❚ Article ❚

"When Social Media are Your Sole Life Jacket": A Capability Analysis of Foreign Brides' Empowerment by Social Media in South Korea*

Dominique Nduhura
Hallym University, South Korea
Shin Dong Kim
Hallym University, South Korea
Nadine Mumporeze
Hallym University, South Korea

Abstract

Social media have proven to be among the digital developments that have drawn the highest academic interest since the early 2000s. As regards digital migration, empirical evidence has established countless benefits of using social media, including the reinforcement of social ties (also referred to as strong, weak, and latent ties), thus allowing technologically mediated social practices that were impossible before the advent of social media. From this backdrop, the present paper aims to shed light on the ways foreign brides harness social media platforms in South Korea. This research is underpinned by Sen's Capabilities Approach and, drawing from qualitative interviews and focus groups discussions, the authors undertake to verify the extent to which this approach is appropriate to explain the foreign brides' situation. Key findings suggest that social media play a pivotal role in foreign brides' empowerment as they navigate dire conditions, but also, in some instances, may embed capability deprivation. This research bears significant theoretical implications as regards the Sen's Capabilities Approach. Among other things, the study concludes that individuals are not necessarily responsible masters of their own destinies as contended by Capability Approach proponents.

❚ *Keywords* : social media, capability approach, empowerment, foreign brides, digital migration, South Korea

Introduction

Social media scholarship has skyrocketed in the last two decades in order to establish theoretical frameworks useful to shed light on the uses, benefits, and risks of social media, a phenomenon based on Web 2.0 technical practices (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012; Dahlberg, 2015; Gray, 2015; Madianou, 2015). Attempts to define social media have associated this phenomenon with the recent digital media technologies such as blogs and social network sites that facilitate interaction between users. Through these platforms, users are offered the possibility not only to consume contents but also to create and share online whatever they want by using a variety of devices such as computers and mobile phones (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2012). The present research espouses a definition that views social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). However, understanding this phenomenon poses considerable ambiguities, as for instance what is *social* in social media is not always clearly specified (Shah, 2015) and social media technologies evolve at an unprecedented pace and expose users to complex and unlimited information (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Empirical evidence has established a close relationship between digital media in general, social media in particular, and migration processes (Cabalquinto, 2013, 2016, 2017; Cassar, Gauci, & Bacchi, 2016; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Dekker, Engbersen, & Faber, 2016; Diminescu, 2008; Komito, 2011; Komito & Bates, 2011; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Willson, 2010). Most of these studies concur in saying that, unlike in the past two or so decades, migrants nowadays are able to remain connected to their communities in both their home countries and their host environment—hence the term "connected migrant," which means that migrants nowadays live in a mobility culture through which they are engaged in "continuous co-presence," always reachable by anyone (Diminescu, 2008). Through new media technologies, migrants are able

to nurture their family relationships and thereby lessen the distress caused by a prolonged absence (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Digital technologies also transform and facilitate migration processes by boosting strong ties, weak ties, and latent ties, thus easing access to practical information (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Dekker et al., 2016). However, scholars caution that this role should not be overemphasized, since some individuals may decide to not adopt digital technologies and stick to their offline ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014).

More particularly, a vast body of research has expounded on the benefits of using social media (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2015; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Haythornthwaite, 2002; Lupton, 2014; Mattoni & Treré, 2014; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014; Vitak & Ellison, 2012), with the key feature being the reinforcement of social ties, thus constituting an invaluable glue for strengthening social capital (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Further benefits include ease of academic research (Lupton, 2014), satisfaction of basic psychological needs and motivations and boosting collective self-esteem (Hoffman & Novak, 2012), and somewhat impacting organizational productivity (Aguenza, Al-Kassem, & Som, 2012). Recent research has also commended the participatory culture that stands as the lifeblood of social media. In this way, social media have become a social equalizer where ideas are shared among groups of people who otherwise would not be able to meet or talk (Hwang & Kim, 2015). Social media are also widely lauded for allowing greater immediacy, interactivity, and transparency, hence being praised as game changers in democracy (Willson, 2010) on the one hand, and in community formation and maintenance (Velasquez, 2012; Velasquez & LaRose, 2015) on the other.

However, more recent research has observed that social media may not necessarily live up to the expectations of all users. There is empirical evidence that social media may bear disadvantages such as threatening media governance (Obar & Wildman, 2015) and deterring people's political participation by eroding political trust (Ceron, 2015). With the recent fake news controversy, social media platforms such as Facebook and

Twitter have been invaded by powerful actors such as governments, armies, and different other organizations in order to manipulate public opinion, hence jeopardizing democratic principles in different countries (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). Social media consumption is more and more feared to lead to "infantilism," where users are treated like powerless young children who need to be fed, told what to do, and protected by someone else (Karatzogianni, 2015). Social media companies compel their users to reveal details of their daily life, hence severely threatening their privacy (Elmer, 2015). There is also a relationship between social media consumption and partisanship, as users tend to form small groups with people who share the same interests, which creates what is known as an echo chamber (Jacobson, Myung, & Johnson, 2015).

