Online Discussion Forum And Pre-migration Information Seeking: An Affordance Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Potential immigrants increasingly rely on online technologies to access needed information as they have limited access to offline sources of information at the pre-arrival stage. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of online discussion forums in facilitating potential immigrants' access to relevant information about the host country labor market. This paper draws on extant literature on computer-mediated communication and a qualitative content analysis of 363 forum discussions to explore the phenomenon of increased use of online forums by prospective immigrants to Canada to access relevant labor market information. We draw on existing concepts of technology affordances and knowledge exchanges in online discussion forums and contextualize them to the dynamics of immigrants' labor market integration. We found that online forums have the potential to facilitate immigrants' labor market integration by enabling the continuous access to and exchange of needed information across time and space. For potential immigrants, online discussion forums afforded them the ability to seek employment advice, share migration experiences, establish connections with similar others, communicate with individuals in the receiving country, and exchange information about the host country labor market.
The relevant information gained in online forums can help potential immigrants calibrate their expectations about the host country, make migration decisions, and plan for migration. More adjusted expectations and better preparation pre-migration can in turn facilitate better adjustment and employment integration post-migration. Overall, this paper highlights the importance of online discussion forums in facilitating information sharing and co-creation of new information resources between prospective immigrants and immigrants in the host country. We uncovered several unique discussion forum affordances enacted by potential immigrants. The findings inform policy makers of the role of online discussion

forum technology in providing potential immigrants with low-cost pre-arrival information and training available across time and space that can assist with adjustment and labor market integration post migration.

Keywords: Computer-mediated communication, discussion forums, employment, technology affordances, potential immigrants

INTRODUCTION

Immigrants constitute a significant part of the global talent pool, and their labor market integration benefits receiving countries' economies and societies (Cerdin et al., 2014; Chand and Tung, 2019). Immigrants bring valuable skills and foreign market expertise, increase cultural diversity and innovation in organizations, and reduce overall skill shortages (Cascio and Boudreau, 2016; Vaiman et al., 2015). Moreover, research has shown that immigrants' integration in the receiving country's labor market is critical for their settlement, adaptation, and social integration (Kaushik and Drolet, 2018). Employment also grants immigrants a sense of belonging, recognition, and acceptance (Dietz et al., 2015; Frank, 2013). Further, employed individuals have significantly higher levels of physical and psychological health than unemployed individuals do (Paul and Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012). However, the above advantages are only attained when immigrants are fully integrated into the labor market (Fang et al., 2013; Reitz et al., 2014).

The Internet is increasingly becoming the primary information source for immigrants due to its accessibility, availability, and low cost (Ahmed et al., 2020; Shuva, 2021; Yoon, 2017). Immigrants use different online technologies to seek and access different types of employment information, such as search websites (e.g., Google) to search for specific employment information, social network sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn) to draw on their social capital and job search websites (e.g., Indeed and Monster) to find available jobs. Internet sources are particularly critical for potential immigrants, who are in the process of immigrating or consider immigration to another country (Shuva, 2020; Solati et al., 2021), given their limited access to alternative offline sources of information in the host country. This trend has been exacerbated with measures to contain the global COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly reduced the availability of formal and informal face-to-face support (Nardon et al., 2022).

One type of under-researched Internet technology used for immigrant employment is online discussion forum. While online forums have been identified as being used for accessing how-to information (i.e., how to go about searching for and getting a job?) (Janta and Ladkin, 2013), to our knowledge, no comprehensive study of the use of online discussion forums for accessing labor market knowledge by potential

immigrants exist. In this study, we examine the increasing use of online technologies by potential immigrants in support of labor integration by exploring the role of online discussion forums in immigrants' integration into the Canadian workforce. We examine online discussion forums through an affordance theory lens, which has been identified by Information Systems (IS) scholars as an appropriate approach to study the adoption and use of technology
(Volkoff and Strong, 2017).

This paper contributes to the emerging literature on online technology affordances and immigrants' labor integration (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Janta and Ladkin, 2013) by elaborating on online discussion forums' affordances and their role to facilitate continuous access to, creation, and exchange of labor-related information. In addition, by exploring the online information resources created and exchanged through interactions among online forum participants at the pre-arrival stage, we identify areas of need and opportunities to further enhance immigration services. We propose that information resources available and created in online forums can help potential immigrants calibrate their expectations, make migration decisions, and better prepare for migration and job search. These, in turn, can help potential immigrants better integrate and adjust into the new country after migration.

Existing research on immigrants' labor market integration has primarily examined offline sources of information and immigrants who were already in the host countries (Dietz et al., 2015; Lim 2021; Reitz et al., 2014). Our study expands our understanding of immigrants' labor market integration by examining online discussion forums as an information source for potential immigrants who are still in their home countries. This study is important as potential immigrants have limited or no access to offline sources of information at the pre-arrival stage, in which their information needs and challenges have been understudied.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next sections we present relevant literatures concerning immigrants' labor market integration and computer mediated communication (CMC), discussions forums, and technology affordances. Next, we discuss our methodology, analysis and finding. Finally, we discuss implications to theory and practice and outline limitations and suggestions for future research.

IMMIGRANTS LABOR MARKET INTEGRATION AND CMC

Knowledge of the local labor market and information environment are critical in finding relevant employment and facilitating integration (Caidi et al., 2014; Farh et al., 2010). Immigrants can seek employment information from various sources, including family, friends (Shuva, 2020), ethnic communities (Makwarimba et al., 2013), co-workers and locals (Boese, 2015), government organizations (Darrow, 2015), immigrant service organizations (Nardon et al., 2021) and online communities (Bancarzewski and Hardy, 2017; Janta and Ladkin, 2013).

