The Role of Social Media and Network Capital in Assisting Migrants in Search of a Less Precarious Existence in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Precarity is a consequence of the shift from Fordism, which was linked to lasting and secure employment, to Post Fordism underpinned by flexible labour with provisional, casual, unstable, low paying jobs. Globalisation and widening inequalities around the world have driven people to migrate in search of a better life. This paper aims to explore the extent to which migrants in Saudi Arabia use social media sites to facilitate their migration process in search of better life. We found social media strengthens social networks, which play an important role in influencing individuals' decision to migrate. Their social network helped migrants during the planning and the actual migration to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, migrants used social media to persuade or assist relatives and friends 'back home' to migrate to Saudi Arabia.

Key words: Precarity, Social Media, Social Networks, Saudi Arabia, Migration.

Introduction

Precarity is a term that has become increasingly popular as a way of capturing the material and psychological insecurities resulting from the implementation of neo-liberal policies, especially, more flexible employment, continuing erosion of welfare protection, and ever-increasing quest for finding market solutions to social problems (Nasstrom & Kalm, 2015). Precarity associated with insecure employment, 'flexibility', 'availability', and mobility is a product of neo-liberal globalisation (Schierup et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2008). Precarity is not a new concept; it has its roots in mid-twentieth century Keynesianism and Fordism (Burawoy, 2015; Ettlinger, 2007; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008), and refers to the transition from Fordism associated with permanent, and stable jobs to Post Fordism and flexible labour with temporary, casual, insecure, and low paying jobs following the globalisation of finance and services (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Precarity represents the era

of work with flexible rules (Beradi, 2009). What is new about Precarity are the ways in which it is spreading to other areas of work, affecting different groups including non-migrants (Casas-Cortes, 2014). Capitalism creates precariousness for workers, because workers have to sell their labour for a wage with no guarantee of fixed employment (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007). Precarity has been a continuing condition for people in the global South (Harris & Scully, 2015; Paret & Gleeson, 2016). The concept of precarity 'describes the condition of certain groups who suffer from deteriorating social and economic networks of support and as the result become vulnerable (Butler, 2009).

Globalization has created a class structure, at the bottom of which are the precariat and the underclass (Standing, 2011). The precariat is made up of people with insecure employment, insecure access to housing and public resources, who are faced with a continuous sense of brevity. Deprived of an occupational identity, the precariat experiences alienation and anxiety, and is penalized by neo-liberal norms, blamed for its own predicament (Standing, 2011). Neo-liberal ideology has opened national economies to global competition, re-regulated labour markets, and opened up a global labour market, trebling the world's labour supply whilst restructuring labour market, which has resulted in the rise of migration whilst at the same time, accelerating privatization of public services and lowering taxes on high income groups and capital (Standing, 2014). After the financial meltdown of 2008, which was primarily caused by deregulation in the financial industry, the ensuing austerity measures means we are faced with growing inequalities, falling wages, rising unemployment, poverty and homelessness with governments reducing assistance for the disadvantaged, while at the same time increasing subsidies for the rich (Standing, 2014). Emerging economies have benefited from rising wages whilst the opposite has been true for industrialized countries, encouraging internal and external migration (Standing, 2014). Globalisation and growing world-wide inequality has pushed people to migrate (Sassen, 2014). Not all

migrants occupy the social category of precariat, but they disproportionally experience informal labour, uncertainty and risk (Schierup et al., 2015).

> Migrant precarity can be understood as a situation of vulnerability and insecurity for migrants, related to employment, social entitlements, political and civil rights, as well as migration status... Migrants tend to find themselves in a state of precariousness because they work in low-wage sectors, often in an undocumented or contract-tied manner. After returning home, they frequently remain in desperate situations, leading to re-migration (UNRISD, 2015, p. 1).

