Employing Social Networking Sites in migration research: Preliminary findings of the German Emigrants Overseas Online Survey

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1 Introduction

The mobility of people across shorter and longer distances is as old as mankind itself. However, since the end of the 20th century, and in the context of a rapid globalisation of almost all aspects of social and cultural life, mobility and migration are also increasingly in the focus of public and academic interest. Research on international migrants has seen a sharp increase during the last decades (Pisarevskaya et al., 2020), yet most of these studies focus on immigrants. This means that researchers usually limit their analysis to a single or a small number of countries and

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investigate how newcomers fare in them, what consequences their arrival has for the respective societies, etc. Furthermore, large parts of the available scientific knowledge concentrates on the movement of people from countries in the Global South to countries in the Global North or, to a smaller degree, between countries in the Global South. In contrast, far less is known regarding the contemporary migration of people originating from countries of the Global North.

In the last twenty years, the outmigration of Germans raised increasing interest in the media, the general public, and amongst political actors. From a political and economic point of view, the emigration of highly qualified individuals is of particular interest, as it constitutes a potential loss of important human capital in an era that is largely characterised by the transformation of industry-based to knowledge-based economies (Ette & Sauer, 2010). In a broader sense, however, it is important to gather additional information regarding individual motivations, migration and settlement processes, and the daily life of migrants from the Global North (e.g., from Germany) to develop a comprehensive understanding of global migration dynamics. Such knowledge can, furthermore, constitute a valuable point of comparison for integration research directed at immigrants in Germany.

The German Emigrants Overseas Online Survey (GEOOS), funded by GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, addresses the described research gap by focusing on Germans living outside their country of origin. In the above-described sense this study can be characterised as a study of emigrants,¹ as it investigates one specific target group (Germans) on a nearly global scale, without preselecting specific countries for data collection. The main goal of the project is to expand the knowledge on German emigrants. We want, for example, to understand better why they left Germany, whether and how they are still connected to Germany, and what their daily life in their countries of residence looks like. The design of our study allows us to take a comparative perspective and to highlight commonalities and differences between Germans living on different continents or in different countries.

This report presents a first descriptive overview on a selected number of findings from our research. All results are preliminary.

2 Methods

Administrative statistics on immigrants of specific nationalities (e.g., Germans) are not available for all receiving countries on a global scale. Where they exist, they can only provide a rather superficial picture of specific immigrant communities, due to their general nature. Therefore, surveys constitute an appropriate means to collect comprehensive data suitable to shed light on the above-mentioned issues. However, surveying emigrants globally or, at least in a large number of countries, is a complicated endeavour. This is, firstly, due to the lack of a coherent and easy to implement mechanism to recruit eligible individuals on a global level (i.e., a sampling method) and of information a corresponding mechanism could built on (i.e., a sampling frame). Secondly, a sampling frame that exists in one specific country, is not necessarily available in another, resulting in a situation in which cross-national migrant surveys, this

¹In this short report, we use the term “emigrants” in a broad sense, referring to people who live outside their country of birth and/or the country whose nationality they hold irrespective of the duration of such stays and of additional (return) migration aspirations.

means surveys that are simultaneously conducted in various countries, regularly have to rely on a variety of sampling strategies (Reichel & Morales, 2017). This does not only come with the risk of introducing different biases in the sub-samples, complicating comparisons between them, but also tends to increase project costs, even more so if particular sampling approaches also require the use of different modes of data collection. Nevertheless, a number of pioneering studies on German emigrants have already been conducted and gathered valuable information. Their strategies to reach the target population, however, are often very complex and resource intensive (Ette et al., 2020), presuppose access to specific infrastructures or governmental institutions (Schupp et al., 2008; Waibel et al., 2018) respectively the assistance of private sector actors that could function as multipliers (Pfeiffer & Heimer, 2007). These approaches are often successful in recruiting German emigrants who have left the country only quite recently and live in European countries, the United States of America, and Canada. For example, a total of 4,545 Germans living abroad participated in the recently conducted first survey of the German Emigration and Remigration Panel Study (GERPS), which is an important new infrastructure providing migration researchers with a wealth of data. However, due to the project's design, nearly all of the participants had left Germany during the 12 months preceding the survey and almost three quarters lived in other European countries ($n = 3,362$). Of the 1,173 Germans interviewed in other world regions, almost two out of five resided in Canada and the USA ($n = 456$). In contrast, only 129 lived in Central- or South America (including the Caribbean), and no more than 77 on the African continent (Erlinghagen & Schneider, 2020).