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However, immigrants typically lack relevant knowledge of the local information environment, have limited access to local information sources, and are typically detached from longstanding social relationships and family and friends who stayed behind in the home country (Shuva, 2021). In addition, for potential immigrants, who are still in their home countries, online technologies may be the only viable and available source of information about the host country.

With online communication becoming increasingly accessible and available, more and more immigrants are turning to seeking employment information online (Ahmed and Veronis, 2017; Fang et al., 2013; Yoon, 2017). CMC refers to exchanges using Internet-based technologies that facilitate interactions between individuals or among groups, such as online discussion forums, social media, social network sites, e-mail, and instant messaging (Ahmed et al., 2020; Au and Ho, 2021).

Seeking and accessing relevant knowledge in person (offline) takes more time and requires more effort and resources than online. Searching employment in traditional ways (e.g., visiting employment agencies, reading print) is costly and the information is not always accessible (e.g., employment agencies are typically open Monday to Friday only) or timely (e.g., newspapers with job postings are typically printed weekly and have limited number of jobs). In comparison, online technologies facilitate continuous access to employment information from anywhere (Sirikul and Dorner, 2016; Yoon, 2017). In addition, many employers have also shifted their recruitment to online (Dillahunt et al., 2021).

Research has shown that individuals who use online technologies for employment information search typically experience better employment outcomes and shorter unemployment duration than comparable individuals who searched offline only (Beard et al., 2012; Kuhn and Mansour, 2014; Shahiri and Osman, 2015; Suvankulov et al., 2012). A study examining German and South Korean job seekers (Suvankulov et al., 2012) found that individuals who used the Internet for job search found employment sooner (in both countries) and they had a higher probability of being re-employed (7.1% higher in Germany and 12.7% in South Korea) in the next 12 months. Unemployed individuals who seek work online are also about 50% less likely to cease their job search and find employment about 25% faster than comparable individuals who do not seek work online (Beard et al., 2012; Kuhn and Mansour, 2014). Research has also shown that more and more immigrants favor online technologies over traditional media information sources (e.g., print, radio) and are turning to online technologies such as job search websites and online discussion forums to seek and access relevant information (Ahmed and Veronis, 2017; Janta and Ladkin, 2013; Sirikul and Dorner, 2016).

The examination of the role of job search websites has received a considerable attention of researchers in the last two decades (e.g., Kuhn and Mansour, 2014; Shahiri and Osman, 2015). Research has shown that compared to offline searches (e.g., searching newspaper job ads), online job search sites allow users an easier

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and less costly way to search vacancies and apply for available jobs (Kuhn and Mansour, 2014; Suvankulov et al., 2012). In addition, individuals tend to find more information about available jobs online than with print outlets (Shahiri and Osman, 2015). Online job search websites also allow users to filter available jobs by specifying job location, required experience, pay level and education level, and enable users to apply to an unlimited number of positions (Shahiri and Osman, 2015; Suvankulov et al., 2012). In addition, individuals tend to find more information about available jobs online than with print outlets (Shahiri and Osman, 2015). Online job search websites also allow users to filter available jobs by specifying job location, required experience, pay level and education level, and enable users to apply to an unlimited number of positions (Shahiri and Osman, 2015; Suvankulov et al., 2012). However, before applying for specific jobs in the job search websites, immigrants may want to gather more information about the job, local labor market, and advice about application process and practices in the host country, among others, and many are turning to discussion forums to seek the needed information. Discussion forums allow users to interact freely and are relatively unconstrained compared to job search websites. They afford job seekers to seek personal advice and have open conversations with others who are experiencing similar challenges. This study aims to expand our limited understanding of the role of online discussion forums in immigrants' employment.

ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

Online discussion forums are websites or parts of websites where individuals with similar interests can connect, communicate, discuss, seek, and exchange information through posting initial messages or replying to existing messages (Figer and de Torres, 2012; Le, 2018). Online discussion forums are topic-centred and focus on cooperative information exchanges on specific topics of interest to the discussion forum community (Ki and Jang, 2018; Malinen, 2015).
Online discussion forums have been examined in several areas of research, including education (e.g., Griesbaum et al., 2015), health (e.g., Lee, 2017), and psychology (e.g., Zhao and Basnyat, 2018). Studies have demonstrated that online discussion forums can facilitate information exchange and co-creation of knowledge (Griesbaum et al., 2015), acculturation (Schau et al., 2017), community formation and engagement (Caidi et al., 2014; Kim and Sundar, 2016), and enhance users' social networks (Figer and de Torres, 2012). However, despite growing research on issues related to global migration and immigrants' employment (Guo and Al Ariss, 2015), the unique challenges and opportunities of online discussion forums as a source of labor information has mostly been ignored in research (few exceptions are Bancarzewski and Hardy, 2017; Caidi et al., 2014; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Janta and Ladki, 2013), a gap that this study addresses.

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In the examination of information practices of foreign-trained health professionals in online discussion forums, Caidi et al. (2014) found that online discussion forums facilitate search and access to specific information, creation of virtual community, and interactions with others on the subjects relevant to the specific community.

In their study of online forums administered by Polish migrants in UK, Fitzgerald et al. (2012) also found that discussion forums facilitate exchanges of relevant information, networking, and development of migrant communities.

