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*Evaluating Socio-Political Changes:
The Decision-Making Process of Skilled Migrants
Relocating to Sweden*

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Abstract

In today's climate of frequent global mobility and heightened competition for skilled migrants, this paper investigates how recent socio-political changes in Sweden, such as rising crime rates, heightened terrorism threats, tighter immigration policies and economic challenges have impacted the decision-making process of skilled migrants considering relocation to the country. Through qualitative research, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with skilled migrants, revealing that their relocation decisions are not solely based on external conditions, as the frequently used push and pull theory suggests. Instead, this study found that skilled migrants often make their decisions based on a comprehensive assessment of risks and rewards. Participants often engage in a more nuanced decision-making process, comparing the risks in Sweden to those in their home countries while also considering pull factors like Sweden's well-developed social welfare system, high quality of life, and progressive social policies. Although recent socio-political changes in Sweden have increased perceived risks, these factors have not significantly hindered the overall migration intentions of skilled migrants.

This study extends the push-pull model by incorporating a factor called “emotional responses to perceived risks”, emphasising the moderating role of risk perception in migration decisions. This theoretical contribution provides a more nuanced understanding of migration dynamics, highlighting the psychological and emotional factors that influence skilled migrants. In addition, our study finds that despite undergoing major socio-political transformations, Sweden's strong national brand image continues to exert a powerful influence in attracting potential skilled migrants.

Keywords: Skilled migration, Socio-political changes, Sweden, Risk perception, Push-pull theory, Nation branding, Migration decision-making, Qualitative research.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	7
<i>1.1 Background</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>1.2 Relevance and Theoretical Contributions</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>1.3 Problem, Aim and Research Questions</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>1.4 Structure of the Thesis</i>	<i>14</i>
2. Literature Review	14
<i>2.1 Nation Branding.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>2.2 Destination Image and Talent Attraction.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>2.3 Global Migration of Skilled Migrants</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>2.4 Key Driving Factors of Skilled Migrants</i>	<i>18</i>
3. Theoretical Framework	21
<i>3.1 Push-Pull Theory</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>3.2 Risk Perception Theory.....</i>	<i>24</i>
4. Methodology.....	27
<i>4.1 Research Strategy.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>4.2 Research Design.....</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>4.2.1 Sampling</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>4.2.2 Data Collection: Interviews</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>4.3 Transcription and Data Analysis Method</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>4.4 Quality of Research.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>4.5 Ethical Considerations.....</i>	<i>36</i>
5. The Empirical Data: Findings and Analysis	37
<i>5.1 Push and Pull Theory</i>	<i>37</i>
5.1.1 Push Factors.....	37
5.1.2 Pull Factors	41
5.1.3 Moderating Factors	47
<i>5.2 Risk Perception.....</i>	<i>49</i>
5.2.1 Sources of information	49
5.2.2 What are the Perceived Risks?.....	52
5.2.3 Assessment and Response to Perceived Risks.....	54
<i>5.3 Merging Risk Perception and Push-Pull Framework</i>	<i>58</i>

6. Discussion	62
<i>6.1 Concluding Discussion</i>	62
<i>6.2 Contributions, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research</i>	64
Bibliography	67
Appendix.....	75

List of Figures

Figure 1. Push and Pull Theory - Economic and Noneconomic	23
Figure 2. Push and Pull Theory - Economic, Social, Political.....	24
Figure 3. Data Analysis Process Flow Chart.....	33
Figure 4. New Conceptual Model of the Decision-Making Process of Skilled Migrants.....	59

List of Tables

Table 1. Sampling strategy.....	29
Table 2. Demographic Overview of Participants.....	31

1. Introduction

How does a country maintain its appeal to international skilled professionals when its socio-political landscape is in flux? In an era marked by rapid global mobility and fierce competition for high-skilled labour, understanding the factors that attract skilled individuals to specific destinations has become crucial for national economies (Kirss et al., 2014). Amidst a landscape of global mobility, Sweden stands out as a beacon for skilled professionals, offering a blend of innovation, high quality of life, and progressive social policies (Svenska Institutet, 2024). The capacity of Sweden to attract skilled professionals, innovators, and thinkers from around the world is a testament to the effectiveness of its destination image (OECD, 2023b). However, as socio-political tides shift, the factors that once made Sweden attractive are now under scrutiny by potential movers (Åberg, 2019). This study delves into the dynamics at play, examining how recent socio-political changes within Sweden influence the perceptions and decision-making processes of skilled migrants.

1.1 Background

In discussions of international skilled professionals, the terms "skilled migrants" and "global talents" are sometimes used interchangeably, though they originate from different academic fields. The term "skilled migrants" is traditionally rooted in migration studies (Docquier & Marfouk, 2005), while "global talents" is frequently used in business and management and talent management fields (Anlesinya et al., 2019). The definitions of both skilled migrants and global talents have evolved to reflect the changing needs of the global labour market. Traditionally recognized for their high-level qualifications, these definitions have expanded to recognize their roles in promoting economic development and innovation (Docquier & Marfouk, 2005; Hu et al., 2020). They now include a broader range of capabilities that align with the strategic developmental needs of various regions (Boucher, 2020; Kirss et al., 2014).

For the purpose of our thesis, the authors will use these terms interchangeably, as they both refer to highly skilled individuals whose relocation is influenced by a variety of global and local factors. While human capital is recognized as a key factor for economic growth in modern society (OECD, 2023a), the importance of global talents has been widely acknowledged since ancient times. As early as the 4th century BC, ancient Greek and Roman were aware of the importance of skilled migrants in enhancing productivity. Various strategies to attract them

have been adopted by different civilizations. These historical strategies have evolved into the core of several research areas today, such as nation branding and economic stimulus measures (Mir et al., 2023).

Research in migration studies reveals that skilled migrants consider diverse factors when choosing a destination, such as economic opportunities, cultural offerings, political stability, and robust social systems (Martin & Zürcher, 2008; Mahroum, 2000; Papademetriou et al., 2008; Silvanto & Ryan, 2014). Different professional groups are influenced by tailored push and pull factors catering to their specific needs (Mahroum, 2000; Solimano, 2008). For instance, economic incentives and career opportunities are important for engineers and executives, while political freedom and inclusivity matter to those from restrictive regimes. Overall, migration decisions are shaped by an integrated package including career growth and a supportive environment (Silvanto et al., 2015; Etola, 2022; CBRE, 2024).

Sweden, along with the entire Nordic region are known for high welfare systems, sustainability, and high living standards, attracting global talents (OECD, 2023c). However, over the past decade, Sweden has navigated through a series of socio-political shifts that range from governmental changes and policy adjustments in areas like immigration to its responses to global events (Svenska Institutet, 2023). The 2022 election brought a centre-right minority coalition into power, backed by the Sweden Democrats (SD), known for extremist tendencies (Widenstjerna & Widfeldt, 2023). Under the leadership of the new right-leaning government, the stance on immigration became more stringent, including strict amendments to labour migration laws. The new government enforced stricter immigration policies, increasing the salary threshold for work permits, to reduce low-skilled immigration and attract high-skilled workers (OECD, 2023a; Dahlsten & Lindstrom, 2024; Engstrand, 2024).

In the realm of international policy and diplomacy, facing the aggression of Russia towards Ukraine, Sweden submitted its application to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in May 2022 and, after a long wait of 20 months, officially became NATO's newest member on March 7, 2024 (NATO, 2024; Bryant, 2024). This historic event signifies the abandonment of Sweden's over 200 years of non-alignment policy, ending its long-established image and international identity as a neutral country (Widenstjerna & Widfeldt, 2023). Meanwhile, domestically, incidents like the public Quran burnings by a right-winged nationalist in 2023 have sparked international uproar, predominantly in Muslim countries,

leading to the burning of the Swedish embassy in Baghdad and making Sweden a focal point of international attention (Boxerman & Kwai, 2023; Rubin & Kwai, 2023). This incident not only heightened the external security threat to Sweden, prompting the government to raise the terrorism threat level from 'elevated' (level 3) to 'high' (level 4), but also impacted its diplomatic relations, marking a stark departure from its historical stance of neutrality.

These events, along with a misinformation campaign alleging the kidnapping of Muslim children, being forced to live in violation of Islamic teachings, have painted a picture of Sweden as Islamophobic (Svenska Institutet, 2023). Combined with the Quran burnings, these incidents resulted in a broader discourse that questioned Sweden's commitment to open and tolerant societal values, touching on issues of freedom of speech, religious freedoms, and the role of state institutions like the Social Services and the Police in such controversies.

Therefore, the image of Sweden has experienced fluctuations in specific contexts, particularly in countries like China, Russia (Svenska Institutet, 2023), Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Svenska Institutet, 2024), where perceptions have notably deteriorated. In these nations, Sweden's rankings have declined across all indicators, signalling a broader negative shift in attitude towards Sweden. Moreover, the varying degrees of familiarity with Sweden further compound the challenge of managing its destination image. While almost three-quarters of respondents claim some level of knowledge about Sweden, understanding is markedly lower in geographically and culturally distant countries.

Furthermore, in the domain of domestic security in Sweden, the significant rise in gang violence and shootings has attracted increasing international attention. Since 2013, Sweden has experienced a sharp increase in fatal shootings, with the number of gun-related deaths in 2022 reaching a new high (Sunnemark, 2023). Notably, data indicates that since the year of 2000, Sweden is the only European country where the number of fatal shootings per 100,000 residents has increased, with Stockholm's per capita rate of gun homicides being approximately 30 times that of London (Sunnemark, 2023; Dyvik, 2024). The emergence of "no-go zones" describing areas where the influence of law is questioned, and the safety of residents and emergency services is threatened, together with a surge in violence attributed to immigration issues by far-right parties (SD) complicates the situation further (Åberg, 2019; Sunnemark, 2023).

‘We live in a time of difficult challenges. The fact is that no Swedish Government in modern times has had to simultaneously tackle challenges that are so numerous, so major and so difficult.’

*Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson
(Regeringskansliet, 2023)*

Research on the impact of socio-political factors on migration decisions is crucial to understand the dynamics of skilled migrants movement (Lee, 2016; Kwilinski et al., 2022). Studies in the area have explored how political changes, legislative reforms, and social unrest affect a country's ability to attract and retain foreign talents. For instance, research has shown that political stability, transparent governance, and consistent legislative environments are key attractors for skilled migrants (Alvarez & Campo, 2013; Khalid et al., 2022; Ristovska & Eftimov, 2019). Conversely, political turmoil, frequent changes in immigration laws, and episodes of social unrest can diminish a nation's appeal, as these factors introduce risk and uncertainty into the decision-making process of potential migrants. Additionally, perceptions of safety and stability play a significant role. Skilled migrants are not only looking for better job prospects but also for a stable environment where they can build a future.

Amidst the broader examination of socio-political changes and their impact on Sweden's global image, an aspect to consider is the role of media attention. As the internet has become one of the principal information sources used by individuals, it has a large impact on people's perception of destinations (Rafael, 2016). Sweden's global image has been shaped by media coverage, and in 2023, publications about Sweden rose by 10% over 2022 and 37% over 2021 (Svenska Institutet, 2024). Increased coverage in Arabic and Turkish publications was driven by reactions to Quran burnings, NATO membership, and gang criminality. Despite negative attention, Sweden's overall image remains positive globally (Svenska Institutet, 2024). This consistency in perception underscores the resilience of Sweden's national image, which has been maintained over several years.

Despite facing numerous internal challenges, Sweden consistently excels in global indexes as an attractive country for residence. A thorough assessment using various indicators of talent attractiveness recently ranked Sweden second among the countries surveyed, highlighting its strong appeal as a destination for skilled migrants (OECD, 2023c). This appeal stems not only from economic opportunities but also from societal values, lifestyle, and its commitment to

fostering an innovative and creative environment (Svenska Institutet, 2024). Sweden's strong social governance, social welfare system, environmental and climate protection, and quality of life are key elements of its destination image, bolstered by its reputation in exports, innovation, and education. These factors align with contemporary values of skilled migrants and global trends toward sustainability and social equity (Svenska Institutet, 2023).