From this context, we will explore the extent to which migrants in Saudi Arabia use social media sites to facilitate their migration process in order to overcome perecarity. Information flow is one of the fundamental features of social capital, and the Internet, particularly social media, are great resources for the growth of social networks and social capital (Ryan et al., 2015). Social capital refers to the collective value of all "social networks" [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). It also refers to the sum total of connections between groups or individuals that can be economically valuable. People can trust or assist each other, thereby enjoy powerful and useful relationship. Social capital is the 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119), and what Coleman (1990) calls collective relationships amongst family and community members.

Living in precarious social conditions calls for a better understanding of how people utilize the resources available to them in order to adapt, and survive their condition by drawing on social capital stemming from social networks surviving personal, emotional and economic difficulties (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010). Social networks provide benefits to both individuals and society, and help grow 'network capital'. Larsen and Urry (2008, p. 93) define network capital 'as the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with

individuals who are not necessarily proximate, which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit'.

According to Dekker and Engbersen (2012), it is widely acknowledged that social networks play an important role in influencing individuals' decision to migrate. They contend that social media has brought about new channels of communication that have changed migrant networks and made migration possible through the following basic functions. Firstly, by building a powerful source of knowledge on migration as provided by the migrants already settled in the new country; secondly, by reinforcing strong ties with friends as well as families; thirdly, by establishing a network of latent ties; and lastly, by establishing weak ties to persons that can help with migration processes. Collectively, the aforementioned functions can lead to reduction of migration costs by cushioning migrants from emotional problems often experienced by individuals during separation and allowing access to contacts as well as information that can facilitate a smooth relocation of the migrant (Dekker & Engerbersen, 2012). Migrants are not ordinary objects of the macro-processes influencing migration; rather, they are subjects who are selective about the movement between different countries (Brettell & Hollifield, 2008). Migrants tend to follow the connections they establish; they tend to travel the beaten paths, resulting in chain migration (Castle &Miller, 2003; Dekker &Engbersen, 2014).

Social media are central to migrant networks as they provide communication channels that can be accessed almost easily anywhere in the world, easing social ties between people, providing information on new countries whilst being 'accompanied' by your friends. Social media, nonetheless, provides a way for persons to communicate when they were not formerly connected. Consequently, this helps to fortify their networks in the Home and host countries (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Komito (2011, p.1077) comments that 'new technologies made snowball migration easier by increasing the number of friends and relations abroad who can be

found and might be willing to provide assistance'. For migrants, garnering up-to-date information as well as resources is critical. In Dekker and Engbersen's (2012) view, weak ties connect different social groups, which hold diverse information. Therefore, weak ties are commonly more helpful compared with strong ties, weak ties cannot be seen as an inferior method of bonding; rather, they can be seen as a way of seeking social capital (Putnam, 2000; Wells, 2011).

Research Methods

Given the complex nature of the phenomenon under investigation, our fundamental goal was to provide a detailed description of the influence of social media on migration in Saudi Arabia; therefore, we employed both in-depth interviews and questionnaires in a single research (Johnson et al., 2007). Questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used in the collection of qualitative and quantitative data about how social media facilitate migration. The rational for our chosen research method was to achieve a more complete answer to the research question (Bryman, 2012) and assisted us with selection of interviewees (Thøgersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005). Interviews are familiar and valuable technique for data collection in various social science disciplines, and to run interviews successfully involves some degree of creativity, as both the researcher and the participant share and create meaning together (Hollaway and Jefersson 2000). Before embarking on research, we had to get permission from the ministry of labour and social development, and the manager of Islamic Centre of labour.

By using a questionnaire, we were able to collect data about the extent in which the migrants used the social media and to get a more complete picture (Lockyer, 2006). A random sample of ninety employees was selected from the register of the labour office in Abha Saudi Arabia, and the questionnaires were sent via emails. We did not include incomplete questionnaires in the study; therefore, in total fifty-four questionnaires were analysed, this amounts to 60% response rate.