As far as migration is concerned, the need to use social media is believed to exponentially increase as individuals move to remote places. For those who live close to their families and can interact with them face-to-face, social media effect is more or less minimal, but those who are completely separated from their families always cherish the need to stay in touch and create new friends and communities who may assist them in the migration process (Cassar et al., 2016). Therefore, social media undergird the emergence of transnational identities where migrants, despite being integrated with the host community, still feel that they are full-time members of their home societies through online networks (Dekker et al., 2016; Hiller & Franz, 2004), thus forming an imagined community (Lee, 2012). Additionally, social media and other digital media help diasporas boost their solidarity and identity, which is instrumental in facilitating better living conditions in host societies (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Among other technologies, blogs have proven to be importantly harnessed by migrants by allowing them to freely express their opinions and form online communities, hence furthering migrants' empowerment (Cabalquinto, 2013). A recent study on Filipino migrants in Australia noted that migrants are able to participate in the festive rituals of their distant families, hence restoring intimacy through the use of social media (Cabalquinto, 2017).

The present paper finds its foundation in the above diverse debates and intends to shed light on the ways a particular community of foreign brides harnesses social media platforms in South Korea. We, therefore, seek to provide answers to the following research questions: What are the patterns and trends in foreign brides' social media uses? What impact do social media have on processes of foreign brides' migration and integration in South Korea? It must be noted here that South Korea remains one of the most connected countries in the world, with almost 100% of the population accessing the Internet. The country boasts of the highest Internet speeds and is characterized by pervasive use of smartphones. As a result, social media have become part and parcel of people's activities in a country where respectively KakaoStory, Facebook, and Twitter are the most prevalent platforms (Statista, 2016).

Literature Review

Roots and Development of Multiculturalism in South Korea

Since the early 1990s, South Korea shifted from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving nation (Jun & Ha, 2015) with an increased flux of less-skilled and highly-skilled migrant workers as well as settled immigrants (Seol, 2015). Since 2016, foreigners living in South Korea surpassed two million (A-sa, 2016) and, with these changes, South Korea found itself on the path of multiculturalism as a crucial strategy to deal with globalization and migration imperatives (Watson, 2010). Among the settled migrants are women married to Korean men, referred to in the present study as foreign brides, a phenomenon that has gained in magnitude, with marriages of Korean husbands and foreign wives reaching 65.7 % of all migrants' marriages in 2016 (Statistics Korea, 2017). Economic reasons, as well as the Korean Government's desire to address the low birth-rate, are at the heart of this phenomenon, as women from low-income countries marry Korean citizens in order to migrate to South Korea for better life conditions (Kim, Wie, Son, & Kim, 2016).

It is worth noting that the South Korean government has been en-

couraging this phenomenon, which bears many advantages, including representing one way to bridge the population gaps ushered in by a low birth rate, an ageing population, and a shortage of brides (Moon, 2015). Top suppliers of marriage migrants entering South Korea include South East Asian countries, mainly China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Once in South Korea, the majority of these foreign brides get involved in agriculture-related employments (Chung, Kim, & Piper, 2016; Kawaguchi & Lee, 2012), and most of them live in depressive conditions. Their hardships include various human rights violations (Kang, 2010; Watson, 2010); being considered as others (Y. J. Kim, 2011) or opportunists that marry for interests, which sparks tight control (Cheng & Choo, 2015); being subjected to aggravated battery, family quarrel, rape, divorce, suicide, and killings (C. S. Kim, 2011; Moon, 2015); and finally, like other immigrant women, being appallingly discriminated against in the labor market (Yang, 2017). The situation remains critical despite policies and laws put in place by the government to ease foreign brides' integration (Jun, Hong, & Yang, 2014; Nho, Kim, Shin, & Heo, 2017).

The scholarly literature cited above is replete with empirical evidence that digital technologies play an invaluable role in migrants' lives. However, over the last few years, the academic discourse on migrants and new media technologies has tended to consider migrants to be a uniform group of people whose dominant motivations of using digital technologies reside essentially in nurturing ties with their communities of origin or in host societies. This discourse overlooks the fact that sub-groups such as foreign brides present particular characteristics due to the dire conditions they live in, which may lead them to have aspirations and motivations to engage in digital communication not necessarily comparable to those of the rest of the migrants. Precisely in the case of South Korea, this sub-group is appallingly absent in scholarly work on the capabilities offered by digital technologies in general, and social media in particular. While South Korea has positioned itself as an uncontested world leader in the field of digital technologies (Lee, Kim, Na, & Hu, 2007), it remains scarcely documented how this country capitalizes on its digital power

to set up telecommunications policies appropriate to vulnerable communities such as foreign brides. This paper is, therefore, the first of its kind that, by using Amartya Sen's capabilities' framework (Sen, 2003), seeks to investigate whether and to what extent social media are significant in empowering foreign brides as they settle in Korea and endure adversity in Korean society or actively express themselves and network with others. Thus, this research attempted to zoom in on the various tensions, issues, and concerns embedded in the use of social media platforms by foreign brides. The paper has also endeavored to draw from foreign brides' uses of social media and suggest policy implications to ICT policy-makers in South Korea.

