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# Online Communities and the Immigration Journey: A mixed-methods study on Facebook Groups

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## Abstract

*Online communities are increasingly becoming a useful tool in for the immigration process. As the decision to immigrate can bring about a significant disruption to one's life, it is vital to understand how the use of online communities may influence the immigration decision and support the immigration process. In this paper, we focus specifically on South African immigrants who plan to immigrate or have already immigrated to the United Kingdom and their use of Facebook groups. We adopt a mixed methods approach and combine quantitative and qualitative techniques to develop a holistic understanding of the immigration decision and process. Our findings show that online communities can be influential towards the immigration decision, but instrumental during the immigration process, transforming one's social network before and after their immigration.*

**Keywords:** immigration; online communities; mixed methods; social capital; transnationalism

## 1. Introduction

Transnationalism is the process by which immigrants form and maintain the various level of social relations that link their country of origin together with their settlement destination (Bilecen et al., 2018; Láštiová, 2014). However, immigrants require more than economic capital alone to immigrate (Evergeti & Zontini, 2006); they also need social capital in the form of social networks, social support and information (Hellermann, 2006). Social support offers immigrants protection against stressful situations and helps reduce acculturative stress experienced when integrating into a new culture or host society (Chen & Choi, 2011). Social capital is therefore an essential factor in the immigration and intercultural adaptation process.

Online communities have created new communication channels, enabling immigrants to move abroad while remaining in contact with people in different geographical locations (Dekker et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2015; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2017). They also assist them by providing an easier method for information sharing, forming and maintaining social ties (Komito, 2011), including promoting interpersonal connections between family members (Rea et al., 2015).

Dekker & Engersen (2014) posit that online communities have brought about significant changes in the literature of social networks and international migration, and there is evidence to indicate that online communities do have a significant impact on the immigration process (Komito, 2011; Láštiová, 2014; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2017). However, research suggests that there is a gap in understanding the impact of online communities on immigration decisions (McGregor & Siegel, 2014). While there has been a rise in social media studies in recent years, there has been a dearth of research on the role of online communities in relation to the immigration process in particular (Kapoor et al., 2018).

The aim of this study is to address this gap and focuses specifically on exploring how the use of online communities can facilitate the immigration process, which is essential to understand as the decision to immigrate can bring about a significant disruption to one's life. We focus specifically on South African immigrants who plan to immigrate or have already immigrated to the United Kingdom for two reasons. First, existing immigration studies focusing on South African immigrants tend to focus on the immigration of skilled professionals (e.g., healthcare workers and teachers) rather than how Information Technology (IT) of any kind supports them in doing so (e.g., Manik, 2014; Paige et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2015). Second, many South African immigrants have ancestral links to the United Kingdom, which allow them to bypass the skill-based immigration restrictions.

We address our research question through a mixed methods approach to develop a holistic understanding of how online communities, and specifically Facebook groups, are used during the phases of the immigration process (Venkatesh et al., 2016). We first conducted a questionnaire-based survey to develop a preliminary understanding of the immigration phases and whether and how Facebook is used. We then conducted in depth semi structured interviews, which allowed us to focus our research around the transformational effect that Facebook has on immigrants' social networks, making information exchange more accessible and thereby facilitating the migration process.

Our findings show that, while support from family and friends is often the main influence on the immigration decision, the use of Facebook also plays a role. The information and support from the online community enables a smoother integration process for immigrants as they can better prepare for challenges encountered by tapping into others' experiences and asking for help.

In what follows, we present the background to our study on transnational immigration, social networks and social capital, and a review on the role of online communities within these contexts.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1. Transnationalism, Social Networks and Social Capital**

One's social network may change and evolve as new relationships are forged or discarded over time. However, it is an essential source of social capital, especially for immigrants, as it provides them with access to their social resources, social support and information relating to their relocation (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Hellermann, 2006; Ryan et al., 2008). Social capital within immigrants' networks help them reduce the risk and the costs (financial or otherwise) often associated with immigration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011). Due to this, immigrants prefer to immigrate to a place where they have existing contacts (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

Traditionally, immigration scholars understand these immigrant social networks to be made up mainly of 'strong' ties (Dekker et al., 2016), whereby these tend to be ties with family and close friends. In contrast, 'weak' ties are the ties with acquaintances and work colleagues (Granovetter, 1983). Haythornthwaite (2002) introduces a third form of tie, the 'latent' tie, where a technical connection exists but requires social interaction for the connection to be activated. Ellison et al. (2007) have suggested that Facebook can potentially facilitate a smooth transition from latent to weak tie.

