

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION NETWORKS OF MIGRANTS IN MALTA: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON BOURDIEU'S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK*

Şeyma Esin ERBEN**

Received: 24.05.2025 - Accepted: 25.09.2025

Erben, Ş. E. (2025). *Social communication networks of migrants in Malta: An analysis based on Bourdieu's theoretical framework*. *Etkileşim*, 16, 162-183.
<https://doi.org/10.32739/etkilesim.2025.8.16.309>

This study complies with research and publication ethics.

Abstract

Malta, one of the smallest countries in the European Union, has a rapidly growing population in recent years, with its migrant population accounting for a quarter of the total population. The island country's limited physical space and high migration rate increase daily encounters between different groups and allow for direct observation of social mobility and communication networks. This research examines the relationship between migrants' social mobility and the formation of social communication networks by drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital and the concept of cleft habitus. Within the scope of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-five migrants; data were collected through participant observation between 2023 and 2025. The obtained data were evaluated using the thematic analysis method. The findings draw attention to the determining role of how migrants' capital is recognised or transformed in social communication in the post-migration context. The study reveals the relationship between factors such as country of citizenship and duration of residence with social mobility and social communication processes. It is observed that the social networks of non-EU migrants, who experience downward mobility in particular, have narrowed, and this situation reinforces structural inequalities. Furthermore, the study shows that language proficiency alone is insufficient to promote inclusive social communication.

Keywords: Bourdieu, Malta, migration, social communication, social mobility.

* This paper is part of a postdoctoral research project entitled Social Communication of Migrants in Malta, conducted at the University of Malta under the supervision of Prof. Ġorġ Mallia. Parts of the data used in this article were also used in a conference abstract titled "Social Communication of Migrants in Malta: An Analysis in the Context of Cleft Habitus and Social Mobility", accepted for presentation at the ESA RN15 Midterm Conference, 18-19 September 2025, Split, Croatia.

** Postdoctoral research intern at the University of Malta, Msida, Malta.
 esin.erben@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-9984-1242

MALTA'DAKİ GÖÇMENLERİN SOSYAL İLETİŞİM AĞLARI: BOURDIEU'NÜN TEORİK ÇERÇEVESİ BAĞLAMINDA BİR ANALİZ*

Şeyma Esin ERBEN**

Gönderim Tarihi: 24.05.2025 – Kabul Tarihi: 25.09.2025

Erben, Ş. E. (2025). Social communication networks of migrants in Malta: An analysis based on Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Etkileşim, 16, 162-183.
<https://doi.org/10.32739/etkilesim.2025.8.16.309>

Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Öz

Avrupa Birliği'nin en küçük ülkelerinden biri olan Malta'nın nüfusu son yıllarda hızla artmaktadır ve göçmen nüfusu toplam nüfusun dörtte birini oluşturmaktadır. Ada ülkesinin sınırlı fiziksel alanı ve yüksek göç oranı, farklı gruplar arasındaki günlük karşılaşmaları artırmakta ve sosyal hareketlilik ve iletişim ağlarının doğrudan gözlemlenmesine olanak tanımaktadır. Bu araştırma, Bourdieu'nun sermaye teorisi ve yarı habitus kavramından yararlanarak göçmenlerin sosyal hareketliliği ile sosyal iletişim ağlarının oluşumu arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Araştırma kapsamında otuz beş göçmenle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış; 2023-2025 yılları arasında katılımcı gözlem yoluyla veri toplanmıştır. Elde edilen veriler tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılarak değerlendirilmiştir. Bulgular, göçmenlerin sermayesinin, göç sonrası bağlamda sosyal iletişimde nasıl tanındığı veya dönüştürüldüğünün belirleyici rolüne dikkat çekmektedir. Çalışma, vatandaşlık ülkesi ve ikamet süresi gibi faktörlerin sosyal hareketlilik ve sosyal iletişim süreçleriyle ilişkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle aşağı doğru sosyal hareketlilik yaşayan AB dışı göçmenlerin sosyal ağlarının daraldığı ve bu durumun yapısal eşitsizlikleri pekiştirdiği gözlemlenmektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, dil yeterliliğinin tek başına kapsayıcı sosyal iletişimi teşvik etmek için yeterli olmadığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bourdieu, Malta, göç, toplumsal iletişim, sosyal hareketlilik.

* Bu makale, Prof. Dr. Görg Mallia'nın danışmanlığında Malta Üniversitesi bünyesinde yürütülen Malta'da Göçmenlerin Sosyal İletişimi başlıklı doktora sonrası araştırma projesi kapsamında hazırlanmıştır. Makalede kullanılan verilerin bir kısmı, 18-19 Eylül 2025 tarihlerinde Hırvatistan'ın Split kentinde gerçekleştirilecek olan ESA RN15 Ara Konferansı'nda sunulmak üzere kabul edilen "Malta'da Göçmenlerin Sosyal İletişimi: Bölünmüş Habitus ve Sosyal Hareketlilik Bağlamında Bir Analiz" başlıklı bildirisi özetinde de yer almaktadır.

** Doktora Sonrası Araştırmacı, Malta Üniversitesi, Msida, Malta.
esin.erben@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-9984-1242

Introduction

Due to its two official languages (Maltese and English), the cultural diversity shaped by the interaction of migrant communities and local people, the Mediterranean lifestyle, and a growing demand for labour, Malta has become an appealing destination for those seeking new employment opportunities. The demand for foreign labour in Malta has been rising due to economic growth, a shortage of skilled workers, low birth rates, and an ageing population (General Workers' Union, 2024). This trend has resulted in a rapid increase in the number of migrants over the past fifteen years; for instance, while migrants made up 5.5% of the total population in 2012, this figure had risen to 28% by 2024 (National Statistics Office, 2024a; 2024b).

