



The effect of social networks and norms on the inter-regional migration intentions of knowledge-workers: The case of Saxony, Germany



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the migration intentions of current and future knowledge-workers in Saxony, Germany. A structural equation model (SEM) is applied to analyze the impact of social networks and norms on inter-regional migration, in addition to lifestyle and utilitarian location factors. The dataset comprises 2731 young knowledge-workers. The results show that: (i) migration intentions positively associate with social networks in other cities, subjective norms that West- is better than East-Germany, and that other regions provide better life opportunities; (ii) staying intentions positively relate to having origins, close friends and family in Saxony, and positive consideration of Saxony as an option by the parents; (iii) the structure of the social networks and norms is related to socio-economic characteristics, travel habits, and on-line social networks.

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1. Introduction

Urban agglomerations and world cities, seek to attract and retain knowledge-workers as means for increasing the regional competitiveness, expanding the talent pool and business opportunities, motivating innovation and generating economic growth and resilience (Angelidou, 2015; Beaverstock & Hall, 2012; Darchen & Tremblay, 2010; Florida, 2002; Hu, 2014; Wedemeier, 2010; Yigitcanlar & Lönnqvist, 2013). The social dimension of knowledge cities, or 'people's climate', comprising of social capital, socio-cultural development, networking, diversity and independence, is a strong element of best practice knowledge-based urban development (KBUD) policies. Within the social dimension, the movements of high-skilled employees or 'brain circulation' and the subsequent formation of social-networks are important for increasing the competitive edge and centrality of the knowledge region (Jöns, 2009). Hence, the accessibility of social and professional networks is considered a major development area for attracting knowledge-workers to the region (Yigitcanlar & Lönnqvist, 2013).

While the role of social networks for facilitating migration has been researched, there are significant knowledge gaps regarding the formation and use of social networks among highly-skilled workers (Ryan, Klekowski Von Koppenfels, & Mulholland, 2015) and students (Findlay, King, Stam, & Ruiz-Gelices, 2006). Yet, it seems that the role social networks play in the migration of highly-skilled workers has

been largely under-estimated, possibly because of the convention that the migration of knowledge-workers is of individual nature (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Ryan et al., 2015). Recent qualitative studies, such as the studies of Ryan et al. (2015) and Brooks and Waters (2010) contest this approach by presenting evidence that international migration of highly-skilled workers is often grounded within social networks, with family encouraging migration by establishing traveling norms and role models, with friends and colleagues establishing connection across regions for education, entry to the labor market, and to the formation of migrant communities that provide further social support (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Cappellari & Tatsiramos, 2015; Krabel & Flöther, 2014).

The primary focus of this research on the link between social networks and knowledge migrants has been on international migration, while the relationship within country level is an emerging research theme (Dahl & Sorenson, 2010). The inter-regional location choice of university graduates for example, is often modeled at the residential choice literature only in relation to individual socio-economic characteristics, employment opportunities and regional attractiveness (Busch & Weigert, 2010; Dotti, Fratessi, Lenzi, & Percoco, 2014). Dahl and Sorenson (2010) present evidence that, besides the main effect of work opportunities and wages, proximity to family and friends is secondary factors related to inter-regional location choice of knowledge-workers in engineering and technology in Denmark. Brown and Męczyński (2009) find that proximity to friends, having a family in the city, and originating from a region, are, alongside career opportunities, the most popular reasons for choosing to reside in Poznan and Birmingham. Similar results are obtained by Hu (2014), who found that while lifestyle and transport ease are important to 83.1% and 75.1% of

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movers in the decision to reside in the Greater Sydney region, proximity to family and friends is an important location factor to 51.2%, similarly to career opportunities (58.4%). Darchen and Tremblay (2010) state that work opportunities and social networks have a greater influence than the quality of place on the retention of students in their university city after graduation. Kôu and Bailey (2014) report that positive social norms towards migration play a role in outbound migration, while family ties play a major role in return migration. Krabel and Flöther (2014) estimated a model for inter-regional mobility of German university graduates as a function of socio-economic characteristics and field of study, social ties in job search, human capital, and the urbanization degree of the region. Buenstorf, Geissler, and Krabel (2015) estimated a model for inter-regional mobility of German university graduates as a function of employment opportunities, regional characteristics, geographical roots and dialect, which could be considered as indicators of social and cultural proximity.