Similarly, Janta and Ladkin (2013) shown that discussion forums can be critical transnational platforms facilitating networking and information exchanges between migrants and their co-nationals. Moreover, online discussion forums can also facilitate international migration and migrants' employment by connecting migrants with potential employers by providing a platform for matching migrants to search jobs and for recruiters to post job advertisings (Janta and Ladkin, 2013). The investigation of use of discussion boards by Polish workers in Japanese foreign investments in Poland (Bancarzewski and Hardy, 2017) showed that in additional to facilitating community formation among workers, online forums also provided a platform for workers to share their experiences and perceptions as well as to vent about their work, which in turn facilitated development of community of coping and resistance. We extend this literature by looking at online discussion forums affordances and their use by potential immigrants seeking work in Canada.

AFFORDANCE THEORY

Originally rooted in ecological psychology, affordance theory refers to how an environmental object can be engaged as perceived by a goal-directed actor (Gibson, 1977). Engagement refers to the affordance the object provides in meeting the goal of the actor, but does not refer to a property of the object itself. Over time, affordance theory has been cultivated by Information Systems (IS) researchers as an appropriate lens in which to study the adoption and use of technology by individuals and/or organizations (Volkoff and Strong, 2017). Within an IS context, affordances refer to the potential actions technology affords, but not the technical characteristics or functions of the technology (Majchrzak and Markus, 2013). For example, online discussion forums have characteristics that allow users to post and comment on a variety of topics and one of its affordances is the action of exchanging information to those who are in need (Ki and Jang, 2018).

Affordance theory has been used in a multitude of IS-related studies. Recently, Hacker et al. (2020) mined a large Twitter dataset to uncover affordances and constraints of using web conferencing systems during the pandemic. Strong et al. (2014) extended the definition of affordance from the individual to the group, to an organizational context in their study of electronic health records within a workplace setting. Using an interpretive case study, Seidel et al. (2013) identified the types of

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affordances that are required in IS for sustainability transformations. While IS-related studies using affordance theory are varied, the majority of them have focused on the use of social technologies.

Based on a literature review of social media studies, Treem and Leonardi (2013) inductively coded and identified four affordances common to social media. Those affordances, including visibility, persistence, association, and editability, have been used as a starting foundation for subsequent studies. For example, Wallace et al. (2018) studied envy on Facebook through an affordance lens and adopted and subsequently added additional affordances to the original four identified by Treem and Leonardi. Ellison et al. (2015) adapted and extended the main social media affordances in studying knowledge sharing in distributed organizations using enterprise social networking sites. Other studies, while acknowledging the initial work of Treem and Leonardi, derive the technology affordances from data either directly or secondarily reflecting social media usage. These include the inductive discovery of affordances and constraints from twitter data on the use of web conferencing systems during the pandemic (Hacker et al., 2020) along with the study of fashion organizations' affordance discovery process of the adoption of enterprise social media (Ng and Yee, 2020).

Depending on the study, technology affordances are presented in various levels of abstraction and extent of context. For example, Treem and Leonardi's seminal work presents affordances that are relatively close to the technology (low level of abstraction) and with little context (i.e., they can be applied across different situations). Alternatively, other studies, for example Wallace et al. (2018) and Ellison et al. (2015) present affordances at a much higher level of abstraction (further away from the technology) and in a very specific context. This research extends Treem and Leonardi's affordances to online discussion forums.

We thus present the new affordances at a consistent level of abstraction with Treem and Leonardi's original effort. We also present an additional set of affordances that are at a higher level of abstraction and in the specific context of pre-migration employment seeking.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Our focus on discussion forums was driven by the importance of exchanges of relevant information with other immigrants to better understand the local labor market integration in the host country combined with the unique affordances of discussion forums. We adopted an inductive, qualitative, and elaborative study to explore the role of online discussion forums in immigrants' labor market integration. Elaborative studies use preexisting concepts or a preliminary model to develop new theoretical insights (Fisher and Aguinis, 2017). In this study, we draw on existing concepts of technology affordances and knowledge exchanges in online

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discussion forum and contextualize them to the dynamics of immigrants' labor market integration.

Consistent with inductive research, we iteratively examined and described the collected data using concepts and literature that the analysis suggested being relevant (Miles et al., 2014). Specifically, we used qualitative content analysis to study 363 discussions collected from online discussion forum that focuses on labor market integration of potential immigrants in Canada to examine the content of the discussions (i.e., identify discussion topics and categories).

Since existing research on a phenomenon is minimal, coding categories are derived directly from the data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Consistent with previous studies using affordance theory to study social media phenomena (Ellison et al., 2015; Wallace et al., 2018), we started with Treem and Leonardi's (2013) four established social media affordances and then inductively determined additional fundamental forum affordances. We then view the fundamental affordances at a higher level of abstraction, to identify the actions that online discussion forums provide in pre-migration employment seeking behavior. Finally, we discuss the resulting actions and the role of online forums in facilitating immigrants' labor market integration.

Data Collection

In line with research examining online forum data (e.g., Bancarzewski and Hardy, 2017; Janta and Ladkin, 2013), we collected the data from the Canada Visa forum, which is the largest online forum discussing topics concerning immigrants and Canada. The Canada Visa forum was founded in 1996 and is has over 860,000 registered members (Canada Visa, 2022). The discussions in this forum are publicly available, and the forum participants are aware that their messages can be viewed and read by others. After selecting the forum, we examined and identified relevant sub-forums. A sub-forum is a part of the online discussion board, and it contains discussions concerning a specific subject.