These attributes have contributed to maintaining a strong and stable nation brand globally, as evidenced by the 2023 Nation Brands Index (Ipsos, 2023). According to this index, Sweden ranks tenth among 60 nations, slightly down from ninth in the previous year but consistent with its decade-long performance: underscoring the enduring appeal and stability of Sweden's national brand. Yet, this impressive standing presents a paradoxical picture: Sweden is simultaneously a beacon of success and a case study in emerging societal crises (Åberg, 2019). Such a contrast complicates Sweden's destination image, suggesting that while the nation continues to earn global admiration for its quality of life and progressive policies, it is also grappling with social and criminal issues that could undermine its domestic peace and international stature. This complex narrative poses questions about how Sweden can sustain its image and continue to attract skilled migrants amidst these internal challenges.

1.2 Relevance and Theoretical Contributions

The societal relevance of this research is profound as this research investigates the case of Sweden and the recent socio-political changes. The timeliness of these socio-political changes makes Sweden a compelling case study, as there is a real-time evolution in the factors that traditionally contributed to its appeal. This dynamic situation presents a unique opportunity to study the immediate impacts of socio-political changes on skilled migration. The literature on migration often overlooks how recent socio-political changes, such as legislative reforms or social unrest, specifically influence the perceived attractiveness of a country like Sweden, known for its high standards of living and progressive policies. Hence, the recency of Sweden's socio-political shifts means that there is limited research of this in existing literature. Previous studies have not had the opportunity to examine how such contemporary changes affect Sweden's ability to attract and maintain a skilled workforce. This lack of prior research creates a critical space for this study to contribute insights into the ongoing situation in Sweden, offering a new perspective on how skilled migrants respond to evolving socio-political landscapes. This research will help increase the knowledge of this phenomenon, by providing

valuable data that can inform both policy and practice in migration mobility during periods of significant political and social change.

This study gains added significance in light of Sweden's recent commitment of 25 million SEK to national talent attraction strategies (Gemsjö et al, 2024), underscoring a renewed effort to enhance Sweden's appeal to skilled migrants. By exploring how skilled migrants perceive Sweden amidst socio-political shifts and what factors sway their decisions, this study provides actionable insights that help align Sweden's strategies with the evolving expectations of skilled professionals. These insights are particularly crucial as Sweden addresses a labour shortage in key sectors, impacting its economic growth and competitiveness (Gemsjö et al, 2024). Nonetheless, this research also serves as a benchmark for other nations facing similar challenges. By using the insights from this study, countries can better understand migration decision-making and address the concerns of skilled migrants, which ultimately increases their attractiveness as a relocation destination.

Moreover, this study also makes theoretical contributions to the fields of migration studies, talent acquisition and nation branding. By integrating the push and pull framework from migration theory (Brettell & Hollifield, 2022) with risk perception theory, traditionally rooted in psychology and sociology (Sibanda, 2018), this research offers a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the decision-making processes of skilled migrants. The push and pull framework helps identify the specific economic, social and political factors that either attract or repel skilled migrants in their consideration of Sweden as a potential destination (Urbanski, 2022). This framework is inherently aligned with the core concerns of talent acquisition, particularly in understanding what attracts or deters potential talents in competitive global markets (Hongal & Kinange, 2020). Incorporating risk perception theory enriches this analysis further by examining how skilled migrants perceive and evaluate the risks associated with socio-political changes in Sweden. This theory elucidates the subjective judgments migrants make regarding stability, safety, and opportunity, which are crucial for making relocation decisions amidst uncertainty (Wildavsky & Dake, 1990). The combination of these theoretical approaches enables a comprehensive analysis of how Sweden's evolving socio-political landscape impacts its attractiveness as a destination for global talents.

The synthesis of these theories helps to understand migration dynamics and deepens the understanding of how risk perception influences migration decisions by revealing the complex decision-making process that skilled migrants undergo when evaluating potential destinations.

Additionally, by analysing how changes in socio-political environments affect its destination image and, subsequently, its ability to attract skilled migrants (Herrero et al., 2015; Roozen et al., 2017), this study provides qualitative findings for theoretical exploration and practical guidance to enhance Sweden's and other nation's competitiveness in the global talent market. Through this dual focus, the study makes a valuable contribution to academic knowledge and strategic practice in the field of skilled migration.

1.3 Problem, Aim and Research Questions

Sweden has traditionally attracted skilled migrants with its high quality of life, progressive policies, and innovative culture (Svenska Institutet, 2024). However, recent socio-political changes have undermined its appeal. Rising gang violence, stricter immigration laws, and NATO membership have created uncertainty, while controversial incidents like Quran burnings have tarnished Sweden's image of openness and tolerance (Sunnemark, 2023; Bryant, 2024; Åberg, 2019; Svenska Institutet, 2024). These changes jeopardise Sweden's strong national brand, potentially hindering its ability to attract skilled migrants. Globally, competition for skilled talent is intense, with national economies relying heavily on innovation, diversity, and the expertise of high-skilled workers (Marsh & Oyelere, 2018). The inability to attract these workers could limit economic growth and impact a country's standing in global markets. Despite this importance, existing migration research often simplifies migration into a push-pull model (Kanayo et al., 2019), overlooking how migrants perceive and evaluate risks in potential relocation destinations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial since they influence relocation intentions.

Given the complexities outlined, this thesis aims to deepen the understanding of how skilled migrants evaluate and perceive the risks associated with relocating to a country that is esteemed yet facing socio-political challenges.

Based on this aim, this study will explore the following two research questions:

RQ 1: *How are perceived risks evaluated by skilled migrants in their decision-making process when considering relocation to Sweden?*

RQ 2: *How do socio-political changes in Sweden influence the relocation intention of skilled migrants?*

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Following the present introduction, the literature review section will systematically review previous literature and relevant key concepts to this study, including: nation branding, destination image, global migration of talent and key driving factors of talent attraction. The purpose is to establish the theoretical foundation for the study. In the theoretical framework chapter, we will introduce the Push and Pull Framework and Risk Perception Theory, detailing the components of each framework. These theories will guide the subsequent data collection and analysis. The following methodology chapter will describe the research design, sample selection, data collection, and analysis methods. It will explain the reasons for selecting specific research methods and discuss the quality and ethical issues of the study, while acknowledging possible limitations and biases. The analysis will present and analyse the collected data, combining theoretical frameworks with actual data to explore how risks are perceived by skilled migrants and how the socio-political changes have influenced the relocation intention of skilled migrants. Finally, the thesis will end with a concluding discussion of the work, where the main findings of the study will be summarised, research questions will be answered and suggestions for future research will be made.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, we delve into the key concepts related to migration decision-making. This includes an analysis of nation branding, the formation of destination images, the global patterns of skilled migrant flows, and the key factors driving their decisions. Together, these elements provide us a solid ground for understanding the complex dynamics behind migration decisions.

2.1 Nation Branding

Nation branding applies branding principles to entire countries with the aim of managing and enhancing their international reputation, as described by Dinnie (2022). This holistic approach to nation branding involves constructing, communicating, and managing a country's image across various facets, including culture, politics, exports, tourism, and national identity (Birdir

et al., 2018). Unlike destination marketing's focus on tourism attraction, nation branding aims at a deliberate shaping of a nation's image to enhance its global standing. This encompasses enticing foreign investment, stimulating tourism, amplifying cultural influence, and attracting skilled migrants—a relationship underscored by studies from Herrero et al. (2015) and Roozen et al. (2017), which highlight the positive correlation between a nation's image and talent attraction.

The strategic importance of nation branding in the global arena is increasingly recognized, with nations viewed as brands competing for global attention, respect, and trust (Herrero et al., 2015). This broader branding effort not only aims to make a country more appealing to foreign investors and talents but also seeks to bolster diplomatic influence, facilitating favourable trade agreements and partnerships (Dinnie, 2022). Moreover, effective nation branding initiatives can significantly enhance tourism, as well as, promote national products and services, thus improving the perceived quality and desirability of a country's exports (Mak, 2011). Beyond its external impact, nation branding also plays a crucial role in strengthening national identity and unity, celebrating unique cultural heritage and achievements, thereby influencing both international relations and domestic cohesion.

2.2 Destination Image and Talent Attraction

Building on the foundational insights into nation branding, it is essential to delve into the concept of destination image—a construct that encapsulates the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that individuals hold regarding a particular destination (Crompton, 1979). Central to the notion of destination image is its composition of cognitive elements, which encompass the knowledge and beliefs about the destination, and affective elements, encompassing the feelings and emotions directed towards it (Tasci, 2003). Tasci (2003) also outlines that the most significant stage in destination image formation for visitors is “pre-trip”, which includes planning, decision-making and destination choice. This stage is necessary to understand how the image is formed as it profoundly affects selection behaviour. Destination images significantly influence the perceptions of attractiveness and the decision-making process of potential visitors, shaping their desire to visit, invest in, or relocate to the destination. It emerges as a nuanced construct that experts in nation branding meticulously sculpt and manage, aiming to project a positive and inviting image.

Herrero et al (2015) underscores the critical role of destination image in the talent attraction process, a notion supported by broader research which posits that the image of a country substantially influences the migration decisions of skilled workers (Herrero et al., 2015). In examining the impact of destination image on talent attraction, it is essential to consider how socio-political changes within a country can influence its image, thereby affecting the decisions of skilled migrants regarding their destination preferences. Research highlights that the affective component of a country's image, encompassing emotional perceptions and attitudes towards the country, plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall destination image (Tasci, 2003). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that political incidents can adversely affect the country's image, with a more pronounced impact on the affective image (Alvarez & Campo, 2013). These changes in perception influence individuals' feelings and attitudes towards the country, impacting their willingness to migrate or visit.

Moreover, the varying degrees of familiarity with a country can amplify the challenge of managing its image as a desirable destination. A low level of familiarity can suggest a weakly held image of the country, which, as Baum and Kabst (2014) have identified, poses a challenge for attracting new skilled migrants due to the significant positive correlation between familiarity and the appeal to potential talents. Consequently, it becomes imperative to invest in building familiarity and awareness (Nadeau & Olafsen, 2015). These insights highlight the effect familiarity and socio-political changes can have on a nation's ability to attract skilled migrants. As countries compete for skilled individuals to foster innovation and economic growth, the importance of maintaining a positive national image is paramount.

2.3 Global Migration of Skilled Migrants

Data shows that since 1960, the proportion of the global population living outside their country of birth has been steadily increasing (Kerr et al., 2016). At the same time, migration patterns have changed, particularly with a significant increase in the proportion of high-skilled migrants. Developed economies have become the main destinations for these migrants. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of high-skilled migrants received by OECD countries surged by approximately 130%, including both permanent migration and temporary migration driven by global companies. Despite OECD countries having less than one-fifth of the global population, they have attracted two-thirds of the world's highly skilled migrants (Del Carpio et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2016).

Notably, the number of highly skilled female migrants moving to OECD countries has dramatically increased, and by 2010, the number of women among highly skilled migrants had surpassed that of men. The surge in female migration is closely related to broader socio-economic dynamics such as gender inequality and labour market challenges in their countries of origin. Differences in women's rights among countries encourage women to migrate to countries with higher levels of equality (Kerr, 2020). There are many reasons why highly skilled migrants tend to concentrate in wealthier countries, including government efforts to attract skilled migrants, declining costs of transportation and communication, and the international pursuit of higher education (Kerr et al., 2016). At the same time, due to significant income disparities between countries, the strong demand in wealthier countries for skilled labour, especially in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, cannot be met by the local populations, which has prompted a global competition to attract top talent (Kapur & McHale, 2005; Marsh & Oyelere, 2018).

The concept of "War for talents" was first introduced by McKinsey & Company in a report published in 1998. The report predicted that attracting, acquiring, and retaining top talent would become an ongoing and costly battle in the business world (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Schuler et al., 2011; Harvey, 2014; GÜMÜŞ, 2016). Today, under the backdrop of globalisation, the demand for highly skilled workers continues to increase, and this war has expanded from the organisational and corporate level to the national and regional levels, evolving into a "Global Talent War" (Kirss et al., 2014). International talent flow has become an essential component of globalisation. All participating countries are engaging in intense competition to attract outstanding international talents (Vaiman et al., 2012).

