), are characterized by high rates of population migration and weakly rooted urban communities. Despite the similarities and challenges faced by Arctic cities today, it is necessary to highlight their socio-cultural characteristics, which have a significant influence on the value structure, local identity and sense of place of specific northern societies, as well as create unique contexts for the sustainability of these communities.

The main concept which, in our view, is applicable to identifying the characteristics of local identity is the concept of a sense of place. The aim of this article is to provide a substantive definition of Norilsk residents' sense of place as inhabitants of not only a "transit hub" city (Gonina, 2015), but also a city with dominant corporate and professional identities — a work community.

Theoretical framework of the study

The relationship between people and place is complex, context-dependent and influenced by a multitude of factors. Until recently, the scientific literature was dominated by the view that there is a link between the process of globalization and a loss of a sense of place, whereby the absence of an emotional connection to the surrounding urban landscape culminates in a feeling of "placelessness" (Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024).

Understanding globalization and its impact as fluid modernity led Z. Bauman to discuss the "curse of identity construction" in modern society, where the flexibility of social boundaries, labor market, and increased mobility lead to a loss of ties to place and low social cohesion of communities (Bauman, 1996). Making a similar assessment, the British sociologist Y. Gabriel notes that identity in globalization is based on notions of image, driven by increased consumerism and neoliberal assumptions about individualized meritocracy and consumer sovereignty. He argues that increased mobility, associated with career and educational prospects, has separated people from their traditional identities based on place and forced them to identify with "visible" material goods and professions (Gabriel, 2005). Similarly, R. Thomas and A. Davies suggest that in the context of globalization, people experience increased uncertainty, vulnerability, and anxiety in relation to belonging to communities, particularly professional ones (Thomas, Davies, 2005). According to these assumptions, locality and sense of place are central concepts in defining identity in the context of globalization. This viewpoint is not shared by all researchers: in particular, E. Casey notes that the

destructive consequences of globalization are leading to a revival of sensitivity to place (Casey, 1997). Similar ideas can be found in the works of phenomenologists, in which a sense of place is interpreted as a natural condition of human existence in a changing world (Heidegger, 2003; Norberg-Schulz, 1979).

As for a substantive analysis of the concept, it is important to note that a sense of place is manifested both in people's subjective experience (memories, traditions, history, culture, and groups) and is associated with objective external environmental influences (landscape, smells, sounds), which form various associations with place. Thus, a sense of place is a subjective perception and attitude of people towards a familiar or unfamiliar environment, arising as a result of interaction with it. It is expressed in descriptive and emotional representations of the experience of this interaction. The environment itself is a combination of physical and social parameters influenced by the following factors: historical (duration of the place's existence, historical milestones of its development) (Devine-Wright, Lyons, 1997; Hay, 1998; Low, 1992); demographic (age groups, mobility, intensity of population migration in a given place); social (quality of people's social capital, value systems, social ties among residents of a given place); physical (type, size, scale, components, climatic features of the place) (Steele, 1981); symbolic meanings associated with the place (Stedman, 2002; Stedman, 2003).

People's relationship with a place, or the social practices and actions that occur in a particular context, shape a way of life and narratives of self-identity (Giddens, 2023). People construct their identities on the basis of their narratives about places, adapting to changes. In fact, these narratives constitute the intangible heritage of places. They create a unique sense of place (Graham, Mason, Newman, 2009); life experiences linked to people's everyday lives and their experiences of places (Stewart, 1996). In this interpretation, the sense of place is closely linked to "place identity" and "place attachment" (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). People, their culture and habits are the abstract aspects of urban areas that create a unique spirit or sense of place (O'Donnell, Turner, 2012). If changes in the physical environment are not managed in a way that protects social interactions and a sense of place, memories will fade and a sense of alienation may arise (Wang, 2016).

At the same time, it is important to note that work communities, such as single-industry towns, are examples of localities where the organizational sphere is integrated with the core of individual and social life. Moreover, these towns are undergoing significant changes as a result of shifts in industry, training, education and social welfare, as well as global trends of increasing corporate globalization and changes in work. The term "working community" in this context is used to refer to the residents of an industrial single-industry town, united by a shared mental conceptualization of those with whom they live, work, communicate, share common values, for whom professional and corporate identities are dominant and determine the nature and directions of the urban community's sustainability. These are specific "imagined audiences composed of personal ties, professional ties, communal ties, and/or phantasmal ties" (Litt, Hargittai, 2016).