Lášticová (2014) argues that the distinction between strong and weak ties closely resembles the distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. Bonding social capital is associated with strong ties and the connection within a homogeneous group (R. Putnam, 2001; R. D. Putnam, 2007). By contrast, bridging social capital is associated with both weak and latent ties and the linkage between diverse groups (Ellison et al., 2014). To account for connection an individual had previously but lost through the progression of life, Ellison et al. (2007) introduce the concept of

‘maintained social capital’, and an example of this type of social capital can be considered a university alumni network.

While traditional networks relating to immigration consist mainly of strong ties, many people operate within loose and fluid social networks (Wellman, 1999). Indeed, often weak ties can be more useful than strong ties for accessing resources and information, because it is the weak ties that provide linkages to social groups with a different collection of information and resources (Granovetter, 1983; Haythornthwaite, 2002).

## **2.2. Online communities and the Immigration Decision**

The decision to immigrate encompasses both push and pull factors, whereby push factors are negative factors at the origin location (e.g., lack of economic prospects, crime and political unrest) and pull factors are positive factors at the destination location (e.g., good economic prospects and a stable environment) (E. S. Lee, 1966). On this basis, Alroey argues that the decision to immigrate includes other factors as well, and specifically, the existence of reliable and accurate information, because it helps alleviate the fear of the unknown in the host society (Alroey, 2011), thus playing a vital role.

Building on the importance of information within the migration decision, Vilhelmson and Thulin (2013) posit that Internet Technologies have made information sharing easier, thus affecting people’s decision to immigrate. Indeed, existing research shows that Internet use influences planning for both interregional (Moon et al., 2010) and international migration (Komito, 2011; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2013).

Against this background, there are two points that need to be raised in relation to online communities and their link to the immigration decision.

First, online communities can both encourage and discourage the immigration decision. They can contribute towards the immigration decision by reducing the social and emotional costs of immigration (Dekker et al., 2016; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011). In addition, online communities influence one’s spatial flexibility: on the one hand, they can offer reassurances that the individual will not be drifting apart from their social network, thus making the immigration decision easier; on the other hand, increased online communities use may make the decision more difficult, whereby the individual hesitates to immigrate, fearing they will be sacrificing their social bonds (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2017).

Second, while it is unequivocal that online communities support information exchange, not all information exchanged is accurate or credible (Tandoc et al., 2020), and this applies to the information offered by fellow immigrants in their online communities of fellow immigrants, too (Dekker et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). To address this, bridging ties may prove to be more useful than bonding ties, because the first allow cross-referencing information from disconnected sources (Granovetter, 1983; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Yet, the trustworthiness of information provided by bridging ties is often seen as less trustworthy in comparison to information supplied by bonding ties (Dekker et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

### **3. Methods**

The aim of the study is to explore the influence of online communities during the during the phases of the immigration process. We are specifically interested in whether and how online communities influence the immigration decision and whether and how they facilitate the immigration process. To address these questions, and guided by the philosophical assumptions of pragmatism (Cresswell, 2003), we adopt a mixed methods approach. We integrate quantitative and qualitative techniques to develop a multiperspective and holistic understanding (Venkatesh et al., 2016) on the use of online communities during the immigration process. In line with the principles of pragmatism, and other mixed methods studies (e.g., Fox & Connolly, 2018), our chosen methods include a self-administered questionnaire-based survey, to identify the relationships between the use of online communities and the immigration process, and the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, to explore further and explain these relationships. Therefore, we adopted an explanatory approach, where we first conducted the quantitative strand of our study, which informed and focused the qualitative one (Venkatesh et al., 2016).