We conducted ten interviews in order to provide the respondents with a chance to explain their responses. The sample for interviews were made up of six males and four females. All interviewees were migrants working in Saudi Arabia and were users of social media who completed the survey and agreed to follow up in-depth interviews. The interviews conducted were very flexible due to the researcher's ability to guide them in real time. Interviews were conducted with the full consent of the participants who were provided with the information sheet and their right to withdraw at any stage following the ethical guidelines. The co-author of this paper who had previously worked as case manager working with labour office, interviewed participants in Arabic and English language depending on the country of origin of the participants, on average the interviews took about thirty minutes. Most interviews were conducted in one of the interview rooms in labour office. We used thematic analysis as the analytical framework for the analysis of interview data. We are aware that the sample size for this study is not large, but we believe the sample size will not limit the study in any way as we do not intend to generalise our findings.

The State of Immigration in Saudi Arabia

Since the discovery of oil in 1938, Saudi Arabia has attracted migrants in search of better employment opportunities from around the world (Rahman, 2011, 2015; Fargues, 2011). The Saudi's policy, like other Gulf States, was to invest in capital intensive industries in early decades which relied heavily on the labour from neighbouring Arab countries, especially Egypt seeking to preserve their cultural identity (Fargues, 2011). Saudi Arabia is among the many countries that are largely recognized for receiving and hosting huge numbers of immigrants from different parts of the world. As of 2005, Saudi Arabia was a host to approximately seven million migrants (Price & Benton-short, 2008). The migrant population in Saudi Arabia is increasing significantly just as the Saudi population is. Migrants represent 31 percent of the population; male migrant labourers make up 22 percent

of the total Saudi population (Roth, 2014). By the middle of 2013, there were 9,723,214 non-Saudis out of the total population of 29,994,272.17. Migrant workers filled 89.1 percent of the jobs in the private sector (De Bel-Air, 2014). The 2007 World Bank data revealed that there were about 1.4 million expatriates from India, 1 million from Egypt and 1 million from Pakistan (Roth, 2014). By 2013, their estimated numbers had risen to 2.8 million Indians, 2 million Egyptians, and 1.5 million Pakistanis (De Bel-Air, 2014). As of 2013, Saudi Arabia was ranked fourth in the list of countries with the highest number of people living in a country where they were not born after the United States, Russia and Germany (Connor et al., 2013). Millions of temporary migrants, largely low skilled males support the huge oil industry and related infrastructure (Zimmermann, 2005). Predominantly male (287 men for 100 women) with low education; 62.3% below secondary level education. Fifty nine percent are confined to the lowest blue-collar categories (De Bel-Air, 2014).

After the Gulf war, the Saudi government and employers began to recruit Asian labour for fear that Arab labour, whom they shared a common language, religion and culture, would want to remain permanently, thus trying to avoid the creation of an organized working class (Fargues, 2011). Asian labour were preferred because they were viewed as more flexible and docile, flexible workforce minimize the risks for employers (Mahdavi, 2011). Asian labour sending countries send their nationals to Saudi Arabia for temporary employment under the Kafala system (Longva, 1999; Esim & Smith, 2004).

> The kafala system restricts family reunification for unskilled migrants, ties them to a single employer, disallows them from marrying locals, and enforces other restrictions on rights and movements so that migrants stay as transient workers in the Gulf countries (Rahman, 2015, p. 205).

Immigrant labour is managed through a sponsorship system (Kafala). Before immigrants enter the country, they must have a confirmed job and are expected to work for their sponsor for the duration of their stay. Therefore, sponsorship and employment are

requirements for a residence permit. The scenario planned by the Saudi government, should assure that when the job ends, the immigrant loses his or her sponsor, and must return home. However, this does not always happen; there is rampant black-market activity in which immigrants obtain visas, enter Saudi Arabia and remain there (Shah, 2008). Their numbers must reach millions, as 4.7 million migrants regularized their status during amnesty period (Rajan & Joseph, 2017). Visa trading produces further incomes for kafeels and encourage irregular recruitment practices in Saudi Arabia (Rahman, 2011), which is indicative of the wider tensions between the restrictive *kafala* system and demand for a more flexible labour force (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican, 2019). These loopholes have led to exploitation within the system. However, the government has ignored such practices. Neo-liberal economic policies are largely blamed for the rise of flexible labour as Mahdavi (2011, p. 428) states;