In this article, we focus on an empirical study of sense of place in relation to an urban environment that, for objective reasons, is unattractive in terms of climate, environmental conditions, and amenities. A key focus of the study is the city's status as a single-industry city with a distinct corporate and professional identity. The essential nature of the city lies in the constant renewal of the host community: people rarely spend their old age here due to a reluctance to live in harsh climatic conditions and be buried in permafrost (quote from an interview: "nobody wants to die here"). A distinctive way of life develops in the city, shaped by harsh climatic conditions, professional employment, corporate affiliation and multiple territorial identities. However, a sense of attachment to it, in the form of a distinct identity as a "northern person", may persist even after an individual changes their place of residence.

In this empirical study, we focus on identifying the discursive construction of a sense of place in the city of Norilsk, which is an industrial and living frontier (Zamyatina, 2007). To obtain data on the discourse of Norilsk residents' sense of place, we rely on the results of in-depth interviews and the digital footprint, that is, statements about the city created by residents as users of social networks (public discourse). We examine the narrative created by residents through their statements and text messages describing their attitudes toward the city and identify those dominants within it that meaningfully reflect Norilsk residents' sense of place. Largely through social networks, we are able to document the transformation of residents' relationships with time, space, and each other, and observe the growing significance of specific places and "local orders", which are represented, among other things, through urban public pages (Zaporozhets, Lapina-Kratasyuk, 2015). The widespread presence of urban communities on social media reflects a need not only for physical (geographical) proximity, but also for mental one. According to Z. Bauman, mental (spiritual, moral) proximity consists of people's ability (desire) to experience a sense of belonging: to perceive others as subjects, with their own goals and rights to achieve them; with similar values and emotions (Bauman, 1996).

Studies on Norilsk are rare in the scientific literature; we particularly note the works of N.Yu. Zamyatina and N.V. Gonina, who have studied in detail the characteristics of the local identity of Norilsk residents. In the works of N.Yu. Zamyatina, in addition to the distinctive quality of "northernness" of Norilsk residents, associated with life in extreme temperatures, and a sense of remoteness ("mainland" — meaning everything beyond Norilsk), the author highlights "frontierness" as a special border (polar) state: the purity of the tundra and the industrial dirt of the plant; high technology and exhaustive physical labor in the factory; the light and darkness of polar days and nights; the cold outside and the heat inside the flats; hard work and long, comfortable holidays (Zamyatina, 2007; Zamyatina, 2014). N.V. Gonina focuses on such qualities of Norilsk residents as high adaptability, increased daily activity, migratory intentions — as a state of mind, in particular, constant seasonal migration as a norm of everyday life. In her study, N.V. Gonina also touches upon the concept of a sense of place and notes that Norilsk is not a homeland, but a workplace (Gonina, 2015). The scientific novelty of this study lies in two aspects: the theoretical

aspect involves the development of theoretical propositions related to the concept of a sense of place in an urban environment of special status — a single-industry city with distinct corporate and professional identities; the second aspect concerns the empirical research, which is presented by a mixed-methods approach, incorporating data from in-depth interviews and data from the digital footprints left by Norilsk residents on social media.

Research object

Norilsk, Talnakh, and Kayarkan form a single municipality, subordinate to the regional authorities, and do not belong to the Taymyr District.

Today, Norilsk is a typical single-industry city, classified as a Category 3 single-industry municipality of the Russian Federation — a single-industry city with a stable socio-economic situation ¹. Its industrial complex accounts for approximately 86.5% of the gross municipal product (GMP). As of the end of 2020, the territory's industrial output accounted for approximately 41% of the industrial output of Krasnoyarsk Krai and almost 1.6% of Russia's industrial output. The Polar Division of PJSC MMC Norilsk Nickel accounts for approximately 80.6% of the municipality's GMP and approximately 85.7% of total industrial output ².

The city's history dates back to the 1930s and, as noted above, is linked to the Soviet industrialization policy, which led to the emergence of a number of towns built "from scratch" due to the construction of factories and plants that became the foundation of the country's economic development. Until the 1950s, the local community consisted mainly of prisoners and forced migrants recruited to work in the mines. After the abolition of Norillag in 1956, the city (Norilsk was granted city status in 1953) began to attract young enthusiasts, romantics and members of student construction brigades. The urban community was a social mix of former prisoners and volunteers who had come to work on Soviet construction sites. Beginning in the 1960s, the city was gradually filled with residential buildings and social infrastructure, transforming into the form we recognize today.

The city entered the early 1990s in much the same way as most industrial centers of the already disintegrating Soviet state: the agenda was dominated by issues of property redistribution, the privatization of industrial enterprises, and the suspension of urban infrastructure development programs. As a result, the outflow of the economically active population, primarily young people, increased, and living standards deteriorated. Demographic decline, geographical remoteness, and the status of a closed settlement left their mark on both the residents' sentiments and their attitudes toward their place of residence.

