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The Internet and desire to move:

The role of virtual practices in the inspiration phase of migration

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the understanding of non-local migration in the digital age by investigating emerging virtual practices in the migration process. We focus on the initial inspiration phase that theoretically defines the attainable reach of individuals considering moving. Using a case-based approach, we distinguish how online information and social contact influence an individual's early considerations and desires to move elsewhere. We draw on in-depth interviews with young adults in Sweden. Our findings characterize how Internet-based information influences the spatial, social, and temporal horizons of inspiration with potential implications for subsequent plans. We find that virtual practices spatially expand these horizons and promote a shift towards insider information. Results further suggest that a flow of information and background knowledge regarding opportunities in other places drives the inspiration phase, extending its duration until it is more or less continuous. Reduced information friction increases the scope for impulsiveness to spark migration inspiration and intentions.

Introduction

The Internet has become an obvious and almost taken-for-granted tool for information search in everyday life. Internet searches connect us to information, services, and people so we can make discoveries about space and place in particular. In everyday life, the Internet helps us locate people and facilities, the best routes through a city, when the next bus arrives at a nearby bus stop, etc. Increasingly, it also supports more extensive spatial decisions such as where to spend holidays, where to move to find employment, and where to move one's place of residence.

It is easy to forget that information search using the Internet is quite a new phenomenon. It is only in the past two decades that massive amounts of information have become easily available via search engines. As argued by Graham et al. (2013), it is reasonable to believe that this new situation will profoundly affect various aspects of social life, not least regarding our relationships with space and place. In line with suggestions from other researchers (e.g. Dutton, 2009), one might expect Internet-based information and contacts to reconfigure access and transform people's knowledge, conceptions, and preferences, for example, concerning where to live and when to move (e.g. Palm and Danis, 2002). However, in their tentative review of Internet-based search studies, Graham et al. (2013: 370) conclude that comparatively little is known about 'the ways in which we interact with, learn about, move through, consume in, and enact physical and material places' via the Internet.

We argue that the *migration process*, that is, people's considerations and decisions regarding moving, is likely to be integrated with, and hence affected by, online

information search and reflection – what we here denote *virtual practices*. As the Internet offers abundant, often tailored, interactive and regularly updated information about jobs, education, housing, residential areas, and environments in distant places, and improves our access to social networks, there are reasons to believe that it could also affect individual migration interest, intentions, and action (e.g. Stevenson, 2009). On the sender's side, the increased role of web-based place-marketing strategies in attracting desirable visitors, tourists, and migrants indicates this tendency (e.g. Gertner et al., 2007; Urban, 2002).

In previous papers, we demonstrated that virtual practices now provide integrated support for most migration plans and decisions of many young adults in Sweden (Author(s), 2013a; Author(s), 2013b). These practices inspire migration interest, influence migration intentions and more detailed planning activity, and to some extent are also perceived to modify preferences (as regards the relative weight of migration motives and the range of potential search areas). However, the role of the Internet is highly diversified and integrated in various ways in terms of the use and type of support at different stages of the migration process with different implications for the decision to move. Four such phases are distinguished: inspiration, sorting and screening, practical and emotional preparation, and post-processing after settlement.

In this paper, we further investigate the potential influence of the Internet in non-local migration decision making. We concentrate on the *initial inspirational phase* of the pre-migration process, before any firm plans are settled or a final decision to move is made. We seek to distinguish how the Internet affects individual desires and possibly shapes subsequent plans to move to other places. Our approach is case based as we, by means

of in-depth interviews, seek to explore how online search practices influence decision making among a group of young adults living in Sweden.

The interviews were conducted in 2010 as part of a larger study (cited above) describing the overall migration process and examining the extent to which online information and social contact influenced decision making. We focused on young adults for several reasons. Importantly, this group is in a period of life when thoughts of migration often arise: their actual propensity to migrate interregionally is comparatively high and has been increasing in recent years in Sweden (Lundholm, 2007). Furthermore, young adults are generally very experienced Internet users with highly developed online practices and skills, as indicated by their spending an average of over two hours per day online in 2010 (Nordicom-Sverige, 2011). It is reasonable to think that virtual practices established in this period of life will likely be maintained and also spread to other groups of the population.