Sen's Capability Approach and New Media Technologies

The present study was underpinned by the capability approach, which is "a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies and proposals about social change in society" (Robeyns, 2003, p. 5). This approach focuses on people's capabilities, that is, what people are able to achieve or be. Therefore, this approach evaluates whether or not people have the freedom to determine their destinies, which involves the ability to choose their development policies such as the various aspects of their well-being. In other words, people should be able to achieve their functionings, understood as the ability to be and do what they want (Sen, 2003). The concepts *functionings* (what is effectively achieved) and *capabilities* (people's potential) embed the freedom to work, rest, be literate, live a healthy life, join a community, be respected, among other things (Robeyns, 2003). Sen notes that the emphasis should be on human capabilities and functionings rather than utilities such as income and commodities. The latter are seen as only tools that help capabilities and functionings to flourish (Sen, 2003). Expanding Sen's work, Martha Nussbaum summarized the capability approach as encompassing the notion of justice where universal values and rights are granted to all humans (Nussbaum, 2000). Using a

capability approach to evaluate people's well-being or development refers to a critical evaluation of existing policies and strategies and their impact on people's capabilities, as well as the constraints that hamper people's well-being (Robeyns, 2003).

The gist of the literature on the capabilities approach and ICTs rotates around theoretical considerations and empirical applications (Dasuki & Abbott, 2015; Dasuki, Abbott, & Azerikatoa, 2014; Hatakka & Lagsten, 2011; Jacobson, 2016; Kleine, 2010; Zheng & Walsham, 2008), with the key argument that technology's ultimate essence is and will always be the extension of human capabilities (Oosterlaken, 2013). To study the relationship between the capability approach and the use of new media technologies, scholars have either explored how the capability approach crisscrosses the debate surrounding digital technologies and social justice (Zheng & Walsham, 2008), or how digital technologies are converted into capabilities (Hatakka & Lagsten, 2011). In practice, this relationship comprises of a number of factors which determine people's readiness to use technologies, such as interventions (any support that encourages people to use technologies), conversion factors (social and environmental factors), and capabilities set (the achieved functionings) (Kleine, 2010). Although we view the capability approach as an appropriate analytical framework for this paper, we also recognize its loopholes as highlighted by various studies (Navarro, 2000; Oosterlaken, 2013; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 2003), including the fact that the capability approach may be an incomplete and ineffective framework when it comes to exploring how ICTs contribute to the attainment of development as freedom to define own destiny (Heeks, 2009; Robeyns, 2006). Sen himself acknowledged the ambiguities that traverse this approach, especially as regards the definition of capabilities and functionings (Sen, 2003). In addition, scholars argue that social media platforms should not be looked at through deterministic lenses since their effects on society depend on users' will (Beasley & Haney, 2015) as well as other factors such as social structures and norms (Haenssgen & Ariana, 2017).

Method

The present study relies on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The choice of these methods was dictated by this study's purpose as well as by the need to collect as many life experiences from foreign brides as possible. Qualitative interviews are widely praised for allowing respondents to freely express their minds and expose their life situations, which helps generate the data that otherwise would be difficult to obtain (Kvale, 2006). Research manuals highly recommend the use of FGDs that gather in one place six to twelve participants per group (especially when the group is homogeneous), as FGDs constitute a favorable setting for the collection of participants' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions (Neuman, 2014). A total of six FGDs were organized for about one hour each, thus giving the participants an opportunity to open up while voicing their views.

Selection of respondents was conducted through a purposive sampling with an intention to involve those participants who would contribute better to this research. Respondents' recruitment was done in a snowball process. A previous study conducted with the same research population supported these qualitative methods and snowball sampling over the rich and diverse findings they yielded (Chung, 2010). We identified initial contacts, who, after understanding the objective of this research, helped select further participants throughout the country, essentially in Chuncheon (Kangwondo Province), Daejeon, Daegu, and Seoul, where a total of 40 respondents agreed to participate in this research. Where possible, the selection of participants was done based on their ability to hold a fruitful conversation in English. At the same time, interpreters were readied before discussions to foresee the instances where respondents' groups would not understand the questions in English. The latter groups hailed from Vietnam, the Philippines and Cambodia, three of the most represented countries in terms of foreign brides' distribution in South Korea (Chung et al., 2016).

We interviewed the respondents on average for about 40 minutes. The collection of field data took place between February and June 2018, usually in public location following respondents' preferences. The interviews and FGDs were recorded and later transcribed prior to the analysis. Data collection was based on an interview guide consisting of 17 open-ended questions, most of which generated additional sub-questions in the course of discussions. The questions were intended to explore foreign brides' patterns of social media uses and motivations for using social media.

Qualitative data analysis was inspired by the grounded theory, which refers to the process through which a theory is established on the basis of the data systematically found and interpreted, which allows the researcher to accordingly predict, explain, and interpret the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is viewed as appropriate for open-ended research questions such as *why* or *how*, which focus more on happenings in the research participants' lives and their decision making by centering on processes, programs, and events (Yin, 2003). Accordingly, we exam-

Table 1.
Analysis of Foreign Brides' Perspectives (N = 40)

Themes	Codes	*N*	Percentages
Positive capabilities	Nurturing connectedness	40	100
	Cathartic role	38	95
	Mutual education	29	73
	Advocacy	25	63
	Business platforms	22	55
	Body celebration	19	48
	Political participation	13	33
	Access to services	7	18
Flip sides	Online marriages uncertainty	18	45
	Source of family conflict	16	40
	Worsening of stress	15	38
	Addiction	11	28

ined, classified, evaluated, and compared the data in order to single out meaning units. The data were then organized and integrated in order to draw generalizations and find out the most outstanding themes. Thematic analysis was carried out by grouping the data into the most significant categories of recurrent themes and sub-themes following causal relationships among them, which is known as "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data were analysed and interpreted essentially in a bid to reflect this research's theoretical framework. The themes were quantified to determine which one occurs the most. This was done on the basis of the number of respondents who converged on a specific theme (See Table 1 below).

