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Social Media And The Migrant Experience: Navigating Emotions, Identity, And Decision-Making In The Digital Age

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Abstract. Social media has become a powerful force shaping migration experiences, influencing individuals before, during, and after their journey. This paper explores how social media influences people's desire to migrate, affects migrants' mental health, and leads to unhealthy consumption habits. While social media provides migrants with emotional support, connectivity, and a sense of belonging, it also creates unrealistic expectations, increases stress, and can lead to compulsive engagement. By analyzing the double-edged nature of social media, this Literature Review aims to highlight both its benefits and drawbacks in the migration process. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing healthier digital habits and more realistic migration narratives.

Keywords: social media, migration, emotion, identity, decision-making, digitalisation

1. Introduction to Social Media and Migration

Social media is now a big part of life for billions of people. In 2021, there were 3.78 billion users, and by 2025, that number has grown to over 5.42 billion (Efe and Suliman) ("Social Media Statistics"). People now spend more than 2 hours a day on these platforms (Kahn). Social media plays a big role in migration decisions. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter help people learn about destinations, routes, and connect with others who have already migrated (Dekker et al.).

Before, migrants mostly asked family or friends for advice. Now, they can read stories from strangers and get support from wider networks, shaping their decisions in new ways (Dekker and Engbersen 401). During the journey, smartphones and apps help migrants navigate and stay safe (Dekker et al.). Even after arriving, social media helps them stay in touch with loved ones and feel involved back home (Komito 1075).

But social media also brings problems. It can cause anxiety, depression, and loneliness—especially for migrants already under stress (Meshi and Ellithorpe 106949). Comparing themselves to others online may make them feel disconnected or regretful (Kahn). So, while social media helps migrants in many ways, it also adds emotional challenges like homesickness and identity struggles (Komito).

2. General Roles of Social Media in Migration

Social media plays a massive role in shaping migrant's decisions about whether to leave their home country and where to go. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and messaging apps provide information that can strongly influence someone's thoughts about migration. Many

migrants use social media to learn about possible destinations, check updates on routes, and connect with others who have already made the journey (Dekker et al.). It is not just about finding information; it's about feeling connected and making decisions based on what they see and hear online.

One of the biggest ways social media affects migration is by expanding networks. Before, people mainly relied on family or close friends for information about moving to another country. Now, with social media, migrants can reach out to strangers, read personal stories, and get advice from people they've never met. This means they are exposed to a wider range of experiences and opinions, which can shape their decisions in unexpected ways (Dekker and Engbersen 401).

During the illegal migration journey, social media serves as a real-time guide. Migrants use smartphones to navigate routes, communicate with other travelers, and adjust their plans based on the latest information. Maps, GPS, and instant messaging apps become essential tools, allowing them to avoid danger and find the safest paths (Dekker et al.). These platforms are not just about planning; they become a lifeline for those traveling through unknown places.

Table 1. Websites and Applications Consulted Before and After Migration (Multiple Answers Possible).

	Before Migration, % (n=51)	**During Migration, % (n=47)**
Social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn)	80	38
Instant messaging (WhatsApp, Ping)	63	66
VOIP (Skype, Viber)	47	38
Maps (Google Maps)	20	64
Video Sharing (YouTube, Vine)	14	4
Government websites	2	0
Other (Websites found via Google)	41	13

Table 1 illustrates the most used tools among illegal migrants during their journey. Social networking sites, instant messaging apps, maps, GPS, and Voice over IP (VoIP) applications were the most popular. Notably, as migrants progressed toward Europe, there was a shift in usage patterns: the reliance on maps and GPS increased, while the use of social networking sites and VoIP applications decreased (Dekker et al.).

Beyond the journey itself, social media transforms how migrants stay connected to their home country. In the past, leaving meant losing touch with one's community, but now, migrants can remain actively involved in their home society. They participate in discussions, follow news, and even influence events from afar. Knowing that social media can keep them connected to their homeland and assist them throughout the journey gives migrants more confidence to take the leap. Unlike the past, when emigration often meant losing most of one's connections, today's

migrants can maintain relationships, stay informed, and even participate in their home society from afar. This sense of continuity can make the decision to migrate feel less daunting and more manageable (Komito).