> This is manifest in the kafala system that renders all migrant workers temporary, guest workers, dependent entirely on their sponsors/employers. It is precisely the informal, temporary nature of the work – which has been constructed by capitalist forces and EuroAmerican companies in the global race to the bottom –and the sense of deportability, expendability and interchangeability created by narratives of employers (and capital, more broadly speaking) that employers in receiving countries seek out, and that sending states market.

Thiollet (2007) argues that immigration policies in Saudi Arabia were used as a form of indirect asylum policy in the second part of the 20th century. The country did not directly offer political support through clear asylum rights. Saudi immigration policies have also been used as a tool for regional diplomacy and for enhancing regional integration.

Saudi Arabia has recently started enforcing policies to reduce dependency on migrant labour and encourage Saudi citizens to work. When compared to other Gulf states, Saudi Arabia has the lowest percentage of migrant labourers (Walker, 2013). Over 50% of its workforce comprises of migrant labourers. According to O'Doherty and Lecouteur (2007),

some migrants enter the country as pilgrims but then overstay; others enter the country illegally through the Saudi-Yemen border.

The Nitaqat programme introduced by the Saudi government in 2011 classified companies as red, green, yellow or platinum based on the percentage of Saudi citizens in their workforce. Red companies are barred from renewing permits and employing foreign immigrants, platinum companies can employ foreigners and poach employees from red companies at will. This process has boosted the regularization of the status of immigrants who do not work for their sponsors and enabled many migrants to change their status entirely. The plan by the Saudi government to change its workforce to include more of its nationals, is partially informed by the substantial financial losses suffered because of remittance outflows. Between 1993 and 2002, emigrants remitted about $156.1 billion (Pakkiasamy, 2004); the amount of remittances every year average 5% of the total gross domestic product. The existence of a black market has been supported by the tendency for migrants to communicate with relatives and friends from their home country. Most of them are convinced that working in Saudi Arabia will help them overcome poverty (Rahman, 2015). The migrants usually recommend their relatives and friends to sponsors while others facilitate their illegal entry into Saudi Arabia. Knowing more people, and a wider network of friends and family members in the new country would increase one's opportunities to find assistance and help with settlement. Migrants often persuade their family members to join them by regular communication by cheap phone calls and the Internet (Vertovec, 2004).

However, recently, Saudi Arabia has been trying to come up with policies that are aimed at trimming down the demand for foreign labour (Rajan & Joseph, 2013). Ordinarily, the Saudi Arabian migration policy has given the employer a lot of power and does not protect the interest of foreigners. In order to migrate to Saudi Arabia, especially as a worker, one has to obtain a sponsorship of a suitable employer or a legally recognised Saudi family in the case

of domestic employees. In addition, each migrant is required to obtain a residency card and hand over their passport to the sponsor.

In Saudi Arabia, migrants cannot change jobs or employers as they wish, except if they are released by their sponsors. For migrants with managerial, technical or professional jobs and post-secondary education, they are allowed to carry their families along (Rajan & Joseph, 2013). It is important to note that arrangements for visa or residency in Saudi Arabia is not done by individual migrant rather it is done by the sponsor. Social integration of migrants in Saudi Arabia is limited due to restrictive migration policies.

Despite unfavourable Saudi migration policies, many migrants enter the country. The Saudi migration policy prevents foreigners from integrating into Saudi society, making it difficult for foreigners to stay in the country. Nationals and foreigners are segregated in labour camps and compounds (Fargues, 2011; Jackson & Manderschied, 2015). In addition, there is segregated access to socio-economic rights. People with similar education but nationalities do not earn the same salary (Roth, 2014). Saudi Arabia has tried to implement anti-integration policies but has failed to enhance integration and streamline migration policies. Foreign professional men can marry local women, but marriage will not entitle them to citizenship (Rahman, 2011). The Gulf states prefer temporary labour migrants and are very strict in offering citizenship and refugee status (Valenta, 2017).