In this "war" for talent, the ultimate winners are undoubtedly the destination countries that manage to attract skilled migrants (Vaiman et al., 2012). These proficient workers make significant contributions to economic growth through innovation and the establishment of business networks (Marsh & Oyelere, 2018). They also help fill gaps in the labour market, particularly in key sectors such as technology, healthcare, and academia. International students also play an indispensable role in this "war," as globalisation fuels their desire to study abroad, allowing them to experience different cultures and educational systems. This mobility plays a crucial role in the transnational transfer of human capital. They contribute economically to their host countries and also benefit universities by driving research and academic excellence. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and advancements in technology have profoundly changed

work patterns, making remote work increasingly common, this has not reduced the need for physical proximity. On the contrary, these changes appear to complement the global flow of talent, indicating that both remote and physical presence are important in the modern economy. It is expected that the number of highly skilled migrants will continue to grow (Miao, 2021). Therefore, for countries aiming to maintain global competitiveness and successfully transition to a green and digital economy, knowing how to continuously attract global talent is an urgent issue.

2.4 Key Driving Factors of Skilled Migrants

From the perspective of Mahroum (2000), high-skilled individuals are attracted to different factors, which vary across different groups. The study categorically discusses high-skilled professionals in various sectors. For managers and executives, discrepancies in salaries and benefits between different locations become the primary driver for their mobility. For engineers and technical personnel, the nature of work, conditions, and the reputation of the organisation they belong to are core push and pull factors in their mobility decisions. Entrepreneurs tend to relocate to regions that support the international expansion of their businesses. Scholars and scientists value visa convenience, tax systems, and policy protections, all of which are decisive factors in their involvement in international projects. Furthermore, accessibility to financial services and the efficient operation of bureaucracies are equally important for them. Students, driven by a desire for cross-cultural experiences, tend to choose educational environments that offer international opportunities.

Similar to Mahroum's analysis, Solimano (2008) also points out that different types of talents have different mobility motives, which exert unique influences on both the source and destination countries. Specifically, the researcher mentions medical professionals, such as doctors and nurses, who tend to migrate to countries with high demand, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada. For talents in the cultural sector, such as artists, musicians, singers, and writers seek global recognition, greater economic opportunities, and exchanges with the global artistic community. Furthermore, Solimano (2008) emphasises that political systems significantly influence talent mobility, with individuals preferring to move from authoritarian countries to democratic ones, which offer more civic freedoms and rights protection. This trend of mobility is particularly pronounced among highly educated and skilled individuals, as they are more inclined to leave non-democratic or politically unstable environments.

Papademetriou et al. (2008) classified various factors influencing talented individuals' decision-making process when choosing a location, dividing them into drivers, facilitators, and the total immigration package. They argue that drivers are first-order decision-making variables, crucial for most talents' location choices. Key driving factors include *opportunity, capital infrastructure, and the presence of critical masses of other talented professionals*. Talents are attracted to places that can offer the highest value for their skills and knowledge and promote personal and professional development. Simultaneously, they are drawn to locations with a concentration of other talented professionals, as this represents potential collaborative effects, greater possibilities for research breakthroughs, and product innovation.

Facilitators, as second-order variables, affect decisions but are less likely to determine the final outcome (Papademetriou et al., 2008). These factors include *a fair and generous social model, lifestyle and environmental factors, and a tolerant and safe society*. Social policies, such as healthcare, education, and welfare, play a certain role in the attractiveness of a location, especially for those planning to stay long-term or migrate with family. Similarly, climate, natural landscapes, and cultural activities can significantly influence talents' immigration decisions. A welcoming, inclusive, and safe community environment is crucial for talents to choose a place where they feel accepted and safe. The total immigration package is the core of these two sets of variables, encompassing the sum of all immigration rules and conditions. Immigration policies significantly affect talents' decision-making processes. A clear, fair, and transparent immigration system, providing a reasonable path to permanent residency or citizenship, recognition of foreign qualifications, and opportunities for family members, are key factors in deciding where talents choose to relocate.

In their 2014 study, Silvanto and Ryan identified five vision drivers and suggested that countries aiming to attract professionals should highlight these attributes in their national brand value propositions. These vision drivers include *employment opportunities, cultural diversity and inclusiveness, clear immigration policies and effective governance, geographic concentration of talent, and quality of life*. This resonates with the views of Papademetriou et al (2008), who also believe that providing attractive employment opportunities is a key factor in attracting international skilled professionals. Economic incentives, particularly wage differentials and career advancement opportunities, are primary drivers for talent choosing to migrate overseas. Silvanto and Ryan (2014) further emphasise the importance of social integration, noting that potential isolation and marginalisation have negative effects on the

migration decisions of foreign professionals. The factor of "clear immigration policies and effective governance" highlights the role of political and regulatory factors in global talent mobility.

In 2019, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) developed the "International Talent Attractiveness Index" (ITA) to measure the attractiveness of different countries to highly skilled workers, international entrepreneurs, and university students. This framework recognizes that different types of talents may exhibit different preferences for different countries. The original ITA framework consisted of seven dimensions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected work and migration patterns, accelerating global digital transformation, leading to the expansion of the framework to nine dimensions. The updated dimensions include: *Quality of Opportunity, Income and Tax, Future Prospects, Family Environment, Skills Environment, Inclusiveness, Visa and Admission Policy, Quality of Life, and Health System Performance (optional)*. The newly added Health System Performance dimension is specifically used to evaluate a country's healthcare system performance, focusing on individual healthcare expenditure and accessibility to quality healthcare services (OECD, 2023a).

These research findings reveal various key drivers that attract skilled migrants, covering aspects from economic incentives and career opportunities to political stability and cultural inclusiveness, demonstrating the diversity of motivations behind talent mobility (Silvanto et al., 2015; Etola, 2022; CBRE, 2024). However, understanding only the attractions of the destination countries does not fully explain the phenomenon of skilled migration. The migration decisions of skilled migrants are not solely based on the appeal of the destination; their motivations are also rooted in the conditions of their home countries. Therefore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process of skilled migrants, we need to consider both the push factors that drive them from their home countries and the pull factors that attract them to new locations. In the upcoming theoretical framework section, we will shift from focusing only on key driving factors to a broader push-pull theory model, expanding our analytical perspective to better understand the migration decisions of skilled migrants.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter starts by introducing the Push-Pull Theory, which provides a foundational perspective on the economic, social, and political factors that influence migration, then goes on to the Risk Perception Theory as it offers insight into the cognitive and emotional dimensions that govern how potential migrants perceive and evaluate these factors.

3.1 Push-Pull Theory

To this day, academic research on international migration has made considerable progress. In the early stages of this research field, Ravenstein (1885) proposed the "Laws of Migration", noting that while various factors such as laws, taxes, and climate can influence people's migration decisions, most migration behaviours are primarily driven by economic factors with the aim of improving economic conditions. Although Ravenstein did not delve into these specific drivers of migration, his theory laid an important theoretical foundation for subsequent studies on international migration (Wijesinghe, 2023; Kanayo et al., 2019).

Building on this foundation, Lee (1966) proposed the famous "Push-Pull Theory". Lee's theory outlines that migration decisions are influenced by four main factors:

1. *Factors Associated with the Area of Origin:* This includes factors that might either attract people to stay or push them to leave the area, such as economic opportunities, political environment, and social services.
2. *Factors Associated with the Area of Destination:* Again, this encompasses factors that attract or prevent people from moving to a new area. It is worth noting that people's knowledge and understanding of a new destination are often not as comprehensive as that of their departure location, adding uncertainty and risk to the migration decision.
3. *Intervening Obstacles:* This refers to the difficulties and challenges that individuals need to overcome to reach a new destination, such as physical distance, immigration law restrictions, and economic costs.

4. *Personal Factors*: An individual's perceptions and views of their current location and potential destination greatly affect whether they choose to migrate. This also includes unexpected events that might suddenly prompt them to decide to migrate.

Lee's (1966) theory provides a more detailed consideration of factors related to both the place of origin and the destination, indicating that migration behaviour is usually the result of both push factors from the original place of residence (such as political oppression or environmental degradation) and pull factors from the destination (such as better educational opportunities or higher quality of life) (Nikou et al., 2023). Notably, migration decisions are not always entirely rational and people might be influenced by their emotions or make decisions based on incomplete information (Lee, 1966).

Three years later, the economist Todaro (1969) studied the reasons behind the rural population's migration to cities in developing countries, once again emphasising that economic factors such as the pursuit of higher wages and better job opportunities are the main drivers of population migration. Since then, the Push-Pull Theory has been widely recognized and applied in the field of immigration research (Shamala, 2021). However, since the 1980s, several critics emerged, arguing that push factors frequently have a greater influence on migration decisions than pull factors, and as a result, these variables shouldn't be viewed as having an equal impact (Kanayo et al., 2019). Moreover, the Push-Pull Theory was criticised for oversimplifying migration behaviour by viewing it as a unidirectional response of individuals to external environments and ignoring the diversity of individual experiences.

Many scholars have further pointed out that the Push-Pull Theory fails to differentiate the migration motives across various groups and social classes, making it difficult to determine which factors are decisive and which are secondary for different groups (Bruzzone, 2020). Contemporary literature in the field of migration further reveals the complexity of the forces behind international migration (Stanojoska & Petrevski, 2012; Wijesinghe, 2023; Shamala, 2021). For example, Martin & Zürcher (2008) categorised reasons for migration into economic and non-economic factors (Figure 1), with other scholars preferring to discuss this phenomenon in three areas: Economic, Social, and Political (Figure 2) (Urbanski, 2022). Besides the repeatedly demonstrated role of economic factors, social factors also play an indispensable role in migration decisions. For example, a well-developed social welfare system, and the need for family reunification in the relocation country are all significant attractions. Migration is seen

as a way to fulfil personal or family aspirations, including providing better education and growth environments for children, as well as, pursuing a higher quality of life. Similarly, political factors also play a crucial role in migration dynamics, with political dissatisfaction and lack of trust in the government being reasons for people to leave their home country (Urbanski, 2022; Kanayo et al., 2019; Wijesinghe, 2023). Furthermore, although traditional migration studies rarely consider media in shaping migration decisions, with the rapid development of information technology, social media and news have become important platforms for migrants to obtain information and form opinions about potential destination countries (Kanayo et al., 2019). The information about the destination provided by these platforms undoubtedly influences people's expectations of migration and ultimately their decision regarding relocation.

Figure 1. Push and Pull Theory - Economic and Noneconomic

Type of migrant	Factors		
	Demand-pull	Supply-push	Network/other
Economic	Labor recruitment (guest workers)	Unemployment or underemployment; low wages (farmers whose crops fail)	Job and wage information flows
Noneconomic	Family unification (family members join spouse)	Fleeing war and persecution (displaced persons and refugees/asylum seekers)	Communications; transportation; assistance organizations; desire for new experience/adventure

Note: All three factors may encourage a person to migrate. The importance of pull, push, and network factors can change over time.

(Martin & Zürcher, 2008)

Figure 2. Push and Pull Theory - Economic, Social, Political

Area	Push Factors	Pull Factors
Economic	Poverty Unemployment Low wages Lack of basic health High fertility rates Lack of basic education	Prospects for higher wages Improved living standards Personal development Job opportunities Good welfare standards Labor demands
Social	Discrimination Poor medical care Social insecurity Inadequate education systems Population growth	Family reunification Ethnic homeland Freedom from discrimination Better Medicare Welfare state benefits
Political	Conflicts Corruptions Poor governance Human rights abuse Bad governance Terrorism	Safety and security Political freedom Democracy Political stability Human civil rights

(Urbanski, 2022)

In addition to the traditional application of push-pull theory in migration studies, Alessandro & Bassu (2015) approached this topic from a service marketing perspective, offering new and valuable insights for regional migration. They considered the factors that prompt individuals to leave their current locations (push factors) and those that attract them to new locations (pull factors), and incorporated moderating factors including switching costs. The switching costs here primarily refer to the costs associated with migration (monetary and psychic costs). High costs can hinder an individual's willingness to relocate. The findings of these researchers in the field of migration provide important insights for our analysis and discussion of the decision-making process of skilled migrants considering relocating to Sweden. In this study, we will apply the push-pull theory to conduct a structured analysis of the collected interview data. By analysing the individual experiences of the respondents, we will understand the nuances of each factor and how these factors play a role in the decision-making process of these talents.