In a bid to ensure objectivity and unravel any form of disagreement in theme coding, three coders were used. Interrater reliability was computed and a Cohen's kappa valued at .76 (76%) was established, which indicates substantial agreement among the raters.

As regards ethical considerations, the present study had to deal with power asymmetries that can prove to be considerably challenging, especially when qualitative interviews are conducted with vulnerable groups (as in the present research) to study their life conditions, including personal and family matters. As gender relations may worsen this situation, scholars often suggest that female interviewers take precedence, whether the interviewees are male or female (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Winchester, 1996). To anticipate any possible hiccup, the third author, a female herself, conducted the interviews to ensure that the respondents easily opened up about their experiences. In the same vein, all respondents were assured confidentiality and anonymity, as most of them feared further questioning by their family members. Thus, the narratives were either paraphrased or cited with respondents identified only by city of residence. The main characteristics of this study's participants (see Table 2) included their country of origin, place of residence, occupation, age, level of education, and social media experience.

Table 2.

Respondents' Demographics

No.	Country of origin	Place of residence in S. Korea	Occupation	Age	Education level	Social media experience
1	Cambodia	Chuncheon	Housewife	20	High school*	4 years
2	Cambodia	Seoul	Shop attendant	38	High school	5 years
3	Philippines	Daejeon	Student	27	Doctoral level	6 years
4	Philippines	Seoul	Shop attendant	30	High school	6 years
5	Philippines	Seoul	Shop attendant	25	High school	5 years
6	Philippines	Seoul	Shop attendant	32	High school	4 years
7	Philippines	Chuncheon	Housewife	30	High school	5 years
8	Philippines	Chuncheon	Shop attendant	40	High school	5 years
9	Philippines	Chuncheon	Shop attendant	36	High school	4 years
10	Philippines	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	38	High school	6 years
11	Philippines	Chuncheon	Housewife	35	University	5 years
12	Philippines	Daegu	Housewife	33	High school	6 years
13	Philippines	Daegu	Housewife	44	High school	5 years
14	Philippines	Daegu	Shop owner	45	University	5 years
15	Philippines	Daegu	Shop owner	48	High school	5 years
16	Vietnam	Seoul	Company employee	29	University	6 years
17	Vietnam	Seoul	Company employee	26	High school	6 years
18	Vietnam	Seoul	Company employee	36	High school	5 years
19	Vietnam	Seoul	Housewife	32	High school	4 years
20	Vietnam	Seoul	Shop owner	38	University	5 years
21	Vietnam	Seoul	Shop owner	33	High school	5 years
22	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant owner	49	High school	4 years
23	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	28	High school	5 years
24	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	40	High school	5 years
25	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	29	High school	5 years
26	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	35	High school	6 years
27	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	39	High school	5 years
28	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant owner	40	University	6 years
29	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	27	High school	5 years
30	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	30	High school	4 years
31	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	36	High school	5 years
32	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	34	High school	6 years
33	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	40	High school	5 years
34	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	38	High school	5 years
35	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	24	High school	5 years
36	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	27	High school	4 years
37	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant attendant	37	High school	5 years
38	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant co-owner	40	High school	7 years
39	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant co-owner	39	High school	5 years
40	Vietnam	Chuncheon	Restaurant co-owner	42	High school	5 years

Note. *Respondents either completed or dropped out of high school or university.

Research Findings

While the analysis of the field data indicated that the country of origin, place of residence, and age did not seem to impact much on the respondents' use of social media, their occupations significantly determined the frequency of use. Much as many respondents used social media platforms in their daily activities, others were involved in occupations that were not well compatible with the use of the Internet, at least during daytime, such as restaurant jobs. Some indicated accessing social media during free time during the day and late at night after household chores. In addition, the respondents' level of education and experience seemed to influence their mastery of the technologies used. Participants with at least a university level of education and long experience had more ease in using these tools for one-on-one communication and through online communities. Some of them owned accounts and blogs (or regularly visited) through Facebook and other blogging platforms such as WordPress.com.

Overall, the wide majority of respondents indicated that they freely and easily accessed a variety of platforms in different proportions, respectively Facebook, Kakaotalk, Skype, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, Viber, and blogging. Although none of them exactly remembered when they started using these social media platforms, their experience ranges between four and seven years and their frequency of use climaxed as soon as they migrated to South Korea.

Nurturing Connectedness

Connectedness tops the motives of access and use of social media by foreign brides, who not only would give anything to stay in contact with their families and friends in their home countries in order to quell nostalgia, but also felt the need to establish new relationships with local communities in South Korea, with both Korean citizens and foreigners:

If I were to migrate 30 years ago when social media did not exist, I think it would undoubtedly be far more difficult for me

because my family and friends were very close during this journey. So, lacking access to social media, phone, and Internet would be problematic for me. I would almost certainly miss them a lot, but now it is quite easy because of these technologies. Even though I still miss home, but at least we are able to communicate and that is great for me (FGD participant, Daegu).