Fargues (2011, p. 24) suggest;

> The Gulf states have never pursued any policy of granting nationality to foreign nationals, except on a very restrictive basis, limiting naturalizations to a few individual cases each year…. The Gulf states all have an exclusive system of paternal jus sanguinis with elements of jus soli. Only sons and daughters of a national father can be nationals and those born in the Gulf from foreign parents will always remain foreigners.

State policies do not discourage migration in a large way (Roth, 2014). Stronger determinants are the economic and social factors. Economic factors include employment and

improving purchasing power; social factors include the existence of an immigrant's family or business relations in the nation, or a community from his/her country (Roth, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

In total, 54 questionnaires were analysed, 43%. were females and 57% were males. Eighty nine percent were 20 to 50 years of age. In terms of country of origin, 19% came from India whilst 30% were Egyptian, 11% from Philippines, 9% from Yemen, and 9% from Pakistan, and 22% from other countries. Regarding educational attainment, 17% were educated to pre-elementary level, 8% had elementary level education, and 9% were educated to intermediate level, whilst 15% had secondary level education. Fifty-one percent of the respondents had higher education qualification. The majority of respondents (71%) worked in white collar jobs compared to 29% who had blue collar jobs. When asked 'why did you migrate to Saudi Arabia'?, 7% stated because of political reasons whilst 46% mentioned economic reasons, 29% came to Saudi Arabia for cultural and social reasons, 6% migrated for health and security reasons, and 2% said they migrated because of environmental reasons, and further 10% had other reasons for migrating to Saudi Arabia.

On what drove them to migrate to Saudi Arabia, 50% of the participants indicated that they moved to Saudi Arabia to find a job; 44% indicated they were looking for a better life than the one they had in their home country; and lastly, only 6% migrated to Saudi Arabia to find a spouse. The majority of the respondents chose to migrate to Saudi Arabia for economic reasons. The majority had access to the Internet, and were using social media like Facebook, Twitter, Skype, amongst others, and were a member of the social network for five years or more. They were using the Internet on a daily basis, in order to send texts and photos, as well as talking between them and their families. Moreover, social media was used to persuade or assist relatives and friends who are at home to migrate to Saudi Arabia; however, none of them admitted that they used social media to participate in national debates

in their home country through transnational associations. Furthermore, their decisions to migrate to Saudi Arabia were influenced by the fact that they would be able to maintain affiliation through the social media with family and friends left at home. One participant said;

> I came to Saudi Arabia to find a job and to create a better life for my family back home. Since I came to Saudi Arabia, I have never regretted my family's decision to make me migrate to Saudi Arabia because I have a job and the living condition for my family has improved immensely (54-year-old male from Sudan).

Another participant said that he travelled to Saudi Arabia after he made a decision to quit his job in the home country. He said;

> I had applied for a job in Saudi Arabia to be a university lecturer at the point when I almost quit my job in my country. When I received notification that my application was successful, I knew it was time to leave and improve my socio-economic status by going for a better-paying job in Saudi Arabia. Since then, I have never looked back (50-year-old male from Iraq).

Most participants in the sample migrated to Saudi Arabia for employment except one who said;

> I was invited to Saudi Arabia for visitation. When the visit was over, I thought I would go back to my country, but I met an amazing girl through a friend of my cousin. Because of her, I decided to stay and start a family in Saudi Arabia (38-year-old male from Lebanon).

Fifty three percent of the migrants were invited by family and friends to migrate to Saudi Arabia by having jobs arranged with a kafeel through personal networks of friends and family, who in turn passed the required documents to the relevant authorities for work visa, hence evading local employment agencies and their sub-agents (Rahman, 2011b).