Social media has changed how people migrate, making it easier to get information, connect with others, and feel supported. It helps migrants learn about destinations, feel less alone, and make more confident choices. But while it makes migration easier, it also brings emotional challenges, like feeling stuck between two worlds.

3. Mental Health and Social Media

Social media plays a major role in migrants' mental health, both positively and negatively. While it helps them stay connected with their homeland and find support, excessive or problematic social media use can harm their well-being. Some people's social media habits become maladaptive, causing distress and interfering with daily life (Kuss and Griffiths 3528). For migrants, this could mean obsessively checking updates from their home country, engaging in heated online debates, or feeling overwhelmed by the content they see.

Problematic social media use has been compared to substance addiction. Just like substance use disorders, excessive social media consumption can ruin executive functions and decision-making abilities (Delaney et al. 478). For migrants, this might affect their ability to adapt to a new environment, make sound life choices, or focus on their goals. Some might spend so much time online that they struggle to build in-person relationships in their new home. Rather than calling it an addiction, researchers prefer the term "problematic social media use." Studies have consistently shown that this kind of usage is linked to negative mental health effects, including increased levels of depression and anxiety (Marino et al. 274). Migrants who rely too much on social media may experience greater emotional distress, especially if they compare their lives to those of others online. Seeing friends and family back home enjoying events they can't attend can intensify feelings of loneliness and regret.

Spending too much time on social media, even when it's not classified as "problematic use," has also been linked to increased depressive symptoms (Primack et al. 179). It means that migrants who constantly scroll through their feeds could feel more isolated or homesick over time. Instead of helping them adjust, excessive online engagement might pull them further into nostalgia and sadness.

Interestingly, researchers have also theorized that worse mental health leads to problematic social media use (Brand et al. 1). Migrants who feel lonely, anxious, or depressed might turn to social media for comfort, but in doing so, they risk deepening their struggles. Instead of finding relief, they may end up feeling more disconnected from real-life interactions.

The relationship between social media use and mental health is complex and requires further study. One possible explanation is the lack of in-person social support. Spending more time online often means less time spent in face-to-face interactions, which are crucial for emotional well-being (Shensa et al. 150). For migrants, this is particularly important. If they don't actively seek friendships and community in their new country, they might find themselves trapped in an online world that does more harm than good.

While social media can be a lifeline for migrants, it can also become a burden if not used wisely. Migrants need to be aware of how social media affects their emotions and take steps to ensure it remains a helpful tool rather than a source of distress.

4. The Impact of Social Comparison on Behavior

Social comparison is a natural process where people evaluate their own opinions, abilities, and behaviors by comparing them to others (Kahn). This tendency exists both in real life and in online interactions, but social media has amplified it significantly. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp provide an endless stream of updates about people's lives, achievements, and emotions, making social comparison an almost unavoidable part of daily life.

With social media constantly updating, users are exposed to posts from friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers, creating a nonstop cycle of comparison (Kahn). We see their vacations, jobs, relationships, and even their opinions, which inevitably leads to evaluating our own lives against theirs. This comparison can sometimes inspire us, but it can also lead to dissatisfaction, insecurity, or unrealistic expectations about what life should look like.

One of the key reasons social media enhances social comparison is its ability to bring together people who are like us. Studies have shown that we are naturally drawn to those who share our background, interests, and lifestyles, and social networking sites strengthen this tendency. While this can create a sense of belonging, it also increases the likelihood of comparing ourselves to those in our circles, often in ways that make us feel inadequate. Seeing others achieve milestones or live seemingly perfect lives can create pressure, making us question our own progress and worth (Kahn).