We focus specifically on South African immigrants, who have immigrated already or plan to immigrate to the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom has traditionally been one of the main immigration destinations for South Africans, possibly because their interlinked historical and cultural backgrounds make it relatively easier for South Africans to establish themselves into the local society. More importantly, probably, many South African migrants have ancestral links to the United Kingdom, allowing

them to by-pass the skill-based immigration restrictions, which in turn results in a more convenient immigration (Kaplan & Höppli, 2017). In addition, while there is a wealth of studies about the immigration of South Africans, in their majority they are focused on the immigration process of skilled professionals, such as healthcare workers (e.g., Manik, 2014; Paige et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2015), rather than on their use of online communities during decision-making.

Through our engagement with the literature, we identified three main stages of immigration, namely: ‘pre-immigration’, ‘during the immigration’ and ‘post-immigration’. As we were interested in the use of online communities across all three phases of the immigration process, we designed the questionnaire to align with the immigration status of the participant. We organised the questionnaire across five main thematic areas: basic demographic information; online communities use before immigrating; online communities use while immigrating; online communities use after immigrating; perceptions on the influence and trust on online communities. As the questionnaire was online, we were able to control the flow and completion of the thematic areas according to control variables (i.e., immigration status).

Due to the paucity of research in this area, we chose to focus on more exploratory questions to gauge the participants’ perspectives on the use of online communities, such as Facebook groups. For this reason, the instrument was not developed in a way so as to allow hypotheses testing but rather to support a descriptive analysis of our sample’s perspective.

Considering the focus of our research, we adopted purposive sampling in order to identify South Africans who have immigrated to the United Kingdom or are intending to do so and who are members of online communities. To this end, we identified relevant Facebook groups that cater to South Africans’ communities with the aim our self-administered online questionnaire, once we secured ethical approval from the researchers’ hosting University and confirmation from the Facebook groups’ moderators. We administered the questionnaire between June and July 2019 across six moderated Facebook groups.

#### **4. Analysis and Results**

Our sample consists of 105 complete and valid responses, which we analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The demographics of the sample are shown in

Table 1. 77% of the participants are women, while only 22% are men. This indicates an overrepresentation of women among the sample or a non-response bias. However, surveys tend to exhibit higher response rates from women participants (Moore, 2019). Among our sample, age-wise, we note a larger concentration between the ages of 26 to 55, and more participants with a National Senior Certificate (the equivalent of high school graduation degree) or with a Bachelor's degree. Most participants have completed their immigration to the United Kingdom (63%), residing in the country for one year or more.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

	<b>Category</b>	<b>N = 105</b>	<b>%</b>
Gender	Woman	81	77
	Man	23	22
	Prefer not to say	1	1
Age	18 - 25	3	3
	26 - 35	38	36
	36 - 45	32	30
	46 - 55	21	20
	56 - 65	9	9
	66 +	2	2
Education	Standard 9	1	1
	National Senior Certificate (Matric)	34	32
	Certificate	4	4
	Diploma	12	11
	Bachelor's degree	39	37
	Master's degree	13	12
	Doctorate degree	2	2
Immigration Status	Haven't initiated the immigration process	7	7
	During the immigration process	16	15
	Completed the immigration process	82	78

The primary reason for joining a Facebook group is to find support or other people who are going through a similar immigration process (Table 2). More than half of the sample participants indicated that they joined the group to find migration information followed by information about the settlement. Although finding other South Africans living in the United Kingdom and being a part of a South African community are not the main reasons, it is interesting to note more than a third of the participants joined a group for these reasons. Other reasons include the desire to help other South Africans and business promotions.

**Table 2: Reasons for joining a Facebook group.**



	N = 105	%
To get information regarding immigration	56	53.33
To find support/people going through similar processes	61	58.10
To find information regarding settling	53	50.48
To find other South Africans living in the UK	39	37.14
To be part of a South African community	35	33.33
Other	8	7.62

Note: participants could choose multiple options.

We then explored the frequency of use of online communities after participants have completed their immigration to the United Kingdom (Figure 1). Almost half of the participants reported they access online communities regularly to keep in touch with friends and family (46%), and, similarly, for staying up to date with affairs in South Africa and the UK (50%). However, only 31% of the participants indicate that they accessed online communities for settling (all the time or often) in the hosting country, and indeed participants do not indicate that they had been making frequent use of online communities for making friends, finding a job or finding an accommodation in the UK. 42% of the participants reported they have made friends in the United Kingdom by being in a South African Facebook group.