3.2 Risk Perception Theory

Risk perception theory was initially proposed in the 1970s within the field of psychology and was later explored in sociology. It investigates how individuals perceive and react to various risks (Sibanda, 2018). Risk is defined as the possibility of experiencing harm or loss when making a decision, characterised by uncertainty due to its unpredictability (Wildavsky & Dake, 1990; Boholm, 1998). People's risk perception—the subjective assessment of the likelihood of

potential negative events occurring—is deeply influenced by their personal experiences (Sibanda, 2018; Knuth et al., 2015). Risk perception includes two main dimensions: the cognitive dimension, which involves knowledge and understanding of risk, and the emotional dimension, which involves feelings about risk.

Research in risk perception generally holds that knowledge about risks largely determines how individuals perceive them (Sibanda, 2018). Experts are considered to assess risks through scientific data and objective analysis, while the general public tends to rely more on subjective perceptions and intuitive judgments. Moreover, their risk perceptions are also deeply affected by emotional responses, social norms, and methods of information dissemination (Kasperson et al., 1988; Paek & Hove, 2017). The Risk Perception Theory emphasises that individuals' perceptions of risk are not uniform. Understanding an individual's risk perception is a very complex process that requires a comprehensive consideration of both the cognitive and emotional aspects of risk, as well as individual experiences, knowledge, reasoning abilities, and deeply rooted values. Additionally, cultural and national backgrounds can lead to significant differences in risk perception, as different countries and cultures prioritise risks based on specific factors relevant to them (Boholm, 1998; Siegrist & Árvai, 2020).

In the field of psychology, Risk Perception Theory also involves the concept of Optimism Bias, which is the tendency of individuals to underestimate the risks of negative events happening to themselves compared to others. This bias is quite common and may stem from an overestimation of one's own coping abilities, or a psychological feeling that these risks are distant, thus inadvertently downplaying the associated risks (Sunagic, 2024). Additionally, since ordinary people often lack comprehensive knowledge, they tend to rely on heuristics to assess risks. The Availability Heuristic is a prime example; where people estimate the likelihood of an event based on how easily they can recall similar instances. In other words, if a specific memory is easily recalled, people are more likely to base their decisions and judgments on this recollected information. For example, studies have shown that the size of a country can influence risk perception through the availability heuristic, with larger nations experiencing more frequent events, thereby leading to higher perceived risk (Boholm, 1998). Although various heuristic methods help simplify the complex process of information processing, they can also lead to people overlooking other important information in their decision-making, thus creating biases in their decisions (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020).

Kasperson et al. first introduced the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF) in 1988, and further refined it in 2022. This conceptual framework explores how risk events are filtered, decoded, and processed within society, thereby affecting public perceptions, and examines the roles of both informal (interpersonal networks) and formal (news media) communication channels in amplifying or attenuating risk perceptions. SARF posits that these communication channels act as “Amplification Stations”, which not only generate and transmit information about risks but also influence stakeholders who may be distant or in the future. This is akin to the ripple effect caused by throwing a small stone into water, where the ripples may amplify or diminish the initial risk perceptions and their consequences.

In today’s era of highly developed global digital communications and social media, formal channels such as media reports can significantly influence the dissemination of risk and public reactions to it. (Kasperson et al., 2022). The way media presents risk (for example, the emotional tone and focus of reports) and the volume and focus of coverage can shape public opinion and make certain risk issues appear more significant to the public. Informal communication channels, such as conversations among friends, family, and colleagues, can also intensify or mitigate perceptions of risk by sharing information with each other. Furthermore, discussions with families and friends can deepen or alter the interpretation of media reports, further influencing risk perception (Paek & Hove, 2017). Additionally, the role of government activity on social media platforms in affecting public trust and risk perception is increasingly being recognized by academics (Kasperson et al., 2022). In summary, Risk Perception Theory reveals that people’s judgments about risks are influenced by a range of factors, including cultural and political backgrounds as well as local geographical or social environments (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2010).

Using Risk Perception Theory, this thesis aims to understand how skilled migrants assess the various risks associated with relocating to and living in Sweden. Through the cognitive and emotional dimensions, this study will analyse skilled migrants' understanding of Sweden's socio-political changes, economic stability, safety, and social welfare policies, and how these factors influence their risk perceptions. Given that the interviewees come from all around the world, Risk Perception Theory will also be used to explore how different cultural backgrounds shape their perceptions of risk. For example, talents from countries with unstable political environments might perceive Sweden's democratic system as stable and having lower political risk.

The "Social Amplification of Risk Framework" (SARF) helps us understand how information about Sweden is disseminated through various channels, such as international media, word-of-mouth from friends and family, and official promotions from the Swedish authorities. These channels can amplify or mitigate the perceived risks and benefits of moving to Sweden, especially considering the recent socio-political changes in Sweden.

Furthermore, the concept of optimism bias guides our analysis of whether international talents tend to underestimate the risks of relocation due to an inherent optimism bias. They may believe that negative experiences affecting others will not similarly impact them. Moreover, the availability heuristic will reveal how recent socio-political events or significant news in Sweden might disproportionately influence their decision-making process regarding relocating to Sweden.

4. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study, detailing the connections among the research aim, selected theory, chosen methods, and data collection. It begins with an explanation of the research strategy, followed by a discussion of the research design. Subsequently, the chapter describes the data collection process and the analysis of the data. Lastly, it assesses the quality of research and addresses ethical considerations.

4.1 Research Strategy

This thesis adopts a constructivist ontological paradigm and an interpretive epistemological stance, aiming to delve into the intersection of migration, talent acquisition and nation branding within the specific context of Sweden, with a focus on the nuances introduced by risk perception and socio-political changes. The constructivist view acknowledges that reality is constructed by individuals' interactions with their environment, making it particularly suited to explore how skilled migrants perceive the destination image of Sweden amidst evolving socio-political landscapes and risks (Bryman, 2016). Interpretivism, complementing this ontological stance, facilitates a deep understanding of skilled migrants perceptions and the context in which

they are formed, underscoring the importance of subjectivity in our analysis. By focusing exclusively on the perspectives of skilled migrants, this study positions itself to uncover the subjective evaluations that underlie their decision to move to Sweden, offering a critical examination of the push and pull factors influenced by risk perception and socio-political changes. The intention is to not only highlight the specific socio-political considerations that are most salient to these individuals but also to contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of how such risk factors are integrated and evaluated into personal decision-making processes.

The qualitative nature of this research necessitates a methodological approach that can capture the complexity and nuances of skilled migrants' motivations, concerns, and how they perceive Sweden's socio-political landscape. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are specifically chosen to shed light on the intricacies of how socio-political shifts influence global talent's decision-making process to relocate to Sweden (Flick, 2014). Interviews were conducted with skilled migrants as it helps to gather rich, in-depth insights into the decision-making process of moving to Sweden amidst the socio-political changes (Bryman, 2016).

4.2 Research Design

This thesis employs a case study approach to explore how risk perceptions and socio-political changes in Sweden influence the decision-making process of skilled migrants considering relocation. The selection of a case study design is motivated by the desire to conduct a comprehensive examination of the perceptions, motivations, and concerns of skilled migrants in the face of Sweden's evolving socio-political landscape. As stated by Yin (2009, p. 18), a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” and serves as an exemplar for other countries experiencing similar challenges (Bryman, 2016). Sweden serves as a pivotal case for delving into the broader effects of socio-political shifts on the attractiveness of a country; renowned for its high rankings to potential talents.

The adoption of an abductive approach facilitated a fluid, iterative exploration between theory and data, allowing us to extend existing theoretical models of migration decision-making with empirical insights from interviews with skilled migrants (Bryman, 2016). This methodological stance enabled us to remain open to unexpected findings and adapt our understanding as new data emerged. While the theoretical foundation of the push and pull framework guided initial data collection, we allowed insights from interviews to shape and evolve our theoretical approach dynamically. This iterative interplay between theory and data led to the identification

of new themes, particularly around risk perception, enriching our understanding of the complex relationship between socio-political factors and skilled migrants' decision-making processes.

4.2.1 Sampling

This research embarked on a qualitative exploration to understand the perceptions and decision-making processes of individuals contemplating relocation to Sweden for work or life opportunities. Given the specific focus on individuals at the crossroads of making a significant life decision, a purposive sampling technique was employed, particularly criterion sampling, to identify and select participants who are actively considering Sweden as a potential new home or have already decided to move but have not yet relocated. This methodological choice guarantees that our sample is representative, efficient, and valid, as underscored by Clark et al. (2021).

Table 1. Sampling strategy

Qualitative Method	Sampling Strategy	Brief Explanation
Semi-structured Interviews	Criterion Sampling	<p>Criteria:</p> <p>(1) Target individuals relocating for work or life opportunities.</p> <p>(2) Select global talents, defined as those with a minimum of 5 years of work experience in their field or holding at least a bachelor's degree.</p> <p>(3) Focus on global talents who are either contemplating relocation to Sweden or have made the decision to move but have not yet relocated.</p>

The rationale behind focusing on individuals relocating for work or life opportunities stems from their engagement in a comprehensive decision-making process. This process involves evaluating various facets of the destination country, including aligning its values with their personal and professional aspirations for a new home. Furthermore, the requirement for individuals to possess either a minimum of 5 years of work experience or a bachelor's degree

aligns with an expansive definition of skilled migrants. This definition encompasses all individuals with the capabilities to fulfil the specific economic and social development goals of a particular region, as outlined by Hu et al. (2020) and Kirss et al. (2014). Adopting this broad definition facilitated more accessible engagement with skilled migrants during data collection, given the constraints of time and resources. Moreover, by concentrating on individuals in their "consideration phase," we hone in on a critical juncture of destination image formation. According to Tasci (2003), the pre-trip stage is pivotal for understanding image formation, as it significantly influences selection behaviour. This approach allows us to capture the nuanced perceptions and values that drive skilled migrants towards Sweden, providing rich insights into the factors that mould their relocation decisions.

Participants were primarily recruited through targeted posts in Facebook groups, such as "Moving to Sweden," known for their engagement with individuals planning to relocate. This digital platform served as an effective tool for reaching a broad audience of skilled migrants from various backgrounds and nationalities, all sharing a common interest in moving to Sweden (Kozinets, 2002). Because the aim of the study did not include any reference to the nationality of the skilled migrants, the authors tried to select a sample that did not favour any particular nationality by making sure that it would be as heterogeneous and varied as possible in this regard. In total, people from 12 different ethnicities were interviewed (Table 2). This wide range of nationalities enriches the research with varied cultural perspectives on the decision-making process and the perceived attractiveness of Sweden as a destination.

An unforeseen outcome of the recruitment process was the disproportionate willingness among genders to volunteer for participation, resulting in a sample composed of 11 females and only 5 men. While this imbalance was not intentional, women showed a higher propensity to engage in the study. It is important to note that this research does not aim to generalise its findings to all skilled migrants considering Sweden as a destination. Instead, the goal is to delve into the nuanced perceptions of Sweden's destination image and the socio-political risks considered by this specific group. The exploratory nature of this study means that while a diverse and heterogeneous sample was sought to capture a broad range of experiences and viewpoints, the particular characteristics of the sample do not detract from the trustworthiness of the insights gathered. Rather, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing the decision to relocate to Sweden. Although some may argue that the collected data is insignificant in size to show any credible results, it is important to remember that this thesis is

an explorative thesis aimed at generating insights to understand a phenomenon that has not been researched that much before.