In the next section, we outline our theoretical and conceptual points of departure. We briefly examine the current state of the scant relevant research, making explicit how we contribute to current knowledge and extend the results of previous studies. The third section presents our qualitative data and method. We then present and analyze our interview findings, and finally discuss them in a concluding section drawing attention to how the Internet affects human reach and the spatial, social, and temporal horizons of migration from the individual's point of view.

Theoretical approach

Examining the role of the Internet and associated virtual practices in non-local

migration emphasizes the need to reflect on migration decision making from the process

and time perspectives. According to the biographical approach to migration studies (see

e.g. Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; King, 2012; Kley, 2011), migration decision making is

a process that occupies an individual's mind and steers his or her action for long

periods. Migration-related thoughts, searches, and communication often become

habitual at certain transitional times of life: for example, when young people leave the

family home, young adults seek work after higher education, and middle-aged adults

enter the empty-nest period of family life. Associated with such lines of thought, the

migration process is often understood as a sequence of stages (e.g. Brown and More,

1970; Kley, 2011; McHugh 1984). Thoughts of moving often start with a felt need for

change (or dissatisfaction with the present living situation) evoking vague dreams and

desires to change the place of abode, occasionally followed by planning, decisions, and

concrete acts of relocation.

The Internet has become progressively more integrated with the migration decision-

making process (Hiller and Franz, 2004). This integration entails information search and

related social contact with other people becoming part of daily routines. This is not a

new phenomenon, as information seeking and social interaction have always been

critical constraining and enabling elements of migration (e.g. DaVanzo, 1981; Massey,

1990). However a qualitatively new situation has developed, as large amounts of online

information, in principle about any place, are now easily accessed anytime and

anywhere. This situation not least concerns information connected to major motives for migration, such as employment, housing, education, leisure activities, and local environmental qualities and assets (Clark and Maas, 2013; Lundholm et al., 2004). The same is true as regards virtual access to social networks, contacts, and knowledge relating to other places. As information transaction costs are now low and interactivity is high, the Internet supports the active user, often by providing instant updates and feedback in the form of information tailored to individually expressed preferences regarding, for example, jobs and housing. Especially at an early, inspirational phase of the migration process, one could expect the Internet to help mobilize, maintain, and reinforce people's interest in moving and intentions to do so.

In-depth research into the role of the Internet in the migration process is scant. An exception is studies of the role of mobile telephony and online contact in the post-migration (or settlement) phase of international migration, for example, how ICTs facilitate the growth of transnational families and have implications for the migrant's situation (e.g. D'Haenens et al., 2007; Diminescu, 2008; Komito, 2011; Paragas, 2008). Research into the pre-migration experience, however, is even scarcer. Hiller and Franz (2004) document how the Internet is generally used for information seeking, exploring and assessing migration opportunities, making formal and informal contacts to obtain insider knowledge of places, gaining assistance about the move, building pre-migration excitement, and easing worries. Burrell and Anderson (2008) explore how the Internet helps produce images of new opportunities, lifestyles, and places, images that encourage early hopes and desires to move. Stevenson (2009), in a study of job searching, finds that the Internet intensifies people's information-seeking activities, causing them to read

more job postings, apply for more jobs, and become more spatially extended in seeking opportunities. Furthermore, Moon et al. (2010) find a positive, though weak, relationship between degree of personal Internet use and interregional migration planning. Such a positive association is also found in a representative survey of young Swedes' completed moves and future migration plans (Author(s), 2013).

In an earlier paper examining the role of the Internet in non-local migration, we found that Internet use in migration is very diverse in terms of the focus of use and type of support (Author(s), 2014). This diversity was found to be connected to the specific stage of the migration process, and a typology of four phases useful in enhanced research was discerned. The first three phases refer to the more broadly defined pre-migrant phase discussed by Hiller and Franz (2004): (i) In the inspiration phase, online information and personal contacts (e.g. email contacts and social media) are used as sources of desire and support when plans to move may progress. People experience increased awareness and knowledge of opportunities and conditions in other places. (ii) The information screening and sorting phase includes the regular monitoring of migration opportunities. The Internet is then perceived as important in trying to realize migration plans that have advanced and become spatially fairly well-defined. Regular information-seeking routines concerning, for example, adequate employment and housing in preferred environments and places are established by subscribing to information lists and update alerts. (iii) In the phase of practical and emotional preparation, virtual practices are used for support in making the move once it is decided on, including in the preparation and administration of practical matters (e.g. change of postal address, TV and broadband subscriptions, and hiring moving assistance), and to emotionally prepare

and reduce anxieties related to the imminent move (e.g. by learning more about the destination and becoming 'virtually familiar' with the place in advance).