Although the Canada Visa forum contains 34 sub-forums, only four sub-forums were deemed relevant as they primarily focused on topics directly concerning immigrants' labor market integration in Canada, such as finding work, self employment, labor legislation and resources for finding a job in Canada. The data was collected in January 2017, and we focused our examination on discussions in which the most recent reply was posted on or after January 1, 2016. A discussion is a topic posted on an online forum, and it typically contains an initial post and subsequent replies (Griesbaum et al., 2015). The final sample for this study is 363 discussions by potential immigrants. This number of discussions is consistent with prior studies using online forum data and qualitative content analysis. For example, Bancarzewski and Hardy (2017) examined the content of 200 posts on newspaper discussion board written by Polish workers in Japanese foreign investments in

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Poland, and Burri et al. (2006) studied 459 initial posts from an online forum aimed at recent ex-smokers.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We analyzed and organized the data using a qualitative content analysis approach (Cho and Lee, 2014; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) supported by Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. First, we analyzed and categorized the content of the 363 identified discussions (both initial posts and full discussions) to gain better understanding of the data and the role of online forums in facilitating potential immigrants labor integration.

In all 363 initial posts, potential immigrants were requesting rather than providing information. The prevalence of requests is consistent with extant research on online health and education forum communities suggesting that most users' initial posts seek rather than provide resources (e.g., information, emotional support) (Kim and Sundar, 2016; Mo and Coulson, 2010). Next, we analyzed and categorized the 363 initial posts by topics, such as finding jobs, education, and work permit, to gain a better understanding of the discussion categories. Through multiple iterations of data, we grouped initial posts into eight final categories: job opportunities (25%), finding and applying for jobs (22%), visa and work permit (21%), education and qualification (9%), business opportunities (6%), others' experiences (6%), work practices and living in Canada (6%), and resources (5%).
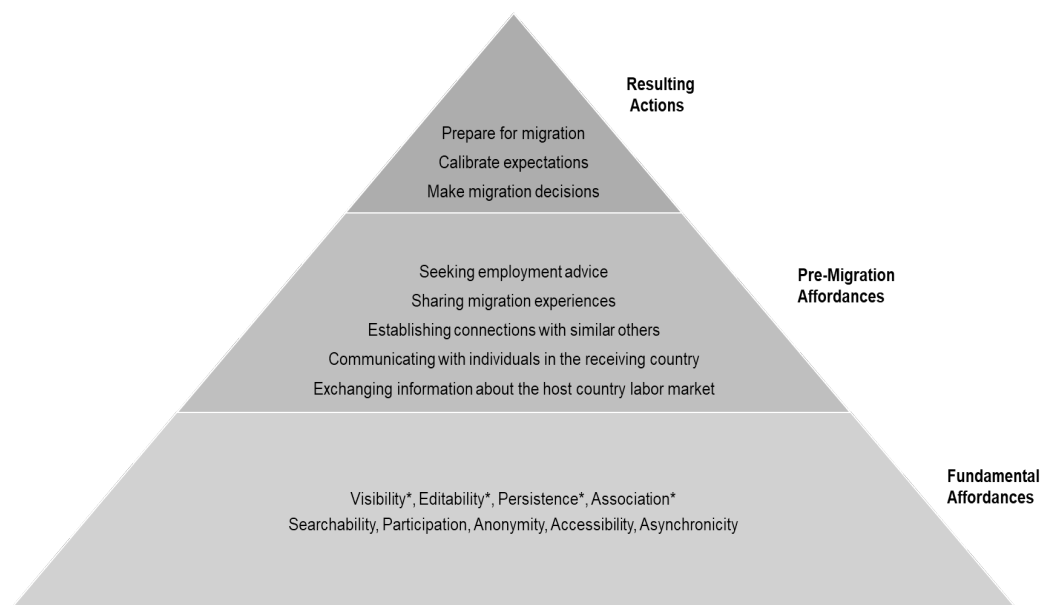
Finally, we proceeded to examine whether the requests for information were met. For this analysis, we focused on the full discussion (initial post and all subsequent replies) and categorized discussion outcomes based on whether a request in an initial post has been met (Caligiuri et al., 2001; Sun et al., 2014). The information request was concluded to be met when the information requested in the initial post has been fully provided in the subsequent replies in the discussion. In this sample of 363 discussions, about 67% of the requests were met. The rates of needs met varied for different categories of topics requested in initial posts. For example, for the top three topic categories (i.e., job opportunities, finding and applying for jobs, and visa and work permit), needs were met in 62%, 66% and 68% of discussions respectively. While overall only 67% of needs were met with online forums, it is important to consider that the cost of seeking and obtaining information resources is substantially lower online than offline. Moreover, for potential immigrants, online is often the only option.

Discussion forum affordances

In our examination of the data and online forums technology, we established nine fundamental affordances that have the potential to facilitate immigrants' labor

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market integration by enabling the continuous access to and exchange of needed information across time and space. For potential immigrants, the online discussion forums afforded them the ability to: seek employment advice; share migration experiences; establish connections with similar others; communicate with individuals in the receiving country; and exchange information about the host country labor market. The relevant information gained in online forums can help immigrants plan for migration, calibrate their expectations and make migration decisions. These findings are illustrated in figure 1 and discussed below.

Figure I. Online discussion forum affordances and labor market integration

Resulting Actions

Prepare for migration
Calibrate expectations
Make migration decisions

Pre-Migration Affordances

Seeking employment advice
Sharing migration experiences
Establishing connections with similar others
Communicating with individuals in the receiving country
Exchanging information about the host country labor market

Fundamental Affordances

Visibility*, Editability*, Persistence*, Association*
Searchability, Participation, Anonymity, Accessibility, Asynchronicity

Fundamental affordances of discussion forums

We realized that online discussion forum technology affords users new ways for accessing and exchanging information resources across time and space. Building on the Treem and Leonardi (2013) framework and four universal technology affordances (visibility, editability, persistence, and association), we inductively identified five additional affordances (searchability, participation, anonymity, accessibility, and asynchronicity) of online forum technology. Table 1 below lists and describes the nine affordances, starting with the four universal technology affordances (marked with *) identified by Treem and Leonardi (2013).

