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## Exploring social remittances: A comprehensive review and recommendations for future research

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### Abstract

This paper combines a variety of academic perspectives on social remittances, analyzing several key studies in the field. Each article is critically reviewed for its primary findings, methods, and limitations, focusing on identifying both the distinct contributions and shared elements among them. The comparative analysis brings to light the various ways social remittances influence and are present in both sending and receiving communities across cultural, economic, political, and social aspects. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for future research, promoting a multidisciplinary approach, integrating technological advancements, and recognizing the changing nature of global migration. This review aims to provide a detailed guide for future investigations in the area of social remittances, seeking to deepen our comprehension of their complex role in the context of global migration.

**Keywords:** Social remittances; Migration studies; Comparative analysis; Literature review

### 1. Introduction

Social remittances, a term coined by sociologist Peggy Levitt, refer to the flow of cultural norms, practices, identities, and social capital transmitted by migrants to their home communities. Unlike financial remittances, which are quantifiable monetary transfers, social remittances are intangible and involve the exchange of ideas, behaviors, and social knowledge. This concept highlights the significant, yet often overlooked, impact of human migration on the cultural and social landscapes of both sending and receiving communities.

A key challenge in assessing social remittances lies in their intangible nature. Unlike financial remittances, which can be measured through monetary transactions, social remittances are ingrained in migrants' interactions and personal transformations. These changes can be subtle and diffuse, making them difficult to quantify and track. For instance, migrants may influence gender norms, political views, or entrepreneurial attitudes in their home communities, but these shifts are often gradual and entangled with other local dynamics, making causality hard to establish.

One problem in evaluating social remittances is the lack of a standardized methodology. Research in this area often relies on qualitative methods, such as interviews and ethnographies, which provide deep insights but may lack the breadth and comparability of quantitative data. Additionally, the subjective nature of these methods can introduce biases and limitations in capturing the full spectrum of social remittances.

Another issue is the heterogeneity of migrant experiences. Migrants come from diverse backgrounds and migrate for various reasons, ranging from economic opportunities to escaping conflict. This diversity means that the types and impacts of social remittances can vary widely, complicating efforts to generalize findings or develop a coherent theoretical framework.

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Moreover, the impact of social remittances is not always positive. While they can foster development and progressive change, they can also perpetuate social inequalities or introduce conflicting values. For example, migrants returning with new ideas about democracy and human rights can positively influence political processes, but they can also unintentionally intensify social divisions if their ideas clash with traditional norms.

Future research should focus on developing more sophisticated and comprehensive methods to assess social remittances. This could involve integrating quantitative approaches, such as surveys and network analysis, with qualitative research to capture both the breadth and depth of social remittances. There is also a need for extended studies that track the long-term effects of social remittances on communities, as well as comparative research that examines different migrant groups and contexts.

Additionally, researchers should explore the complex synergy between social and financial remittances. Understanding how these two forms of capital interact can provide a more holistic view of the migrant experience and its implications for development.

In conclusion, while social remittances represent a vital aspect of the migration experience, their assessment presents unique challenges. Addressing these challenges requires innovative research approaches that capture the complexity and diversity of migrant contributions to their home and host societies. As migration continues to shape our globalized world, understanding and leveraging the power of social remittances will be crucial for fostering sustainable and inclusive development.

This paper aims to consolidate the diverse and rich literature on social remittances, offering an in-depth review of key scholarly contributions. By carefully analyzing the main findings, methodologies, and limitations of influential works in this domain, this review uncovers both the distinct and converging aspects of these studies. The paper presents a comparative analysis to draw out the differences and similarities in approaches to understanding social remittances, their complex nature, and their varied impacts. The conclusion of this review outlines several key recommendations for future research, underscoring the need for interdisciplinary approaches, the inclusion of technological perspectives, and a consideration of the dynamic nature of global migration trends. This comprehensive review aims to serve as a foundational resource for scholars, providing a clear direction for future research in the field of social remittances and migration.