Contrary to the above-described limitations, Facebook Inc. offers the possibility to reach and, subsequently, survey emigrants on a (nearly) global level through its social networking services. Because the Facebook ecosystem does not only include the social networking site of the same name but also Instagram, different age cohorts can be reached. A precondition is, of course, that the respective services are accessible from the targets' countries of residence. Furthermore, using Facebook as a sampling mechanism should allow us to reach individuals who have already been living abroad for a considerable time. A final advantage consists in the fact that, contrary to the above-mentioned approaches, sampling via Facebook can be implemented on short notice and can, therefore, be used to conduct surveys on emerging topics. A clear and rather obvious limitation of this approach is that it is restricted to individuals who use Facebook's services.

For our survey, we posted German language advertisements on Facebook and Instagram. These ads invited users to follow a link which brought them to the welcome page of our questionnaire. The data collection of this project started on August 13, 2020 and ended on September 12, 2020. Our advertisement campaign targeted Germans living in any country outside of Europe. We excluded the European continent for practical reasons and because, as mentioned above, the knowledge about Germans living overseas is particularly scarce. However, while we did not actively target Germans in European countries, we did not exclude them from the survey either. Indeed, they were able to participate by invitation because we provided respondents with a link which could be shared with German friends or family members who also lived abroad (including in European countries) towards the end of the questionnaire. To achieve a diverse sample, we divided emigrants' countries of residence into 13 regions and targeted male and female Germans divided in two age-cohorts individually in these regions. This resulted

in 52 subsamples for which we used individual ad sets (for the detailed reasoning behind this approach see Pötzschke & Braun, 2017).

3 Results

At the beginning of this section it should be clarified that none of the presented individual information stem from Facebook, but all were collected through our questionnaire. In fact, the research team did at no point of the project receive direct access to any individual information that users included in their Facebook or Instagram profiles.

3.1 Sample description

During the four weeks of our survey a total of 3,809 eligible participants completed our questionnaire.² These are persons who were either born in Germany or held German citizenship (or both), and were, at the time of the survey, living in another country than Germany. Given the sample size and using the above cited studies as a frame of reference, this project can be considered very successful in reaching and surveying Germans abroad. The map in Figure 1 shows the geographic dispersion of the participants.

Figure 1: Number of participants per country (countries without any reported German emigrants are coloured in grey)

The participants of the survey lived in a total of 147 countries and territories around the globe. Somewhat similar to findings reported in previous studies (see also section 2), the largest sub-groups resided in predominantly Anglo-phone countries; more specifically, in Canada (n

²At the end of the survey, participants were offered a link that could be used to invite family members or friends to participate in the project. Furthermore, respondents were invited to leave contact information so that the research team might contact them in the future. The present analysis includes all participants who completed the survey until the closing screen and those who answered the last substantive question but dropped out of the survey at any of the mentioned two subsequent points.

= 416), New Zealand (n = 359), Australia (n = 343), and the United States of America (n = 321, excluding overseas territories). However, taken together the Germans in these countries only constitute 38 percent of our sample. Indeed, nearly a quarter of the participants (n = 867) lived in Latin America and the Caribbean, 862 resided in Asian countries, and 476 in Africa, two thirds of them in Sub-Saharan countries. The data show that the used sampling approach allowed us to survey ten or more members of the target population in 53 countries and territories.

Contrary to participants of most of the previous surveys on German migrants, the majority of respondents in this project had already spent considerable time in their current country of residence. More specifically, 63 percent³ stated that they already lived there six years or longer. Nearly a quarter had resided for 21 years or longer in the country from which they participated in the survey. Only 13 percent had moved to their current country of residence at some point during the last two years. Most of the respondents had no immediate plans to move once more to another country (including back to Germany). More specifically, only 15 percent said that they envisioned leaving their current country of residence within the next two years after the survey. While slightly less than one third of the participants did not yet know how long they would remain in their current country of residence, 41 percent declared that they would stay for the rest of their lives.

The median age of the survey participants was 45 years, meaning that half of the respondents who provided information regarding their age (n = 3,753) were younger than that. One quarter was 32 years or younger and ten percent were aged 69 or older. The gender distribution was comparatively balanced, with women constituting a somewhat larger part (57 percent) of the sample than men (43 percent). Ten respondents self-identified as a third gender.

Unsurprisingly, a large fraction of the respondents originated from Germany's most populous federal states. Taken together, participants born in North Rhine-Westphalia, Bavaria, and Baden-Württemberg constitute 45 percent of the sample. This is only slightly lower than the combined percentage of the German population living in these states (51 percent, see Federal Statistical Office of Germany [Destatis], 2020). The highest shares of respondents who were born in Eastern-German federal states came from Saxony (5 percent of the overall sample), Berlin (5 percent), and Thuringia (3 percent).