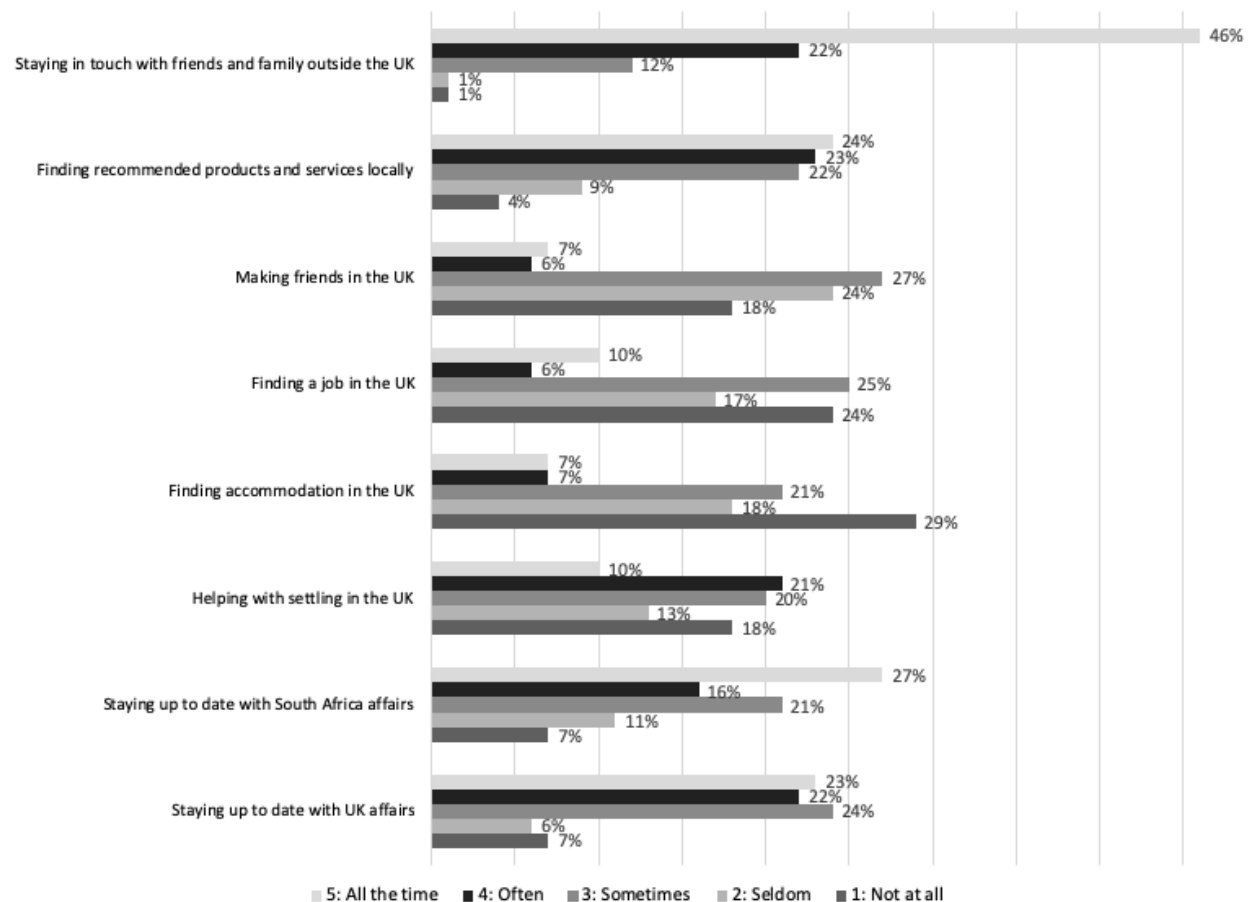


Figure 1. Frequency of use of online communities post immigration (N = 82).