Table 2. Demographic Overview of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
Amber	Female	American (living in Germany)	Physician assistant
Raj	Man	Indian	Lead software engineer
James	Man	Afroamerican	Musician
Zoe	Female	New Zealanders (living in Germany)	Early Childhood Education
Claudia	Female	Spanish	Teacher
Omar	Man	Moroccan	Nurse
Emma	Female	American/Swedish	Administrator/Writer
Laila	Female	Mozambican	Account Manager
Sanne	Female	Dutch	Psychiatric Nurse
Thandi	Female	South African	Police Colonel/Brand Manager for South African Police Services
Misha	Female	Indian (living in America)	Clinical Social Worker/Mental health Therapist
Grace	Female	American	Therapist (own business)
Kwame	Man	Beninois	Hospital Receptionist
Chinedu	Man	Nigerian	Trade Marketing Specialist
Helga	Female	Icelandic	Teacher/Special Needs Educator
Charlotte	Female	American	Welder

4.2.2 Data Collection: Interviews

This research utilised semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection to gain insights into how skilled migrants evaluate the risks associated with relocating to Sweden and how socio-political changes influence their relocation intention. This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' thoughts and experiences while providing the structure necessary to address specific research questions (Bryman, 2016). An interview guide (Appendix A) structured the conversation into four main sections: (1) Introductory questions, (2) Driving factors and value proposition, (3) Concerns and socio-political changes, and (4) Closing reflections. This guide facilitated a natural flow of dialogue, ensuring all relevant topics were covered to address the aim and research questions while allowing for the emergence of unexpected insights. A pilot interview was conducted to refine the questions, ensuring they were clear and elicited meaningful responses. Following the pilot's success, 16 interviews were conducted, varying in length from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes. To accommodate the global distribution of talents, interviews were held online via Zoom, providing a quiet, controlled environment for both parties.

The authors began by introducing the subject before going over each participant's rights and the goal of the interview. Every participant was assured of their anonymity and that the information used in this study is only for scholarly purposes. The interviews began with introductory questions, such as asking about the participant's background and motivations for considering Sweden as a new home. These initial questions served to build rapport and create a comfortable atmosphere for sharing personal stories and reflections. Throughout the interviews, a conversational tone was maintained to minimise formality and intimidation, encouraging participants to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions (Bryman, 2016).

When participants provided brief or off-topic responses, follow-up questions gently guided the conversation back to the research themes. Open-ended and specific questions were used to capture comprehensive insights into participants' motivations and concerns, while vignette and probing questions encouraged them to explore hypothetical scenarios and provide detailed explanations of the factors influencing their decisions to move to Sweden (Bryman, 2016). For instance, an open-ended question such as, "Can you share any concerns or reservations you might have about moving to Sweden?" allowed participants to express any hesitations or worries freely, ranging from personal to professional to socio-political factors, without leading them toward a specific area of concern. While a more specific question like, "Are you aware of any social or political difficulties Sweden is going through right now? If so, what are they?" asks for specific awareness and perceptions of Sweden's current socio-political challenges, directing participants to reflect on how these might impact their decision to relocate.

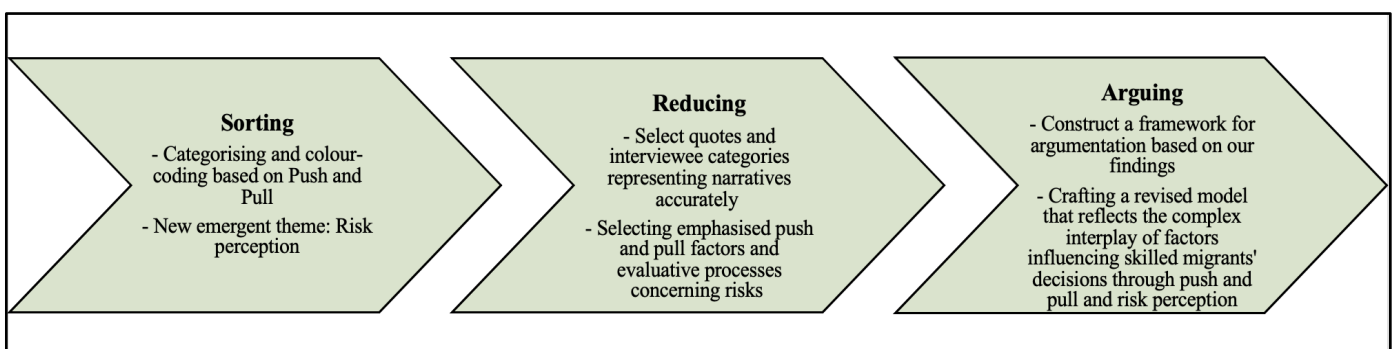
Moreover, during our interview process, we encountered instances where participants displayed a limited awareness of the current socio-political challenges in Sweden. To address this, we provided contextual prompts to ensure they possessed sufficient background to offer informed opinions. Care was taken to convey this information objectively, often prefaced with clarifications such as, "When we started researching this issue, this is what we found..." This approach aimed to set a neutral stage for participants' responses without swaying their perspectives. By framing the information as our research findings rather than established facts, we sought to minimise any prompting bias. Our intent was not to lead the interviewees but to empower them with a foundational understanding that would enable a deeper and more meaningful discussion about their perceptions and decisions related to Sweden as a potential destination for relocation.

These varied types of questions, from open-ended to specific, vignette, and probing, formed a comprehensive strategy that allowed for the collection of rich, detailed data. The approach ensured that every interview provided a well-rounded view of each participant's perceptions, motivations, and concerns regarding relocating to Sweden, capturing the complexity of their decision-making processes. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. The choice to focus on individuals in the decision-making phase—particularly those weighing the risks and socio-political landscape against Sweden's opportunities—ensured the research captured the complexities of image formation and decision-making in the context of international relocation.

4.3 Transcription and Data Analysis Method

In this study, we meticulously navigated the complex processes of transcription and data analysis. Our initial step in data collection involved using smartphones to record interviews, capturing every detail of the conversations. This technique enabled multiple review cycles, allowing for an immersive engagement with the data. The transcription phase followed, where each researcher carefully listened to the recorded interviews, pausing frequently to ensure accuracy and completeness. Upon completing the transcriptions, each researcher independently coded two interviews, applying the analytical principles: sorting, reducing & arguing outlined by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018). These principles—addressing chaos, representation, and authority—shaped our methodological approach.

Figure 3. Data Analysis Process Flow Chart



We initiated the sorting phase by identifying, colour-coding, and categorising data to structure our analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This thematic analysis was particularly focused

on extracting excerpts that demonstrated push and pull factors related to migration. The theoretical framework of push and pull factors guided our sorting process, yet we remained open to emergent themes that could enrich our understanding. The sorting phase enabled us to familiarise ourselves with the data through the use of colour-coding to visually distinguish between the themes. For instance, segments discussing the appeal of Sweden's social welfare system were marked in blue, indicating an "Attraction to Social Benefits". It also became evident that a new theme—risk perception—was emerging, particularly regarding how migrants assess and evaluate risks in the context of migration. We identified and colour-coded discussions around risks, uncertainties, and hesitations, integrating these observations into our broader analysis to highlight how risk perception evaluations were made in skilled migrants decision-making process.

Following individual coding, we convened to review and ensure that similar trends and themes were consistently identified across individual analyses. This collaborative step was crucial for maintaining consistency in our application of the theoretical framework as emphasised by Bryman (2016). We then continued to document our findings in a shared document, which became a dynamic platform for noting emerging themes and organising the colour-coded data clearly. The subsequent step involved reduction, as described by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018), where we reduced the data to manage the wealth of information effectively. This reduction process was selective, focusing on a manageable subset of data that still reflected the overarching narrative. This stage required careful selection of quotes and categories, representing the empirical material accurately while emphasising specific push and pull factors and the evaluative processes concerning migration risks.

In the final stage of our analysis, we engaged in arguing, also known as theorising, as proposed by Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018). Here, we wove the codes into a coherent narrative, constructing a framework for argumentation based on our findings. The emergent insights regarding risk perception, previously not encompassed within the push and pull framework, presented an opportunity to enhance our understanding of the migration decision-making process. By integrating risk perception into our theoretical model, we not only enriched the existing framework but also began crafting a revised model that reflects the complex interplay of factors influencing skilled migrants' decisions.

Throughout the analytical process, we engaged in continuous discussions to ensure that our interpretations were consistent and valid (Bryman, 2016). This rigorous approach to data analysis revealed the intricate motivations, concerns, and evaluations that guide skilled migrants in considering Sweden as a potential home. Our methodical efforts in sorting, reducing, and theorising ensured that our conclusions were firmly anchored in the data, providing a clear, trustworthy perspective on the experiences of our participants.

4.4 Quality of Research

To ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of our research, we implemented several measures. Firstly, we clearly explained the research design, aligning it with our research aim to ensure appropriateness (Bryman, 2016). We also provided a detailed description of our sampling method to verify the representativeness of our study population (Bryman, 2016). To maintain dependability, we offered a clear description of the research process, enabling future researchers to replicate the study if desired (Koch, 1994). Additionally, to ensure inter-rater reliability, we achieved consensus among researchers regarding the coding and thematic analysis of responses from the semi-structured interviews, minimising potential bias and adding credibility to our findings (Collis & Hussey, 2014). By using a psychological theory (risk perception) to explain migration decisions within the field of migration studies, we achieved a triangulation of theories, further enhancing the credibility of our research (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Moreover, respondent verification techniques were employed during interviews, ensuring participants' experiences and viewpoints were accurately captured in our conclusions (Bryman, 2016).

However, we recognize certain limitations in our research. The number of skilled migrants we engaged with within the given timeframe limits the external validity of our findings, though they may still be relevant to other nations facing similar socio-political changes (Bryman, 2016). More critically, the recent nature of socio-political changes in Sweden at the time of investigation made it challenging to fully comprehend their implications on the decision-making of skilled migrants, potentially affecting the study's internal validity.

Furthermore, introducing additional context during interviews posed potential challenges to credibility and dependability (Flick, 2018). Although providing contextual information ensures participants respond with a baseline level of informed awareness, it may inadvertently introduce researcher bias into the data. By sharing socio-political insights, there was a risk of

influencing participants' responses and impacting the authenticity of their perspectives, a notable concern regarding credibility. To address this, we emphasised that the shared information was derived from preliminary research findings, allowing participants to interpret and react independently. Additionally, maintaining consistency in the information provided ensured that each participant had a similar knowledge base, enhancing dependability. This careful balancing act aimed to preserve research integrity while encouraging insightful and informed contributions. Engaging in a self-assessment process like this reduces potential biases and enhances transparency and trustworthiness (Bryman, 2016).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

In undertaking this thesis, ethical considerations were meticulously addressed to ensure the research's integrity and respect for all participants. The ethical framework guiding this study revolves around informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the avoidance of harm to participants, principles that are foundational to ethical research practices (Silverman, 2013; Bryman, 2016; May, 2011).

Informed Consent and Recruitment:

Participants were thoroughly informed about the research's purpose, methods, and intended uses (Bryman, 2016). The recruitment through Facebook groups followed a two-step approach: an initial public post (Appendix B) briefly introduced the research topic and solicited volunteer participants, followed by a detailed private message to interested individuals. These communications featured a brief introduction to the researcher's and the study, ensuring participants were fully aware of their involvement's nature. Furthermore, participants were provided with a consent form (Appendix C), explaining the data that the researchers were going to collect during the interviews. The consent forms were signed and sent back to the researchers prior to the interviews. Additionally, verbal consent was collected at the beginning of each interview to ensure participants were fully aware of their rights.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

All interviewees were assured of their anonymity within the thesis, with the option to have their recordings deleted upon request (Bryman, 2016). This assurance was reiterated at the beginning of each interview, emphasising the non-use of real names and the application of fictional names

to disguise identities. These pseudonyms were thoughtfully chosen to reflect the participants' ethnicities and genders without revealing their actual identities, enhancing the confidentiality of the data.

Voluntary Participation:

The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, with individuals responding to our recruitment efforts fully informed that they could withdraw at any time or refuse to answer specific questions i.e respondent validation (Flick, 2018). This approach ensured that participation was entirely consensual, addressing any concerns about voluntariness in the study.