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## 2. Comprehensive Review: Social Remittances Literature

In this section a thorough exploration of scholarly works focused on the concept of social remittances is presented. The review examines a range of academic papers, each offering distinct perspectives and insights into the interaction between migration and the exchange of social and cultural capital. Various studies are investigated, analyzing the complexities of social remittances and assessing their impact on both migrants and their communities of origin. This comprehensive analysis seeks to provide a broad understanding of the existing literature on social remittances, highlighting key findings, methodologies, and the development of this concept in migration studies.

The first article is the foundational one "Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-Level Forms of Cultural Diffusion" by Levitt (1998). It introduces the concept of social remittances, examining them as a significant form of cultural diffusion influenced by migration at the local level. The main findings in this study are:

- **Definition and Scope:** Social remittances are identified as the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country communities. These remittances play a crucial role in shaping local-level social and cultural dynamics.
- **Impact on Sending Communities:** The study finds that these social remittances significantly transform the social and political life in sending countries. They are instrumental in promoting immigrant entrepreneurship, community and family formation, and political integration.
- **Transformation of Ideas and Practices:** Levitt emphasizes how ideas and practices are remolded in receiving countries and then transferred back to sending communities, influencing broader societal structures and norms.

Levitt's study utilizes a qualitative research approach, focusing on the analysis of various case studies and empirical research related to migration and cultural diffusion. The methodology involves a thorough examination of the mechanisms by which social remittances are sent back to sending communities and their subsequent role in transforming these communities. The study synthesizes existing literature and theoretical frameworks on migration and social change to form a comprehensive understanding of the process and impact of social remittances.

Although the study is quite comprehensive in its exploration of social remittances, it does have its limitations. While it provides a foundational conceptual framework for understanding social remittances, it may rely heavily on theoretical analysis with limited direct empirical data specifically gathered for this purpose. The findings, primarily derived from case studies and existing literature, might not be universally applicable across different migrant populations and cultural contexts, potentially limiting the study's generalizability.

In conclusion, Levitt's 1998 article presents a pioneering exploration of social remittances, highlighting their role as a local-level, migration-driven form of cultural diffusion. The study lays the groundwork for understanding the complex interaction between migration and cultural change, despite certain limitations in empirical scope and generalizability.

In 2011 Levitt and Lamba-Nieves published "Social Remittances Revisited" an extension of the above paper offering a comprehensive analysis of social remittances, broadening the understanding of how migration impacts societies. The main findings of it were:

- **Influence of Pre-Migration Experiences:** The study finds that migrants' pre-migration experiences significantly shape their actions in host countries and influence what they remit back to their homelands. This includes the transfer of social and cultural values, practices, and ideas.
- **Individual vs. Collective Social Remittances:** A key finding is the distinction between individual and collective social remittances. Individual remittances occur through personal interactions, while collective remittances take place through organizational roles, impacting broader societal structures.
- **Scaling Up and Scaling Out:** The paper asserts that social remittances can scale up from local-level impacts to effect regional and national change and scale out to influence various domains of practice, indicating their far-reaching impact.

The study employs a qualitative research approach, analyzing existing literature and theoretical frameworks on social remittances. It revisits and expands upon Levitt's original concept of social remittances, integrating insights from transnational studies, sociology, and migration research. The methodology involves synthesizing various case studies and empirical research to form a comprehensive understanding of how social remittances operate within migrant communities and their home countries.

In the extended study by Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011), although there is an expanded analysis of social remittances, similar limitations persist. This study, while broadening the original concepts and incorporating insights from other studies, still primarily relies on qualitative analysis of secondary data. This approach may not fully capture the diversity of migrant experiences, especially considering the rapidly changing global dynamics since the original study. Additionally, the extended study, with its broader scope, might still struggle with the generalizability of its findings across various migrant populations and cultural contexts, particularly in light of new migration trends and social remittances patterns emerging after the original study's publication.