We conducted an ANOVA test to analyse whether participants' perceptions regarding the usefulness of Facebook groups remain unchanged throughout the immigration process. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated ( $\chi^2(2) = 8.267, p = .016$ ), therefore the degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ( $\epsilon = .91$ ). The results of the ANOVA for the within subjects test shows that there is a statistically significant difference between the immigration phases ( $F(1.821, 145.517) = 9.173, p < 0.00$ ). In other words, it is unlikely that participants hold an unchanged view on how useful are the Facebook groups as they go through the immigration process. Based on the contrast results (Table 3), there are significant positive changes in immigrants' perceptions regarding the usefulness of Facebook groups between the first phase of the immigration process ('before') and the next two ('during' and 'after'), but there are no statistical differences in perceptions once they have started the immigration process.

**Table 3: Contrast Results**

	<b>Before vs During</b>	<b>Before Vs After</b>	<b>During Vs After</b>
Difference (Estimate – Hypothesised)	- 0.384	- 0.348	- 0.36
Std. error	0.082	0.106	0.107
p-value	0.000	0.001	0.736

Based on the results from the quantitative strand of our study, we recruited six participants from within a single Facebook group who were at the time already residing within the United Kingdom, to further explore and explain the use of Facebook group during each immigration phase

We conducted semi-structured interviews between June 2019 and August 2019. We analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The Interview guide can be found in the Appendix. We note that, while we had a set of predefined questions to guide the interview, these were only used for prompting the interviewee rather than limiting the discussion around them. The main theoretical concept that drove the analysis was that of social capital, as previously identified in the literature. However, due to the nature of the data collection, which allowed us to tap into the

experiences of the participants, interesting themes revealed themselves during the interviews and during the analysis. We therefore adopted a theoretical and inductive thematic analysis, which allowed us to reflect on themes beyond social capital.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded with the consent of the participant, and later transcribed and manually coded. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. During the analysis, the transcripts went through three cycles of analysis. The first cycle of analysis allowed us to identify initial ideas and codes and observe instances where there was a repetition of similar information (Saldana, 2013). Emerging codes were identified, noted, reflected and categorised into themes and categories and we used spreadsheets to capture the final themes, categories, and codes. Table 5 shows the results of our thematic analysis.

**Table 4: Demographics of Interview Participants.**

ID	Gender	Age	Length of stay in the United Kingdom
P1	Woman	36 - 45	1 – 2 years
P2	Woman	36 - 45	Less than a year
P3	Woman	36 - 45	3 -5 years
P4	Woman	46 - 55	1 – 2 years
P5	Woman	46 - 55	1 – 2 years
P6	Man	26 - 35	3 – 5 years

**Table 5: Thematic Analysis.**

Themes	Categories	Codes
Community	Social Support	Emotional Support Reassurance Giving Back Reliance Motivation/Upliftment
	Trust	Connections Real Experiences Common/Similar Backgrounds
	Negatives	Bickering/Disagreements Negative Emotions Entice Rush Decisions
Settlement	Set up a household	Freecycle Groups Market Place
	Settlement Factors	Where to Stay Finding/Having a Job
	Local Community Pages	Recommendations Updates Exploration of Area Social Activities
Social Network	Rebuild Social Structure	Formation of latent ties through helping each other Hobby groups Activation of latent ties through meet-ups
	Maintain Social Capital	Facebook posts

		Facebook feeds Interaction through comments
	Social Capital Types	Bridging capital Bonding capital Maintained capital

## 5. Results

In this section, we present the findings from the qualitative strand of our study, the latter having been informed by our literature review and the results from the quantitative strand. The section is structured around the core themes we identified: the use of Facebook groups for feeling as part of a community; for settlement; for building a social network.

### 5.1. Facebook Groups as Communities

Interviewees described that they experience their Facebook group as a community where they can find and give social support. This support ranged from emotional support and reassurances regarding the uncertainties around the immigration journey, to giving back to the community in the form of sharing their own experiences and motivating others:

*“It has given me the same reassurance that I believe other people are asking. It’s given me that. Also, I love to hear the success stories. I find that very uplifting. So, it’s validation that I’ve made the right decision, and I got out at the right time as well.” (P5)*