From a theoretical perspective, the attempt to link online search to certain stages of the process of migration decision making appears reasonable and requires more detailed exploration. Previous research rooted in the theoretical understanding of decision making and spatial mobility (see e.g. Gardner et al., 1986; Gollwitzer, 1996; Heckhausen, 1991) and the principal theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) demonstrates that the formulation of migration plans (e.g. influenced by the sorting and screening phase discussed above) has a certain predictive value as regards final outcomes and actual moves. However, the earlier phase of inspiration comprising more indefinite desires to move elsewhere appears less closely associated with resulting spatial behaviour (Kley and Mulder, 2010). In our view, the inspiration phase is when the manoeuvring room (or potential opportunity space) is defined rather than when the actual migration is directly predicted. Our previous study (Author(s), 2014) indicates that the Internet is particularly influential in the inspiration phase, by broadening potential action spaces, relaxing constraints on perceived opportunities (e.g. in relation to work and education), and by sustaining individuals' desires to change their environment or discover new places.

This conclusion is theoretically aligned with the notions of 'reach' and of stock of knowledge in the life-world analysis developed by Schütz (1970, 2011), originally introduced and elaborated on in the spatial and mobility studies of Hägerstrand (1978) and Buttimer (1980). More recently, it has been emphasized by Author(s) (2004) and Bakardjieva (2005) in their analyses of the socio–spatial implications of Internet use, by

Dant (2012) regarding the role of television, van Egmond (2007) regarding the choice of destination in tourism and travel, and Engelbrekt (2011) in relation to a multitude of imaginative, virtual, and communicative mobilities. Shütz (1970) distinguished between the worlds within the actual versus potential reach of an individual. 'Actual reach' refers to one's spatial and temporal location and the part of the world accessible to one's immediate experience. 'Attainable reach', being part of a broader conceptualization of 'potential reach' (also including 'restorable' reach, e.g. places experienced earlier in a person's biography), is oriented towards the future. It denotes how mass communication and informal communication with friends and colleagues, on one hand, and expert systems (e.g. search engines focused on migration) on the other bring previously 'unknown' places/parts of the world within an individual's reach. Social media and the Internet arguably play an important role in realizing indeterminate horizons, rendering them explicable, and in familiarizing their users with new places and situations – maybe even blurring the original distinction between attainable and actual reach (as suggested by van Egmond, 2007). Against this conceptual background and brief state-of-the art review, our paper contributes to the literature by further exploring and specifying the functions and implications of virtual practices in the early inspiration phase of the migration process.

Data and method

We draw on empirical data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a group of young adults in Gothenburg, Sweden. The interviewees were selected in a two-step

process. First, in line with our focus on people's experiences in the pre-migrant phase, we specifically needed to select respondents with articulated thoughts to move (non-locally), in the near future and thus probably being able to reflect on the role of the Internet in the migration process. For this purpose, a mail survey was sent to all students who had graduated from the University of Gothenburg from 2006 to 2010 with a bachelor's or master's degree in human geography. This population consisted of 167 individuals, 94 of whom completed the survey. Sixty of these were approved to participate in our in-depth interview, and 39 of these expected to migrate within two years.[1] Second, 24 of the 39 candidates were interviewed by one of the authors. The remaining 15 were removed from the sample because of difficulties either contacting them or arranging an interview time. The final sample consisted of 14 women and 10 men aged 24–30 years, all highly educated. Most of them lived in the city or region of Gothenburg at the time of the interview, while a few had moved to other cities in Sweden. Most of them were gainfully employed, while some had moved to other universities for advanced studies. All said they were considering moving elsewhere in Sweden (non-locally) and six of them internationally as well.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and centred on the respondents' own reflections, activities, and decisions in the pre-migration process, with a particular focus on the role, implications, and support of the Internet. An interview guide addressed four broad issues: i) recent migration experiences and future plans, ii) the occurrence of virtual practices (e.g. seeking Internet-based information and online contacts) related to migration desires and plans, iii) the role