It is important to recognize that social media does not always reflect reality. People tend to share only the best parts of their lives, filtering out struggles, failures, and daily challenges. Yet, when we compare ourselves to these curated versions of life, we might feel like we are falling behind, even when we are not. This can affect self-esteem, mental health, and decision-making, especially for migrants who are trying to adjust to a new life and may already feel disconnected or uncertain about their future.

Understanding social comparison and its impact on behavior is essential for navigating social media in a healthier way. Instead of letting comparison create self-doubt, we should remind ourselves that everyone's journey is different, and social media only shows a small fraction of reality. Awareness and mindfulness can help reduce the negative effects of comparison and allow us to use social media in a way that supports, rather than harms, our well-being.

5. Social Comparison on Social Media and Migration

Social media plays a significant role in shaping young people's perceptions of life abroad, often influencing their decision to emigrate. By presenting an idealized version of other countries, and highlighting opportunities while minimizing challenges, it can create unrealistic expectations. This curated reality may lead young individuals to feel dissatisfied with their current life, making migration seem like the only path to a better life (Skrbis 235).

However, social media continues to shape identity even after migration. It provides a space for social comparison, where users constantly measure their abilities, achievements, and experiences against others (Yang et al. 95). For migrants, this can be even more complex, as they navigate between their home culture and a new one while dealing with personal and social expectations. The same platforms that once fueled their dreams of a better life can now amplify feelings of displacement, cultural disconnection, or even regret, making the process of identity formation both transformative and challenging.

There are two main types of social comparison: one based on ability and competition, and another based on opinions and perspectives. Ability-based comparisons often make people feel pressure to succeed, while opinion-based comparisons help shape viewpoints and beliefs (Yang et al. 95). Social media amplifies ability-based comparisons by constantly showcasing others' achievements, making individuals feel as though they are falling behind. For those facing obstacles in their own countries, this can create the perception that success is only attainable beyond their borders.

These comparisons make people think about themselves in different ways; both reflection and rumination influence major life decisions, including the choice to emigrate. For some, reflection leads to self-discovery and the pursuit of new opportunities, while for others, rumination fuels negative thoughts about their self-worth and future, making migration feel like the only escape. In both cases, social comparison plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals perceive their possibilities and limitations (Trapnell and Campbell 290).

However, after moving, social comparison does not stop—it simply shifts focus. Migrants may begin comparing their current lives not only with their past but also with the lives of family and friends who remained behind. Seeing loved ones together, celebrating moments, and sharing the highlights of their lives on social media can create a filtered nostalgia, making migrants question their decision. Without considering the challenges they once faced or the difficulties their loved ones may still experience, this selective comparison, often driven by rumination, can lead to feelings of regret or isolation. In this way, social media with social comparison not only shapes migration aspirations but also continues to influence migrants' emotions, reinforcing both expectations and doubts about life in a new country (Suls et al. 225, Yang et al. 95).

6. Challenges of Social Media Use for Migrants

While social media is a powerful tool for migrants, it also comes with serious challenges. One major issue is how social media can create and spread negative attitudes toward migrants. In many Western countries, anti-immigrant sentiment has grown, and digital platforms have played a major role in shaping how people talk about migration. Since many people get their news online, the way migration is portrayed on social media influences public opinions and reactions (Walsh and Hill 700).

Platforms like Twitter have been used to create fear and moral panic around migration. During the 2019 Canadian election, for example, Twitter was used to spread exaggerated concerns about migrants. Many tweets focused on cultural and security-related fears rather than real economic effects. Posts that portrayed migrants as a threat gained the most attention, showing how social media can fuel discrimination and exclusion. Since these platforms encourage emotional and dramatic content, negative messages about migrants spread faster and reach more people.

Another challenge is that social media has changed how migration debates happen. Unlike traditional media, where news was controlled by journalists and experts, social media allows anyone to create and share content. This has made migration discussions more interactive, but also more chaotic. Misinformation spreads quickly, and non-professional users can shape public opinion in ways that are not always based on facts. This means that migrants are often judged by misleading or exaggerated narratives that can make their experiences harder (Walsh and Hill 700).