In the process of intensive participation of migrants in the labour force, migrants face many difficulties, such as finding a job according to their skills, lack of job mobility opportunities, inability to access educational opportunities, and low unionisation rates (Debono, 2021). In addition, it is observed that migrants' positions in the labour market and their social mobility are closely related. In addition, improving their social and economic conditions in the destination country or sometimes maintaining their social positions in the country of origin constitutes an additional area of difficulty for migrants. These problems play a decisive role in the ways migrants participate in social interaction.

Employing Bourdieu's habitus concept can better explain how migrants' social participation and interaction processes are shaped. This concept draws attention to the practices, tendencies and daily actions that emerge from the social conditions in which individuals are situated. In this direction, it is significant to examine the connection between economic and social conditions and individuals' lifestyles and show substantial differences according to classes (Bourdieu, 2015, pp. 255-258).

On the other hand, this habitus can change for individuals undergoing social mobility, especially migrants, and difficulties may arise in social interaction processes. Cleft habitus, not frequently emphasised in Bourdieu's studies but a critical concept in understanding migrants' social and communication practices, depicts the tension and incompatibility experienced by an individual between two different social structures (Bourdieu, 2012, p. 125). Such tensions are often unavoidable for individuals migrating from one social space to another. Migrants may encounter significant discrepancies in their communication processes, finding themselves caught between their society's linguistic, cultural and social norms and the new social space. These tensions are directly related to the individual's economic and cultural capital, language skills and social networks.

A socialisation process cannot occur without communication. Migrants – especially those experiencing social mobility – need to gain new forms of recognition within social communication processes. Essential components of habitus, such as social class, cultural capital, or social capital from the origin

country, are repositioned under the migrant identity or habitus in the destination country.¹ Moreover, structural elements beyond the control of migrants also have a decisive impact on this process. These include factors such as the migration policies of the destination country, ethnic identity and inclusiveness policies, and the country's position in international agreements. Among these, the international cooperation of the destination country on migration, in particular, creates significant differences in terms of migrants' residence and work rights.

Migration studies should not overlook the multifaceted and complex elements of migration. Therefore, social mobility is an important conceptual tool for understanding migrants' social communication strategies and socialisation processes in the destination country at different macro and individual levels. This research evaluates the forms of social communication networks among migrants in Malta, within the framework of their social mobility processes, diverse demographic characteristics, and various forms of capital.

Social Mobility and Migration

Migration is a phenomenon that reflects constant change and involves many intertwined social and individual processes. As migrants reposition themselves within the society they migrate to, the recognition of their capital may change. Therefore, significant differences can be observed between their socio-economic positions in their country of origin and the destination country.

Difficulties experienced by migrants in transferring their cultural capital, combined with challenges in participating in the labour market, often result in, or are associated with, downward social mobility. On the other hand, upward social mobility may occur due to the significant advantages they gain in the labour market.

Social mobility, in its straightforward form, refers to the change in an individual's socio-economic status throughout their life. Being part of either a disadvantaged or advantaged group within a social structure plays a crucial role in the occurrence and direction of social mobility (Balestra & Ciani, 2022; Funjika & Gisselquist, 2020). Although migrants may sometimes acquire citizenship in the destination country, they often encounter significant structural inequalities in their social mobility processes, as they are typically positioned among socially disadvantaged groups (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 55). This, in turn, shapes the upward or downward mobility they experience.

¹ In this study, the terms country of origin and destination country are preferred over dichotomies such as home–host or sending–receiving, which may imply that migrants are either temporary *guests* or passive actors within migration processes. However, as de Haas et al. (2020) note, the choice of terminology often varies depending on the research approach and focus.

Goldthorpe (2017, pp. 92-96), one of the academics who brought an essential perspective to the social mobility literature, evaluates this concept in two different ways: absolute and relative mobility. Absolute mobility refers to the transition to a different social class between generations, and this situation is closely related to social classes. Relative mobility, conversely, explains the comparison of people's achievement of certain social positions throughout their lives as an indicator of equality of opportunity.

Goldthorpe's approach to social mobility, although it has made significant contributions to the field, has been criticised methodologically because it largely ignores subjective experiences by focusing on structural and objective dimensions and emphasising social mobility rates (Friedman, 2014, p. 354). In this context, evaluating the social mobility experiences of disadvantaged groups, especially migrants, solely through rates risks overlooking mobility's emotional, cultural and everyday dimensions.

Various factors, including structural, personal, international migration agreements, and domestic legal context, shape the social mobility experiences of migrants. For example, in the social mobility experience of first and second-generation migrants, the rapid population growth of second-generation migrants may cause policymakers in the receiving country to make new arrangements according to the labour market or education system (Papademetriou, 2009). Not only legal arrangements but also, as Levitt (2001, p. 205) stated, the discrimination faced by some migrant groups in the destination country narrows down the social and economic mobility opportunities.

Therefore, to discuss whether the social mobility experience of migrants is upward, lateral or downward, it is necessary to evaluate this process in a more complex framework, not only with structural or individual indicators but also in the context of the relationship between different forms of capital.

Bourdieu: Forms of Capital and Social Mobility

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital provides an essential theoretical framework for understanding the social mobility processes of migrants. Bourdieu speaks of four types of capital that are effective in the reproduction of social structure: economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is not limited to educational capital or an educational diploma as its indicator. Instead, cultural capital encompasses the knowledge and skills acquired through education, inherited from family, and throughout one's life. On the other hand, social capital is formed through the network of relationships and social connections in which social actors are embedded, and it is closely associated with being valued and respected. In addition to economic capital, which is based on material resources, the legitimacy attributed to these forms of capital – and the privileges that may result from such recognition – constitutes symbolic capital (Bourdieu,

2015, pp. 256-258; Bourdieu, 2018, pp. 222-225).