The third paper that was analyzed is "Social remittances and the changing transnational political landscape" by Lacroix, Levitt, and Vari-Lavoisier (2016). This paper examines the influence of social remittances on the transnational political landscape, specifically focusing on their impact on social protests, elections, and governance. The main findings of the study relate to:

- **Influence on Social Protests and Elections:** The study highlights that social remittances significantly influence social protests and elections in various countries. Migrants transfer not just financial resources but also ideas, practices, and skills that can reshape political participation and advocacy in their home countries.
- **Impact on Governance and Transparency:** The article underscores the role of social remittances in fostering greater transparency and governance reform. Migrants' experiences and perspectives contribute to calls for change and reform in their countries of origin.
- **Relationship Between Migration and Political Change:** The study reveals the intricate relationship between migration and political change, demonstrating how the circulation of culture, ideas, and social capital between sending and receiving communities impacts the political landscape.

The research methodology in the study is qualitative, focusing on case studies from a diverse range of countries such as Poland, Mali, the Ivory Coast, Tunisia, and Senegal. It explores the impact of emigrants on the political dynamics of their countries of origin. This approach combines empirical evidence with theoretical insights in the fields of migration, politics, and social remittances, aiming to shed light on their international influences.

The study, despite its coverage of multiple countries, has a geographic focus that may limit the generalizability of its findings to all regions or contexts where social remittances occur. Additionally, its scope, primarily centered on specific political aspects such as protests and governance reform, may not fully encompass the entire range of political changes influenced by social remittances. Furthermore, the study captures a picture of the impact of social remittances on the political landscape, reflecting temporal dynamics that can evolve over time. This aspect could potentially limit the long-term applicability of the findings, as the influence of social remittances on political processes might change in different temporary contexts.

In conclusion, the paper provides a critical understanding of the role of social remittances in shaping political activities and governance in migrants' home countries. The study clarifies on the broader implications of migration beyond economic factors, emphasizing the transformative power of cultural and social exchanges.

After analyzing “Social remittances and the changing transnational political landscape” by Lacroix, Levitt, and Vari-Lavoisier (2016), the next paper to be examined is “Social Remittances” by Tuccio and Wahba (2020) in the “Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics”. This article provides an extensive review of the economic literature on social remittances, focusing on their economic impact and integration with labor markets. The main findings of Tuccio and Wahba's review are centered around how these remittances influence economic behaviors and decision-making processes in migrants' home countries.

- **Transfer of Norms Through Migration:** The article emphasizes the significant role of international migration in the transfer of norms, attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge from host to origin countries.
- **Influence of Host Countries:** It points out that the types of social remittances transferred are greatly influenced by the host countries. The host country environment plays a critical role in shaping the attitudes and knowledge that migrants transmit back to their countries of origin.
- **Economists' Contribution to Understanding Social Remittances:** Although economists have recently started contributing to this field, their work has been crucial in advancing knowledge about the causal effects of migration on social remittances.

The study utilizes a literature review methodology, examining a wide range of economic research on social remittances. It involves an analysis of various studies to understand the mechanisms and effects of social remittances, as well as the role of migration in facilitating these transfers.

The research conducted by Tuccio and Wahba (2020) on social remittances, while comprehensive, does acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, it recognizes gaps in the current understanding of the mechanisms through which norms and behaviors are transferred via social remittances. Although it extensively covers economic aspects, it predominantly focuses on economic literature. This narrow focus may result in the oversight of valuable insights from other fields such as sociology or anthropology, which also offer significant perspectives on migration and cultural exchange. Moreover, the dynamic nature of migration patterns and the evolving socio-economic conditions in both host and origin countries pose a challenge. These changing circumstances might affect the long-term relevance and applicability of the review's findings, as the impact and mechanisms of social remittances could vary over time with shifting migration trends and economic contexts.

In summary, "Social Remittances" by Tuccio and Wahba (2020) offers a comprehensive overview of the economic aspects of social remittances, highlighting the transformative role of migration in transferring norms and the significant influence of host countries in this process. However, the review recognizes the need for further research to fully understand the mechanisms of social remittance transfer.

