Social Media Use by Refugees Residing in Germany:

Prevalence and a Potential Relationship with Migration Forcedness

Jens H. Hellmann[1], jens.hellmann@uni-muenster.de

Pascal Schlechter[2], ps798@medschl.cam.ac.uk

Judith Knausenberger[1], judith.knausenberger@uni-muenster.de

Katja Wehrle[3], katja.wehrle@psychol.uni-giessen.de

David Schiefer[4], schiefer@dezim-institut.de

Mana Arian[1,5], mana.arian@diakonie-mark-ruhr.de

Ute-Christine Klehe[3], ute-christine.klehe@psychol.uni-giessen.de

Gerald Echterhoff[1], g.echterhoff@uni-muenster.de

[1]University of Münster, Münster, Germany

[2]Cambridge University, Cambridge, United Kingdom

[3]University of Giessen, Giessen, Germany

[4]DEZIM Institute, Berlin, Germany

[5]PSZ Hagen, Hagen, Germany

Abstract

The present study explored the feasibility of data assessment from refugees in Germany via social networking sites ($N = 127$). A paper/pencil approach revealed that almost ninety percent can be reached via Facebook or Instagram. Level of migration forcedness did not vary dependent on whether respondents had an account.

[49 words]

Keywords: refugees; migration; social networking sites; Facebook; integration

The typically low likelihood of a safe return to their home countries among the millions of refugees requires an accurate understanding of factors facilitating or impeding inclusion and integration in receiving countries (Echterhoff et al., 2020). The use of social media services by refugees is relevant for refugee-integration research for several reasons. One fundamental psychological motive for social behavior is the desire for establishing or maintaining connectedness with others (Smith et al., 2015). Given their forced migration, refugees often leave family members and friends abruptly behind in their country of origin. In post-migration contexts, refugees report less social support compared to Western residential populations, which partly accounts for psychological distress (Schlechter et al., 2021). Social media services may provide valuable means to stay connected with fragmented social support networks in a refugee's home country. Additionally, social media services may facilitate connecting with other refugees or residents in the receiving country. Accordingly, the active use of social media platforms can contribute to a sense of belonging, connectedness, and information exchange (Verduyn et al., 2022). However, there is still lack of knowledge about refugees' use of social media platforms.

In addition to gaining knowledge about refugees' social networking sites use, researchers themselves also benefit from refugees' social media use for the acquisition of research participants. Previous research has used social networking sites to recruit refugees for social psychological research (e.g., Schlechter et al., 2021). However, if a large proportion or majority of refugee-community members cannot be reached via social networking sites, such studies are prone to serious sampling biases. An accurate estimate of how many refugees and asylum seekers can be reached via social media services is therefore highly desirable.

One examination of the use of different social media platforms by refugees in Germany from 2016 (Richter et al., 2018) reported different levels of Facebook use among asylum seekers and refugees in Germany, for instance, less than one third of Syrian respondents and more than sixty percent of Iraqis. In contrast to this finding, other studies

with refugees in Germany (e.g., Borkert et al., 2018), Greece (Latonero et al., 2018), or across several countries including Jordan, Turkey, and Iran (Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2021) revealed that approximately 80 percent of refugees use social media services, and among these services particularly Facebook. These discrepancies between previous studies concerning the percentage of how many refugees use such social media platforms warrant further investigation.

The Present Study

We investigated social media usage of refugees in Germany between August and October, 2021. We examined whether social media usage differs as a function of refugees' demographic characteristics and migration forcedness. Germany is a pertinent context for this study as it constitutes the largest European destination for Middle eastern refugees since 2015 (UNHCR, 2020). Our research question necessitated a paper/pencil approach to estimate the percentage of refugees in Germany who use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Conducting the study online could have resulted in the link to the questionnaire being shared via social media. This would have inflated the response rate of those indicating regular activity on social media platforms.

Method

Sampling Strategy

Using established contacts to the broader refugee community, we contacted practitioners who provide assistance for refugees in Germany (i.e., counselors, volunteer language teachers, and social workers in refugee accommodation centers). Overall, representatives from six institutions from different parts in Germany contributed to the data collection.

Participants

In total, $N = 127$ questionnaires were returned. Of those participants, $n = 58$ were female, $n = 36$ were male, $n = 33$ did not indicate their gender. Mean age was 33.38 years (*SD*

= 10.68), ranging between 18 and 72 years (6 participants did not indicate their age). Respondents came from 29 different countries, with most refugees coming from Syria (38), Iran (15), Iraq (13), and Afghanistan (12).