By staying connected to families, the participants declared that they didn't feel the long miles that separated them from their home countries. Through live chatting on the platforms such as Skype, they could even participate in events such as birthday parties, where they could go so far as sharing drinks with remote friends.

Cathartic Role

Research participants overwhelmingly converged to catharsis as a paramount fulfilment from social media. Staying connected to families and friends helps the respondents cope with loneliness and depression through sharing difficulties and happiness with their loved ones. Many respondents, especially those with a low level of education or limited e-skills, sought and relied on contents posted by others to survive in the complex and draining Korean context. According to some of them, life without social media would be impossible:

To be honest, social media is my savior, I would say. When I left Cambodia last year, I did not know what to expect from here. I was too young, pregnant, and had no knowledge of the Korean language. Communicating with my husband and in-laws was hectic. A friend of mine who is married here gave me some social media hints that helped me to survive here. She connected me to Facebook groups of other Cambodian women married to Koreans. With them, we can spend hours and hours per day talking about our misery. When my mother-in-law stresses me, I can only find refuge in social media to get some

comfort. I really do not know what I would become of me now without social media (Interview respondent, Chuncheon).

Most respondents also exposed their private life online to showcase how hard it is to reconcile work, studies, and home responsibilities:

I always tell my friends on Facebook how stressed and frustrated I feel for accomplishing my duties as a mother after my tiresome work, some miles away from home. When I reach home in the evening, I must take care of my twins, clean the house, and prepare food while my husband is just sitting in the living room, busy with his video games. I would work my tail off until there is numbness in my hands. It is as if Korean men just think their only responsibility is to make money. I have no rest, just one or two hours at night when all of them are asleep. Of course, I love my husband and family; but this situation is so unbearable that only my Facebook friends can understand. These days, I like posting live videos so other foreign wives can at least sympathize with me (Interview respondent, Seoul).

Therefore, the respondents comforted each other, which helped relieve stress and eventually strengthens the belief that, despite the troubles faced in the Korean society, there is room for hope.

Mutual Education

The major part of the contents shared online concerned practical information, especially on how to survive marriage life, on knowing their rights and self-protection skills, and on learning the Korean language and culture. The foreign brides who migrated to South Korea long ago volunteered to provide newcomers with information online, thus helping them have a smoother integration:

I came here completely unprepared in terms of language, and everything was new to me. My husband does not speak English,

and I spoke no single word of the Korean language in my early days here. Things were really tough, as I had to use sign language to communicate with my husband and mother-in-law. They sometimes got mad at me, and I could not understand why. During my two first years, I was staying with my in-laws. What a crazy time! I did not know what to do and I was always afraid of making mistakes. Luckily, during some chats with friends on Facebook, I got to know that I needed to follow anything my in-laws told me. After some months, I gave birth and things worsened, as I did not know how to raise my child. I would spend nights crying. Thereafter, I had a chance to come across free Korean lessons on a friend's blog. I now realize I would have gone nowhere without these lessons (FGD participant, Chuncheon).

Advocacy

Numerous respondents disclosed sometimes taking a proactive stance to call upon all their friends to have and stick to clear goals, and above all, to be patient with harsh conditions. This sense of activism also targeted young women in home countries to warn them against the dangers of always considering marriage with Korean men as a panacea:

As I started my graduate studies, I came to understand that there must be some friends who are suffering in silence due to the low level of education. I, therefore, decided to create my blog page to empower them and show them that they are not alone. Thereafter, they started sharing the struggles of living in a multicultural household. I started having messages from those who are abused by their husbands and in-laws, divorced, and those living in critical conditions of poverty. My first instinct was, therefore, to always tell them to stand up for their rights and to improve their conditions since they are not alone. I encourage them to never be shy, instead to always open up about the trou-

bles they are going through so that we can empower each other and find solutions for the most vulnerable among us (Interview respondent, Daejeon).

Respondents indicated that advocacy actions often bore substantial results for some women in dire need:

I will never forget how Facebook once saved my niece who lives in Busan. I posted on my blog how she had been thrown out of her home along with her mother due to problems with her husband. She had been badly beaten and abused mentally and chased out with not a single coin and nowhere to sleep. As soon as I asked other women to do whatever they can to assist them, the responses were quick. My niece found a place to stay in and some money was collected to help her. Shortly after, Facebook friends took this case to the police and my niece's husband was jailed (FGD participant, Chuncheon).

Business Platforms

Some foreign brides indicated having found in social media a boon for business marketing, either for the companies they work in or their own businesses. In so doing, the respondents could circumvent costly advertising in mainstream media:

I use social media mainly for my business-related matters. I advertise for my phone company; by the way, that is why they always want to keep me in the house. I have so many followers and friends on Facebook whom I can talk to live to advertise and explain to customers all our services as well as special events in our company. My boss wants me to do that also because I can speak 3 languages fluently: Filipino, English, and Korean. So I am always busy on Facebook (Interview respondent, Seoul).