¹ Order of the Government of the Russian Federation of July 29, 2014 No. 1398-r. "On approval of the list of single-industry municipalities of the Russian Federation (single-industry towns)". URL: <http://government.ru/docs/all/92337/> (accessed 24 March 2025).

² Strategy for the socio-economic development of the municipal formation of the city of Norilsk until 2035 as a supporting city of the Arctic (Eastern Arctic). URL: <https://xn--80aaihqaohqkqgkfc2pxb.xn--p1ai/upload/strategy2035.pdf> (accessed 24 March 2025).

Modern Norilsk is the third largest city in the Russian Arctic after Arkhangelsk and Murmansk. The predominantly negative population trends over the past two decades across virtually all cities are particularly striking. To provide a comprehensive description of the subject, we will refer to statistical indicators in the context of other urban settlements in the Arctic zone of the Russian Federation. The analysis is based on the urban districts with the largest populations in the AZRF (a total of 9 cities across 5 constituent entities of the Arctic Zone): Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, Norilsk, Severodvinsk, Novy Urengoy, Noyabrsk, Vorkuta, Severomorsk and Apatity.

According to the 2010 census, the sharpest decline in population was recorded in Vorkuta (-28.1%) and Norilsk (-20.5%). In contrast, Noyabrsk showed a noticeable increase (+14.7%). In the other cities, the decline was insignificant — within 10%.

According to the 2020 census (in 2021), the pattern looks completely different, with the exception of the consistent leader in population decline — Vorkuta (-28.5%). Severomorsk also experienced a sharp decline (-25.6%), taking second place after Vorkuta. The population decline also became more noticeable in those cities where it did not exceed 10% according to the 2010 census (Severodvinsk, Apatity, Arkhangelsk, and Murmansk — from 12.0% to 18.3%). Meanwhile, Norilsk has practically maintained its existing population, showing a minimal decline (-0.6%).

As of January 1, 2024, a relatively stable situation with minimal changes was observed among all cities. Norilsk was among the cities with slightly positive dynamics (along with Noyabrsk and Severomorsk) — an increase of 1.3%. All other cities declined by no more than 3%.

Thus, Norilsk experienced a sharp decline between 2002 and 2010, and since then, the population stabilized with a trend towards positive growth. This reflects a certain specificity of the demographic situation in Norilsk, as seen in retrospective.

Table 1

*Dynamics of demographic indicators for the city of Norilsk from 2012 to 2023*³

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Natural increase (decrease), people	1 658	1 604	1 683	1 675	1 484	1 423	1 349	1 279	1 087	850	833	860
Migration increase, people	-1 211	-2 864	-2 038	-540	-936	162	68	-439	-257	496	-1 173	1 101

When considering the factors contributing to population retention in Norilsk, we turn to the natural and migration growth (loss) indicators presented in Table 1. Norilsk has been characterized by stable natural growth over the past ten years, in contrast to migration processes, which have been in various directions (predominantly negative, but with some positive figures in 2017–2018 and 2023). Norilsk is a relatively young city, considering the average age of its residents — 35 years. By comparison, in Murmansk this figure exceeds 40 years (this is an approximate calculation; distributions by one-year age groups for people over 70 are not publicly available; all representatives of this category are considered seventy-year-olds in the calculation).

³ Source: compiled by the authors based on Rosstat data.

The unevenness of migration patterns is also noteworthy. Table 2 shows that the main destinations for the migration of the local population are other regions of Russia, where people are moving in search of a better life. In turn, the city's main sources of migration are people from neighboring countries (the CIS and Baltic states). This situation is generally typical both for other Arctic territories and for all peripheral regions.

Table 2

*Dynamics of migration directions in Norilsk in the period from 2012 to 2023*⁴

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
within Russia	-2 123	-3 717	-2 718	-1 407	-1 803	-436	-332	-977	-1 144	-787	-1 106	740
intraregional	-52	-446	-299	-57	-252	106	-37	152	-224	-133	-312	-154
interregional	-2 071	-3 271	-2 419	-1 350	-1 551	-542	-295	-1 129	-920	-654	-794	894
international	912	853	680	867	867	598	400	538	887	1 283	-67	361
with the CIS and Baltic countries	910	840	672	863	863	592	409	535	888	1 258	-68	375
with other foreign countries	2	13	8	4	4	6	-9	3	-1	25	1	-14
external (for the region)	-1 159	-2 418	-1 739	-483	-684	56	105	-591	-33	629	-861	1 255

In the context of Arctic regions, Norilsk has its own distinctive. Firstly, it is located in the eastern part of the Arctic zone, which is characterized by harsher natural and climatic conditions (for example, in contrast to the Murmansk Oblast, where the Gulf Stream significantly moderates the climate). Secondly, long winters, polar nights and subarctic days are compounded by the city's remoteness and logistical inaccessibility: setting themselves apart from the inhabitants of the "mainland" (as noted above) is a common practice in the city. Thirdly, despite Norilsk Nickel's large-scale sulfur recycling projects and its commitment to reducing emissions to zero⁵, Norilsk remains one of the most environmentally polluted cities.