Besides public opinion, migrants themselves face risks when using social media. While platforms help them access valuable information, they also expose them to misinformation. Many migrants rely on social media to make "smart" decisions about where to go and how to travel, but not all the advice they find is reliable. False information can lead migrants into dangerous situations, making their journey riskier. In addition, access to social media is not always equal—some migrants struggle with internet access, language barriers, or difficulty finding accurate sources of information (Dekker and Engbersen 405).

Despite these challenges, social media remains a key part of migration today. It connects migrants, helps them plan their journeys, and keeps them in touch with their home countries. However, the risks of misinformation and negative portrayals should not be ignored. Understanding these challenges is essential for making social media a safer and more useful tool for migrants.

7. Social Media's Emotional Impact After Migration

Social media has changed the way migrants experience emotions related to their journey. In the past, migration often meant a complete disconnect from one's home country and family. Now, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, migrants can maintain emotional bonds despite physical distance (Komito 1080). This ability to stay connected can provide comfort, but it also raises new emotional challenges.

One major emotional impact is the way migrants feel about their identity and belonging. Studies suggest that ethnic identification influences psychological well-being, but its effect depends on how migrants are accepted in their host country. If they feel rejected, their ethnic identity may not boost their self-esteem as expected, leading to emotional distress (Nesdale et al. 575). At the same time, social media allows migrants to share their emotions, find support, and maintain a sense of community, even when they are far from home. Social media also plays a key role in shaping emotions such as nostalgia and longing. Migrants often express feelings of homesickness through posts, stories, and messages. Digital interactions with family and friends make them feel connected but can also intensify their yearning for home (Boccagni and Baldassar 75). Constant updates from their home country—whether family gatherings, cultural events, or political discussions—can make them feel emotionally torn between two places.

Additionally, the concept of "Connected Migrants" has evolved into "Virtual Migrants," where social media allows people to remain socially and culturally active in their home community, even without physical presence (Komito 1080). This raises important questions: Does strong emotional support from social media prevent migrants from forming deep relationships in their new country? Does it make migration easier because they can "carry" their community with them wherever they go? These digital connections shape how migrants experience adaptation and belonging.

Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), strong emotional support from social media can influence how migrants adapt to their new country. This theory suggests that people define themselves based on the social groups they belong to. When migrants stay closely connected to their original communities online, they reinforce their old identity, which can make them feel emotionally secure but also limit their willingness to integrate into new social groups.

Because they receive validation and support from their existing network, they may feel less pressure to build deep relationships in their new country. Instead of forming strong local

bonds, they might continue identifying primarily with their homeland and culture, slowing down their sense of belonging in their new environment. However, for some, social media can act as a bridge, helping them maintain old ties while gradually forming new ones.

8. Conclusions

The relationship between migration and social media is deeply complex, offering both empowerment and emotional strain. While digital platforms facilitate connectivity, provide critical information, and help migrants sustain relationships with their home countries, they also introduce new psychological and social challenges. The emotional weight of migration is often heightened online, where curated images of home can intensify nostalgia, and the lack of physical proximity can deepen feelings of isolation.

One of the key findings of this study is the paradoxical role of social media in the migration experience. On one hand, it serves as a tool for empowerment, allowing migrants to form virtual communities, navigate legal and logistical challenges, and gain emotional support. On the other hand, it can foster unrealistic expectations, increase exposure to misinformation, and create emotional dependencies that hinder full integration into new environments. The psychological impact of this digital engagement cannot be overlooked—migrants who rely heavily on social media for emotional reassurance may struggle with detachment from their surroundings, delaying their sense of belonging in their host countries.

Ultimately, the influence of social media on migration is shaped by both individual usage patterns and broader systemic factors, such as government policies on digital access, online censorship, and the presence of supportive diaspora communities. Future research should explore how migrants can leverage social media more effectively to balance emotional well-being with the practical realities of adaptation. Recognizing both the benefits and pitfalls of these platforms is crucial in understanding how digital connectivity continues to reshape the migrant experience in an increasingly online world.

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