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[1] Respondents were asked, "Do you expect having moved to another place [interregionally] within two years". Those answering "Yes, I have specific plans to migrate" or "Yes, I have unspecified plans to migrate" were included in the sample from which persons for the in-depth interviews were recruited.

of the Internet in advancing knowledge of and openness to opportunities in other places, and iv)

the perceived implications of Internet use for migration interests and decisions. The interviews

were transcribed and entered into a computer program (NVivo) for qualitative analysis and

subsequently coded and analyzed thematically. For the article, questions and answers related to

the inspiration phase, centred primarily on topics ii) and iii), constitute the heart of the analysis.

It is important to note the selective aspects of our case study. By focusing on Internet use

and self-reflection among individuals with fairly active migration plans, our study might

have exaggerated the inspirational role of the Internet in the decision-making process. The

interviewer, however, tried to avoid situations in which negative implications were not

taken into account or discussed. Furthermore, as the sample excludes people with no plans

to move, we cannot consider how this group perceives the role of the Internet in migration

decisions and whether these people were encouraged by Internet use to remain settled or to

move.

Results

The search for opportunities elsewhere

Most of the interviewees (20 out of 24) have experiences of using the Internet in the inspiration

phase of recent and/or planned moves. Our analysis particularly highlights cases where online

practices are perceived to play an active role, shaping early migration considerations in different

ways.

A first main finding is that a majority of the interviewees perceive the knowledge and

conceptions of opportunities elsewhere to change due to virtual practices and Internet use. The

Internet plays a crucial role in the inspiration phase by being the dominant and often only source of information about labour markets, education, and university courses in various places. For example, the interviewees claim that easy online information seeking combined with the effortlessness of considering additional places encourage spatially wide-ranging search practices. The habit of seeking information over relatively large areas is developed by using various search engines (which gather information on university courses and job postings from private companies, public authorities, newspapers, and university-related sites, etc.) that allow for easy access and a broad overview of existing opportunities. The interviewees also cite examples of common search practices being largely decoupled from place, for example, using keywords to 'Google' relevant information, as illustrated in the following quotation.

> For example, regarding [how she found] this in Malmö, these courses you know …
> I wouldn't have found them if I didn't have Internet. At that time it was just me and
> a friend, like okay let's look for everything that is about 'community planning', and
> then we found all the different courses in various places in Sweden that were related
> to that, and I probably would not have done that … I obviously would not have
> been so ambitious if I had to order all the various university catalogues [by
> phone/regular mail]. But I did that via the Internet. And because of that, I could
> come to this decision [to move there], so of course it [i.e. the Internet] has a role.
> (Emma, age 24)

Such extensive search practices are sometimes used very strategically when trying to maximize the field of opportunities, for example, regarding qualified jobs to apply for. Other times they are described in less strategic terms, for example, as part of a back-up plan (in case a very interesting

opportunity should turn up elsewhere) or as driven by sheer curiosity and the fact that a spatially wider-ranging search does not really require more time or effort.

Our results further reveal that a majority of the interviewees believe the use of virtual practices in the early phase of the migration process to produce a better overview and a 'less local' and wider-ranging awareness of opportunities and conditions in other places. Here we find interesting examples of how such a broadened awareness can affect the migration process, for instance, by allowing more distant and unexpected alternatives and places to be incorporated into emerging migration plans. One example is that of *Johanna* who continuously uses the Internet to keep track of the labour market and available jobs, which has inspired her to change migration plans and considerations in important respects.