Research methodology

This study is based on the principles of social constructivism, according to which a sense of place can be described as a socio-cultural construct articulated in language and "created" through human interaction (Berger, Luckman, 1995).

The methodological framework of the study is based on a qualitative data analysis approach, involving the collection, structuring and interpretation of texts. Narrative analysis was chosen as the primary method for analyzing qualitative data. Narrative analysis focuses on the messages people convey (in our case, interview data (transcripts) and social media posts) and on the language they use to make sense of them. This is important for a deep understanding of people's subjective perceptions regarding a specific issue. The narrative created by the informant in the form of text requires the researcher to use analytical tools to identify semantic connotations.

⁴ Source: compiled by the authors based on Rosstat data.

⁵ Norilsk aims to become Russia's most environmentally friendly city by 2026. URL: <https://runews24.ru/society/06/12/2024/norilsk-stremitsya-stat-samyim-ekologichnyim-gorodom-rossii-k-2026-godu> (accessed 24 March 2025).

Lewins A. and Silver C. identify the following tools: content searching, linking, coding, annotating, querying, and mapping or networking (Lewins, Silver, 2007). The use of these analytical resources allows the construction of a more complex narrative structure alongside its textual presentation (Kanygin, 2022). In this study, we rely on automated searching and coding.

The object of this empirical study is the urban online community “Tipichnyy Norilsk” (“Typical Norilsk”), operating on the VKontakte social network. The choice of empirical object is justified by the theoretical framework for studying sense of place. Based on our own previous research and that of other scholars, we believe that an online community dedicated to the city, through regular and intensive communications, forms representations of the symbolic and emotional connections of community members to the city (Nenko, Nedoseka, 2022; Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024; Nedoseka, Sharova, Lizova, 2025). These representations, in the form of verbalized users’ statements about the city, as well as in the visual format of users’ photographs accompanying comments and posts, form a rich empirical material. Narrative analysis allows interpreting this discursively diverse data without resorting to pre-established analytical categories — through close reading and coding.

The online community “Tipichnyy Norilsk” was founded in 2012 and is active at the time of writing, with 63,000 subscribers, making it one of the most popular online communities in the city on this social network. The community discusses everyday issues, proposed by both the group administrator and its members. The community is structured, with sections such as “Overheard in Norilsk”, “Questions from other cities”, and “Lost and found”.

The empirical basis of the study was compiled using:

- text messages, posts, and comments from 2021–2024. A total of 4,511 posts were collected, of which 110 were selected. The sample included posts with more than 50 comments. An automated processing procedure was then applied to clean the text corpus using the Python programming language library *nlTK*, which is designed for processing text data (Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024);
- individual in-depth interviews (18 employees of the Nadezhda Metallurgical Plant named after B. V. Kolesnikov, the Talnakh Concentrator and the Komsomolskiy Mine) conducted in 2019.

The data from this study’s sample were not linked by a common objective. The interviews were conducted as part of a commissioned study, and some of the questions in the interview guide focused on the local identity and migration intentions of the plant’s workers. The interview data were validated using the results of an analysis of posts and comments from the city’s online community on the social network VKontakte.

Analysis of the results

The results of our study of the substantive components of the sense of place as represented by the residents of Norilsk have revealed dominant themes that can be categorized into emo-

tional attachment to the place, perception of Norilsk as a “place not for everyone” and as a city of an industrial corporation with a special professional profile — heavy labor professions⁶.

