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The role of social media in the sense of belonging of Spaniards in Iceland



Due to the economic crisis of 2008-2014, many Spaniards emigrated to search for work in Iceland. There, the number of Spaniards has increased fivefold between 2008 and 2021, and many of these new migrants are highly qualified young people. A new study explores how social media helped them integrate into the Nordic country, which is still not very multicultural, and at the same time helped them maintain their social relationships in Spain.

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Previous research has documented that social media can facilitate a sense of belonging for intercontinental and forced migrants, while this issue has not been studied for intra-European and highly skilled migrants who tend to have fewer barriers to meeting local people and to travel. Furthermore, it is unknown to what extent migrants adapt their use of social networks to the new cultural context and what consequences this has. The different use of social media in Spain and Iceland provided an excellent basis for studying this question.

The study, published this summer in the journal *New Media & Society*, is based on in-depth interviews carried out in 2017-2018 with 29 Spaniards residing in Iceland (with an average age of 31), and on the analysis of their networks of personal relationships. The participants came from ten autonomous communities, worked in different sectors in Iceland, and differed in their aspirations to return to Spain. They were all active social media users, had a mobile phone and access to the internet. Focusing on the sense of belonging, the researchers distinguished between three groups: those who felt they belonged to both Spain and Iceland (the majority), only Spain or Iceland, or no country in particular.

The first group had more social relationships (and more intimate relationships) in Iceland than the other two groups. This group often hybridized the social media practices of both countries, and they explained that this helped them forge new ties in Iceland and maintain their ties in Spain. Thus, on average, they regularly used four social media platforms (the other groups two) and communicated daily with people in Iceland and Spain through these platforms (the other groups only with people in Spain). On the one hand, they continued to use WhatsApp, although uncommon in Iceland (where 22% of the population uses it), and Skype to maintain their ties in Spain and create a “virtual co-presence.” On the other hand, they learned to adapt and intensify their use of Facebook to the levels and customs of Iceland. They began to use it for work, commerce, economic exchange, seeking information about events, and broader sociability. As one interviewee said, “I mainly use Facebook because Iceland is Facebook. If you’re not on Facebook, you don’t know what’s going on.” Indeed, 91% of the population of Iceland uses Facebook, compared to 58% in Spain. Furthermore, half of the participants in the first group started using Snapchat, a popular social media platform in Iceland (used by 65% of the population) but much less in Spain (22%).

The other groups hardly adapted their use of social media to the local context, therefore, they had fewer opportunities to participate in Icelandic social life, an issue of which they were not always aware. The first group sometimes complained about the time that using social media cost them and the conflicts it caused them with their partners, but they saw it as a necessary evil.

Overall, the study shows that the role of social media depends on the agency of the migrants, and knowing how to adapt to local customs. In short, not only intercontinental and forced migrants benefit from social media for their adaptation to the country, but also intra-Europeans.

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References

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