Body Celebration

A significant part of this research's participants revealed harnessing social media as a favourable forum for those who wanted to liberate themselves from their environment by posting contents that otherwise husbands and in-laws would not tolerate. Moreover, they could openly stand against Korean beauty standards and affirmed that one cannot be perfect regardless of the size or beauty:

> I am not worried to post my photos although I am now as fat as a cow! Since I gave birth to my first kid, my weight increased up to 154 lbs. I tried my best to get back to my initial 148 lbs but I failed. My husband does not like it at all and yells at me all the time. Now, I have decided to accept my situation and feel proud of myself. I post my photos and tell my friends that after all beauty comes in all shapes and sizes, whether you're fat or thin. We are all different and everybody is beautiful in their own way. Seriously, my friends and I always motivate each other that we need to love our bodies as they are (Interview respondent, Daejeon).

Political Participation

A large number of respondents indicated taking part in current debates about matters of interest for their home countries and South Korea. Their discussions ranged from simple comments to bitter critiques:

> Ever since I got married here, the craziness of our President in a visit here in Korea was arguably the hottest topic we have ever debated with friends on Facebook. He publicly kissed married women on the lips, which most of us saw as a serious insult to the women who migrated here. While some of us supported this thing, I personally found it cheap and indecent. A President should not do that, and a proud Filipino woman should not accept this. I think we have degenerated into some kind of idolatry

culture, which is stupid to me (Interview respondent, Seoul).

Access to Services

According to several respondents, social media facilitated access to services such as transportation, taxes, finding jobs, banking, as well as planning of marriages:

> When I was still in Vietnam, I always dreamt of travelling and marrying a foreigner. But I had no idea which country to choose. I spent most of my daytime in cybercafés where I interacted with some friends living abroad. I happened to have at least five Facebook friends and a cousin of mine married here in Korea. I always over-swamped them with questions on what marrying a Korean looks like. I would look at the photos and videos they posted time and time again. I ended up falling in love with this country and asked my cousin to connect me to a Korean man. It then all started on Facebook until my then husband-to-be flew to Hanoi to meet me and my family (FGD participant, Chuncheon).

Social Media Flip Side

The respondents revealed encountering important mishaps in social media such as uncertainty linked to online-initiated marriages:

> I know two or three cases of those whose marriages failed because they dated Korean men online and did not have a chance to know each other face-to-face. Once they reached here, they were profoundly shocked, as the reality was different from what they saw during interactions on Facebook or other tools. By the way, one of them came here and was surprised to find that her Korean husband had another wife. It was total chaos and now they are in the divorce process (Interview respondent, Daegu).

Additionally, social media tended to worsen foreign brides' dependency on their husbands and eventually ignited conflicts in couples. In some cases, participants revealed that their husbands have a monopoly over the use of the Internet:

> As a housewife, I economically depend on my husband. So I constantly ask him for money to get access to social media. Sometimes he screams at me and nearly hit me one day saying that I'm asking him too much while I earn nothing. I know he hates it, but I cannot live without using the Internet (Interview respondent, Seoul).

To some respondents, social media exacerbated stress due to harmful feedback during online interactions:

> There is nothing more demoralizing than when I post something on my blog with an intention to relax and help others' distress; instead, I receive bitter comments; for example, some call me arrogant. This makes me mad and I tell them that I do not care what they say. I never understand the human mind: why do they visit my blog in the first place if they think I do not satisfy them? The last time it happened, we badly argued and I told those who commented to go and create their own blogs instead of messing up my life (Interview respondent, Daejeon).

Of those who could limitlessly access social media, several deplored their somewhat obsessive use of these tools:

> I have had no real problem with social media so far. But they are sometimes overwhelming. They consume most of my time. But there is nothing else I can do; I am simply addicted to social media. That feeling of away making you always want to be connected (FGD participant, Chuncheon).

While some participants declared being somewhat disenchanted and were tempted to quit, none of them has managed to do so.

Discussion

From the short review above, the key findings emerging from this research reveal that key conditions for foreign brides in South Korea to access social media are favorable, including unrestricted and free of charge (or else cost-effective) access to a diversity of platforms. Analyzed through the Capability Approach lens, the findings from the present study suggest that in general, social media infrastructures and platforms empower the respondents in many ways including during migration processes, during integration in the new environment, as well as during the creation and maintenance of relationships both in South Korea and their countries of origin. This result aligns well with previous studies which established that social media allow migrants to navigate through strong and weak ties in order to organize their migration and settle in host countries (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). However, the result slightly diverges from earlier reports that hypothesized that weak ties tend to be more important than strong ones, especially when it comes to finding new information resources (Granovetter, 1973). Instead, the present study suggests that strong and weak ties are inextricably intermingled since essential pioneers and techno-savvy migrants volunteer to assist the newcomers.

When comparing our results to those of older studies, the present research provides a significant and novel finding that social media may be palliative against depression in so far as these tools contribute to foreign brides' escapism. To many respondents, digital platforms constitute a life jacket for staying afloat in the relatively harsh conditions they are subjected to in the host country. Thanks to social media, the respondents do not feel isolation, as they can participate in events in their home country such as birthday parties. This outcome was superficially alluded to by the existing literature, which argues that digital technologies enable migrants to be ubiquitous across country borders, hence allowing digital intimacy and helping the migrants to cope with feelings of anxiety and despair sprouting from a prolonged displacement (Twigt, 2018).