The capital volume (the total level of capital) possessed by migrants can vary significantly depending on the destination country. However, the composition of this capital (the types of capital and their varying levels within the total capital volume) may also differ. For example, individuals with high cultural capital in their country of origin may struggle to have this capital recognised in the destination country, which can lead to downward shifts in their social position. Therefore, to fully understand the mobility experiences of migrants, it is essential to consider not only the total capital volume but also the transformative power of these different forms of capital and their interrelationships.

Bourdieu's concept of habitus also plays a key role in discussions of social mobility. Habitus refers to a system of lasting dispositions shaped by the material conditions of the social class to which an individual belongs, and it emerges from socially structured environments. This system generates consistent practices and representations without the need for conscious intention or explicit mastery of the conditions required to achieve particular outcomes. For migrants, however, one of the most significant features of habitus is its capacity to produce strategies that help individuals navigate unexpected and continuously changing circumstances (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 158).

The most primary and visible form of mobility in the migrant experience initially manifests as geographical mobility. However, migration involves much more than a change of location. Reed-Danahay (2020, pp. 7-9) highlights the relationship between social mobility and geographical mobility, emphasising that an individual's social position and mobility within social space should be considered together. While migrants may feel at home within the social space of their country of origin, they often experience a sense of alienation both geographically and socially in the society of the destination country. This alienation may result from the incompatibility between the migrants' capital and the capital system of the destination country, or a mismatch between their habitus and the social structures of the new environment.

Along with the geographical mobility of migrants, incompatibilities in habitus may also arise with capital mobility. The concept of cleft habitus, which Bourdieu (2012, p. 125) describes as being full of tensions and contradictions, does not occupy as prominent a place in his works as his other theories. Moreover, Bourdieu illustrates the concept of cleft habitus through his own experience of upward social mobility. Having begun his life in the countryside, he did not fully belong to either world and developed a cleft habitus upon entering the bourgeois and academic circles of Paris.

Perger (2023) describes Bourdieu's concept of cleft habitus as the incompatibility between the social conditions in which individuals' predispositions are formed and the current conditions to which these tendencies must be adapted. Individuals may encounter difficulties within the social sphere be-

cause they lack the appropriate practices and habits for the new environment. Migrants, in particular, are not always able to validate their cultural, social, or symbolic capital in the destination society. The inability of the destination country and society to recognise migrants' educational capital, along with doubts about their professional qualifications and skills, as well as the need for migrants to build new social networks, results in changes to their capital composition. This situation, in turn, leads to their repositioning within the social space.

The social networks migrants are part of do not consist solely of new connections or actors in the destination country. It is observed that the class backgrounds of migrants from their country of origin can be reproduced in the destination country, particularly through kinship ties, or reshaped by family members who assume supportive roles that resist such reproduction (Trinidad & Faas, 2025; Niu & Siriphon, 2025; Koçak & Karasu, 2023, p. 87). Therefore, the class dynamics and social networks of migrants are crucial factors in shaping their social positions. In this context, the social mobility of migrants is not simply a matter of upward or downward movement but constitutes a field of struggle closely tied to the recognition of capital (Reed-Danahay, 2020; Kim, 2018).

The Role of Social Mobility in Shaping Communication Networks

Migration studies often address social communication as a key factor shaping social integration (Wang et al., 2023; Chouliraki & Georgiou, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). However, this study focuses on the relationship between social mobility and the formation of social communication networks. The extent to which migrants' various forms of capital are recognised, and the direction of their ensuing social mobility, are among the factors that determine which actors and communities they can engage with in the social space and how they can sustain this communication.

The migration process is shaped from the outset, beginning with the decision to migrate, by the social, economic, and political structures of both the sending and destination countries. Migrants' social networks within these structures, particularly migrant networks, often serve as a form of social capital (Sha, 2021). However, migrant social capital is not a fixed resource but rather a dynamic structure, influenced by various contexts such as previous migration experience, access to social resources, type of migration, labour market conditions, and prevailing social norms (Garip, 2008).

The communication processes of migrants with their country of origin and the transfer of capital are frequently explored in transnational migration studies. These studies generally emphasise the increasing possibility for migrants to participate more directly and actively in the daily life of sending societies, highlighting the role of advances in information, communication, and

transportation technologies (Levitt, 2001, p. 22; de Haas et al., 2020, p. 12). At the same time, factors such as educational capital and professional expertise are critical drivers that lead individuals to migrate in search of better employment opportunities (de Haas et al., 2020, p. 63).

However, the role of information and communication technologies is becoming vital for migrants in shaping their capital. The use of these technologies in a specific framework, in a digitally literate manner, is not limited to the initial stages of migration or the maintenance of transnational communication and ties. Thanks to these technologies, migrants have the opportunity to develop their cultural capital by accessing online vocational or language training that can be adapted to different languages and personalised according to individual needs – but only if they have developed sufficient digital literacy (Bradley et al., 2025, pp. 149-150; Guichon, 2024, p. 81). In the destination country, they also have the opportunity to establish and expand social networks in online and offline environments utilising digital media (Bork-Hüffer, 2022; Kim & Won, 2025). Moreover, the production of cultural capital continues not only through technology, but also through different social structures and areas of daily encounters.

Erel (2010, p. 656) emphasises that migration reveals new forms of producing cultural capital and that these processes are shaped within the framework of power relations between sending and receiving countries. According to Erel, migrants have to negotiate with both the ethnic majority and migrant communities to activate and validate the cultural capital they possess. These negotiations involve a broad field of social communication that includes language, status, norms and values.

However, a significant dimension often overlooked in the literature that focuses on these opportunities and production processes is the extent to which social mobility shapes the formation of social communication networks. In other words, the relationships that migrants have, with whom they can communicate, under what conditions, and in which social contexts are often simplified to individual actions or completely overlooked. Yet social communication and interaction networks are closely linked to migrants' social mobility, as a fundamental component of social capital (Mirfardi et al., 2020).