> Well, yes, well in the sense that all the jobs you look for are on the Internet and you keep track of the labour market online, and because you do it continuously for support in your decisions … It is a very good tool for information seeking and you get inspired to look for jobs and places that you didn't think of before, and you happen to find things online that lead you to new lines of thought. (Johanna, age 29)

However, our interviews also reveal that online information search routines are not really spatially boundless or independent of geographical boundaries. Early migration considerations and related practices either focus entirely on Sweden (or certain parts of Sweden) *or* are directed towards places abroad, but rarely both. Interestingly, migration practices driven by the search for a suitable job do not include other countries, even though the interviewees conclude that this is possible in theory and also recognize the great potential of online searching in this respect. In this context, spatial horizons – although broadened by online searching – do not transcend Swedish

borders. In contrast, certain types of online information seeking and contact are directed entirely towards places and opportunities abroad. Such practices are in general based on dreams and desires to move abroad as part of a deeply felt quest for a radical change of living environment.

A tool of discovery and exploration

Most of the interviewees consider virtual practices to be associated with very low thresholds for information seeking and social contact. Our results suggest that low thresholds encourage the exploration of preliminary migration thoughts, especially when directed towards unfamiliar and distant places. Much of the information now easily found on the Internet would otherwise be very difficult, awkward, or in some cases impossible to obtain in an imagined pre-Internet context. Several (one fourth) of the interviewees also argue that these information constraints would probably have inhibited or discouraged dreams and considerations of relocating to distant places. Also discussed in this context is the importance of the Internet in reducing technical and emotional barriers to personal contacts as a means of exploration. Interviewees generally claim that it is much easier to contact individuals, organizations, and companies in distant places by e-mail than by phone. We find that early migration inspirations are very easily transformed into online search and discovery practices. Vague dreams that would perhaps otherwise remain nothing more than dreams rapidly become more real, respondents argue. One example is a young woman with dreams of moving to the USA. She describes how her use of the Internet in the early phase of inspiration allows her to easily, on her own, and (not least) anonymously sit by the computer and explore opportunities elsewhere.

> No, I probably would not have known where to look, and I think if I had not had the
> opportunity to quietly and by myself look for and, yes, well, read about these

schools that I'm interested in … then I believe that it would have been much harder

to make such a decision. It's just that you [can search for information] on your own,

that you feel that you're a bit in control – that makes it easier to consider decisions

like that. I feel that I can get all the needed information by myself and create my

own mental images and don't have to rely on others. Otherwise, it would have been

so difficult to get that type of information and I really believe that it makes things

much easier, it provides a certain comfort for starting to think about moving.

(Jennifer, age 26)

Furthermore, several (one quarter) of the interviewees put certain emphasis on the role of online

search and discovery as a means of concretizing what a potential move would mean and assessing

how it would affect their lives in various ways. Such interviewees, while searching for

information about job opportunities, also use the Internet to gain a fuller understanding of places

as living environments. This includes many types of information, such as general facts about

geographical location, population size, and communications, but also more detailed information

about a place's characteristics, for example, regarding physical environment, culture, sports,

entertainment, proximity to other places, and services. One young woman describes how she uses

the Internet to gain a more comprehensive view of various alternatives when she is looking for

job ads from unfamiliar places and what this could mean to her life.

Well, when it has to do with moving to some distant place, then you really need a

little more 'meat on the bones' than merely information on available jobs. Then it

[i.e. the Internet] provides support for deciding whether or not something seems like

a good alternative, before you go on and consider it further. I probably would not

have been as open, perhaps [without the Internet]. I think it would probably have

felt more intimidating, for example, to sit in the employment office and learn that there were some vacancies in northern Sweden, and not be able to form a mental image of the place … because you can easily do that when you're online. When I think about it now, if I only had the information on a piece of paper that there was a job available 1000 kilometres north, then I would probably have said 'no'. But now when you can learn so much about a place in advance, well, you get an overview and a sense of what you're getting yourself into. That's comforting and I believe it plays a role, for me. (Johanna, age 29)

Particularizing vague ideas of migration and potential destinations with concrete content is perceived to contribute to a sense of security. The respondents argue that this also makes them more eager to consider unfamiliar places in their emerging migration plans. The potential consequences of a move are more easily anticipated. In sum, these results suggest that the online exploration of distant places and opportunities helps mobilize the early phase of inspiration, leading to more concrete migration plans. Put another way, by being important tools for the virtual discovery of place, virtual practices are perceived as encouraging plans for physical mobility.