Love and hate: emotions of place

In discussions about the city as a place of residence, natural and climatic conditions are primarily highlighted as the core of emotional representation. The majority of posts in the public group (58.1%) are dedicated to northern nature and the urban landscape. The positive connotations of the posts and the ambivalent nature of the comments regarding the harsh climatic conditions are noteworthy. Posts are most often accompanied by photographs and videos demonstrating the power of blizzards and frosts, snowdrifts, and the aurora borealis in the urban landscape. Winter scenes are the most common subjects for photographs and videos. Discussions under the posts divide commenters into two camps: those who express their love for the city, and those who believe that “there is nothing to do in it” and that it is not worth wasting the “best years” of life there. Negative messages are characterized by comparisons with prison, through which the historical memory of the city’s founders — prisoners — is conveyed (*“Leave this prison” (quote from a public group, 27 likes); “GULAG. And don’t try to romanticize it. I had been living there for 25 years” (quote from a public group, 13 likes)*). The number of comments from people who have already left the city is noteworthy; in Norilsk chats, this phenomenon is more common than, for example, in public pages in Murmansk and Vorkuta. This indicates that people continue not only to monitor life in the city, but also to comment on posts and messages, demonstrating an emotional connection with the place. These comments cannot be reduced to a single content focus: they include boredom, melancholy (*“as if uprooted”*), and sincere joy at having left, and calls for those remaining to leave the city. The results of the interviews also confirm the ambivalent nature of the informants’ statements: on the one hand, “beautiful nature”, on the other, “terrible climate and ecology”.

It is also important to note that Norilsk residents’ understanding of place is not limited to the city’s borders. As for residents of all Arctic regions, the North is a vernacular region, where Norilsk residents see themselves as “the northernmost northerners”. This position is confirmed by constant comparisons with other Arctic cities, most often with Murmansk and Vorkuta.

“Guys, this is crazy, the days are already getting shorter, the polar day is shrinking, and you’ve only just got spring. Murmansk has heated up to 30 degrees more than once. Catch up.” (quote from a public group, 3 likes)

*“Vorkuta is much worse, ***** smaller in every respect, with far more abandoned houses both in Vorkuta itself and in the surrounding settlements that are still inhabited. On the other hand, the environment in Norilsk is much worse, the courtyards are paved with asphalt and there is absolutely no sign of any northern greenery whatsoever. It’s further from the mainland, the climate here is more continental, you can*

⁶ All quotations are reproduced with the original grammar and punctuation of the authors’ posts, with minimal editorial adjustments, mainly concerning spaces and the separation of compound words.

only get here by plane or boat, whereas in Vorkuta the railway runs all year round.” (quote from a public group, 2 likes)

Place not for everyone

The city is closely linked to the mining industry and the production of non-ferrous metals by Norilsk Nickel, one of the largest producers of precious and non-ferrous metals in Russia and worldwide. Other enterprises were established and operate to support core production and to meet population needs (approximately 7.1% of the GMP)⁷. The dependence of Norilsk's socio-economic development on Norilsk Nickel is evident in the share of industrial production, which exceeds 80%. The majority of the economically active population is employed in the industrial sector of Norilsk Nickel. The plant is the heart of Norilsk as a city.

In reality, the urban community is divided between those who work at the plant and those employed in other sectors. The line between employment at the plant and outside it is a stratification factor, shaping different opportunities and lifestyles. In the residents' view, the level of wages at the plant is the sole reason for attracting and retaining residents in the city. The price of such work is health.

“But everyone knows that decent pay isn't available everywhere. It's mostly at the “plant”. You won't get much at the state-funded job. And even as a turner at the “plant”, without “polar bonuses”, you won't earn much.” (quote from a public group, 3 likes)

“If you're a plant worker, you now get paid for your travel expenses every year, whereas in 2002 they paid you every two years. Your salary has clearly been significantly raised, unlike on the mainland.” (quote from a public group, 3 likes)

“The only place you can work is the plant, and that's hard physical labor.” (quote from an interview)

“You'll end up “without pants” and without health. I've lived for 36 years, 18 of which I worked in the mine” (quote from a public group, 3 likes)

The corporate policies of Norilsk Nickel, on the one hand, promote a sense of security for employees (in particular, through a benefits package guaranteeing vacation pay and compensation for housing costs, programs of subsidized housing purchases in more southern regions after 10 years of employment, and extensive opportunities for professional development and retraining at the company's expense); on the other hand, they create a contrast for city residents not employed at the plant, in the form of unattainable benefits.

Salaries at the plant also contribute the varying levels of leisure time among Norilsk residents: fishing trips, alpine skiing, excursions to the tundra, access to sports and leisure facilities are not available to everyone. Thus, Norilsk is perceived by residents as a city of unequal opportunities and diverse lifestyles.

The notion that Norilsk is not a place for everyone is supported by the widespread local ideology of a special “northern man” who is capable of surviving in harsh climates and difficult

⁷ Strategy for the socio-economic development of the municipal formation of the city of Norilsk until 2035 as a supporting city of the Arctic (Eastern Arctic). URL: <https://xn--80aaihqaohqkqgfk2pxb.xn--p1ai/upload/strategy2035.pdf> (accessed 24 March 2025).

physical labor. According to the city's residents, these circumstances shape such character traits of Norilsk people as resilience, strength, warmth and sincerity.