Another paper to be reviewed is the editorial “Mapping social remittances” by Boccagni and Decimo (2013) in *Migration Letters*. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the concept of social remittances within the framework of transnational migration studies. It effectively outlines the strengths and limitations of current research on social remittances, while also identifying areas in need of further exploration and development. The main findings are:

- **Central Role in Literature:** The concept of social remittances has gained a central position in literature on the effects of emigration on home societies.
- **Need for Further Research Development:** The editorial identifies four key areas for further research: tensions between individualization and home-society obligations, incorporation of economic remittances within socio-cultural remittances, interfaces between social remittances and social capital, and the impact of physical and social distance on social remittance distribution.

- **Complex Interplay of Factors:** It highlights the complexity of how individual and societal pressures shape the development and circulation of social remittances.

Regarding the methodology this paper employs a critical literature review, analyzing the existing body of work on social remittances in transnational migration studies. It synthesizes various theoretical and empirical studies to map out the current state of knowledge and identify gaps and future directions for research.

"Mapping social remittances" by Boccagni and Decimo, while extensive, acknowledges certain limitations. Primarily, its focus on existing literature may restrict the incorporation of insights from emerging or unpublished research in the field of social remittances. This could mean that the latest developments or innovative perspectives might not be adequately represented. Furthermore, considering the vast diversity of migration contexts, the applicability of the findings to all forms of transnational migration could be limited. Different migration scenarios, influenced by varying socio-economic, cultural, and political factors, may exhibit unique patterns of social remittances that are not fully captured in the review. Additionally, the dynamic nature of migration trends and the ever-evolving dynamics of social remittances present a challenge. As these patterns are subject to continuous change, the review might not entirely capture or reflect the latest shifts and developments in migration models and their consequent social remittance impacts.

In conclusion, the paper by Boccagni and Decimo (2013) provides a critical overview of the concept of social remittances in global migration studies, highlighting its importance in the literature and calling for more focused research in several key areas. The underscores the need to deepen the understanding of social remittances through diverse and evolving migration contexts.

"Transnational Literacies as Social Remittances: The Role of Language Ideologies in Shaping Migrants' Online Literacies" by Tony Capstick, is another paper that has been reviewed. It was published in Applied Linguistics in 2020, and explores the interconnection between migration, social remittances, and literacy practices. The paper main findings are related with:

- **Social Remittances and Literacy Practices:** Capstick identifies literacy practices as a form of social remittances, where migrants circulate ideas, practices, identities, and social capital between their destination and origin countries.
- **Influence of Language Ideologies:** The study emphasizes the role of language ideologies in shaping migrants' online literacy practices. It shows how beliefs about language influence the way migrants engage in literacy practices online and remit ideas and beliefs through these practices.
- **Continuity of Literacy Practices:** The article seeks to understand the relationship between migrants' literacy practices before and after migration, and how these practices facilitate the remittance of ideas and beliefs, thus maintaining transnational migration.

Capstick uses a qualitative research approach, focusing on a case study of a key respondent named Usman. The study involves tracing the meaning-making trajectories in interviews with Usman and examining the language and literacy choices made by his family and friends on Facebook. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how international literacies operate as social remittances.

The study, while insightful, faces certain limitations that should be noted. First and foremost, its findings are derived from a single case study. This focus, while providing in-depth insights, may limit the applicability of the results to migrant populations or contexts, as different groups may have varied experiences and outcomes. Additionally, the dynamic nature of online literacies poses a challenge. These literacies are constantly evolving, and the study, capturing a specific moment in time, may not adequately reflect changes that occur over an extended period. This could affect the relevance and applicability of the findings in rapidly changing digital landscapes. Lastly, while the study addresses language ideologies, it may not completely capture their complexity and diversity. Language ideologies can vary greatly among different migrant communities, influenced by a multitude of cultural, social, and individual factors. Therefore, the study's focus might not encompass the full range of these ideologies, potentially overlooking refined variations and understatements present in different migrant settings.