Our study focuses on the inter-regional migration intentions of university students and recent graduates in the five years after their graduation. Students and recent graduates form an attractive subset of knowledge-workers due their increasing inter-regional flows, and their contribution to the formation and resilience of knowledge cities from increasing university ranking to their potential as the next generation of the region's social, cultural and intellectual capital, and in forming hetero-local social networks (Findlay et al., 2006; Jöns & Hoyler, 2013). Common phenomena are relocating from the home region to another university region, and relocating from the university region for seeking employment opportunities (Dotti et al., 2014). According to Busch and Weigert (2010) about 30% of the university graduates leave their university region within ten years of their graduation. Yet, studies suggest the existence of a 'critical age' to migration due to increasing difficulty as age progresses (Brooks & Waters, 2010), and the ease of migrating prior to home ownership and forming life partnerships (Busch & Weigert, 2010). Hence, university graduates within five years after graduation are possibly an important target population for cost-effective attraction and retention of knowledge-workers.

Our case-study focuses on inter-regional migration intentions to/from the region of Saxony to other regions in Germany. The focus on intra-country inter-regional migration provides important information regarding the attractiveness of regions at the national level, their potential of economic growth and fostering innovation, and potential within-country inequalities (Dahl & Sorenson, 2010). The importance of this issue is conveyed with recent evidence from Italy and Germany. In Italy, about 20% from the students enrolled in universities in the north of Italy come from the south, compared to 1.4% vice versa (Dotti et al., 2014). In Germany, university graduates are highly mobile on their first job search after graduation, but mobility differs across regions. While about half of the university graduates leave their university region when taking the first job after graduation, only one quarter of the students migrate out of Bavaria but about 40% migrate out of Saxony when entering the labor market (Krabel & Flöther, 2014).

In order to shed light on the relative role of lifestyle, place amenities, social networks and norms, the proposed behavioral framework for the inter-regional migration intentions of knowledge-workers views classical location factors, Florida's lifestyle theorem (2002) and social networks and norms as integral parts of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991). The rigor of the proposed unified approach lies in its comprehensiveness and its compatibility with behavioral paradigms. The behavioral framework is validated by means of structural equation modeling (SEM) because of its suitability to accommodate latent attitudinal factors alongside observed characteristics. The proposed model is applied to a large sample of 2731 students and young knowledge-workers. The data were collected by means of a tailor-made web-based survey.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the methodology and details the employed

disaggregate models. The third section presents the research region and the sample characteristics. The fourth section shows the estimation results. The last section draws conclusions and suggests further research directions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research hypotheses

We focus on the question "what is the role of social networks and norms, versus lifestyle and regional amenities as motivators to stay or to leave Saxony as the current residence region?" Based on the recent development in the literature presented above we state the following hypotheses:

- H1.** Social networks and norms play a main role in forming inter-regional migration intentions, similar to lifestyle, job opportunities, and location amenities.
- H2.** Large social networks across regions facilitate inter-regional migration of knowledge-workers.
- H3.** Knowledge-workers who originate from a region are less likely to migrate from the region than ones who reside in a region but originate from another region.
- H4.** Knowledge-workers who have friends or relatives in the region are less likely to migrate from that region compared to other knowledge-workers.

We qualify this question by also looking at the relevance of these ties from the perspective of the knowledge-worker.

- H5.** Subjective norms that another region offers better opportunities than the current region of residence are a motivator for inter-regional migration.
- H6.** Parental consideration of the current region of residence as a good future choice option encourages knowledge-workers to stay in the region.

The specific approach we apply below allows looking even deeper into social networks and social norms, while statistically validating the research hypotheses.

2.2. Behavioral framework

The proposed behavioral framework for examining the research hypotheses views classical location factors, Florida's lifestyle theorem (2002) and social networks and norms as integral parts of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991). According to the TPB, favorable attitudes, subjective norms and perceived ease of acting lead to intentions to act, eventually materializing into observed action, provided the availability of resources and opportunities. The classical utilitarian approach for residential location choice, applied also to inter-regional migration, discusses location choice associated with the region characteristics in terms of career opportunities, housing affordability, place amenities, transport and accessibility (e.g. Kim, Woosnam, Marcouiller, Aleshinloye, & Choi, 2015, Kunzmann, 2009, Niedomysl & Hansen, 2010, Yi & Lee, 2014). Florida (2002) showed that knowledge-worker's migration is strongly related to the non-tangible social ambience and lifestyle, thus leading to integrating lifestyle with the classical utilitarian approach (e.g. Frenkel, Bendit, & Kaplan, 2013, Lawton, Murphy, & Redmond, 2013). In agreement with the approach of Frenkel, Bendit, & Kaplan (2013a, 2013b), which integrates lifestyle, place amenities, workplace and housing preferences, we conceptualize knowledge-workers as household members, employees, and leisure consumers. We postulate that residential location choice is related to the perceived ease of residing in a region (livability) and

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