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Table 1. Fundamental affordances of discussion forums

Affordance	Description
Visibility*	Users' communications and profiles are continuously visible to others. This allows potential immigrants to view and read needed information about the host country labor market at any time.
Editability*	Users can edit their communications after posting. This is important, as other communication technologies, such as email and text-messages, do not allow users to edit their communications after sending. Editability affords immigrants to clarify their questions or provide additional information or context in the discussions.
Persistence*	Communications remain available always and the communications do not expire or disappear over time. This allows immigrants to read older discussions and to gain greater understanding of the host country labor market and others' experiences with the job search.
Association*	Users can make connections between online forum participants and their content. This allows potential immigrants to identify specific individuals with relevant knowledge and experience, as well as learn about experiences and challenges that others' have been dealing with over time.
Searchability	Users can seek relevant information and users using a build-in search function. This allows immigrants to quickly search for and identify relevant information (for example: "*There are many threads on this so use the search function.*") and/or search for specific users with relevant experience.
Participation	Users can choose to participate actively (by starting new discussions or by replying in the existing discussions) or passively (by lurking - viewing existing discussions only). This allows immigrants to passively view existing information without participating in the discussions.
Anonymity	Users can choose to register in the forum with their real names or use nicknames to maintain anonymity. This can help

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	potential immigrants feel more relaxed when participating in the forum and when asking questions, they may not feel comfortable requesting if they could be identified, for example, when communicating face to face.
Accessibility	Users can always access the discussions from anywhere in the world. This allows potential immigrants access the forum and needed information 24 hours a day and when they are still abroad.
Asynchronicity	Users can reply to others immediately or at some later time. This also allows potential immigrants to seek and request information from multiple potential providers at the same time.

Pre-Migration forum affordances

Online discussion forums offer new ways of communication that differ from traditional in person communication (Majchrzak et al., 2013; Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Online discussion forum technology affords potential immigrants easier, convenient, and low-cost ways to seek, access, and exchange needed employment information, and to identify and interact with knowledgeable others across time and space. The fundamental online discussion forum affordances greatly enhance the access to information and reduce the costs of seeking and acquiring information as immigrants do no need to travel to and interact with specific individuals face-to-face. The online discussion forum technology affords immigrants new, easy, convenient, low-cost way to interact with other immigrants at any time and from anywhere. The affordances allow potential immigrants to search, access, exchange and co-create needed labor market information resources that are always visible and accessible to all.

Through our inductive analysis and using the affordance theory lens we identify potential immigrant enablement of progress towards their goal of labor market integration in a foreign country. Using the results of the fundamental discussion forum affordance identification and further data analysis we identified five critical pre-migration affordances. These affordances and the examples from the discussion forum are presented below in Table 2.

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Table 2. Pre-migration affordances examples

ID	Label	Example
A1 Seeking Employment Advice		
A1.1	General request	*I've been searching for a job in the last three months… I have a degree in Computer Engineering and advanced degrees in Electrical Engineering, but I cannot find a job neither in the industry nor in the academia. They all need 5+ years of experience on average, and I have none, which makes it even harder. Any advice?*
A1.2	Professional accreditation	*I have a question, for the Egyptian bachelor's degree of Mechanical Engineer... Do they need a license to work as an engineer in Ontario? If yes, can anyone tell me where I can find more information about that?*
A1.3	Visa processing time	*Hi, I am an IT professional and have 11 years of experience... I want to know how long the processing time is for getting work visa in Canada, assuming I have received the offer letter.*
A1.4	Resume content	*"Could anyone please share a C++ Software Engineer chronological resume after removing your personal details."*
A2 Sharing Migration Experiences		
A2.1	Topic variety	*I would like to share my person advice and experience while I have been here and how I had few jobs offers and landed a good job. Things to do once you land…*
A2.2	Professional accreditation	*Having been through hell and having spoken to many others sailing in the same boat, here's a word of sincere advice for Newcomers applying for registration as a Professional Engineer to the Professional Engineers Association of Ontario (PEO)… Before you decide to apply to PEO, STOP and research the Registration Process for P. Eng. Designation in all the other provinces of Canada to enable you to decide as to which province has a process that suits you. It is immaterial as to which Province you live in. You can apply for registration to any provincial association…*
A2.3	Resume content	*As a thumb rule the following points may help you get a job soon, this is what I personally did… 1. Create a Canadian format CV… 2. If you are coming from the middle east then please lower your expectations, the economy of the middle east is flush with oil money and companies there will often pay you a lot of money for jobs like administrative officer*

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		or secretarial jobs. In Canada and the real world such is not the case…"
A3 Establishing connections with similar others		
A3.1	Similar employment goals	*Guys, all those who have contacts with people working with Canadian public sector at either municipal or provincial or federal level, please drop in your contact number. I will create a WhatsApp group for networking and to discuss the process to get government jobs.*
A3.2	Similar work experience	*People with mainframe work experience please network here*
A3.3	Similar destination location	*Anyone who had already landed in Saskatoon or Regina, please share the real-time experiences in terms of job search, weather, atmosphere, housing, etc.*
A4 Communicating with individuals in the receiving country		
A4.1	Migration advice	*I need feedback from people who are already in Canada. Subject: Confused to decide to migrate or stay in India. I am 38 Yrs. old, already well settled in India in senior management role with annual Income after tax: 60,000 CAD /annum. I have a daughter (9 Yrs.) in grade 4, my spouse is teacher in elementary school…*
A4.2	Job application	*I have a question for people already in Canada looking for a job or already working. When applying for a job does the cv or resume, should include a photo or not? I heard is not always a good idea, but others say that it does not matter.*
A4.3	Education credentials	*For those who are already in Canada, I just want to ask if courses/certificates/diplomas earned through distance learning like ICS are acceptable credentials to Canadian employers… Do certificates from distance learning institutions have any bearing?"*
A4.4	Job search	*I am planning to immigrate to Canada in this year… Requesting senior forum members who are already in Canada. Please let me know if you come across any Jobs in CCTV and electronic security.*
A5 Exchanging information about the host country labor market		
A5.1	Employment conditions concerns	*What happens if my employer never paid me either the salary, he declared he would pay me on the LMO nor the 6% vacation?*