*“I see a lot of people come on there and they ask questions like ‘What is life like?’, ‘Is there crime?’, ‘What’s the job market like?’. You know, because when you make a decision to move countries, there is this big unknown, you don’t know whether it is going to work for you, so you try to get a picture in your head. And I think this is probably the only thing Facebook is good for these days, is groups like this. Where you’re talking to other people who can share stories, and I mean look, there’s good and bad we all know. But in this instance, it’s mostly good. Mostly, people want to talk about their experience, and other people want to know.” (P1)*

In some cases, the kind of support the community can offer, social or otherwise, may reveal itself much later in the immigration process, and likely when the immigrant identifies more specifically the kind of information they require:

*“I guess, initially coming over, very little. But then afterwards, the 3-years, I would say a bigger percentage. Because I know now what the group can help me with. It was from the immigration process or the visa renewal to potentially where can I live. And just for looking up the information for indefinite leave to remain, what’s that process and stuff. It’s still got useful information even though I am a bit further in the process.” (P6)*

The primary reasons for which interviewees tend to trust their Facebook group as a community is because these groups are formed on the basis of common backgrounds, which allows them to establish connections with others and tap into others’ real experiences, undergoing or having undergone the same process immigration:

*“If you think about it, possibly, you see I’m still not clear on that, coming from different countries the renewal of your spousal visa would be the same thing, I’m sure. I can’t imagine that it would be different, but I just, I felt that I needed South Africans.” (P4)*

Having said that though, interviewees suggested that not all information is trustworthy or accurate enough for making important decisions regarding one’s immigration journey. However, the possibility of having multiple group members corroborating or discrediting information and who have gone through the same or similar experiences, was alleviating issues of trust:

*“Mostly, because enough people usually answer you. You can usually corroborate the opinions. Even if it was something that didn’t seem right, you’d be able to figure out pretty quickly, because someone will either agree or disagree.” (P3)*

Facebook groups, however, seem susceptible to negative reactions and emotions and the impact these may have to their members and the longevity of the community, as they can drive community members away and disenchant them from participating:

*“Unfortunately, some of the South Africans leave with a very bitter, sort of, opinion, and some of them are also quite [redacted], and they bring that to Facebook. Sometimes it gets too much, then I leave and come back later. So, I am in and out all the time.” (P1)*

*“But unfortunately, there is some bickering on the Facebook group sometimes, so what I am using it, is a source for information. I do think there are other people that does see it as a community. But I see a lot of BS going on sometimes, and I try to avoid that.” (P6)*

## **5.2. Facebook Groups for Settling in the Host Country**

Settling in the host country can be a challenging experience, especially when the immigrant has no connections to turn to in time of need. Facebook groups can thus be a valuable resource of information and play a substantial role, offering tangible and intangible assistance. This assistance tends to range from receiving recommendations and updates regarding the local community and information with regards to finding a job or an accommodation:

*“I think it did play a big role. As I said emotionally... We found friends on there that also asked for help. And he basically has helped a few people. We picked up some people at the airport, help them get a car. This specific lady has also slept a night at our house, and we met them on Facebook. And me getting work. Other friends when we’ve just arrived. My husband also met someone on Facebook, who also just arrived, and we met up with them. So, more emotional kind of thing. We’re here let’s try and get to know people.” (P2)*

*“Yah, so I belong to quite a few of those freecycle groups. And believe me, it’s help, I mean we’ve got a lot of furniture in our house that we got for free because of those local freecycle groups. That’s really useful, because, when you’re trying to settle and trying to find furniture and things, having those local things that are in your area, you can really find things that you need.” (P4)*

In several cases, for the immigrants, tapping into Facebook groups for settling meant extending beyond the South Africans’ Facebook groups and accessing local communities pages and participating in social activities to establish and maintain a social structure

*“The buy and sell groups and the district notice board. Because we’re quite rural, we often have a lot of dog walking events and charity events. It is nice to pay back. Our local hospice did a walking event. We had a great time part taking in that event, walking for charity. Again, it’s all increasing our social structure, and that’s all done through Facebook.” (P5)*

However, not everyone found Facebook groups to play an instrumental role after they had completed the immigration process:

*“Not a huge amount. Umm, once we were here, it was very much a case of asking we people whom we’ve met and just figuring it out as we went along.” (P3)*