While several studies approach social mobility in terms of directional changes in individuals' socio-economic status (Boese et al., 2021), this study argues that social mobility is not limited to upward or downward positional shifts. Moreover, the study also examines how such mobility shapes the social communication networks of migrants. Furthermore, it recognises that these communication networks themselves have the potential to (re)produce social mobility.

Methodology

This qualitative research² is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and centres on the phenomenon of social mobility. As Perger (2023) emphasises, Bourdieu's concept of cleft habitus offers a valuable theoretical tool for analysing the experiences of individuals undergoing processes of social mobility. In this context, cleft habitus helps comprehend individuals' internal tensions between their former social positions and the expectations of a new social field in the post-migration setting. The study aims to examine how this conceptual framework shapes how migrants establish and sustain social communication networks.

Accordingly, it seeks to address the following research questions:

- How are factors such as economic and cultural capital and citizenship status related to various dimensions of migrants' social mobility?
- In what ways do indicators such as language proficiency, criteria for choosing friends, and frequency of interaction form migrants' relationships with both locals and fellow citizens?
- How do migrants' experiences of social mobility shape the formation and structure of their social networks in Malta?

To gain a deeper understanding of migrants' personal experiences, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation conducted over two years, from 2023 to 2025. The research questions are organised into four main sections: participants' demographic information, interactions with Malta and Maltese society, daily life and social communication, and social communication and media. These questions enrich the dataset and provide a comprehensive perspective on the migrants' social interaction.

One-on-one interviews were held with 35 migrants residing in Malta for at least six months. The study employs snowball and maximum variation sampling techniques to ensure diversity among participants, incorporating migrants from various countries, with differing professional backgrounds and levels of cultural capital. Initial participants were accessed via social networks or identified during field observations.

Table 1. Demographics

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Education	Duration in Malta	Income status
P1	Scotland	Vo-tech/business school	11-15 years	Low
P2	Finland	Vo-tech/business school	Up to 5 years	Middle
P3	Slovakia	Master's degree	6-10 years	Upper-middle
P4	Egypt	Bachelor degree	11-15 years	Upper-middle

² This study is being conducted with the necessary ethical committee approval from the University of Malta.

P5	Nepal	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Low
P6	Italy	High school	6-10 years	Upper-middle
P7	Syria	High school	6-10 years	Middle
P8	Tunus	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Low
P9	England	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Upper-middle
P10	Türkiye	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Upper-middle
P11	Greece	Bachelor degree	6-10 years	Middle
P12	USA	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Low
P13	Brazil	Bachelor degree	6-10 years	Middle
P14	Spain	High school	6-10 years	High
P15	Venezuela	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Middle
P16	Denmark	Vo-tech/business school	More than 15 years	Middle
P17	Colombia	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Middle
P18	Portugal	High school	Up to 5 years	High
P19	Greece	Master's degree	Up to 5 years	Upper-middle
P20	Serbia	Secondary school	6-10 years	Middle
P21	Morocco	Bachelor degree	More than 15 years	High
P22	Serbia	Bachelor degree	6-10 years	Middle
P23	Syria	Primary school	More than 15 years	Middle
P24	India	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Middle
P25	Denmark	Bachelor degree	6-10 years	Low
P26	Türkiye	High school	Up to 5 years	Low
P27	Russia	High school	Up to 5 years	Middle
P28	Gambia	Primary school	11-15 years	Low
P29	England	Secondary school	More than 15 years	Upper-middle
P30	Philippines	High school	Up to 5 years	Low
P31	Morocco	High school	Up to 5 years	Low
P32	Philippines	Bachelor degree	6-10 years	Middle
P33	Algeria	Bachelor degree	Up to 5 years	Low
P34	Ukraine	Master's degree	Up to 5 years	Middle
P35	Netherlands	High school	Up to 5 years	High

Table 1 presents key demographic information about the participants. A significant proportion of interviewees (25 out of 35) are non-EU citizens. These individuals lack certain rights and opportunities available to EU citizens, such as free movement within the EU, residence without the necessity of a work permit, and effortless access to the labour market.

Approximately one-third of the participants (11 individuals) perceive their income as above average. This study adopts perceived income rather than reported salary as a measure to gain qualitative insight into participants' lifestyles, social networks, and professional transitions as part of their social mobility experiences.

In contrast, gender does not appear to be a significant factor concerning social mobility in this study. Instead, differences in social mobility are more closely associated with other variables, such as economic status and country of origin.

Interviews were conducted in various parts of Malta, including public spaces such as cafés and parks – settings characterised by high levels of social interaction – as well as via online video calls, to observe migrants' social communication processes between 2023 and 2024.

During participant observations, detailed data were gathered on migrants' everyday practices, their styles of social interaction, and their use of public spaces. The study ensured anonymity of all participants, and it kept personal data confidential following established ethical guidelines.

The data were analysed using the thematic analysis method. During the analysis process, key aspects such as participants' social mobility trajectories, economic and cultural capital, citizenship status, language proficiency, and length of residence were coded as central themes. Additionally, indicators of social networking – such as the frequency of interactions with compatriots and locals, criteria for choosing friends, attitudes towards the local population, and language use – were examined. Participants to the study were grouped into three categories based on their social mobility trajectories: upward mobility, referring to improvements in their socio-economic conditions; lateral mobility, indicating neither significant improvement nor deterioration in their living conditions; and downward mobility, characterised by a marked decline in socio-economic well-being (Steel, 2008; Anja & Zhang, 2023). The social networking practices of each group were then comparatively analysed within this framework.

In accordance with research ethics guidelines, the interview questions and study details were submitted via the URECA form. They received approval from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) at the University of Malta.

Findings

Social mobility

Social mobility in the context of migration reflects the dynamic and shifting influence of various factors. The forms of capital migrants possess before migration are not consistently recognised within the new social structure and

everyday life. This situation can result in social mobility occurring in different directions.