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A5.2	Work legalities	*I just have a question about some companies that are not paying their employees when they do overtime. In some industry, it happens a lot. I was thinking if it's that even legal at all.*
A5.3	Professional certification	*My wife is a bio-medical engineer in India, she works at a hospital supporting patient diagnosing and treatment by installing, testing, calibrating, and repairing biomedical equipment… Are there any mandatory certifications/exams she must pass in order to find/apply/practice this occupation?*
A5.4	Salary and taxes	*Suppose I get a job that pays me $60,000 CAD per year in Toronto. How much would my take home salary be after federal and provincial tax deductions?*

A1. Seeking employment advice

Our examination of data indicates that potential immigrants actively seek employment advice using the online discussion forums. Requests range greatly with many of them being very general in nature while others are very specific. We found evidence of broad-based job seeking advice where professionally qualified potential immigrants are having problems finding employment (A1.1), while also observing specific inquiries about professional accreditations and how they impact job opportunities (A1.2). Examples of other detailed requests include inquiries about processing times for a visa (A1.3) and about resume content and construction (A1.4).

A2. Sharing migration experiences

An analysis of the data shows that contributors to the discussion forum often share their own migration experience. Given we are focused on pre-migration posts, migration sharing is uncovered through discussion within the forum. In general, content that shares migration experience is very prescriptive in nature often detailing step by step processes to be completed once a person immigrates and can cover a variety of topics including opening bank accounts; and obtaining drivers licenses and health cards (A2.1). Other experience sharing is very specific. For example, evidence shows clarification about professional designations (A2.2), and specifics on what to include in resumes (A2.3).

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A3. *Establishing connections with similar others*

The concept of similarity in our context can refer to personal characteristics (for example, gender, culture etc.), spatial characteristics (for example, same home country, and/or same destination country), or potential immigrants and immigrants experiencing similar employability goals and challenges. For example, our data indicates coordinated efforts to connect and collaborate with others who are seeking similar employment (A3.1), share similar work experience (A3.2), as well as communication about similar destination locations (A3.3).

A4. *Communicating with individuals in the receiving country*

An analysis of the data shows that pre-migration contributors to the discussion forums often specifically reach out for information to individuals who are already in the receiving country. Through discussions, users sought advice about job application process and preparation (A4.1) and information on validity of educational credentials (A4.2). Others requested advice to help them decide whether they should migrate to Canada (A4.3). There are also many examples of requesting help with finding particular jobs in Canada, such as electronic security (A4.4).

A5. *Exchanging information about the host country labor market*

An analysis of the data shows that contributors to the discussion forum share host country labor market information including potential employability outcomes, job requirements and work conditions. Through discussions, users of the forum have expressed concerns about working conditions, taxes, vacation pay and treatment by employers (A5.1). Others have questioned the legalities of overtime pay, probation period, and firing without notice (A5.2).
Overall users are exchanging and gaining knowledge about the realities of work life and process in the host country. There are also many examples of exchanging information about required professional certifications to be able to achieve employability goals (A5.3) and salaries and taxes in Canada (A5.4).

Resulting Actions

Potential immigrants used online discussion forums to seek information to enhance their knowledge of the Canadian environment and the labor market. We found that potential immigrants were mainly seeking relevant information to help them (a) calibrate their expectations about the new country, (b) better prepare for migration, and (c) make decisions. To explore the outcomes of the needs sought, we examined the 242 pre-arrival discussions with needs met and found that the content of the

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discussion aided immigrants in calibrating expectations in 133, prepare in 97, and make decisions in 12.

Calibrating expectations: In the discussions with a focus on calibrating expectations, potential immigrants described situations or information about their assessments, beliefs, perspectives, and views of the Canadian labor market. They typically sought information from other online forum participants to verify the accuracy of their understandings. Consider the example below, where the potential immigrant salary expectations were adjusted through the discussion.

> Initial post: Recently, I had a debate with some friends since we all are studying computer science, about the salaries for a new grad student! Some said it's around 50k/year or maybe 60k/year maximum. While I thought that a new grad student can earn around 80k/year as a software developer. Does anybody have any information about the salaries here in Canada?

> Reply: 80K is not very realistic - although I am sure there are some that do. 50K - 60K is more realistic for a new grad.

> Reply (Initial post author): Thank you for your post. Do you think that 50k is sufficient for a cost-living?

Prepare: The information that potential immigrants accessed through online discussion forums can also help them better prepare to deal with the new labor market environment's challenges. In our data, several immigrants sought information to help them better evaluate the situation and get ready for the migration and labor market integration before landing.
Consider the example below, where the immigrant is advised to prepare for a three to six months job search.

> Initial post: How fast did you find a job as a newcomer? How was it?

> Reply: Few of my friends were able to grab a job (contracting work with IT companies in most cases) within 2-3 months after landing. This totally depends on the field (technology/function) you are into and your experience. Personally, I will be prepared for 3 months (6 months worst case scenario).