In summary, this research emphasises ethical integrity throughout all phases, including the recruitment of participants, gathering of data, analysis, and dissemination of findings. Given the subject matter and scope of this study, the investigator believes that no harm was inflicted or had the potential to be inflicted upon the participants. By strictly following these ethical principles, the research aims to offer contributions to the fields of migration, talent acquisition and nation branding, all the while maintaining the utmost ethical standards in research practices.

5. The Empirical Data: Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the data will be presented and interpreted through the push and pull framework and risk perception theory. First, the results concerning the decision-making process of skilled migrants will be presented, then the risk perception associated with the socio-political changes will be explained in more depth.

5.1 Push and Pull Theory

5.1.1 Push Factors

When discussing the factors that motivate skilled migrants to relocate, an important trend emerged in the interviews: dissatisfaction with current living and working conditions. As Urbanski (2022) outlines in his push-pull framework, individual dissatisfaction with the current environment can stem from various factors, such as safety and education. The data collected in this study revealed that the majority of the interviewees expressed various forms of discontent that serve as catalysts for their migration considerations. For example, the majority of the respondents articulated that the limited educational and professional opportunities in their home country was a major contributor to their desire to relocate, for example:

Kwame: "I believe in the African environment we don't always have the opportunity to showcase our skills and to benefit more from them".

Zoe: "I am not getting the recognition or opportunities I deserve in my field."

These statements underscore a common narrative of unmet potential and restricted career/educational growth, illustrating a broader pattern of professionals feeling constrained by the economic and social frameworks of their home countries. This supports the argument made by Papademetriou et al. (2008) and Silvanto and Ryan (2014) that talents are attracted to places that can offer the highest value for their skills and knowledge and promote personal and professional development. Another push factor seen as a recurring theme in the data is the desire for safety and stability, especially among those from regions experiencing political volatility or high crime rates. The pursuit of a safer, more predictable environment is a critical driver, particularly for families concerned about their children's futures. This push towards more stable societies is not only about physical safety but also about finding a political climate that offers consistency and fairness. This aligns with Solimano (2008) and Urbanski's (2022) views on political factors playing a crucial role in the migration of skilled individuals, as they are more inclined to leave non-democratic or politically unstable environments. Here are some of the voices on the political factors that strongly function as push factors:

Thandi: "And we go to bed armed. I have an automatic rifle at home, you know, which is insane. This is not normal. This is not normal. And I don't want my kid growing up in that."

Chinedu: "Our politicians can use your head because they can use you. Not because they want to achieve something good for you and your people."

Zoe: “[Criminality, gangs, violence, shootings, bombings] are a big reason why I would never go back to New Zealand.”

Helga: “Here in Iceland, everything in the system has been a bit weird. Uh, I would not say corruption, but sometimes you want to use that word. But it's... The political situation has been spoiled here.”

One intriguing aspect of the study was that Helga was the sole participant identifying worsening weather conditions as a push factor for migration. As Bruzzone (2020) discusses, migration motives vary widely across different groups and social classes, making it challenging to pinpoint which factors are decisive. Helga's unique perspective is likely influenced by her background in a Nordic country, which already shares similar or harsher weather conditions compared to Sweden. This context supports the findings from Lee (1966), who notes that personal perceptions significantly influence migration decisions.

Helga: “I would say the weather conditions have been much worse than it has been for years. And I don't know if it's climate change or something like that. Uh, but the winters are getting worse. The weather is getting, like, more bad here, especially during the wintertime. Uh, and like last summer in June it was raining every day. We almost did not see the sun. It was crazy. And I was telling my husband, like, we need to go somewhere because the weather is so terrible. And then July came and we didn't have any drop of rain for six weeks straight.”

Helga's concerns about the weather reflect a broader issue of climate variability, which can influence individuals' well-being and lifestyle satisfaction. Her remarks indicate a tipping point where the physical environment begins to detrimentally affect daily life, prompting considerations of relocation to places with more stable and pleasant climates. However, the climate was also mentioned by Raj, but in another context:

Raj: “Since I am living in the capital, the capital of India, Delhi and Delhi is one of the most polluted. It comes under the polluted cities of the world, actually. So yeah, breathing air here is like smoking 30 cigarettes a day.”

Unlike Helga, who is driven by the harshness of the cold and unpredictable weather, Raj's motivation stems from the health implications of living in an environment with severe air

pollution. This highlights a potential area of contradiction where individual experiences may diverge significantly based on geographical and personal context, which Lee (1966) suggests might be influenced by personal perceptions and views of their current location. These environmental factors, while distinct, both play crucial roles in the decision-making processes of individuals considering migration. They bring to light an often-underappreciated dimension of migration drivers: the search for environmental security and stability, which is increasingly relevant in today's context of global environmental change (Nikou et al., 2023).

Moreover, during the interviews, many participants expressed frustrations with their current locations due to unfavourable economic exchanges, where the high costs did not seem justified by the benefits received. For instance, Amber and Charlotte highlighted the disparity in healthcare costs, supporting the literature that economic and social factors play crucial roles in migration dynamics (Urbanski, 2022; Wijesinghe, 2023):

Amber: "In the United States, you have high taxes too, and you get nothing for it. The healthcare system is super expensive. Even if you have insurance, if you break your leg or something, it's going to be thousands and thousands of dollars. Here my son broke his foot, and I think the costs for the orthopaedic, his cast, and his crutches was €130, and that was with insurance."

Charlotte: "In the US, you can pay taxes and not get anything in return [...] People will actually go without treatment in the US and they will die of cancer or whatever they have because their family will go bankrupt paying for the treatments."

These quotes imply a disparity between the tax burden and the perceived value of services received. This discrepancy potentially drives the decision to relocate to a place with a more favourable cost-benefit balance (Urbanski, 2022). However, the perceived value not only pertains to the cost-benefit analysis of services like healthcare but also extends to the broader economic environment in which individuals find themselves. Throughout the interviews, a recurring theme was the challenge of sustaining a reasonable quality of life amidst rising living costs. This issue was particularly pronounced in discussions about the capitalistic environment and its impact on personal financial stability. For instance, economic dissatisfaction, as voiced by Misha, highlights a significant gap between the cost of living and the benefits received. Misha's concerns about the need to earn a high income simply to cover basic living expenses

resonate with the framework's emphasis on economic returns as a primary driver of migration (Urbanski, 2022):

Misha: "But what bothers me a lot is just kind of the capitalistic environment. So, like this mentality of, you have to work and work really hard and make a really high salary to survive in this country. Prices keep going up for rent, for groceries, for like all these important things that you have to make a really high salary. Otherwise, you're just paying to just live... So I just see the economy kind of going down and down and down."

Similarly, Helga highlighted how the economic downturn and inflation have exacerbated the cost of essential services, further straining household budgets:

Helga: "Um, in Iceland now, the economic situation has been, like, not the best. And everything has been going up. Especially, like, um, paying for your house and, uh, you know, warm and heating and electricity and stuff like that."

These statements vividly illustrate the economic pressures that drive individuals to reconsider their living situations. This narrative is reinforced by both the early and contemporary migration literature, indicating that economic factors play a primary role in determining migration behaviours, with the ultimate goal of improving economic conditions (Ravenstein, 1885; Kanayo et al., 2019; Wijesinghe, 2023). Rising costs, coupled with a perceived decline in economic stability, underscore a mismatch between the cost of living and the perceived value received in return. As highlighted by Urbanski (2022), economic benefits resulting from relocation serve as a potent incentive for individuals seeking environments where economic conditions align more closely with their expectations for a sustainable and comfortable lifestyle.

For skilled migrants considering moving to Sweden, there are many factors influencing their decision to leave their current location, but the overarching theme is their pursuit of an environment where their contributions are valued, and both personal and professional fulfilment can be achieved—which skilled migrants believe Sweden can offer.

5.1.2 Pull Factors

In exploring the reasons that draw international talents to Sweden, several key pull factors emerge from the interviews. These factors collectively shape the decision-making process for

potential skilled migrants, emphasising the perceived advantages of relocating to Sweden. A positive attitude towards Sweden is clearly evident among the interviewees, which significantly influences their openness to relocation. This attitude is shaped by Sweden's international reputation for stability, progressive social policies, and high quality of life as supported by the report of Svenska Institutet (2024). The interviews revealed that two major driving factors of relocation were quality of life and work life balance - being mentioned throughout all interviews.

Raj: Sweden is innovative. There are lots of major contributions in science done by Sweden and since Sweden is already a developed country, so you will get a better quality of life over there. Whatever you will get, you will get a good quality if you have to eat or I mean, even the air you will get is good.

Charlotte: We have considered moving for a better work/life balance. Also, just a nice change of pace.

Claudia: I think that in Sweden it will be easier, like, you know, if you work from 9 to 6, probably. So then you have all afternoon to be with your partner, with your kids or whatsoever.

Sanne: In Sweden, everything is slower, the pace is slower, especially up in the north. We do one thing a day and it is, uh, we have more quality of life. In our vision like quality of life is having time for each other, having time to grow your own food and think of how you want to live instead of doing the red race here in Holland.

These narratives highlight the cognitive and affective components of a destination's image, which are essential in migration decisions. Both the knowledge of and feelings towards a destination play crucial roles (Tasci, 2003). This supports the notion that perceptions of a destination's social and environmental quality significantly influence migration decisions (Urbanski, 2022). The stark contrast between the interviewees' current situations and the high standards of living that Sweden offers emphasises the country's appeal as a stable, high-quality environment conducive to family life and personal freedom. According to the International Talent Attractiveness Index (ITA), which assesses the appeal of various countries to highly skilled workers, international entrepreneurs, and university students, quality of life is a prominent factor in the decision to relocate. Thus, Sweden's destination image is highly

regarded and firmly anchored in the country's societal values and lifestyle (Svenska Institutet, 2024). Additionally, the unique aspects of Swedish culture also emerge as a significant pull factor. Historically, the perceived "coldness" of Swedes has been seen as a drawback. However, in this study, participants view this cultural trait as an attractive quality, suggesting that the introverted nature of Swedish social interactions aligns with their personal preferences for social engagement.

Zoe: You can have a nice experience out in public without being worried that you're going to be taken back for a barbecue at home or something like this.

Raj: There is something, I personally like, uh, like about these northern European countries is that you have your personal space, like, people stand, even when you are in a queue, people are away from you.

Kawame: Swedish people are very quiet people and they are isolating, introverted people that don't really want to bother other people. When you come to your work, okay, you do your own thing and everybody is just doing his thing. So I want to be in the environment.

Thandi: "Although you guys [Swedes] are a little bit too reserved for our liking. That culture of not bragging, where there is no classism, that was important to us. We do not want our child growing up thinking he's better than someone else."

These narratives reveal a significant appreciation for the Swedish preference for personal space and a more reserved social style. Interestingly, this preference for what might be termed as "unsociable" behaviour in Sweden turns out to be an attractive quality for individuals from cultures where personal boundaries are often less respected. Contrary to the stereotype that this "reservedness" is a drawback, the interviewees find value in the Swedish ethos of individualism and non-intrusion. Thandi highlights a subtle yet powerful aspect of Swedish culture — the low-key, egalitarian approach to social interaction. Her appreciation extends beyond mere personal space to encompass the societal values of equality and humility that prevent classism. This perspective emphasises that while the reserved nature of Swedes can initially seem overly distant to outsiders, it also embodies a deeper cultural ethos that promotes social equality and discourages overt displays of superiority. This shift in perception suggests that what was once considered a negative trait is now seen as conducive to personal freedom and comfort. In

contrast to the typical image of the Swedish reserve, Sanne's experiences reflect a different reality:

Sanne: It's always said that the Swedes are really up to themselves and they don't they're not really open. And it's hard to make new friends, but the few times that we were there and we were working around the house, everybody in the neighbourhood was so kind and open and friendly and helpful."