Results also indicated that family and friends also used social media to receive invites to migrate to Saudi Arabia. Sixty-six percent of the participants indicated that they were invited by family and friends via social media to move to Saudi Arabia. Most participants who were selected for the interviews, told the researcher that had it not been for an invite

extended to them by their family members and friends through the social media sites, they would probably not have migrated to Saudi Arabia. One participant said;

> I used to communicate a lot with my uncle who got a job in Saudi Arabia via Skype. He often shared with me his experiences and photos via the social media. With time, I got the sense that Saudi Arabia was an ideal place to jumpstart one's career. That is how I ended up here (42-year-old female nurse from Philippine).

However, there were participants who told the researcher that their migration to Saudi Arabia was purely based on a personal decision and not an invite extended to them by family and friends. Here is what one had to say:

> After graduating from high school, I always wanted to move to Saudi Arabia. At first, I thought I would just come for a year or two then go back to Egypt. However, when I came in, I liked the environment here, the people were hospitable, and I thought to myself, why not live here [Saudi Arabia] (51-year-old male accountant from Egypt).

A thirty-year-old Indonesian female said that she had to travel with her husband who had just been offered a job in Saudi Arabia. They had a small child and the father wanted to be part of the child's life. For that to happen, it was critical that the mother travelled with him and to take care of the child while the father works. For her, her moving to Saudi Arabia was more of a family matter than any other reason specified in the study.

Social Media Practices of Immigrants in Saudi Arabia

Forty-two percent of the participants were members of online immigrant groups. Fifty-five percent indicated that they did not belong to any online immigration group, whilst three percent did not answer the question. When asked whether they use the social media to post information about living conditions in Saudi Arabia, 49% of the participants indicated to have used social media to share their experiences in Saudi Arabia with others.

On experiences of immigrants in Saudi Arabia, the participants indicated that they faced a number of challenges such as insecurity, inappropriate migration policies in Saudi

Arabia, segregation in the labour market, segregation based on access to socio-economic rights, inadequate salaries, and others. Eighteen percent of the participants indicated that they felt insecure in Saudi Arabia. Twenty-two percent indicated that the host country had inappropriate migration policies, whilst 6% indicated that they faced the problem of being discriminated against in the job market, 18 % perceived segregation against accessing socio-economic rights as being a hindrance to their migration process, 26% indicated that migrant employees were paid inadequate salaries, and 9% stated other challenges.

Role of Social Media in Facilitating Migration

Building on the results presented in the previous sections, participants were asked to indicate whether they had expectations for a better life in Saudi Arabia. Eighty percent had expected to have better lives in Saudi Arabia. On the same point, participants were asked to indicate if they used social media sites to explore the available job opportunities in Saudi Arabia. Fifty-six percent used social media sites to ascertain living standards in Saudi Arabia. In order to establish what helps immigrants with the process of transitioning from their home country to Saudi Arabia, this study examined whether participants had signed up for any virtual migrant community in the country. Doing so was critical in understanding how participants cope in foreign countries such as Saudi Arabia. Only 33% indicated that they were members of a virtual migrant community in Saudi Arabia.

Responses from the interviews indicated that social media tools have made it possible for them to communicate more frequently with their families compared to talking over the phone. On probing further, most respondents cited the relatively cheaper cost of using social media to communicate with their families and friends abroad. This is what some of the respondents had to say concerning this item.

> I used to spend so much money on phone calls I made to my brothers and parents left back home. Since I discovered that I could use Skype to make calls and

> Facebook to have instant chats with them, I have reduced these costs immensely (34-year-old female admin worker from Yemen).

Another respondent from India said:

> Social media sites have helped me minimize my communication costs. Today, I only need to share pictures and videos with my family and friends. Once I upload the pictures and videos on social media, all the people that I would like to view the content can see and share the same with other friends. This way, I do not have to send the same content to individuals because once I post they all get access to it. They can comment on the content of the videos and pictures. This makes life feel more authentic and it helps me cope with being in an alien country (48-year-old male engineer from India).