Capstick's 2020 article provides a novel perspective on the role of language ideologies in shaping migrants' online literacies, highlighting literacy practices as a crucial component of social remittances in globalized migration.

### 3. Similarities and Differences in Social Remittances Studies

The papers on social remittances, each distinct in their approach and emphasis, collectively present a broad range of perspectives and findings in this area of study. From analyzing how migrants' impact social and political environments in their countries of origin to investigating the changing dynamics of cultural and financial exchanges, these studies offer a thorough examination of the complex phenomenon of social remittances. In this section, we explore the detailed differences and notable similarities that are evident across these diverse academic contributions, providing a comprehensive comparative analysis of their research methods, main areas of interest, and key conclusions. Here are the essential differences and similarities among the reviewed papers on social remittances:

#### 3.1. Differences

- **Focus and Scope** - One of the first and most notable differences among the studies on social remittances is their focus and scope. Levitt's 1998 study lays the foundation by introducing the basic concept of social remittances and its focus on cultural diffusion at the local level. Building on this, Levitt and Lamba-Nieves in 2011 extend the concept to delve into how pre-migration experiences shape social remittances, distinguishing between individual and collective forms. Lacroix, Levitt, & Vari-Lavoisier's 2016 research shifts the focus to the political domain, specifically examining how social remittances impact political landscapes, including social protests and governance reforms. In a different vein, Tuccio & Wahba's 2020 study turns attention to the economic implications, particularly the transfer of norms influenced by host countries. Boccagni & Decimo in 2013 offer a critical overview of the entire concept, highlighting both its strengths and limitations while advocating for further research in this field. Finally, Capstick in 2020 narrows down to a specific aspect by investigating the role of language ideologies in shaping migrants' online literacies, categorizing it as a unique form of social remittances. Each of these studies contributes distinct perspectives and insights, enriching the understanding of social remittances in various contexts.
- **Methodological Approach** - The second main difference across these studies lies in their methodological approaches. Levitt's foundational study in 1998 and the subsequent collaboration with Lamba-Nieves in 2011 are characterized by their use of qualitative analyses. These methods allow for an in-depth exploration of social remittances, investigating into the understated complexities of cultural diffusion and its impacts. On the other hand, Tuccio & Wahba's 2020 study adopts a different approach, conducting a comprehensive review of economic literature. This method provides a broad overview of the economic aspects of social remittances, collating and analyzing findings from various sources to present a consolidated view. Similarly, Boccagni & Decimo in 2013 undertake a critical literature review, but with a focus that spans beyond just the economic implications, including a wider range of factors related to social remittances. Lastly, Capstick's 2020 study takes a unique approach, utilizing a case study method to focus specifically on language and online literacy. This approach allows for a detailed examination of how language ideologies manifest in online environments, offering insights into a specific aspect of social remittances. Each of these methodological choices reflects the specific aims and scopes of the studies, highlighting diverse ways of understanding and analyzing the phenomenon of social remittances.

#### 3.2. Similarities

Despite the differences in focus and methodology, the reviewed papers share several key similarities that underline the central theme of social remittances.

Firstly, all the papers converge on the topic of social remittances, emphasizing their integral role in driving cultural, social, political, and economic transformations associated with migration. This common focus underscores the multifaceted influence of social remittances in various realms of migrant lives and their communities.

Secondly, each study acknowledges the transnational impact of social remittances. They highlight the mutual nature of these remittances, illustrating how they influence not just the home countries of migrants but also the host countries. This global perspective is crucial in understanding the broader implications of migration beyond geographical borders.

Thirdly, across these papers, social remittances are consistently portrayed as a dynamic and evolving concept. They are not static but change with shifting migration models and contexts. This recognition reflects an understanding of the fluidity and adaptability of cultural exchanges in the face of global migration trends.