The study identified and analysed key indicators to evaluate whether participants experienced upward, lateral, or downward social mobility after migrating to Malta. These indicators were selected to allow for a multidimensional assessment of migrants' mobility trajectories within the destination society.

Table 2. Social mobility indicators

Indicator	High social mobility	Lateral social mobility	Low social mobility	Key assessment
Occupation (related to symbolic capital)	Higher-skilled role	Similar-skilled role	Lower-skilled role	Comparison of pre- and post-migration occupation
Income (Economic capital)	Increased	Stable	Decreased	Complementary to professional data
Duration in Malta (related to social capital)	Medium or long-term (>10 yrs)	Medium-term (5-10 yrs)	Short-term (<5 yrs)	Permanence of mobility
Education (cultural capital)	Degree leveraged for a better job	Education matches current role	Overqualified for current role	Educational – occupational mismatch and credential recognition
Citizenship Status (non-EU/EU)	Mostly EU citizenship	Mostly EU citizenship or structurally similar countries (UK or US)	Mostly Non-EU or rarely EU citizenship	EU labour market access, structural privilege
Multilingualism	Fluent in Maltese and/or English, or other sector-specific advantageous languages	Fluent in English and other generally advantageous languages	Basic English proficiency and native language; languages not commonly in demand in the local labour market	Multilingual and local language advantages

***Primary factors regarding social mobility of participants:
Economic and cultural capital, citizenship status***

Participants who experience upward social mobility report notable improvements in both their occupational skill levels and perceived income sta-

tus.³ By contrast, those with high levels of cultural capital – such as a university or master’s degree – but limited economic capital tend to experience lateral or downward mobility. Despite their educational attainment, this group often struggles to access employment opportunities that match their qualifications and is frequently compelled to work in low-skilled positions.

EU citizenship is a significant determinant of upward mobility among individuals with high levels of cultural and economic capital. However, the findings also indicate that EU citizens with limited cultural capital enjoy greater access to the labour market than non-EU migrants. This advantage is primarily attributed to the rights associated with EU citizenship, including the ability to reside in another member state without a work permit, the recognition of qualifications across borders, and the freedom to move within the EU without being tied to a single employer.

In contrast, the process is significantly more restrictive for non-EU migrants. All twenty-five non-EU participants reported difficulties in converting their cultural capital into economic capital, primarily due to the non-recognition of their educational and professional qualifications. Eleven of the 14 non-EU participants with higher education could not demonstrate upward social mobility.⁴

For instance, *P34* (Ukraine) worked as a scriptwriter in her country of origin. Still, it was required to obtain new professional certifications before being able to work as an English teacher in Malta. Similarly, *P5* (Nepal) had been employed as a hotel manager before migration, but now works as a service worker in Malta. In addition, *P5* entered the country through a recruitment agency and is required to pay a portion of his overtime wages to the agency. He compares his hourly salary with that of his colleagues and describes the situation as unfair. Nevertheless, he attempts to compensate for this disparity by working additional hours.

³ The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) was used as the basis for assessing occupational skill levels. According to ISCO, skill levels are determined based on criteria such as the complexity of tasks, the level of formal education required, and the duration of relevant work experience. Skill Level 1 corresponds to elementary occupations, while Skill Levels 3 and 4 refer to professionals and managers, respectively. Occupations within the armed forces are excluded from this classification, except under specific exceptions outlined by the ISCO framework (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

⁴ Participants from the United Kingdom were not classified as non-EU in this finding, as they completed their education while the UK was still a member of the European Union.

Table 3. Social mobility assessment sample

Mobility type	Income change	Occupation Change (ISCO Skill Level)	Education	Sample Participants	Key Insight
Upward	Increase in perceived income status or average occupational income	+1 ISCO level (e.g., from clerk to manager)	Mostly higher education, any level of education,	P19 (Greece): Civil engineer during pre-Malta, project supervisor in Malta	EU degree recognition, sectoral advantage in Malta (e.g., fin-tech, construction)
Lateral	Stable	No ISCO change (e.g., from manager to manager)	Mostly $\geq$ High school	P22 (Serbia): Bar manager in pre-Malta, store keeper in Malta	Credential transfer maintains status despite migration
Downward	Drop in perceived and/or average occupational income	-1 ISCO level change (e.g., from manager to server)	Mostly <High school or non-recognition of foreign qualifications	P5 (Nepal): Hotel manager during pre-Malta, server in Malta	Non-EU status and low education cause de-skilling

Participant observations confirmed the interview findings regarding patterns of social mobility. It was observed that non-EU migrants with higher education were frequently employed in relatively low-paid and low-skilled positions – such as service staff, delivery drivers, taxi drivers, or customer support agents – despite having professional or managerial backgrounds.

A Turkish server working in a café explained: “I was a mathematics teacher in Türkiye, but I came here because it is an EU country, and now I do this job.” Although he acknowledged a decline in social status, he said he migrated to Malta to pursue better economic conditions than those available in Türkiye. Similarly, another non-EU migrant, an engineer in his country of origin, now works as a restaurant server. At the same time, another, formerly a lawyer, is currently employed as a customer service agent.

All eight non-EU participants with low levels of cultural and economic capital reported experiencing either downward or lateral social mobility. One example is P28 (Gambia), who has lived in Malta for 15 years due to forced migration. He currently works as a bartender. While he previously worked as a farmer in his country of origin within a family business, he now holds multiple jobs and works long hours to maintain financial stability.

By contrast, *P7* (Syria), who also migrated due to forced circumstances and has lived in Malta for seven years, works as both a manager and a server in the family business. However, due to the complexity of his responsibilities and his limited ability to advance his economic and cultural capital, he has not achieved upward social mobility.