Equally worth highlighting is the leveraging of social media for information and mutual education. The foreign brides who have more e-skills or have spent a long time in South Korea occasionally volunteer to provide newcomers (who are generally ill-equipped in terms of Korean language and culture) with practical information and skills necessary for survival in the Korean environment. A similar pattern of results was obtained by a recent study which showed that Chinese and Korean migrant mothers in the US are substantially empowered by mobile media as regards parenting practices amongst other things (Lee & Chen, 2018). In the same token, research has established that migrants' most important needs in terms of information include, respectively, family welfare in host countries, current issues in countries of origin, and new language and culture learning (Borkert, Fisher, & Yafi, 2018).

The results of the present research demonstrate a significant thrust towards advocacy as some foreign brides motivate their peers for a more proactive but not aggressive stance in order to stay afloat in the nerve-wracking environment of South Korea. The impact of this benevolent activism was strongly confirmed by the users who pointed to having healed from their depression and avoided worse outcomes such as suicide and divorce, as well as championing for assistance to the needy. This finding confirms the existing argument that the repertoire of contention for migrant activists involves more communication strategies than real mobilization for a revolution (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Foreign brides' activism is also visible through their use of social media for political participation. This result is directly in line with previous reports which underscored social media's role in shaping migrants' political practices (Plascencia, 2016; Siapera & Veikou, 2013).

Another intriguing finding is that a non-negligible number of foreign brides turn social media platforms into favourable business *fora* where they engage in free marketing of various products and accessing useful services. This finding was slightly implied in previous research that supported digital technologies' potential to impact on migrants' integration be it socially, politically, economically, or culturally (Dekker & Engbersen,

2014; McGregor & Siegel, 2013).

Social media allow the foreign brides to free themselves from the chains of the new cultural environment, hence breaking taboos and inferiority complexes. As such, they are able to accept and love their own bodies and at the same time contest the harsh Korean beauty standards embedded in "lookism" and sexism. This finding is consistent with previous evidence that Asian migrant women are gradually gaining agency, hence displaying their femininity in order to resist the immobility imposed upon them by socio-cultural environments in host countries (Chib & Nguyen, 2018; Hsia, 2009). On the other side, the finding confirms the existing argument that social media play a paramount role in the construction of migrants' identity (Aguirre, 2014).

However, this study revealed that social media may usher in capability deprivation, (Zheng & Walsham, 2008) such as the breaking up of some marriages due to the inability of the brides to fully get to know their Korean grooms through online interactions. Previous research has alluded to these pitfalls by indicating that foreign brides who use social media for their marriages might be duped, which in most cases derives from the absence of necessary information (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Further mishaps include some respondents' addiction to social media and technicalities connected with unsatisfactory platforms, which echoes previous reports pointing to the same direction (LaRose, Kim, & Peng, 2011; Mahdawi, 2018).

The respondents further highlighted the tendency for social media to increase their dependency on their husbands in terms of access and use of these tools, which occasionally yields conflicts. The finding corroborates previous conclusions suggesting that the digital divide is rampant in multicultural families where digital gaps affect migrant women more than men (Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2016). In the same vein, the present study clearly indicated that social media deteriorate foreign brides' stressful conditions by worsening their stigma due to some interactions that now and again may turn sour. This specific result resonates with recent evidence that, although self-representation of migrants in social media

empowers them in many regards, it may also provoke marginalization (Chouliaraki, 2017).

This study notes that, while engulfed in unfavourable conditions in their families and the Korean society as a whole, the foreign brides constantly use diverse active strategies to not only maintain their relationships in both their countries of origin and South Korea but also maintain and nurture their well-being and empowerment in many regards. Existing research firmly believes that the ultimate capability that people may acquire from new media technologies is "choice," which predisposes them to yearn for other capabilities such as freedom of speech, knowledge, income, mobility, and personal time (Kleine, 2010). The present study, too, has shown that social media promote and enable foreign brides' agency by giving them the freedom to choose their own destinies. We, therefore, suggest that it is high time policy-makers and institutions in charge of migrants' integration substantially incorporated social media into their policies. Policy-makers should go beyond the availability of social media to ensure the effective utilization of these platforms by marriage migrant women. Among other things, domestic violence policy-makers need to encourage foreign brides to occasionally use social media to report abuses, especially those taking place in the private realm. On the other hand, as the foreign brides in this study exhibit a robust reliance on social media for instance during their advocacy and socio-cultural activities, it is imperative for Korean ICT policymakers to capitalize on this drive and create or substantially support these women's platforms.