> Reply: One month is just a personal motivating number I have put in. Realistically I know it will be more than that.

Make decisions: Information about the labor market (e.g., job opportunities, accreditation requirements) can also help immigrants make decisions about

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migrating to the new country and pursuing labor market integration. In our data, potential immigrants requested information about job opportunities and accreditation to assess whether they should migrate to Canada, to other countries, or stay in their homelands. Consider the example below, where the immigrant sought advice to decide whether to stay in India or migrate to Canada.

> Initial post: I am confused about my decision. Me and my wife both having Government Job in India, having Rs. 80,000/- per month family income. Also have PR in Canada… It is tough for me to choose the right one (INDIA or CANADA). Please suggest me expert advice, what is best for me and my family.

> Reply: Canada has better opportunities if you have the perseverance but comes with uncertainty and possibility of a downgrade. I say downgrade not as depreciating term, rather a reality check. Seeing Doctors and Dentists driving cabs here and doing other survival jobs, I wonder if they made right decision to come to this country, when they could have easily made much better living at home with their qualifications.

> Reply: In your case, it looks like you have a good situation and would stay in India (if I were deciding).

Labor integration

Potential immigrants typically acknowledged accessing information in their replies in the discussions by showing that they gained new information or learned new things about the Canadian labor market using appreciative statements such as *"thank you for the information, it is very helpful*," *"useful information*," *"I really appreciate the useful information you posted here*," *"thank you very much, you've been very helpful."* These appreciation and thankfulness statements indicate that immigrants accessed information in the online discussion forum and found it valuable and useful.

There were also several examples of successful labor market integration. In the example below, the immigrant could not find a job in Canada and requested advice by starting a new discussion. Online forum participants provided relevant advice in their replies. The immigrant acknowledged accessing the provided advice (e.g., "*got a volunteer position*"), and reported getting a full-time job in the desired profession (i.e., "*as a sonographer*").

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Initial post: I am PR of Canada and looking for the job of a sonographer (one who does ultrasound examination). I am certified with the American registry (which all jobs want) and have been applying for the jobs but I don't get any interviews. I happen to talk with one of the recruiters and she says that I don't have Canadian work experience though I do have about 5-6 years' experience from my home country. I am kind of disheartened. How to crack the ice?

Reply: Canadian experience matters in this country. Try to get involved in volunteer work to gain Canadian experience.

Reply (Initial post author): finally got a volunteer position after a wait of 5 months

Reply: Congrats! It is hard enough to get a volunteer position sometimes. But you made the first step. Keep on trying.

Reply (Initial post author): hi, sorry for the delayed reply. I have a full-time job as a sonographer now...

DISCUSSION

We explored the use of online discussion forums by potential immigrants to Canada to access relevant labor market knowledge. We found that online forums have the potential to facilitate immigrants' labor market integration by enabling easy, continuous, and cost-effective access to and exchange of needed information resources online across time and space. Through participation in the forum discussions, potential immigrants are exposed to relevant information and gained better understanding about the host country's labor market and employment process. In particular, we found that online forum afforded potential immigrants the ability to seek individualized advice, exchange information, share experiences, develop connections with other immigrants, as well as communicate with individuals in the receiving country. These new information resources obtained through online forums help immigrants calibrate their expectations about the host country, make more informed migration decisions, and better prepare for migration and labor integration. Having realistic expectations of the host country and being prepared for the potential challenges can lead to immigrants' better labor market integration in the host country.

Implications for literature on CMC and immigrants' labor market integration

This study contributes to the emerging literature on CMC in the context of migration (Janta and Ladkin, 2013; Mikal *et al.,* 2013) by elaborating on the role of

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online discussion forums in facilitating continuous access to, and exchange of, labor-related knowledge that can help immigrants integrate into a new country labor market. We found that online forums can be an important alternate medium for exchanging and co-creating information and that immigrants found the information in online forums valuable and helpful.

Extant research on immigrants' labor market integration has primarily focused on offline sources of information and immigrants who were already in the receiving country (Dietz *et al.,* 2015; Reitz *et al.,* 2014). Our study shows that increasing number of potential immigrants use online forums for information search, suggesting that potential immigrants have information needs and may have inadequate access to other sources of information.

In line with extant literature (e.g., Caidi *et al.,* 2014), potential immigrants sought information about average salaries, job opportunities, and credential recognition. However, we also found that they sought relevant knowledge on how to find employment and prepare job applications. About 68% of discussions concerned information about *finding and applying for jobs*, *job opportunities*, and *visa and work permit*, suggesting that online forums can also be an important source of relevant information on how to go about finding and applying for jobs. These findings also raise questions about how we think of immigrants' labor market integration and their knowledge needs at different stages of settlement (e.g., Caidi *et al.,* 2014; Farh *et al.,* 2010). The growing number of online forum users (from 580,000 in January 2018 to 860,000 in January 2022) also suggest that online forums are important venue for potential immigrants to communicate and seek needed information about the host country while they are still abroad. It also highlights the need to focus more on the role of online technologies at the pre-arrival stages of migration.

We also found that about 67% of the information requests were met through online discussions, suggesting that online forums can be an important venue for the search, creation and exchange of relevant and needed employment-related information. Due to the ease of access and the low cost and effort required to seek information in online forums, online forums provide a meaningful and viable alternative to offline information sources. The online forums are particularly valuable for potential immigrants as they are still in their home countries and typically have very limited or no access to offline information sources in the host country.

In support of current literature, which suggests that knowledge can help immigrants develop more accurate and realistic expectations about their employment prospects in the new country and influence their overall adjustment and satisfaction (Mähönen *et al.,* 2013), we found that discussion forums also helped immigrants form their expectations about the new country's labor market before migrating. This highlighting the potential role for pre-arrival online support programs to facilitate management of expectations and better adjustment and labor integration post-migration.