### **5.3. Facebook Groups for Building and Maintaining a Social Network**

We asked interviewees whether and to what extent they believed Facebook groups were helpful in keeping in touch with friends and family and, similarly, whether these groups were beneficial for establishing and maintaining ties with others in the hosting country. By and large, connections with relatives and friends are maintained via other communication channels, such as WhatsApp, which allow for more private conversations. In contrast, for communications with weaker ties, and particularly with the South African community, the Facebook Group was the preferred medium:

*“Most of my friends are on WhatsApp so, I probably would message them using that than Facebook.” (P5)*

*“My parents doesn’t have Facebook accounts and WhatsApp, most people use. So it’s easier to chat or video call via that [WhatsApp].” (P6)*

The Facebook group supports its members to maintain their social capital by allowing them to interact with each other directly via each member’s post, and interact via commenting, or pick up a conversation, which can potentially be taken privately:

*“I basically look at what they post, and I see what they are all about. But I will message them in private and have a private conversation that’s more what I would like to do.” (P2)*

*“So, it would be posting on Facebook. Then I’d respond, and we’d have a mini conversation on Facebook, within reason.” (P5)*

Interestingly, the Facebook Group allows members to form a social network by creating opportunities for bonding capital. We asked our interviewees to share their experiences of making friends through their South African group and many shared positive experiences:

*“We actually became friends because of that group... That’s actually how we met or became friends. So she met me at one of the Saffa braais<sup>1</sup>. And that’s where I met her and certified her documents there, and we just got on so well, we became friends.” (P4)*

*“[T]here were so many people that I helped, and through that, because you talk so much, you eventually share a lot of information. You develop a friendship, slowly we made plans to meet. So I’ve got quite a few South African families that we connect with. We actually had a get together about 2 months ago, and there was about 40 of us. I didn’t realise I had grown such a big network.” (P1)*

However, in some cases not all connections have led to bonding capital but to maintained capital where Group members have developed weak ties, and maintain contact but only meet scarcely:

*“There’s another friend. We don’t see each other awful lot. Again, because we presumed because we’re both from South Africa with similar backgrounds, we’d be really close, but we don’t have that much in common. Which is fine, it’s normal in life.” (P5)*

## **6. Discussion**

This study contributes to the literature of online communities in relation to the transformational effect on immigrants’ networks (Ellison et al., 2007; Hossain & Veenstra, 2017; J. Lee, 2017; Quinn, 2016).

Drawing from social capital, and the literatures of online communities and transnationalism, we extend current understanding as to how online communities, such as Facebook Groups, lower the risks and the threshold for immigration. Our findings show that, although online communities in general play a significant role towards the immigration decision, having friends and family in the United Kingdom, and other personal factors, such as ancestral connections, are crucially more important. This contradicts previous findings, where social media were posited to be the primary mechanism behind individuals’ immigration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). In contrast, bonding capital (e.g., family and friends) continues to play a

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<sup>1</sup> Braai is a South African term for barbeque.



pivotal role in the immigration decision and process, and online communities are core in supporting the migrant once the migrant has decided to immigrate.

During the first phase of the immigration phase, i.e., before initiating the process, Facebook Groups are the first port of call for information gathering. This is not surprising, as a variety of online communities (primarily those without membership), are often used for information gathering and for decreasing ambiguity in areas ranging from personnel selection (Pike et al., 2018) to making sense of one's personal health condition (Delaney & Basinger, 2021). For this reason, Dekker and Engbersen (2014) describe online communities as information infrastructures that support immigrants towards the organisation and coordination of their immigration. We offer an alternative explanation about this and posit that often, a Facebook group offers more current information and richer experiences on visa processes compared to family and friends, who may have completed their immigration process some time ago. In addition, as group members get a glimpse into the lives and experiences of those who have already completed their immigration journey, fear of the unknown reduces, thus making easier the immigration process. Thirdly, we disagree that online communities can be termed information infrastructures, as they don't exhibit core features, at least right now, as for example the unlimited number of connections, including but not exclusively to other platforms, applications and communities (Hanseth & Lyytinen, 2010).