She notes that despite the common belief of Swedes being unsociable, her interactions in Sweden were unexpectedly warm and welcoming. This contradiction highlights the complexity of Sweden's social fabric, where personal experiences can vary significantly from prevailing stereotypes (Lee, 1966). However, it is not only the attitude towards Sweden or Swedes that makes the interviewees want to move to Sweden, it is also the concrete benefits of relocating to Sweden—such as enhanced career opportunities, better educational facilities, and a supportive social system. These benefits are often perceived as surpassing what is available in the interviewees' home countries, making relocation a strategically beneficial move. For example, the majority of the interviewees mention the social welfare system, including education and healthcare as pivotal values influencing their decision-making process.

Zoe: "The big thing that got me was the idea that I could do my degree in English. And then that it was free or like a student loan, things like that. I don't want to do the student loan, but yeah. So to do it that way was a big factor for me."

Claudia: I see Sweden as somehow like the United States of Europe, if that makes sense. Somehow like this, anyone can achieve it [Achieve success in terms of job/education]. Like it doesn't matter where you're from, anyone and everyone can achieve it.

Laila: "The fact that I can do my PhD and still take care of myself financially and be able to explore other things in academia with help of my PhD is something that I value."

Grace: "I like the fact that they [Swedish Government] take care of their poor, they take care of their young, they take care of their old, you know, they help people, they help families, they're family oriented."

The testimonials from Zoe, Claudia, Laila, and Grace illustrate a notable attraction to Sweden's supportive environment, particularly in terms of education and social welfare. As stated by Papademetriou et al., (2008) social policies, such as healthcare, education, and welfare, play a certain role in the attractiveness of a location, especially for those planning to stay long-term or migrate with family. Hence, Zoe's emphasis on accessible and affordable higher education reflects a key pull factor. The ability to pursue a degree in English without the burden of substantial debt is aligned with international trends, where education systems that offer flexibility and financial support draw skilled migrants (Papademetriou et al., 2008). Sweden's educational offerings not only improve individual career prospects but also enhance its attractiveness as a destination. Claudia's view of Sweden as the "United States of Europe" highlights its reputation as a land of opportunity. This perception supports the idea that egalitarianism and accessible success are highly valued by potential skilled migrants, echoing Urbanski's (2022) findings that equitable economic opportunities can be strong motivators for migration.

Laila appreciates the academic and financial support available in Sweden, crucial for sustaining her doctoral studies and broader academic pursuits. This dual benefit—professional development coupled with financial stability—is a compelling example of how Sweden's academic ecosystem supports personal and intellectual growth – leading to a high value perception for skilled migrants. The statement also aligns with Lee's (1966) findings that economic and educational opportunities are among the most compelling reasons for migration. The promise of professional growth and access to high-quality education can be transformative, offering pathways to personal development that are not available locally. Moreover, Grace underscores the welfare system in Sweden, appreciating its family-oriented policies and support for various societal groups. Her observations resonate with the broader literature that robust social policies make a destination more attractive by ensuring a supportive living environment for all residents (Papademetriou et al., 2008; Urbanski, 2022; Svenska Institutet, 2024).

The combination of these narratives provides a powerful illustration of Sweden's multifaceted appeal. The country's education system, coupled with its supportive social welfare policies, not only meets the practical needs of international talents but also aligns with their values and aspirations for a balanced and fulfilling life. This analysis connects the individual experiences

of the interviewees with broader migration trends and research, enhancing our understanding of Sweden's enduring attractiveness as a destination for skilled migrants.

Additionally, a recurring theme throughout the interviews was the repeated acknowledgement of personal recommendations from friends and family already living in Sweden. Some participants had no connection to Sweden at all, but those who had networks such as friends, colleagues and/or family in Sweden stated that they were a big part of the reason they considered Sweden in the first place. Despite not being included in conventional push-pull frameworks like Urbanski's (2022), this pull factor reveals that positive testimonials help to solidify perceptions and reduce the uncertainty associated with moving to a new country.

Omar: "My sister has been living there [Sweden] since 2014 and she really likes it there."

Amber: "I've been interested in my grandmother. Both my grandmother's parents were from Sweden. So I've always been interested [in Sweden]."

Charlotte: "We have only considered Sweden since my husband has a lot of family there, so the stress of moving somewhere unfamiliar would be hopefully less since we have a support system set in place, as well as people who could help us with where to go, what to buy, etc."

These testimonials underscore the critical role of social proof in migration decisions, reinforcing Sweden's attractiveness through first-hand accounts. This phenomenon aligns with marketing theories that highlight the influence of personal recommendations on consumer behaviour, a concept equally applicable in migration studies (Martin & Zürcher, 2008). Such endorsements provide a more tangible and relatable source of information than impersonal data, reducing uncertainties associated with relocating to a new country and enhancing the perceived safety and familiarity of the destination. It also highlights that family reunification and ethnic relations to the country influences the decision-making process of potential migrants (Urbanski, 2022). The presence of family and friends not only eases the transition but also integrates migrants into the social fabric of the destination country more smoothly, validating their choice and potentially increasing their satisfaction and long-term commitment to staying in Sweden.

In summary, the pull factors articulated by the interviewees highlight a multifaceted allure of Sweden, driven by its perceived professional/educational opportunities, welfare system and quality of life. Each element—from the general societal benefits to the personal endorsements—plays a role in shaping the migration landscape. This detailed exploration of pull factors not only underscores the multifaceted nature of migration decisions but also highlights the strategic considerations international talents make when choosing to relocate to Sweden.

5.1.3 Moderating Factors

In traditional push and pull frameworks, such as Urbanski's (2022) and Martin & Zürcher's (2008) model, migration decisions are primarily attributed to push and pull factors. However, Lee's (1966) earlier model introduced the concept of "intervening obstacles," which encompass the challenges and barriers migrants must overcome to relocate, including physical distance, immigration law restrictions, and economic costs. More recent studies, like Alessandro & Bassu's (2015) research, have identified moderating factors such as switching costs, both monetary and psychic costs. In our interviews, these intervening obstacles or switching costs were evident in the migration decisions toward Sweden. Interestingly, our study reveals that financial challenges were notably absent in the narratives of the interviewees. This absence may be attributed to the fact that our participants are skilled migrants, presumably with stable incomes, who may not perceive financial challenges as significantly as they do emotional and logistical ones. Instead, the primary concern among our interviewees was the cultural and language barriers, along with the logistical complexities of international relocation. Some participants provide compelling insights into the difficulties of adapting to a new cultural environment and the daunting logistics of relocation:

Claudia expresses her immediate concerns about housing, a fundamental need for any migrant, which poses a substantial logistical hurdle. She articulates this worry stating, *"Like, you know, it's a bit worrying, like, where am I going to live?"* This uncertainty about securing accommodation underscores the daunting nature of moving to an unfamiliar environment and represents a significant barrier that can deter individuals from making such life-altering decisions.

Adding to the logistical challenges are the technical and practical aspects of living in a new country, as discussed by Thandi. She highlights the necessity of understanding local systems

that are crucial for daily life, such as heating and energy consumption in homes. Thandi notes, *“You need to understand the heating system, especially when you're wanting to buy a house. You need to understand the energy consumption and what kind of heating is in the house, and so forth.”* Her concerns reflect the steep learning curve and the additional effort needed to acclimate to new technical environments, further adding to the switching costs.

Language barriers present yet another critical hurdle, impacting cultural integration and employment opportunities. Kwame brings attention to this issue by sharing an anecdote about a French lady's struggle with the Swedish job market due to her lack of proficiency in the local language. He recounts, *“My second concern has to do with the language [...] There was a French lady who made the comment [On a Facebook group], saying that she had been in Sweden for 18 months, and she was trying very hard to secure a job, but because of the language, people didn't want to hire her because she did not speak Swedish.”* This narrative underscores how essential language proficiency is not only for professional success but also for basic social integration in Sweden.

Raj further illuminates the emotional and cultural shifts associated with moving to Sweden. His reflections provide a stark contrast between the disciplinary and cultural norms in India and the more liberal, non-confrontational approach prevalent in Sweden:

Raj: "The situation is like having a kid. So as you see, there is no physical harassment, no mental harassment, no financial harassment kind of thing there [In Sweden]. [In India] We are beaten. If we do mischief or if you are mischievous or we don't study. And honestly, if my father hasn't beaten me, I would not be going to Sweden or I would not be an engineer. I would be something, uh, I don't know, but my life would be very bad. So you cannot do these things there [In Sweden]."

Raj's account reflects a significant cultural shift and highlights the appeal of Sweden's societal values, which discourage harsh punitive measures and promote a more nurturing and supportive environment. This difference not only impacts his perception of personal and familial life in Sweden but also influences his migration decision, adding an emotional layer to the switching costs.

These individual stories collectively illustrate the diverse switching costs involved in migration decisions. The emotional costs and perceived difficulties described by the respondents add a

psychological burden to migration. These obstacles are consistent with research findings on migration, which show that both tangible and intangible costs can moderate migration decisions (Alessandro & Bassu, 2015; Lee, 1966). However, the individuals we interviewed are skilled migrants actively engaged in the decision-making process of relocating to Sweden. This indicates that despite acknowledging the challenges and costs involved, the potential benefits of moving to Sweden appear to outweigh these concerns for them. This observation suggests a dynamic aspect of the migration decision-making process where the perceived advantages of relocating can mitigate the impact of switching costs.

5.2 Risk Perception

In addition to the traditional push, pull, and moderating factors identified in the data analysis, our research uncovered another emergent theme: risk perception. This theme highlights the nuanced ways in which skilled migrants evaluate potential risks and socio-political changes associated with relocating to Sweden. Risk perception emerged as a critical, yet previously underexplored, dimension of the migration theories, illustrating how migrants assess both visible and subtle risks before committing to move. This finding underscores the complexity of migration choices and suggests that risk evaluation plays a role in shaping migration intentions beyond the conventional factors.

5.2.1 Sources of information

The vast majority of interviewees indicated that they use social media to obtain information about Sweden, such as joining Facebook groups, watching YouTube videos, and checking posts on Instagram and TikTok from people living in Sweden to learn about local conditions. This trend reflects that social media, as an informal channel, has become the primary tool for international talents who are planning to relocate to Sweden to gather information. For example:

Zoe: "I went to Facebook for groups to see if maybe something pops up, I've done all of this just by myself, when you research a topic, basically it's like you try and find all the different sources and then bring it all together and see what you've got."

Sanne: "Social media for sure. Because in the Netherlands, everything is done through social media."

Information from friends and family also serves as an important informal source. Although not every interviewee has friends or family living in Sweden, among those who do have such connections, they heavily rely on the first-hand information provided by these contacts. Sometimes, the information obtained through these private channels, compared to that from formal news sources, can have a deeper impact on the respondents' decisions and perceptions, as the insights and personal experiences of friends and family are often seen as more credible and relevant to real life.

Grace: "It hasn't really influenced me [about the perception of Sweden] from international media and from the newspapers. Now, what my daughter tells me about the country, of course, that influences me."

Only a small proportion of interviewees explicitly stated that they obtain information about Sweden through formal channels, including official websites, the national television broadcaster SVT, newspapers, books, and other mainstream media. Claudia's and Emma's views provide some insights into why some people choose to avoid these formal channels. Claudia suggested that the media tends to highlight the "dark side" rather than the "bright side," and Emma believes that the media deliberately exaggerates the severity of events to attract attention from the public, which impacts their trust in formal news channels. In addition to questioning the credibility of the media, many interviewees noted an interesting phenomenon: the media in their home countries seems to pay insufficient attention to Sweden, rarely reporting on Swedish news events, thus making it quite difficult for them to learn about Sweden through the news.

Amber: "So this is the thing. If I look at America's news, it barely mentions Sweden. So most of the news that I get would be from SVT. America doesn't care and is not very interested in Sweden. They might come up as a blip because of the NATO thing, but they really don't come up in most of my news."

Claudia: "I think the media always portrays what they want you to see, you know. So sometimes the media shows the Dark Sides and not the positive sides."

Emma: "I think that (burning the Quran) was done to Sensationalise, to be sensational in the news. To me, it was a publicity stunt."

Kwame: "The news, I mean I've never really seen something about Sweden on TV. Because I think Sweden is the country that is not too much exposed on the international stage."

Chinedu: "Our local newspaper, sometimes they are producing some news for other countries. But I have not seen any about Sweden."