Virtual practices and images of place

Our interviewees say that virtual practices are important when considering various place options in the early phase of inspiration. This does not imply that the image of a place presented online always encourages the interviewees, as online images can both encourage and discourage preliminary thoughts of migration. A few interviewees reflect more explicitly on the increasing importance of the online presentation and 'packaging' of places, and on the circumstances under

which places appear on the Internet. This refers both to the content of the information presented and to the appearance or 'style' of the presentation. For example, *Sebastian* argues that official websites are important in creating a first impression of a place, and in determining whether a certain opportunity (e.g. a job) is immediately rejected or considered further.

> Well, I think that by, for example, visiting a website of a city you get a certain image of that place depending on the content of the information and what is presented. And then you compare it with a site that looks pretty boring or is poorly designed, then you would think like, well, no this is not right, they are not up to date. I think if you do not immediately like it, because it says something … In a certain sense they [i.e. websites] are like modern advertising posters or information leaflets for a city and, well, these types of things affect you. (Sebastian, age 25)

However, it is also clear that a majority of the interviewees are sceptical of such official place images, regarding them as a type of marketing that they do not uncritically 'buy into'. In this context, we particularly note the key role of social media as an alternative platform for exchanging images and information that are personal and based on 'insider' knowledge and first-hand experience of a place. One third of the respondents describe their use of social media when first considering particular cities, neighbourhoods, and residential areas as potential living environments. The most common approach is to use social network sites, mainly Facebook, to 'collect' personal experiences from 'friends' who live in, have lived in, or know about a certain place. Such insider or first-hand information is regarded as more valuable than other types of (public) information. It is believed to present a truer picture, be more reliable, and be easier to relate to. It is also perceived as particularly valuable because it is personally directed and because online friends are assumed to know something about one's preferences.

A few of the interviewees use more open and anonymous online social networks, such as open forums or blogs, to collect first-hand experiences and views of places. Although this type of information comes from people who are largely anonymous and unknown to the interviewees, it is still regarded as valuable. The mere fact that the information is personal and from the 'inside' is viewed as more important than who is actually posting it. For example, one woman used an open online forum to learn about Stockholm and what parts of the city to consider and what parts to reject when moving there.

> Particularly when I was considering moving to Stockholm, I didn't know about Stockholm at all and had barely been here. Then [I did] a lot of checking around [on social media]. Where is this? What are people saying about this particular neighbourhood? Is it a good area or a bad area? What is nearby? I used forums to read stuff and what people had to say about the different areas. And I could search for a certain area and see what people were writing, pros and cons, and different things like that. (Rebecca, age 28)

Our findings thus suggest that social media can play an important role in the early, inspirational phase of migration decision making, particularly by serving as an alternative platform for exchanging valuable insider and first-hand information about places and opportunities – information that otherwise would not be easily available.

Closeness to information and temporal boundaries

The interviewees repeatedly discuss the role of the Internet in increasing information accessibility. Our findings indicate that this has implications for temporal and frictional aspects of the early migration process. Most interviewees have developed routines of online information

gathering in relation to various migration motives. Obtaining inputs of regularly updated and tailored information about jobs, housing, etc., is described as a daily habit. Such routines are encouraged by automation, for example, by subscribing to information alerts continuously posted to one's mailbox. As previously discussed (Author(s), 2014), such information-seeking routines are most intense in relation to active migration plans (i.e. the sorting and screening phase). However, some interviewees also suggest that they are increasingly becoming part of the inspiration phase as well. Among one fourth of the interviewees we find interesting examples of how virtual information-seeking routines are established on the basis of very vague considerations ('to someday perhaps find a better job somewhere else'), and in relation to dreams and plans perceived as very distant in time ('to move to the countryside in the future', 'to move back "home" at a later stage', or 'to move abroad sometime'). In some cases, these routines are maintained even after a move is completed, as job offers and housing offers continue to appear in one's mailbox.

> I would love to move back to Berlin someday, for a while – that would be fun. …
> And occasionally I visit some German websites and, like, dream a bit … and then,
> of course, there are some German job sites that I check out from time to time, to see
> what's available. (Mattias, age 28)

The interviewees describe this form of information gathering as a pastime, escapism, something done for fun or out of curiosity ('if something very exciting should turn up') or for extra security ('if things don't turn out as planned'). We also find that the frequency or intensity of such practices varies considerably and that such practices are easily stopped and reactivated, for example, depending on the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the current life situation.