"Norilsk, like any person, has its own strengths and weaknesses. Only a true northerner understands this. This is a harsh land, but only the strong can conquer it. The North has no place for the weak." (quote from a public group, 70 likes)

"Every Norilsk resident is a romantic who has experienced what the GULAG is, what the North is! And we have our own nationality (Norilsk resident)! Because the weak ones left for the mainland." (quote from a public group, 37 likes)

"...Norilsk residents are the warmest and friendliest people. You won't find anyone like them anywhere else..." (quote from a public group, 45 likes)

"There's no such warmth on the 'mainland'" (quote from a public group, 3 likes)

In this regard, the recollections of Norilsk residents are also noteworthy, testifying to a sense of unity and mutual support.

"Please tell me, was I dreaming, or was it just the way things were in Norilsk in the 90s, when strangers would hold hands during strong winds so as not to fall over while walking?" Answer: "Yes! It was! And constantly..." (quotes from a public group, 20 likes)

"Norilsk is love for life! The people here are different, life is different" (quote from a public group, 106 likes)

Continuing our substantive analysis of Norilsk residents' comments in the city's social media community, we identified a third set of themes that defines the perception of Norilsk as a city not for everyone. The image of the "shift worker" is manifested in the predominance of negative statements; posts on this topic are the most commented on in the "Tipichnyy Norilsk" community. According to the majority of representatives of the community, shift workers have no place in the city. This may seem nonsensical, since Norilsk is a city of newcomers. It is precisely with shift workers that Norilsk residents associate the subjectively high level of crime and various forms of deviant behavior (alcoholism and drug addiction). Most of the comments are devoted to calls and petitions to ban shift workers from entering the city and to relocate them outside its boundaries. From our point of view, the negative attitude towards shift workers is historical in nature, as noted by N.Yu. Zamyatina in her article: "The isolation and separation of Norilsk is periodically artificially created. In Soviet times, the city was closed in 1963: at that time, to enter it for work, one had to have a special "invitation" from the plant's HR department, the city committee, or the city executive committee. Open during the perestroika years, Norilsk was closed to foreigners again in the autumn of 2001 — from now on, they can enter the city only with permission from the Federal Security Service. The official explanation: too many migrants (including from the CIS) had flocked to the city in search of work; crime had risen (Norilsk residents, like residents of many closed cities, did not always lock their apartment doors during Soviet times); drug addiction, AIDS cases and so on had risen sharply" (Lewins, Silver, 2007).

"Shift workers are gradually being isolated: they will be brought in on charter flights, accommodated in separate hotels, and special shops will be built — the first one will be opened tomorrow." (quote from a post from August 26, 2022, 1,107 likes, 322 comments)

According to Norilsk residents, the reason for this attitude lies in the plant's personnel policy.

"You can clearly see the contingent at the airport. It's as if they were collected at the train stations. There's no work for our own people. They're collecting cheap labor from all over Russia. They don't carry out any inspections. And here's the result. How many people got laid off and how many have left because their salaries have fallen." (quote from a public group, 15 likes)

"Shift workers are cheap labor; they save a huge amount of money on them. The company's security department checks the locals here, and it's a complex system. Shift workers are people hired by contractors, who in turn are hired by the plant. And under such conditions, the plant's security department doesn't cover them" (quote from a public group, 18 likes)

"Before the policy of bringing in all sorts of scoundrels and evicting young people began, a lot of young guys, including me, left because it was difficult to find work at the plant — we didn't want to just work as shop assistants. Instead, they handed over loads of facilities to the outsiders and closed the sanatorium to house them there" (quote from a public group, 9 likes)

Interviews conducted among employees of Norilsk Nickel confirmed that the company is outsourcing some of its services. This has been a major source of social tension for the plant's workers due to the need to transfer to subsidiaries. Some respondents perceived this as a signal to resign, as subsidiaries were unwilling to offer the full social package and various benefits offered by the Norilsk Nickel. It was also noted that hiring shift workers had significantly eroded the company's work culture, which had previously been highly valued.

"A shift worker is a temporary employee, they aren't integrated into the team, and their task is simple: work your shift, then leave. They don't know who they're handing over shifts to, they don't take care of the equipment, and they leave rubbish. We didn't have that sort of thing before." (quote from an interview)

"Contractors are second-class people. Contractors are no longer part of the team. They are brought in, and they are not fully motivated to do the job as we need them to." (quote from an interview)

A city-corporation of heavy labor professions

As noted above, Norilsk is a typical industrial city in the mining sector. It is a place of hard and dangerous labor associated with the professions of geologists, chemists, metallurgists and miners. The professional identity of city residents is an important part of local identity. The Day of the Metallurgist is the largest and most important city festival.