Procedure

Participants were informed about the study on a single page that also included links to and phone numbers of supporting organizations and contact information of the first author they could get in touch with in case any negative emotions arose. Participants were informed that they could keep this sheet. On a separate sheet, they were asked about whether they had an account on the following social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.[1]

Finally, participants were asked about the extent to which they were forced to flee their home country with two highly correlated items (Knausenberger et al., 2022), $r(116) =$ .90, $p < .001$, (*I was forced to flee my home country* and *I migrated because I feared for my life*), perils they experienced before and during their migration each with one item, and about the control they experienced over their life at different stages of their migration, each with one item, all on 7-point scales, ranging from *1 = not at all* to *7 = very much*. Questionnaires were filled out in the following languages: Arabic (29), Farsi (23), English (10), and German (65). Numbers in parentheses represent frequencies of returns in the respective language.

Results

All returned questionnaires were included into the analyses. Because our main research question was to explore how many refugees could be reached via Facebook and Instagram for subsequent studies, we focus here on these platforms.

Refugees' Facebook and Instagram Accounts

Overall, $n = 104$ participants (81.90 %) reported to have a Facebook account. No differences concerning whether participants had versus did not have a Facebook account emerged concerning their age, $t(33.95) = -0.60$, $p = .551$, $g = 0.33$, or their gender, $\chi^2 = 0.11$, p

= .744, φ =.06. There were no gender differences concerning having an Instagram account, χ^2 = 0.15, p = .701, φ =.06, but those with an Instagram account were younger (M = 31.7 years, SD = 10.78) than those without such an account (M = 36.3, SD = 10.12), t(80.21) = 2.29, p = .025, g = 0.44. Of those who did not have a Facebook account, n = 9 indicated to have an Instagram account. Accordingly, of 127 refugee participants, n = 113 (88.98 %) could be reached via Facebook and Instagram.

Having a Snapchat account was indicated by 36 participants (28.35 %). Twenty-three participants reported they had a Twitter account (18.11 %).

We also explored whether experienced migration forcedness differed between participants who had (vs. did not have) an account in one of the social media platforms. There were no such differences (Table 1). Correlations between migration forcedness, premigration perils, and migration perils were high (Table 2).

Discussion

The present paper contributes to the literature on social media use in refugees who fled to Western receiving countries in several ways. Almost 90 percent of participating refugees could potentially be reached via Facebook or Instagram. Discrepancies with prior studies indicating particularly low numbers of Syrian refugee Facebook users (Richter et al., 2018) could be the result of the different times of data collection. That study's data were acquired in emergency shelters soon after refugees arrived, when potentially other immediate needs needed to be addressed.

Another study (Zimmer & Scheibe, 2020) revealed that approximately 60 percent of asylum seekers in Germany who have a Facebook account use it for information acquisition, whereas approximately 40 percent of respondents use it for entertainment. Thus, refugees differ in their motives to use Facebook, with implications for the likelihood of choosing to participate in a study advertised on this platform. Together with this finding, the present study

offers an estimate for the feasibility to recruit refugee participants via Facebook and Instagram for online studies.

Limitations

Missingness was of concern. Consequently, some data like the frequency of the use of different social media platforms could not be analyzed further. Moreover, the present data do not inform about participants' willingness to *actually* participate in online studies. However, this was not the major goal of the study. We mainly intended to explore the percentage of refugees who could *potentially* be reached via social media services and whether having an account was related to migration forcedness. The present sample was likely not representative of the refugee population in Germany.

Conclusion

In the context of social media use, this study is the first to explore potential relationships with migration forcedness (Echterhoff et al., 2020). Results were assessed from a population's sample that was particularly difficult to recruit in times of restricted access to in-person data assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, they provide relevant insight into social media use by refugees in Germany.

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Table 1

Differences between having versus not having an account at social media platforms concerning migration forcedness

	Account		No Account		t	p	Hedges' g
Platform	M	SD	M	SD			
Facebook	5.47	2.29	6.21	1.81	1.62	.115	0.33
Twitter	6.17	1.31	5.65	2.24	-1.40	.169	-0.24
Snapchat	5.94	2.03	5.68	2.14	-0.62	.540	-0.12
Instagram	5.87	1.92	5.41	1.92	-1.00	.323	-0.22

Note. Two items assessed migration forcedness on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, and correlations with confidence intervals

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. migration forcedness	5.61	2.22					
2. premigration perils	5.32	2.37	.85***				
3. migration perils	4.85	2.36	.59***	.66***			
4. current control	4.35	2.14	-.02	-.12	-.14		
5. control before migration	3.98	2.27	-.13	-.10	-.15	.21*	
6. control immediately after migration	3.68	2.14	-.01	-.07	-.09	.38***	.19*

Note. M = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Footnote

[1] Due to missing values, some items were not analyzed: Frequency of use for each platform (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *very often*), number of family members and friends of legal age who also migrated to Germany, and how many of them have an active account on the social media platforms in question, use of other platforms (open format).