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Implications for literature on affordances and immigrants' employment

Prior research examining online discussion forum technology and immigrants is very limited. This study expands our understanding of online forum technology affordances by examining an online forum in the context of potential immigrants' employment and affordances relevant for facilitating employment in the host country. Specifically, this study contributes to the emerging literature on social media technology affordances (Emes and Chib 2022; Hacker *et al.,* 2020; Treem and Leonardi, 2013) by identifying five additional fundamental and five pre-migration affordances of online forums.

Building on the Treem and Leonardi (2013) framework and four universal technology affordances, we identified five additional fundamental affordances (searchability, accessibility, participation, anonymity, and asynchronicity) of online forum technology. We propose that the five fundamental affordances can facilitate immigrants' employment in the host country by facilitating new way of interaction, easy access to and exchange of needed and relevant information about the host country labor environment, and preparation for job search. In particular, online forum allows potential immigrants search for specific topic or information and access needed information from anywhere and at any time. It also allows potential immigrant select level of participation in the discussion (active or passive), degree of anonymity, and choice to communicate (reply) immediately or at the later time. In the specific context of immigrants' labor market integration, we found that discussion forums afford potential immigrants the ability to seek employment advice, share migration experiences, establish connections with similar others, communicate with individuals in the receiving country, and exchange information about the host country labor market. The relevant information gained and co-created in online forums can help potential immigrants calibrate their expectations, make migration decisions, and plan for migration.

Implications for practices

Our study highlights the importance of supporting migrants' pre-arrival, making use of online forum technology to reach them before they land to facilitate better labor market integration outcomes. Immigrants with insufficient pre-arrival knowledge generally face higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty and greater difficulties with integration in the receiving country (Shoham and Strauss, 2007). To facilitate greater labor market integration upon migration, governments may support pre-arrival programs and incentivize immigrant-serving organizations to reach out to migrants at the pre-arrival stage to provide needed training, information, and tailored advice about the Canadian labor market.

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Immigrants support organizations may also accelerate immigrants' labor integration upon landing by connecting potential immigrants with potential employees as well as accreditation bodies for evaluation of their qualifications and skills pre-arrival. Our study also highlights the benefits of using online tools, such as online forums, to provide immigrants with low-cost alternative sources of labor-relevant knowledge that immigrants can easily and continuously access online and from any place. Even if there are official offline sources of information, immigrants may be unaware of these sources, requiring governments and immigrant-serving organizations to monitor, collaborate and contribute to popular online forums where immigrants are congregating and getting information.

The increasing number of immigrants seeking relevant social networks and knowledge in online forums provides government organizations unique opportunities to connect with potential immigrants pre-arrival and provide them with needed knowledge about the Canadian labor market. These forums also offer the opportunity to guide immigrants to counselling services to which they qualify for specific advice and clarification and to help immigrants make sense of ambiguous information. These online resources can also improve pre-arrival immigrants' adjustment and labor market integration outcomes in the receiving country due to better preparation and more accurate expectations about employment prospects before migration. More adjusted expectations and better preparation pre-migration can in turn facilitate better adjustment and employment integration post-migration. These opportunities are even more important after the global COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly reduced the availability of formal and informal offline interactions and delayed migration processes for several months, making pre-arrival online resources even more critical.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examined the data collected from online forum concerning immigrants' labor market integration in Canada. Canada is one of the top immigration countries and has a very long history of welcoming and integrating hundreds of thousands of immigrants in its society annually (Government of Canada, 2020; International Migration Outlook, 2021). This openness to immigrants may have also influenced immigrants' communication behaviour in online discussion forums. Immigrants' interactions in online forums and the findings may be different in other countries. Likewise, the context of immigrants' labor market integration is different from the contexts of immigrants' family sponsorship, settlement, and international students, which may influence the findings as well. Thus, future research should examine online forum interactions in different countries and among different groups of immigrants, such as expatriates, international students, and refugees, to investigate how the interactions and types of affordances may vary.

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The data examined in this study includes discussions written in English only and by immigrants who were able to communicate in English. Therefore, we do not know what happens in other languages or in forums dedicated to ethnic migrant groups. Although immigrants with limited English proficiency cannot fully participate in English forums, there are online discussion forums available for immigrants to Canada speaking other languages, such as Polish and Chinese. Thus, future research should also consider the role of language and ethnic identity in influencing interactions and types of support requested in online forums.

Moreover, although several immigrants in the examined online forum acknowledged labor integration in Canada, in a large majority of cases it was not possible to know the long-term labor market integration outcomes that may have resulted from immigrants accessing the knowledge resources in examined online forum. Thus, future research should also investigate the long-term outcome of accessing the knowledge resources in online forums by immigrants on their labor market integration in the new country, for example, with interview and/or survey data collected from online forum users.

CONCLUSIONS

We found that online discussion forums afford new ways for potential immigrants to communicate, and exchange needed information, which help immigrants calibrate their employment expectations, make migration decisions, and prepare for migration and labor integration in the new country. With this research, we bring awareness to the phenomenon of the increasing use of online discussion forums by potential immigrants and initiate a dialogue about the role of online technologies in immigrants' labor market integration. We believe that the findings and contributions made in this study will lead to new avenues for future theory development on immigrants' labor integration, CMC, and technology affordances. Moreover, we hope that this study will inform and persuade government organizations and policymakers about the importance of online technologies and reaching out to immigrants on the pre-arrival stage to facilitate their employment integration post-migration.

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