"Norilsk is a city of hard-workers! Metallurgists, geologists, builders..." (quote from a public group, 23 likes)

"Norilsk should be depicted as a Gulag prisoner building the city, or as a steelworker!" (quote from a public group, 13 likes, response to an AI-generated image depicting Norilsk as a child)

"A worthy city for hard-working metallurgists and chemists. There are many monuments to those who dedicated their lives to the city and their work)" (quote from a public group, 6 likes)

"Miners and metallurgists are a force!!!" (quote from a public group, 3 likes)

"If a person is motivated by working in their field, they will come here and work in their field, for a large company" (quote from an interview)

Among the plant's workers, professional identity is shaped by the prevalence of heavy physical labor, increased danger of production, and is represented through masculinity, solidarity (mutual support), and responsibility (including adherence to work discipline), focusing on one's direct responsibilities.

"Responsibility, being a man, because you need to have courage and perseverance in a male-dominated work team" (quote from an interview)

"We're all in the same boat, we're all responsible together, me as the leader, him as the performer" (quote from an interview)

"We need to get rid of those who don't stick to their jobs and are irresponsible, because ultimately, I'm responsible for them" (quote from an interview)

"Motivation is a good attitude. If you fulfil your duties, people treat you well." (quote from an interview)

According to members of the city's online community on the social network VKontakte and informants, the city is perceived as a place where work life unfolds, a factor that distinguishes it in this era of constant change. The average length of employment at the plant is over 15 years ("came for 3 years, stayed for 23" (quote from an interview)). One of the company's managers noted in an interview that the enterprise is currently facing a challenge: difficulties in retaining staff, particularly young people. To address this, the company has implemented a number of social programs ("anchors"), in particular, a scheme providing preferential mortgages on the "mainland", available after 10 years of employment with the company. Overall, the plant's employees are people with a strong professional identity, determined to realize it under the given conditions until the end of their employment.

"The only prospect here is working at the plant. Nothing else." (quote from an interview)

"Everyone knows that Norilsk Nickel treats people very well; it's the norm." (quote from an interview)

"Various programs and "anchors" are created to encourage people to stay here." (quote from an interview)

The majority of the informants we interviewed expressed a clear intention to move away upon reaching retirement age. Migration, as noted in the studies by N.Yu. Zamyatina and N.V. Gonina, is a natural phenomenon for Norilsk. After their economically active age, most of the population leaves for other regions, as evidenced by the average age of a Norilsk resident — around 35 years. Earning a pension and caring for housing in more southern regions is one of the most common strategies among plant workers.

The purpose of living in the city is largely to secure a comfortable life in retirement in the more southern and ecologically prosperous regions of the country, to raise children, and to give them the opportunity to live a better life (including leaving the city). Work, essentially, is a means of realizing this purpose. The plant's employees are ready to make sacrifices, willing to work in

hazardous production conditions for high wages, in harsh environmental conditions. Thus, the main purpose of work is to secure the future, even at the cost of sacrificing the present.

“It's psychologically difficult to live in Norilsk. But when you're offered such a job and such a benefits package, it's worth thinking: maybe I'll endure it, but at least I'll get the rewards.” (quote from an interview)

Discussion

A sense of place is formed through interaction with the environment and is meaningfully reflected in its interpretation. In this study, through the analysis of digital footprint data and in-depth interviews, we have identified several important aspects in studying the sense of place within an urban environment of special status (Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024). Firstly, despite the unattractive nature of the living environment itself, primarily due to the harshness of the natural and climatic conditions and the ecological state, the sense of place is distinct. The harshness and difficulty of living are meaningfully transformed into an ideology of the place that is not for everyone.

Secondly, the role of the city-forming enterprise in industrial cities manifests itself in different ways, especially in cities established by state decree. Following the economic restructuring of the 1990s, many industrial cities faced the challenge of survival due to the closure of enterprises or the reduction of production capacity. Norilsk retained its mining and manufacturing industries, which allowed it to preserve the professional structure of the settlement. The predominance of plant workers and their professional affiliations within the city's social structure is the primary source of Norilsk's existence as a settlement — a work community. This is its nature: having arisen in a place that is unsuitable for everyday life, it can exist only thanks to the presence of a functioning enterprise. This fundamentally distinguishes Norilsk from cities that were populated through natural settlement and have a long-established population (Plyusnin, 2022).