The present research bears significant theoretical implications as regards Sen's Capabilities Approach. While this approach offers us a significant framework for the understanding of foreign brides' empowerment through social media, it is worth noting that this approach leaves some hazy zones. As highlighted by Sen and other proponents of this approach, the most essential capability humans can achieve is arguably the freedom to attain their own potential. Thus, individuals are considered responsible masters of their own destinies as they choose which capabilities are more
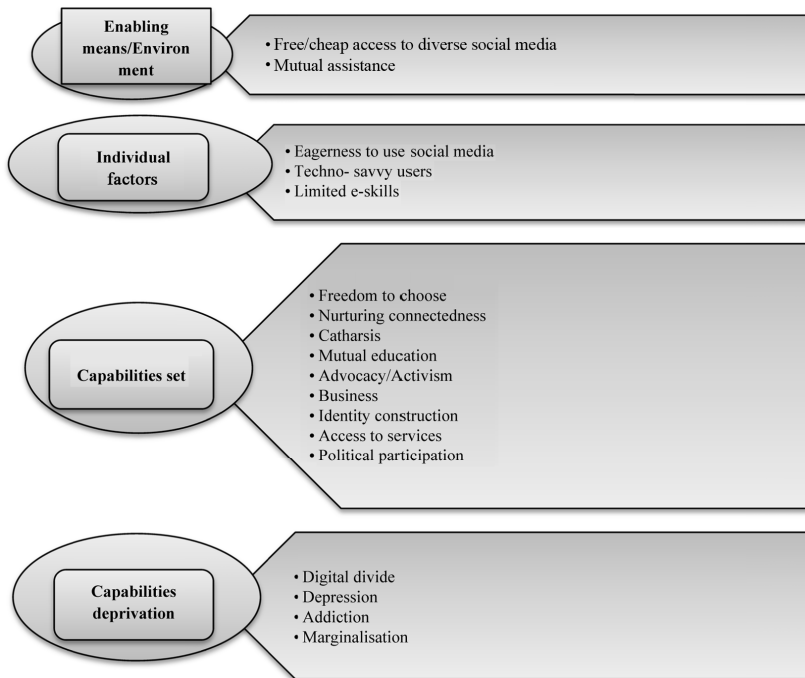
Figure 1. Foreign brides' capabilities mode.

appropriate (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Garnham, 1997; Jacobson, 2016; Robeyns, 2006). However, the results from the present study point to slightly opposite conclusions. Most foreign brides, essentially those with limited e-skills, follow the capabilities selected by their colleagues. Besides, although it appears that some respondents are aware of the disadvantages of social media platforms, they exhibited incapacity to shun these tools. The capabilities achieved by foreign brides are summarized in the model in Figure 1.

As shown the above figure, the host environment offers to the brides a wide range of opportunities in terms of digital technologies, which facilitates considerable capabilities. However, there exist also non-negligible cases where social media may become stumbling stones for brides' integration in the new society.

Conclusion

The present study revealed that social media play a crucial role in foreign brides' lives as they navigate through migration and integration processes in the host country. Nevertheless, it turns out social media embed capability deprivation in some instances, such as by exacerbating depressing conditions. This research has dwelt solely on interviews and FGDs to extract experiences of social media from a relatively small sample of foreign brides. We, therefore, call upon further research to focus on much larger samples and deepen the reflections undertaken in this research by focusing on big data studies in order to determine with precision the various narratives driving foreign brides' presence in social media. In so doing, further research would be able to draw structural dynamics transpiring from the use of social media infrastructures and platforms, thus clarifying the new elites emerging from foreign brides' interactions, amongst other things.

As this paper hinges on qualitative data, we believe a subsequent study is needed to quantitatively provide a sharper analysis by establishing comparisons based on percentages of a number of variables, such as nationality, education level, age, length of stay, and other demographics. On the other hand, neither the present research nor any known scholarly work has ever exhaustively established to what extent social media are facilitating or hampering foreign brides' integration in their host society. For instance, questions remain regarding whether communication and catharsis capabilities provided to foreign brides by social media would hamper their assimilation by short-circuiting their impulse to engage in contact with Korean citizens.

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Biographical Note

Dominique Nduhura (First Author) has a Master's Degree in Culture, Communication and Media Studies from Kwa-Zulu Natal University, South Africa, and trained extensively in digital journalism in Africa, Sweden and the US. He is a Lecturer at the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Rwanda, where he served as Dean for 4 years (2007–2010). His research interests include development communication, digital technologies and society, social media and citizen journalism, and ICT policies, among others. He is currently a Ph.D. Candidate (ABD) in Communication and a researcher at the Institute of Communication Arts and Technologies (iCat) at Hallym University, South Korea. E-mail: dnduhura@gmail.com

Kim Shin Dong (Second Author) is a Professor of Media and Communication and Director of the Institute for Communication Arts and Technology at Hallym University, Korea. He has written and taught on media policy, politics and media, globalization of media and culture. His writings appear in *Asian Popular Culture* (Routledge), *East Asian Cinema and Cultural Heritage* (Palgrave Macmillan), *Mobile Communication: Social and Political Effects* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag), *Perpetual Contact* (Cambridge University Press), *Handbook of the Media in Asia* (Sage), *Contemporary Television* (Sage). E-mail: kimsd@hallym.ac.kr

Nadine Mumporeze (Corresponding Author) (Ph.D.) is a feminist scholar in social sciences and humanities with 16 years of work experience. Her research interests include gender equality, sociology of mass communication and media, sociology of attitudes, sociology of work and employment, social stratification, social change, development theories and strategies, human resources management, and teaching. Her recent publications dwell on gender issues both in the African and Korean context such as the gender digital divide; social media uses by migrant women; sextortion; and factors influencing attitudes towards women's employment. E-mail: nmumporeze@yahoo.fr