Secondary factors influencing social mobility: Language proficiency and duration of residence in Malta

The vast majority of participants (31 out of 35) speak at least two languages fluently, while only native English speakers from the UK and the US reported speaking a single language. As English is the dominant language in the Maltese labour market, these participants stated that they do not experience any language-related disadvantage. However, proficiency in additional languages offers significant advantages to migrants, particularly on a sector-specific basis. For instance, while English remains the primary language in sectors such as software, fintech, and iGaming, knowledge of a second language facilitates employment in companies targeting local or regional markets.

P2 (Finland) clearly illustrates this situation. Formerly a metal welder in Finland, *P2* began working as a customer support agent in Malta's iGaming sector, benefiting from his native language skills. He was later promoted, demonstrating clear upward social mobility.

Participant observations further indicate that multilingualism – especially in the native languages of EU member states – offers advantages in specific professional sectors. However, multilingualism alone does not directly result in upward social mobility. Instead, when combined with favourable citizenship status, cultural capital, and alignment with sectoral demands, it can support improved socio-economic positioning. *P4* (Egypt), who had previously worked as an accountant, explained that he learned Maltese “by force for the permanent residence permit,” but emphasised that his multilingualism enabled him to secure a position as an embassy officer.

At the same time, adapting to the Maltese labour market, acquiring updated professional skills, and learning the local language are all processes that require a considerable investment of time. Migrants' social and economic positioning in Malta depends not only on individual forms of capital but also on the duration of settlement and the experiential knowledge gained over time.

Based on the duration of residence, three main stages of settlement emerged from the study: challenge (0–5 years), adaptation (5–10 years), and stability (10+ years).

Participants in the short-term residency group often emphasised difficulties, particularly those from outside the EU, who reported significant disparities between their symbolic and social capital and that recognised in Malta.

These mismatches frequently led to social and economic challenges.

In the medium-term group (5–10 years), participants began to expand their language skills and engage more actively in local social networks, which encouraged them to pursue more secure and stable employment. Long-term residents (over 10 years) had typically expanded their social networks considerably. Their improved access to job opportunities and ability to maintain their socio-economic status appeared to result from a combination of accumulated work experience and increased social capital.

Establishing social communication networks within the framework of social mobility

A variety of interrelated factors shape the formation of social communication networks among migrants. These include migrants' perceptions of how locals view them, the quality and frequency of their interactions with both locals and compatriots, criteria for choosing friends, and the contexts in which these interactions occur. Language proficiency also plays a critical role in enabling or limiting social interaction. Notably, there are significant variations in how social communication networks are formed depending on participants' social mobility trajectories.

Participants experiencing upward mobility tend to establish more international social networks and maintain communication with Maltese peers. Their friendships are often based on shared interests, and although they express some critical views of locals, especially within work contexts, they do not avoid interacting with them. This group typically constructs social networks around professional identities and employment settings.

Among those who experience lateral mobility, factors such as personal history and length of stay in Malta become more decisive. No consistent pattern was observed in their social communication styles. For instance, *P21* (Morocco), who has lived in Malta for 33 years and holds Maltese citizenship, began his career as an engineer. He now works as a project manager and, due to his fluency in the local language and long-term integration, has developed extensive social networks. In contrast, recent arrivals such as *P26* (Türkiye), who has lived in Malta for just one year, tend to have smaller social circles, often shaped by limited economic capital.

Participants who experienced downward mobility are more likely to rely on strong ethnic solidarity networks and primarily communicate within their communities. Many in this group have proficiency only in English and their native language skills, which often do not provide an advantage in Malta's dominant labour market. Their friendships are generally formed around practical concerns such as trust, shared workspaces, and mutual support. In interactions with locals, they tend to adopt one of two extreme positions: either

highly positive or emotionally detached. For example, *P30* (Philippines) and *P31* (Morocco), both employed in service roles (as a makeup artist and hairstylist, respectively), stated that they had not formed friendships with locals, but still described them as “good people” based on limited encounters.

P32 (Philippines), meanwhile, commented on cultural differences, stating: “If Maltese people don’t know you, they are very cold. Unlike us, we are very friendly. As Filipinos, we trust people easily. Maltese people do not trust people easily.” Despite this perception, he is married to a Maltese citizen and regularly spends time with local people.

Participants who disengage from local communication often attribute their experiences to experienced discrimination and subsequently rely more heavily on ethnic networks. Those living in shared housing for economic reasons tend to form close-knit social circles with people of the same ethnic origin. Participant observations support this finding, highlighting how shared daily routines, combined with limited leisure time and financial obligations toward families in the country of origin, contribute to narrower social environments. For example, *P24* (India) underscored the influence of extended family structures in his country of origin, stating: “Grandmother rules the ladies, grandfather is in charge of the family. Like a team.”

Participant observations also indicate that non-EU migrants experiencing downward social mobility often view Malta as a transitional space rather than a long-term destination. For instance, an Indian taxi driver living in shared housing stated that his economic situation had not improved since the COVID-19 pandemic, and he was now considering relocating to Spain or Portugal. A Pakistani migrant who had previously lived in Dubai before moving to Malta also expressed interest in relocating to another EU member state through his recruitment agency.

More broadly, many non-EU migrants experiencing downward mobility viewed Malta as a stepping stone to other EU countries. One taxi driver, who had held a white-collar position in his country of origin, remarked: “There is no future for me in Malta.” Another migrant, previously a civil servant in Macedonia and currently employed as a store manager, described Malta as “an EU member state that lacks opportunities but pays better than my country.” Migrants who arrived through transnational recruitment agencies and work in manual labour roles often aim to repay migration-related costs, save money for a period, and eventually leave Malta for destinations perceived as offering greater opportunity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study discusses how migrants establish and maintain their social networks in Malta within the context of their social mobility. The findings indicate that individuals’ forms of capital – economic, cultural, and symbolic – as well

as their citizenship status and length of residence, significantly influence both the direction of their social mobility and the structure of their social communication networks.