Thirdly, the scientific literature contains numerous studies emphasizing the importance of the social dimension of a sense of place as an indicator of attachment to a specific locality around which identities are formed (Relph, 1997; Hay, 1988; Raymond, Kyttä, Stedman, 2017; Shamai, 1991). The sense of place among Norilsk residents extends far beyond the city limits and is unstable in the perceptions of its inhabitants. The North is a vernacular region in which Norilsk residents perceive themselves as “the northernmost northerners” (Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024). Our study confirms the importance of this social dimension.

Within the framework of this discussion, we draw attention to the potential of analyzing digital footprint data, as comments voluntarily posted online correspond to the principles of narrative construction. Universality: a narrative is always constructed through natural language or speech. Expression of meaning: a narrative is a story created by the author for a target audience, using statements that are universally understood. Contextual dependence: any statement within a narrative acquires meaning only under specific conditions — social, methodological, everyday, and countless others (Kanygin, 2022). As we noted previously (Nenko, Nedoseka, 2022), in the case of

the analysis of the narratives used in this study, the context is thematically defined: the focus is on specific discussions of urban and regional issues, within which aspects of attachment to place were identified. The informants are not bound by a pre-determined research framework that might compel them to construct deliberately positive answers to questions on sensitive topics. The context of departure (forced migration) is perceived by residents with acute psychological intensity. In comments on posts presenting statistics on natural and migration-related losses, community members tend to display patriotism towards the place or aggression towards those who write about the problems. Direct questions in this case may provoke deliberately positive responses, which is a limitation of survey methods. Obviously, there are some limitations when using digital footprints, such as the inability to ensure representativeness.

Further research using different samples and other cities (regions) in the North will help to verify the consistency of these results. Identifying the most significant components and spatial ranges of place attachment may contribute to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024).

Conclusion

Discussions among city residents about their place of residence in online communities provide interesting empirical material for analyzing such complex and multidimensional phenomena as the sense of place. The analysis of narratives allowed us to identify substantive aspects of the sense of place that are absent or understudied in the literature, conditioned by the context of place existence.

The dominant aspect of the sense of place, identified empirically during the qualitative narrative analysis, is the “North”, which is perceived by the people of Norilsk as extending far beyond the city’s administrative boundaries: regional identity is equated with urban identity. An important aspect of this perception is its structure, which consists of understanding oneself as “the northernmost northerners”, living in a) the real Arctic with severe frosts, 10 months of winter, polar bears on the street; and b) remote part of the world, in a logistically difficult location.

The emotional connection to the place is ambivalent. On the one hand, the city inspires admiration due to its natural and climatic characteristics, its unique conditions, including in the context of aesthetic contemplation of nature. On the other hand, the same characteristics are the subject of criticism: the harsh climate and environmental factors negatively impact the well-being and health of residents.

Urban work communities are cities in which a “social contract” operates, regulating the conditions of living in such places: high wages, polar allowances, paid leave, resettlement programs, northern pensions, and so on. Such a contract is understood as an exceptional symbolic characteristic of the place’s significance, which sustains the place’s identity (Nedoseka, Nenko, Poroshina, 2024). Most social benefits are available only to employees of the MMC Norilsk Nickel, a company recognized by residents as the defining factor for living in the city. The plant is a place

where people spend their entire professional lives, performing difficult and dangerous physical labor, which is ingrained in the local identity and the sense of place as a place not for everyone. The constant factor in the significance of the place, which helps to preserve the positive identity of Norilsk and the North, is the high quality of human capital. In their comments, members of the online community, both those living in the city and those who have left, emphasize the kindness, tolerance, responsiveness, strength, and resilience of northerners. This constant is countered by the image of the generalized “other” — the shift worker — an image with historically conditioned roots, manifested in the closed and isolated nature of the place, where short-term stays contradict the ideology of the “northerner” and are perceived as a negative and reprehensible phenomenon. An important outcome of the narrative analysis was the revealed temporality of place, which captured a persistent image of the past, in which “real” Norilsk residents lived, and an unsatisfactory present, in which shift workers are blurring the boundaries not only of the urban community, but also of the work culture.

Thus, when analyzing the aspects of a sense of place verbalized by online community members and interviewed plant workers, the concept of a sense of place within the urban work community was substantively manifested through three dominant characteristics: emotional (ambivalent), ideological (as a place not for everyone), and work-related (as a place that exists on the condition that the plant with a specific professional profile operates). These dominant characteristics do not manifest themselves in their pure form; in many ways, they are interdependent and interconnected. Nevertheless, identifying the components that make up the concept of a sense of place can be used to distinguish between perceptions of the general background image of a place (place identity as a social stereotype) and the symbolic features that make a place meaningful to specific people in specific life situations.

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