Reasons for Migrating to Saudi Arabia

People migrate from their home country to foreign borders for various reasons. In as much as the subject of migration is a highly multifaceted issue, results obtained from this study suggest that the highest number of migrants leave their home countries for Saudi Arabia for employment and quest for a better life. Urban unemployment forces many migrants to move to other countries for greener pastures, developing economies lack the capacity to provide permanent jobs to majority of the workforce; consequently, most educated and unemployed citizens migrate to other countries to find work (Eggertab, 2010).

A substantial number of participants also indicated that the decision to migrate to Saudi Arabia was influenced by the need to have a better life than the one they previously led in their home country (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). Results from the study indicated that employees are motivated to move from their home country because of better quality of life, professional development, and personal safety. Quest for better quality of life can also be linked to unstable and dwindling allocation of funds for development projects in migrants' home country. A study conducted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) singled out insufficient funding for key sectors such as healthcare to contribute to the loss of trained nurses to high-income foreign economies (England & Henry, 2013). In addition to this, the

situation is often aggravated with low remuneration and poor working conditions, which are likely to lead unsatisfied trained workforce to migrate to countries that offer better life prospects. It is important to take note that quality of life, as a reason of migration, is neatly knit in migrants' search for better job opportunities in Saudi Arabia. These two can hardly be treated as standalones.

High-income and stable economies attract graduates and trained personnel from developing countries. Among the top reasons cited for migration, include low salaries and poor payment structures, poor working conditions and lack of incentives, and inadequate professional development opportunities (Alarkon, 2007; Lorenzo et al., 2007).

Seven percent of the participants indicated that they moved to Saudi Arabia to find a spouse, this finding cannot be downplayed as scientifically insignificant based on the small percentage. Evidence from a previous study suggests that the largest proportion of spouse migration involves migrating for marriage (Charsley et al., 2012). Findings from the same study also indicate that spouse migration may sometimes involve sponsoring of spouses initially located in the original country to move to the destination country of choice.

The Role of Family and Friends in Migration

Family and friends have an influence on the decision of migrants to move from their home country to the host country. We found that 53% of the migrants made the decision to move to Saudi Arabia based on an invite extended to them by a friend or family member who was already residing abroad. Most migrants in the study migrated after interacting with relatives and friends who already lived in Saudi Arabia. Normally, the decision to move to join other family members is based on the need to sustain the social capital, and derive a sense of social belonging (Baldassar, 2016; Baldassar, et al., 2016). Social migration networks are essential ingredients in understanding the migration process (Curran & Saguy, 2013). Qualitative data also revealed that migrants are interested in keeping their families

together even after they migrate to Saudi Arabia for jobs and the quest for an improved quality of life. This can be attributed to the need to establish stronger social ties with the migrants' family members in the host country (Chen, 2013). A case in point was when a male participant interviewed by the researcher indicated that her husband wanted her to accompany him to Saudi Arabia because he wanted to be close to his child while he worked. In this regard, the family as a social unit comes into play where a migrant invites his spouse to migrate to Saudi Arabia in order to maintain the social link within the family when traveling for and migrating to a foreign country.

Social media sites help to nurture stronger ties between migrants and potential migrants, and their families and friends who stay back in the country of origin of the migrant (Chen, 2013; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). As such, its role in the migration of persons cannot be ignored in understanding how migrants adapt during their migration process in Saudi Arabia. This helps to explain why more than half of the migrants who participated in the current study indicated to being invited by a social media site to migrate to Saudi Arabia.