Well, I do it [i.e. look for jobs in other places on the Internet] now and then, more during certain periods. In particular, I search in western parts of Sweden, Gothenburg, and Jönköping but also down south. Often I do it mostly as a pastime. Sometimes, for example, if I'm tired of my work situation, I do it more often. Other times I'm more satisfied, and then I'm not thinking about changing jobs. (Erik, age 29)

Our interview results imply that the immediacy and accessibility of online information encourages ongoing information-seeking practices – although at a low level and in the background. This creates a kind of background awareness of opportunities elsewhere (e.g. in terms of job opportunities, housing, and education), even when thoughts of moving are not active. This is particularly apparent in relation to certain migration motives (e.g. work, housing, and change of environment) that are more affected than, for example, social motives. Our findings suggest that the inspiration phase is becoming longer in duration and more continuous, at least for some interviewees, as a consequence of virtualized information seeking.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that virtual access and the associated accessibility of information could shorten the time needed to convert emergent notions of migration into search, discovery, and communication practices and ultimately into plans. Virtual information seeking thus reduces the friction of the decision-making process. In particular, a few interviewees reflect on how this encourages migration processes based on sudden impulses, whims, and coincidences. For example, they describe how discussions with friends, reading newspapers, certain states of mind, or even sudden ideas generate impulses that are easily followed up on the Internet. The sheer volume of information on the Internet in itself gives rise to new ideas, associations, and traces that are followed, even though they were not initially considered. Furthermore,

interviewees argue that immediate access to online information has probably caused them to 'make something more' of the various prospects that appear in their minds and has reduced the risks of ideas that fizzle out. Overall, we find examples in which interviewees describe how sudden impulses serve to spark the establishment of online practices, sometimes with far-reaching implications for actual migration decisions and plans.

> If I look at myself, it's really, well, about the ease of getting access. Say that you are with some friends and they are talking about some places they have been to or some experience they've had, and you think, well, that sounds very interesting. Then you can check it out immediately [i.e. on the Internet]. Because if you wait a day or two, before looking into it, you will probably forget about it and lose the whole thing. (Elin, age 29)

> Well, when I moved from Stockholm it was not a rational decision. I was emotionally in a fairly bad situation. I was at a friend's place and we had a fairly nice time watching videos and by coincidence I started Googling different university courses and I found a course on tourism and travel in Gothenburg – that's it, that's what I'll do! I submitted an application on the spot. On one hand, I was in a certain state of mind in which I knew that I had to get away, that I needed a change of environment somehow, and then when you go and look for information with an open mind [i.e. on the Internet] you can end up almost anywhere. (Patrik, age 28)

Such observations suggest that the Internet not only encourages routine and ongoing information seeking but also allows information-seeking practices based on impulses and sudden whims. This

is particularly apparent among interviewees who consider migrating for reasons related to change of environment.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the understanding of migration change in the age of digitalization by investigating emerging virtual practices in migration decision-making processes. From a theoretical point of view, our results demonstrate how virtual practices in the early inspiration phase operate and possibly advance the evolution of migration plans in various respects. This is both a practical and policy issue, as it concerns how people's migration intentions and concrete plans might be affected by increased virtual access to information about other places, for example, through place marketing, regular web-based information on housing, education, and labour markets, and social network contacts as well. Our results and conclusions are of course limited by our individual-oriented, case-based approach centred on young adults' perceptions and interpretations. Still, we believe that the main dimensions of influence identified in the study are of relevance also for other segments of potential migrants and thus constitute a relevant basis for future theorizing and action in the field.