It is particularly noteworthy that, although migrants' economic and cultural capital largely shapes their mobility trajectories, the extent to which these capitals are recognised in the post-migration context is uneven. Migrants from non-EU countries, particularly, are more frequently employed in low-skilled positions within the local labour market, even with advanced educational qualifications or professional experience.

When evaluated in relation to Bourdieu's (2012) theory of forms of capital, this situation suggests that the convertibility of cultural capital into economic capital remains limited in the post-migration context. In Malta, structural advantages such as EU citizenship play a decisive role in shaping the social mobility of those possessing economic and cultural capital. In other words, EU citizenship functions as a structural advantage for migrants (de Haas et al., 2020).

As Levitt (2001) illustrates in her study of transnational dynamics between the Dominican Republic and the United States, migrants may experience upward social mobility despite working in low-income jobs, owing to the prestige and material contributions they gain in their country of origin. Similarly, for some migrants in Malta, a low-income job can generate symbolic, economic, and social capital in their country of origin. This highlights that social mobility is shaped not only by the destination country context but also by ongoing relationships with the country of origin. Indeed, this also plays a role in how transnational communication networks are sustained.

The relationship between social mobility and the formation of social networks emerges as another significant finding of the study. Migrants who experience upward social mobility tend to establish balanced social networks comprising both international and local connections. This group often bases their choice of friends on shared interests and professional identities, and adopts a critical yet communicative stance in its interactions with the local population. These findings suggest that migrants' social mobility is not solely economic, but also a process that shapes social interaction strategies aimed at activating different forms of capital (Erel, 2010).

In contrast, the social networks of migrants experiencing downward mobility are predominantly confined to their ethnic groups, and their communication styles tend to be either closed or superficially positive. This pattern suggests that a decline in social and economic capital leads migrants to adopt more insular, group-oriented relational structures. Findings from other studies in the literature – focusing on diverse migrant populations such as entrepreneurial migrants, migrants under temporary protection, and irregular migrants – also point to similar dynamics. In such contexts, declining capital tends to limit migrants' social networks and reinforce intra-group boundaries.

Although Sha (2021) argues that migrant networks can serve as a form of social capital, the present study demonstrates that, under conditions of downward mobility, these networks often remain restricted to ethnic solidarity. As a result, the scope of social capital becomes significantly narrowed.

Moreover, experiences of downward mobility reinforce the perception that the ultimate goal for many non-EU migrants is onward migration to other European countries. In this context, the perception of Malta as a 'stepping stone' aligns with Reed-Danahay's (2020) framing of Europe as a socially and spatially hierarchical space. Certain regions are considered 'more European' and associated with greater upward mobility opportunities. As a result, instead of a 'settled' migrant habitus, what emerges is a cleft habitus characterised by ongoing tension and dissonance. The latter, in turn, fosters more transient and superficial social interactions rather than the development of deep and lasting social networks.

Among individuals experiencing lateral mobility, forms of social communication vary significantly. Key factors influencing these variations include the duration of residence in Malta, post-migration occupation, and language proficiency. These migrants are neither subject to the structural advantages associated with upward mobility nor to the exclusionary mechanisms characteristic of downward mobility. As a result, their social communication networks are primarily shaped by personal preferences and display no consistent pattern.

The research also demonstrates that language proficiency alone is insufficient for meaningful social interaction between migrants and residents. Even when the local language is known, the process of social inclusion is shaped by structural inequalities, citizenship status, and practices of symbolic recognition. This phenomenon can be explained through Bourdieu's concept of cleft habitus. A significant proportion of migrants, particularly those who are recently settled, experience cleft habitus, meaning they face internal tension between their pre-migration identities and the expectations of the post-migration context (Bourdieu, 2012, p. 125; Perger, 2023). Long-term residency of migrants plays an essential role in mitigating, though not eliminating, this tension. Therefore, social interaction analyses should attend not only to structural dimensions but also to the cultural and historical processes through which it unfolds. This is especially important given that power relations within social space are closely linked to forming and maintaining social communication networks.

One of the most significant contributions of this study is its evaluation of the relationship between social mobility and social communication, not solely through economic indicators, but also the everyday practices of migrants, such as friendship choices, frequency of interaction, and the nature of their relationships with local people. In this respect, the study advocates for an understanding of social interaction that incorporates not only economic capital and structural factors, but also the texture of social relations and communica-

tive practices.

In conclusion, in a small yet highly migrant-dense EU country such as Malta, the relationship between migrants' experiences of social mobility and the formation of their social networks displays a multidimensional structure. Understanding this relationship highlights the necessity of addressing migration policies not only through the lens of labour market integration but also with attention to social interaction and everyday relational dynamics.

References

- Anja, A., & Zhang, D. (2023). Ants along the street: Street vending as a lifeblood of the urban poor in Dilla Town, Southern Ethiopia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 60(2), 1134–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231188949>
- Balestra, C., & Ciani, E. (2022). Current challenges to social mobility and equality of opportunity. *OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1787/a749ffbb-en>
- Boese, M., Moran, A., & Mallman, M. (2021). Re-examining social mobility: Migrants' relationally, temporally, and spatially embedded mobility trajectories. *Sociology*, 56(2), 351–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385211033455>
- Bork-Hüffer, T. (2022). Digital media, friendships and migrants' entangled and non-linear inclusion and exclusion. *Urban Studies*, 59(16), 3330–3346. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221111994>
- Bourdieu, P. (2012). *Bir otoanaliz için taslak* (M. Erşen, Trans.) (A. Akay, Ed.). Bağlam Yayınları. (Original work published in 2004)
- _____ (2015). *Ayrim: Beğeni yargısının toplumsal eleştirisi* (D. F. Şannan & A. G. Berkkurt, Trans.). Heretik Yayınları. (Original work published in 1979)
- _____ (2018). *Bir pratik teorisi için taslak: Kabiliye üzerine üç etnoloji çalışması* (N. Ökten, Trans.). İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları. (Original work published 1972)
- Bradley, L., Guichon, N., & Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2025). Migrants' and refugees' digital literacies in life and language learning. *ReCALL*, 37(2), 147–156. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344025000047>
- Chouliaraki, L., & Georgiou, M. (2022). *The digital border: Migration, technology, power*. New York University Press.
- de Haas, H., Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2020). *The age of migration: International population movements in the modern world* (6th ed.). Red Globe Press.
- Debono, M. (2021). Migrants and the challenge of decent work in Malta. *e-Revista Internacional de la Protección Social*, 6(2), 272–293. <https://dx.doi.org/10.12795/e-RIPS.2021.i02.12>
- Erel, U. (2010). Migrating cultural capital: Bourdieu in migration studies. *Sociology*,