Predominant Social Media Practices among Migrants

Forty-two percent of participants indicated that they belonged to an online immigration group. Belonging to an online immigration group helps migrants to adapt to the changes they meet in the new cultural contexts in the foreign countries where they decide to re-establish their lives (Elias & Lemish, 2009). Migrants' need emotional support, and in order to overcome feelings of loneliness and stay in touch with friends and family back home, they join online communities (Komito, 2011). Therefore, social media may slow down the process of integration into the host society, because they become too dependent upon the online community instead of trying to find friends and develop offline networks in their host society (Sawyer & Chen 2012). The social media sites are acutely important for participants to acquire language and cultural competences (Alencar, 2017).

Belonging to online immigration groups helps migrants to socialise with other migrants within and outside Saudi Arabia. To do so effectively, migrants depend on social media sites to share their experiences and ordeals in Saudi Arabia. Sharing of experiences in foreign countries involves identifying and sharing the challenges migrants face in the host country. Pourmehdi (2018) notes that precarity forces individuals to challenge their condition by reflecting on their specific social experiences, by using transnational communication media, migrants link to various networks and turn their cognizance into a strategy to overcome precarity.

One such challenge was low wages received for the actual work done. Migrants are paid less wages compared to native Saudi Arabians, Europeans and North Americans working in Saudi. The second most cited challenge by the migrants, was the existence of inappropriate immigration policies in Saudi Arabia. Research shows that migrants are faced with unfavourable migration policies, which often leave them vulnerable to employers out to exploit them and take full advantage of their desperation for jobs and good living conditions (Buchan & Sochalski, 2004).

The third leading challenge facing migrants touches on discrimination along socio-economic rights of migrants living in Saudi Arabia. The migrant workers possess few rights. They are not allowed to form unions, go on strike, and lack collective bargaining. The non-existence of a minimum wage means that employers are able to pay the workers as they see fit. It is worth noting, therefore, that immigration policies have a cardinal role and influence on migrants' transition processes an eventual settling in to the Saudi Arabian society. Such challenges therefore hamper the expectations migrants have when they make the decision to settle in Saudi Arabia. One of the leading expectations the migrants had was to have a better life than the one they had in their home country.

Conclusion

In this article, using both interviews and questionnaires, we have explored the extent to which migrants use social media sites to facilitate their migration process to find jobs and overcome precarity. Findings from the study have indicated that the search for better paying jobs and employment opportunities still dominates the list of reasons why migrants move from their home country to settle in Saudi Arabia. While the migrants cited challenges relating to low salaries compared to the native Saudi Arabians, this study concludes that such challenges are perceived as such, because the natives are remunerated better than migrants are. In addition, because of the existence of improper immigration policies, migrants felt in a weak position and susceptible to exploitation by employers.

Apart from the economic factors, migrants also suggested that they decided to travel to Saudi Arabia after relatives and friends who were already migrants in Saudi Arabia invited them. For many migrants living under precarious conditions has resulted in attentiveness to the fact that their survival depends on interdependency and cooperation with others whilst being resourceful and creative. The availability of a durable network or established relationships of mutual recognition or acquaintance helped the migrants to find jobs and move to Saudi Arabia in search of a better life. Social networks stimulate and perpetuate migration, and in the case of our sample, migrants were not helpless actors at the mercy of global processes, but they were active agents, rational decision makers who chose their destination carefully, and followed the connections, which they had established. Social capital within their networks was vital for lowering costs and risks of migration, including economic stagnation and conflict with authorities. Therefore, they preferred to migrate to Saudi Arabia where they already had established contacts.

Every research has its own limitations and this study is no exception. We have tried to document the role of social media in the migration process in Saudi Arabia, and in doing so

we did not explore the ways in which migrants make sense of their personal and social world, and to explore their lived experiences. This is a very interesting area of research and would be something for other researchers to peruse using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Moreover, future studies would greatly benefit from bridging the agentic and structural dimensions using social network analysis (SNA). It is also imperative to link the analysis of migrant's networks with an analysis of the wider socio-economic and political contexts, which shape them. We suggest that our understanding of migrants and their networks will be enhanced by studies, which use innovative research methods combining qualitative, quantitative, and visual methods.

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