3.2 Education, employment status, and motivation for emigration

In general, the participants had a high level of formal education as 59 percent held a university degree and three percent had acquired the title of master craftsman ("Meister") respectively craftswoman ("Meisterin"). Most of the remaining respondents, 17 percent of the overall sample, had completed a regular German vocational training. The data also show that the majority of the interviewed Germans abroad actively participated in the labour market, with 39 percent being in full- and seven percent in part-time employment. One in five of the emigrants were self-employed. The proportion of employees and self-employed individuals amongst those who actively participated in the labour market (i.e., the total of employees, self-employed, trainees,

³If not mentioned otherwise, the shown percentages refer to the total of all respondents or to the total of all respondents in a specific subsample, respectively.

and people in voluntary services) is clearly different in our sample than in the German population. While in our sample employees constituted 69 percent and self-employed participants 31 percent of this group, the corresponding values are at approximately 90 and 10 percent respectively in Germany (Destatis, 2019). Another sizeable group in our sample are retirees and pensioners (15 percent). The biggest sub-groups within this category were located in Brazil, Canada, and Thailand. However, while some geographic clustering is visible, individuals in this category participated from no less than 70 different countries and territories. Most of the surveyed German emigrants (56 percent) stated that their household's income allowed them to lead a comfortable life in their country of residence. Contrary to that, less than 100 of the participants mentioned that it was difficult for them to make ends meet.

Our preliminary analysis shows that the reasons why the participants in our survey settled in their current countries of residence are manifold.⁴ Most often mentioned were motivations related to family and love (52 percent), work (41 percent), and quality of life (38 percent). Looking beyond Europe, the only region in which work was – with a slim margin – mentioned most often as reason to live abroad was Asia (49 percent); on the contrary, quality of life was most often cited by the Germans living in Oceania (incl. Australia and New Zealand, 55 percent). However, in relative terms, quality of life was also a more important motivation for those who lived in African countries than for their peers in the Americas and Asia.

3.3 Germans overseas during the COVID-19 health crisis

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, one quarter of the interviewed emigrants lived under a lock-down when they participated, this means at some point between mid-August and mid-September 2020. Comparing the relative shares of respondents within the surveyed regions, this was most often the case for Germans in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, 51 and 45 percent of the corresponding subsamples, respectively. Practically all participants had taken specific measures to avoid a COVID-19 infection during the 30 days preceding the survey. Most widespread were simple things, such as more frequent hand-washing, the use of facial protection, and avoiding handshaking, which were each observed by four out of five respondents. More than every second emigrant had also avoided certain social activities, such as meetings with friends.

Interestingly, regarding the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewees abroad had a higher level of trust in the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, whom 60 percent of respondents in the overall sample declared to rather or absolutely trust, than in the head of government of the country they lived in (39 percent).⁵ The same held true for the German government in general, as opposed to the country of residence governments (59 vs. 43 percent). However, there are remarkable differences regarding these trust levels among countries. Figure

⁴The following results are based on a list of answers amongst which respondents were able to choose those reasons for migration that applied to them (closed question). Additionally, participants were able to provide other reasons in a written form (open question). For practical reasons, the latter could not yet be included in this report.

⁵Respondents were asked to state the level of trust they put in different institutions, individuals, and groups regarding their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The questions offered the following answering options: Don't trust at all, do rather not trust, neither nor, rather trust, trust completely. The percentages reported here pertain to the two latter categories.

2 shows the relative shares of respondents who expressed general or high trust in the heads of government in the six largest country subsamples of our survey, using the total number of respondents in these countries as point of reference. As it can be seen, the one head of government who received a much stronger vote of confidence by German emigrants in any of these countries than Angela Merkel was New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Nevertheless, the trust in Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was still slightly higher than the trust in the German chancellor. However, the figure also shows that the degree to which Germans living in the United States of America trusted Donald Trump's handling of the COVID crisis was particularly low, with only 12 percent of the participants expressing confidence in him. Of the included heads government, only the Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, received slightly fewer positive reviews than Donald Trump. On the contrary, given the similarities in political style and views on the crisis between the presidents of the United States and Brazil, it is remarkable that the relative share of participants who expressed trust in the latter (namely, Jair Bolsonaro) was considerably higher, amounting to 23 percent of the subsample.

Figure 2: High level of trust in heads of government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic

Looking beyond governments and politicians, the results show that respondents had confidence in their personal physicians and in local hospitals, with only one in ten and one in five respectively not trusting them. Finally, participants had a high level of respect for experts when it came to COVID-19, as nearly three quarters of them stated that they particularly trusted scientists in this regard.

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