- 44(4), 642–660. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510369363>
- Friedman, S. (2014). The price of the ticket: Rethinking the experience of social mobility. *Sociology*, 48(2), 352–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038513490355>
- Funjika, P., & Gisselquist, R. M. (2020). *Social mobility and inequality between groups* (WIDER Working Paper No. 2020/12). The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER). <https://doi.org/10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2020/769-9>
- Garip, F. (2008). Social capital and migration: How do similar resources lead to divergent outcomes? *Demography*, 45(3), 591–617. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.0.0016>
- General Workers' Union. (2024, November 17). *The role of foreign labour in Malta's workforce*. GWU. <https://gwu.org.mt/en/the-role-of-foreign-labour-in-maltas-workforce/>
- Goldthorpe, J. H. (2017). Social class mobility in modern Britain: Changing structure, constant process: Lecture in Sociology read 15 March 2016. In J. Carsten & S. Frith (Eds.), *British Academy lectures, 2015–16* (British Academy Lectures Series). British Academy Scholarship Online. <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197266045.003.0005>
- Guichon, N. (2024). Reviewing research methods on adult migrants' digital literacy: What insights for additional language teaching? *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 18(1), 67–89. <https://doi.org/10.47862/apples.137177>
- International Labour Organization. (no date). *Classification of occupation*. ILOSTAT. <https://ilostat.ilo.org/methods/concepts-and-definitions/classification-occupation/>
- Kim, H., & Won, S. (2025). How does digital technology use help immigrants? Examining its impact on life satisfaction of immigrants in Korea. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 5(6), 288–301. <https://doi.org/10.63332/joph.v5i6.2015>
- Kim, J. (2018). Migration-facilitating capital: A Bourdieusian theory of international migration. *Sociological Theory*, 36(3), 262–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275118794982>
- Koçal, A. V., & Karasu, M. A. (2024). Göç kuramlarında güncel bir yaklaşım: Göçmen ilişki ağları kuramı. *Dicle Üniversitesi İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Fakültesi Dergisi*, 14(27), 78–97.
- Levitt, P. (2001). *The transnational villagers*. University of California Press.
- Mirfardi, A., Heidari, A., & Amini Khoo, M. (2020). The social mobility of rural-urban migrants and its relationship to social capital: The case study of Yasouj and Madevan cities. *Regional Planning*, 10(37), 123–140.
- National Statistics Office – Malta. (2024a). *Intercensal population revisions 2012–2021*. Retrieved January 25, 2025, from <https://nso.gov.mt/intercensal-population-revisions-2012-2021/>

- (2024b). *Contrasting population dynamics*. Retrieved December 25, 2024, from <https://nso.gov.mt/contrasting-population-dynamics/>
- Niu, G. Y., & Siriphon, A. (2025). Educational nomadic families: Transnational social reproduction mobility of Chinese middle-income families in Chiang Mai, Thailand. *SAGE Open*, 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251323616>
- Papademetriou, D. G., Somerville, W., & Sumption, M. (2009, June). *The social mobility of migrants and their children*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/social-mobility-migrants-and-their-children>
- Perger, N. (2023). Cleft habitus. In M. Sardoč (Ed.), *Handbook of equality of opportunity*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52269-2_63-1
- Reed-Danahay, D. (2020). *Bourdieu and social space: Mobilities, trajectories, emplacements*. Berghahn Books.
- Sha, H. (2021). *Migrant networks as social capital: The social infrastructure of migration* (MIDEQ Working Paper). Migration for Development & Equality. https://southsouth.contentfiles.net/media/documents/MIDEQ_working_paper_Migrant_networks_as_social_capital_Heila_Sha.pdf
- Steel, G. (2008). *Vulnerable careers: Tourism and livelihood dynamics among street vendors in Cusco, Peru*. Rozenberg Publishers.
- Trinidad, A. C., & Faas, D. (2025). Familial ties and their impact on the class conditions of migrant nurses in the Republic of Ireland. *European Societies*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1162/euso_a_00028
- Wang, X., Liu, J., Zhu, J., Bai, Y., & Wang, J. (2023). The association between social integration and utilization of primary health care among migrants in China: A nationwide cross-sectional study. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 22(1), 210. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-023-02018-x>
- Zhang, Y., You, C., Pundir, P., & Meijering, L. (2023). Migrants' community participation and social integration in urban areas: A scoping review. *Cities*, 141, 104447. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104447>

Participant informed consent: Participants were informed before the data collection and they were asked to sign a form of consent.

Ethics committee approval: The ethics committee approval has been obtained from University of Malta.

Conflict of interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Financial support: No funding was received for this study.

Onam Bilgisi: Katılımcılar işlem öncesinde bilgilendirilmiş, onamları alınmıştır.

Etik Kurul Onayı: Çalışmanın etik kurul onayı Malta Üniversitesi'nden alınmıştır.

Çıkar çatışması: Çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

Finansal destek: Finansal destek bulunmamaktadır.