Online communities have provided a pathway towards weak and latent ties formation, resulting in further benefits for immigrants, current and prospective. Besides being an information infrastructure, online communities enable the formation of social networks, often extending beyond the online world, lending themselves for support across all three phases of immigration: before the immigration process has been triggered, during the immigration process, and after the immigrant has arrived in the country. In other words, they can be seen as combining the focus on relationship-development and on information exchange (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013). The resulting benefits may take the form of both tangible and intangible support. For example, 'knowing they are not alone in the process' provides immigrants (prospective and current) with comfort and a community to turn to should they experience issues at any step in the immigration process. Equally, through the formation of ties, and building on their social network, the online cultivated friendships have the potential to provide instrumental help, such as offering temporary

accommodation to recent immigrants. As a result, the potential of online communities extends beyond their informational value and includes social and emotional support. However, these online communities tend to be fragile. Negative emotions and comments can potentially propagate within the online community and, if not controlled, other members may feel disenchanting with the community and be driven away. Similar incidents have been reported elsewhere. Germonprez and Hovorka (2013), for example, have shown that online community members may experience disillusionment if community administrators introduce top-bottom changes that are in conflict with the values of the community, thus leading to dissent and disengagement. In addition, Butler (2001) has shown that participating in an online community is determined on a cost/benefit analysis. Our study extends this understanding and indicates that disillusionment may occur as a result of other community members' actions and interactions, i.e., from within the ranks, which may damage the community's efforts for information exchange and relationship building, as other members see fewer benefits in continuing being members and distant themselves. Similarly, online communities can be instrumental in augmenting social capital resources among immigrants, as others have noted (Lášticová, 2014). However, we show that, to formulate a social network via the online community and then maintain it, one needs to potentially devote time in engaging with posts, forming ties, and seeking to activate them outside the community, in order to build on the newly formed ties and maintain social capital. Yet, a shared, national, cultural or otherwise background, does not always mean that this effort will come to fruition, i.e., bonding or bridging capital. Instead, maintained capital may be formed where community members may see little value.

## **7. Conclusions**

This study contribute towards the growing body of knowledge on the role of online communities, for the immigration decision and process of international immigrants. Our findings show that, although online communities do not play a significant role in influencing the immigration decision, they play an essential role in supporting the process. Our results confirm previous findings in relation to the transformational effect on immigrants' social network, thereby facilitating migration (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011). At the same time, we introduce a new perspective

on how disagreements and feelings of negativity may discourage members from further engagement.

With regards to future research, we note that our findings show that online communities are seen as more useful during and after the immigration journey, rather than during the first phase of the immigration process, i.e., before the process has been triggered. This finding can be explained by the fact that people often don't know what they will need until the need reveals itself, further investigation is warranted.

Our study comes with some limitations. Our sample lacks diversity, as for both strands of our mixed methods study the participants were primarily women. Particularly for the qualitative strand, interview participants are mainly within the same age group with an ancestral link to the United Kingdom. Purposive sampling could be employed in future studies to gain a broader range of background, gender and avoid potential sample bias. We would also expect that future studies would look beyond a single national background and potentially explore differences across several nationalities. We also had a small number of interview participants, which we believe is due to the nature of our study and our focus on immigration, which is a sensitive topic and may have discouraged other potential interviewees from participating. However, our use of mixed methods approach allowed us to focus the qualitative strand of the study, leading to rich insights.

Another limitation relates to the temporal dimension anchored to the immigration phases. On the one hand, the Facebook groups contained immigrants at different immigration phases, some of whom may have completed their immigration journey several years ago, whereas others may have only just arrived. This means that we had to rely on our survey participants and interviewees to remember the amount and type of assistance the Facebook groups provided them with prior, during and after their immigration. To address this limitation, online ethnography can be conducted within the Facebook groups. This will provide a richer insight into how online communities are used by immigrants, what information they exchange, how this is used, and what are the impacts. Such observations can then be coupled with textual and visual posts to examine how language and multimedia are potentially used to establish collectiveness and shared experiences (Fayard & DeSanctis, 2009). Another potential avenue would be the inclusion of interviews with Facebook group administrators to gain a better understanding of these online communities. This will help understand their perspective and motivation for setting up a Facebook group, as well as

understanding the key elements that make an online community providing a sense of community and the motivators for contributing to such a community on a continuous basis.

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