Lastly, a common thread in these studies is the acknowledgment of the significant influence of migrants' experiences. The papers collectively recognize that both pre-migration experiences and the experiences during migrants' stay in host

countries profoundly shape the form and impact of social remittances. This aspect highlights the deeply personal and experiential nature of these remittances, rooted in the individual journeys of migrants.

Together, these similarities illustrate a comprehensive and evolving understanding of social remittances within the broader context of migration studies.

In summary, while each paper contributes unique insights and focuses on different aspects of social remittances, they collectively emphasize the significance of this concept in understanding the broader impact of migration beyond economic factors, encompassing cultural, social, political, and linguistic dimensions.

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#### 4. Future research recommendations

Based on the analysis of the papers on social remittances, several recommendations for future research in this field can be identified:

- *Exploring Diverse Contexts and Populations* - Future research could explore social remittances in a broader range of contexts, including different countries and cultures, to enhance understanding of how these remittances vary across diverse migrant populations and settings.
- *Extended Studies* - Extended research would provide insights into how social remittances evolve over time, especially considering changing global dynamics, migration patterns, and technological advancements.
- *Impact on Host Countries* - There is a need for more research on the impact of social remittances in host countries, examining how migrants' contributions shape cultural, social, and political dynamics in these societies.
- *Role of Technology and Digital Platforms* - Investigating the role of digital technologies in facilitating social remittances, especially in the context of online literacies and social media, would be valuable. This includes understanding how technology mediates the transfer of cultural norms and practices.
- *Quantitative Analysis* - Employing quantitative methods to complement existing qualitative research could provide more comprehensive data on the scale and impact of social remittances.
- *Interdisciplinary Approaches* - Integrating perspectives from sociology, economics, political science, linguistics, and cultural studies could enrich the understanding of social remittances, allowing for a more holistic view of their complex impacts.
- *Focus on Political and Governance Aspects* - Further research on the influence of social remittances on political processes, governance, and civic engagement in both sending and receiving countries would contribute to a deeper understanding of their role in international political dynamics.
- *Examining Language and Communication* - Investigating the role of language ideologies, communication practices, and literacy in the context of social remittances can provide insights into how migrants negotiate identity and cultural belonging across borders.
- *Economic Implications* - Studies exploring the nexus between social and economic remittances would be beneficial, especially in understanding how social remittances contribute to economic development and changes in labor markets.
- *Policy Implications* - Research should also focus on the policy implications of social remittances, guiding policymakers in creating frameworks that recognize and leverage the social and cultural contributions of migrants.

In essence, future research on social remittances should aim to be cross-disciplinary, drawing from a range of academic fields such as sociology, economics, political science, and cultural studies for a more integrated understanding. This approach would enable a thorough exploration of the topic, covering the vast array of ways in which social remittances manifest and impact communities. Such research should not only investigate traditional areas of migration studies but also explore new territories, considering the role of digital technology and global communication in modern migration patterns.

Furthermore, these studies should be inclusive, capturing the diverse experiences of migrants from varied backgrounds, cultures, and socio-economic statuses. This inclusiveness is essential for understanding the full range of social remittances, from subtle cultural exchanges to more pronounced economic and political influences.

Acknowledging the changing nature of global migration is also crucial. As migration dynamics evolve in response to global events, economic conditions, and policy changes, the nature and impact of social remittances are likely to change

too. Therefore, future studies should be adaptive and flexible, ready to address new challenges and findings as they emerge.

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## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper explains the complex dimensions of social remittances, illustrating their crucial role in the intercultural and socio-economic exchanges that derive from migration. The review underscores the complexity and diversity of social remittances, advocating for a refined understanding that goes beyond simplistic economic perspectives. Future research is encouraged to adopt interdisciplinary approaches and leverage technological advancements, aiming to provide deeper insights into the mechanisms and impacts of social remittances. It is essential for policymakers to recognize the value of social remittances in fostering sustainable development and cultural integration. This paper calls for an expanded research agenda that addresses the evolving landscape of migration and its broad implications for societies worldwide, promoting strategies that exploit the potential of social remittances to contribute to inclusive and resilient communities.

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