Overall, the study identifies three important dimensions of perceived influence concerning the spatial, social, and temporal *horizons of early inspiration* that define the *attainable reach* (or the manoeuvring room) of an individual's future decisions and actual moves. The first dimension concerns the perceived *spatial horizons* of anticipated mobility. We find that young adults often cover wide geographical areas in seeking

relevant jobs, education, or new places to live. An extreme is searches based solely on keywords (e.g. relevant jobs or professions) without any well-defined geographical coupling or limitation. Some describe this strategy of spatially extended search practice as a method to maximize the potential extent of reach and opportunity. Others regard such searches more as an outcome of simple curiosity, as the transaction costs of obtaining additional information are low. In effect, the Internet increases the geographical scope, extending the possible migration area and the number of potential destinations. The interviews illustrate how this broadened attentiveness can actively influence evolving migration plans as less local, less familiar, and more unexpected areas come to be considered – an observation that is in line with the findings of other studies (Gibson et al., 2010; Moon et al., 2010; Stevenson, 2009).

Virtual practices in the inspiration phase also extend spatial horizons more directly than do searches for job and educational opportunities. Low thresholds for accessing information and making social contact mean that even vague dreams of distant, foreign places can be quickly substantiated and that associated place images can become more real and familiar. The improved opportunity to anticipate the future consequences of a certain move paves the way for an increased openness to consider moving to previously unfamiliar places. Internet use could thus play a mobilizing role in the inspiration phase of dreams and thoughts, which spill over to the formulation of more concrete migration plans.

Our results also illustrate how virtual practices and online searching affect learning and image building about places, and can both encourage and discourage preliminary thoughts of migration to a specific place. This emphasizes the importance of how a

place is presented online and the validity of the information supplied. Furthermore, this touches on an ongoing discussion of search and power relationships concerning, for example, who decides not only the content but also what is made visible and accessible on the Internet (Graham et al., 2013).

A second dimension in defining the attainable reach of possible migrants concerns the *social horizons* of the inspiration phase. Our results illustrate how young adults actively use online social contact and social media (e.g. Facebook, blogs, and forums) to form a mental image of living in specific cities, neighbourhoods, and residential areas. This kind of search and discovery goes far beyond merely retrieving images and information presented by official bodies. Information communicated person to person is highly valued: it is perceived as more reliable and authentic as it entails actively participating in other people's first-hand experiences of the world within their attainable reach. Through the Internet and social media, it is in principle possible to access and interact with the collective experience of a place – a kind of crowdsourced migration decision making. The Internet is then used as a platform for exchanging local insider information and for networking, with potentially important implications for resulting migration behaviour. In conclusion, virtual practices in the inspiration stage help expand social horizons and, above all, increase inside information about local opportunities. They inspire and support the pre-migration process and help shape subsequent plans, a result also found in studies of social media and transnational migration (Dekker and Engbersen, 2012; Ros et al., 2007).

A third dimension of attainable reach affected by virtual practices concerns the *temporal horizons* related to the inspiration phase. Virtualization entails radically closer

proximity to migration-related information connected with various motives (e.g. jobs, education, and housing). The development of online practices largely implies the intensification and partly the automation of search habits. This also means that migration-related searches occur not only in direct connection with currently ongoing activated planning; they are also linked to vaguer thoughts and dreams about moving in a distant future emerging from sudden impulses or far-fetched ideas. Established virtual practices and automated searches might also be retained after a realized move, perhaps fuelling thoughts of a subsequent move as information about new jobs or housing continues to come into view. More speculatively, one could claim that an ongoing and increasing flow of information and background knowledge of opportunities in other places forms a platform that perpetuates the inspiration phase, constantly extending its duration until it is more or less continuous. This is in line with the notion that a digital society fosters expectations and lifestyles marked by restlessness, 'nomadism', and weaker ties to place.

A final conclusion concerning time and migration concerns indications of a more compressed and faster decision-making process. Interviewees perceive that increased virtual access to relevant information reduces the friction of migration decision making, that is, the time between initial thoughts and the final decision to make a move. For example, it is easy to turn to search practices in times of dissatisfaction, boredom, and felt needs to change one's living environment or even for sheer escapism. Reduced decision-making friction also increases the scope for impulsiveness, where coincidence, sudden associations, and whims spark inspiration and intention, potentially encouraging what has been labelled a 'hedonistic' migration behaviour (Taylor 1969). It becomes

easier to see, or imagine, that the grass is greener on the other side. However, to what extent and in what ways Internet-based information also affects actual migration behaviour remains an important task for future research.

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