Among those respondents who obtained information through formal channels, they specifically noted a significant difference in reporting styles between international media and Swedish domestic media. They observed that international media often gloss over issues in Sweden, while Swedish media tend to adopt a more critical perspective when examining local problems. This discrepancy has led them to pay attention to domestic reports as well, as this approach enables them to understand Sweden's social challenges more meticulously and comprehensively.

Laila: "International media uses rose-coloured glasses when speaking about Sweden. [...] But that's not true. They have some difficulties. It's true that it's not in the same way as in Mozambique, but they still exist. But it's only the national media that addresses them. Only the national media say, okay, we are not perfect. [...] While the international media is always like, oh, it's so good. Yeah, I feel like that's different. That's why I decided to follow the national newspapers as well because there you can find the other side of the coin that you usually don't find on the international media."

This section primarily summarises how international talents acquire information about Sweden. According to the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), information systems are the starting point where information is generated and disseminated (Kasperson et al., 1988; Kasperson et al., 2022). Various formal and informal information channels act as "amplification stations," and although each "station" processes and transmits information differently, they all play a role in either enhancing or diminishing the perception of risks. In an era dominated by digital technology and social media, informal channels undeniably play a significant role in shaping risk perception. Social media platforms provide immediate and

diverse perspectives, allowing users to quickly gather information from multiple sources, thereby amplifying the spread of certain risk information in society. Moreover, due to the limited coverage by international media on Sweden, the country's socio-political changes may not become a focus of international public opinion. In such cases, major events or risk issues may only be widely discussed within Sweden due to the critical reporting by domestic media, while the international community lacks a deeper understanding and awareness of these issues. The quantity and tone of media reporting can make a particular risk issue more prominent, thus attracting public attention; therefore, the neglect by international media might lead to an underestimation of Sweden's risk issues on a global scale (Paek & Hove, 2017). Particularly for those international talents who rely on firsthand information, the lack of extensive coverage could lead to biases in their understanding of Sweden. Furthermore, the international media's tendency to downplay issues in their reporting style could also weaken the impact of information, reducing the visibility and urgency of risk information on the international stage (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2010).

5.2.2 What are the Perceived Risks?

In the series of interviews conducted with international talents, we found that respondents commonly mentioned various potential risks associated with relocating to Sweden for living and working. All respondents were aware of the rising crime rates in Sweden, particularly concerned about the increasingly severe gang issues in major cities.

Helga: "I know the rising crimes there and especially like the shootings and bombings that have been happening, it concerns me a bit."

Charlotte: "I have heard of quite a bit of gun violence going on in Malmo, which is where we would plan to move, so that was a questionable decision."

Some interviewees specifically expressed concerns about the geopolitical risks that Sweden's membership in NATO could bring. They believed that this change could trigger regional conflicts, thereby increasing security risks in Sweden.

Grace: "I was scared when you [Sweden] joined NATO and I wondered, you know, because he [Putin] had made threats about Finland and Sweden joining NATO. It's a very, kind of an uncertain time for Sweden right now with just joining NATO."

Additionally, most respondents also heard about the Quran burning incidents and the consequent rise in terrorism threat levels, which made some worry about their personal safety after moving to Sweden. One Muslim interviewee was particularly distressed by this public insult to his religion.

Omar: "I know the Quran burnings and that hurts me. I can't stop it and unfortunately the police there are protecting those unlicensed persons. That hurts me."

Kwame: "I heard on the news that there was one guy that burnt the Quran, and so some of the Islamists threatened that they are going to strike Sweden for that. So this [terrorism alert level to from 3 to 4] is definitely a concern that might make me consider my my decision, because you know, safety is very important."

Regarding racial issues, interviewees who are non-white or from outside Europe commonly expressed concerns about the rise of racism and nationalism in Sweden. They feared that these societal trends could impact their quality of life and personal safety in Sweden.

Thandi: "I do noticed the nationalism that [Sweden] is facing right now. But I don't know when this nationalism will be radical and if things will get to a point of physical, aggressiveness or even, uh, the racism. So sometimes I get concerned about those things. At the moment it's only words. And words also hurt."

Other risks mentioned by the interviewees include difficulties in integrating into Swedish society, the tightening of immigration policies, as well as, the rising cost of living, especially the increase in electricity bills, inefficiencies in the healthcare system, and challenges in finding employment and housing. These potential perceived risks are all seen as important considerations affecting their decision to live and work in Sweden.

When analysing the risk perceptions of interviewees considering relocation to Sweden, it is seen that perceptions are multi-dimensional; covering a range of concerns from geopolitical safety to personal security and economic issues. According to the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), we understand that risk perceptions are not only influenced by the way information is communicated but also by a combination of personal emotional reactions, socio-cultural backgrounds, and political-economic contexts (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2010). For instance, respondents' concerns about gang violence and shootings partly stem from the extensive media and public discussions of such events. Due to the frequent reporting of these

types of news, the incidents become more prominent in the respondents' memories, triggering the availability heuristic. This psychological mechanism causes individuals to assess the frequency or likelihood of events based on how easily they can recall them, thereby intensifying their perception of these risks.

Additionally, the emotional reactions these incidents elicit, such as fear and worry, might further amplify risk perception. It indicates that people's risk perceptions are not only derived through logical analysis but also formed through emotional responses associated with specific risks (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020). From the perspectives of political theories and cultural theories, an individual's political stance and cultural background play significant roles in risk perception (Wildavsky & Dake, 1990). Considering that interviewees come from various countries and cultures, there are differences in how they perceive the same risks, with selective emphasis or disregard for certain risks. For example, reactions to the Quran burning incident vary among people of different religious beliefs. Additionally, identity characteristics such as gender, race, and economic status also influence interviewees' perceptions of risk, with those from non-European countries possibly being more sensitive to racial discrimination and nationalism.

5.2.3 Assessment and Response to Perceived Risks

After organising and extracting the perceived risks related to relocating to Sweden, this section now explores how the interviewees assess and respond to these risks. Firstly, regarding the issues of crime rates and gangs, which everyone mentioned, most interviewees expressed that they would avoid areas with high crime rates as much as possible. They commonly choose not to live in large cities, believing that avoiding major urban areas can reduce the chances of encountering danger. One optimistic interviewee mentioned that his religious faith provided him with a firm belief, showing that for some people, faith enhances their sense of security in their decision-making processes.

Amber: "I don't want to live in a high crime area, my husband was even talking about if he could get a job in Gothenburg, he could take the train in and then we'd be farther out anyway. So, it [high crime rate] wouldn't have as much of an impact."

James: "Gangs, it doesn't scare me, you're going to find gangs everywhere. So it's not just Sweden, Nothing can stop what God has planned. I don't care what laws are in

place. I just believe in God. And then on top of that, I have the knowledge and discipline to study and learn about that before I come.”

Another very common phenomenon is that the interviewees often adopt a comparative perspective, continuously comparing the situation in Sweden with that of their home countries, thereby drawing conclusions about certain risks, such as:

Emma: “ It [the rising of criminality] is nothing in comparison to the American. When they talk about things like that, it does not concern me nearly as much as it would concern a Swede, only because of where I'm coming from.

Thandi: “The point I'm trying to make is that the situation in South Africa is far more dire than the situation in Sweden. Your annual stats of murders and victims of terrorists are our monthly stats. So that should put things into context. Um, why the grass is still greener on the other side.”

Kwame: “We don't have gun violence here. So as for safety, I would definitely feel more safe here than in Sweden. So if I'm not feeling safe at that point for some other reason, I'll move away. You know, you need to be alive to enjoy your money.”

Additionally, it is interesting to note that interviewees frequently mention that the issue of crime is almost global, or that the risk of terrorist attacks is rising across Europe. This suggests that they perceive these risks not as unique to Sweden, but as widespread issues.

Laila: “I know about the consequences of having terrorist attacks. But I don't think that, at the moment, would be something that would prevent me because I feel like most of the European countries are on the same level or even higher level of terrorism.”

Thandi: “I see that right wing kind of feel that's happening across Europe. And a little bit of that is happening in Sweden. I was aware that the terrorism levels had gone up in Europe, but as Europe as a whole. So it doesn't affect me because if you look at the situation here [South Africa], I'm more likely to end up dead just by driving to work, getting hijacked, or a robbery at my home than I am being a victim of a terrorist attack in Sweden.”

Helga: “Now in Iceland, they are saying soon it will come some school shooting or school attacking. So I think like globally it's changing. You cannot maybe put spot only

to Sweden, it's everywhere. So it's very good just to have your eyes open and be thinking about it can happen everywhere.”

Furthermore, some interviewees expressed that, given Sweden's long-established positive national image, they believe that certain fundamental elements of Swedish society are unlikely to change in the future.

Emma: “I can't imagine that they would change women's rights significantly, they're not going to change about certain autonomy and things like that. I just can't imagine certain things, I think, that are fundamental to Swedish society.”

Grace: “I don't want to stay in a country that has a lot of pollution, but that I don't fear in Sweden. I don't fear you all are gonna all of a sudden quit being worried about the ecology there, because you always protect that.”

Chinedu: “From what I have read before, what I saw before, uh, Sweden is one of the safest countries, due to the fact that they were always neutral.”

On the other hand, some respondents mentioned that they intentionally avoid paying too much attention to political issues. They are not very concerned about external changes and focus more on daily life.

Helga: “I've been trying not to be too involved with the media because I don't want it to affect our decision to come there.”

Misha: “I'm not thinking too hard about socio-political climate, because I'm not worried about it getting as bad as that I can handle right now. I'm definitely acknowledging it's getting not great and it's hurting a lot of people. But that's not really my focus. My focus is on the daily life. [...] And it comes back to full circle moment of when I first heard that one of the Scandinavian countries was super happy. That seed has never left my brain. I don't know if that will continue to change, but right now it's still very much like a happy place. And I personally feel so happy every time.”

From the data provided above, it is clear that while not all interviewees closely follow the various changes in Swedish society in recent years, they have acquired a preliminary understanding of the risks of relocating to Sweden through various means. However, compared to cognitive dimensions, emotional responses play a more central role in their relocation

decisions. Some interviewees have formed emotional connections with Sweden for various reasons, such as Misha, who became interested in Sweden and fond of Swedish culture in high school after learning that Scandinavian countries are the happiest in the world; or Emma, who has been exposed to various information about Sweden from childhood because her mother is a Swedish citizen, and feels her personality is even more Swedish than her mother's. These cases show that emotional factors, compared to cool and calm logical analysis, have a greater impact on their risk assessments and relocation decisions. For other interviewees who have not established a deep emotional connection with Sweden, they generally exhibit an optimistic bias. As a common personal trait, people tend to underestimate their own likelihood of encountering problems compared to others. Choosing to live on the outskirts of large cities is also based on an optimistic expectation that it would reduce the chances of encountering crime (Paek & Hove, 2017).

The interviewees' use of a comparative perspective again shows what culture theory mentions: people from different cultural backgrounds perceive risks differently (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020). Interviewees from countries with higher crime rates often have a relatively diminished perception of risk in Sweden after comparing it with their homeland. They believe that although the future is uncertain, the current security situation in Sweden is still within a controllable range compared to the more severe conditions in their home countries. This familiarity with surrounding negative news (such as gun violence, terrorist attacks, and the right-wing political climate) actually reduces their concerns about personal safety when moving to Sweden. On the contrary, Kwame, as the only interviewee who admits that staying in his own country would be safer than moving to Sweden, mentioned that his country does not have gun violence, so he places the highest importance on crime rates among all interviewees. When assessing risks, interviewees use their own experience and background information to form opinions about Sweden, and the same risk is interpreted and prioritised differently between countries.

At the same time, we can also glimpse from the interviewees' statements how the positive national brand image that Sweden has long established plays a positive role in their risk assessments. Sweden is known for its environmental policies, social justice, and high standards of living (Svenska Institutet, 2023), these traits not only enhance Sweden's international image but also positively influence the risk perception of potential immigrants. For instance, Grace mentioned her high trust in Sweden's ecological care, so she is not worried that Sweden will suddenly abandon its long-standing environmental responsibilities. This trust reduces her

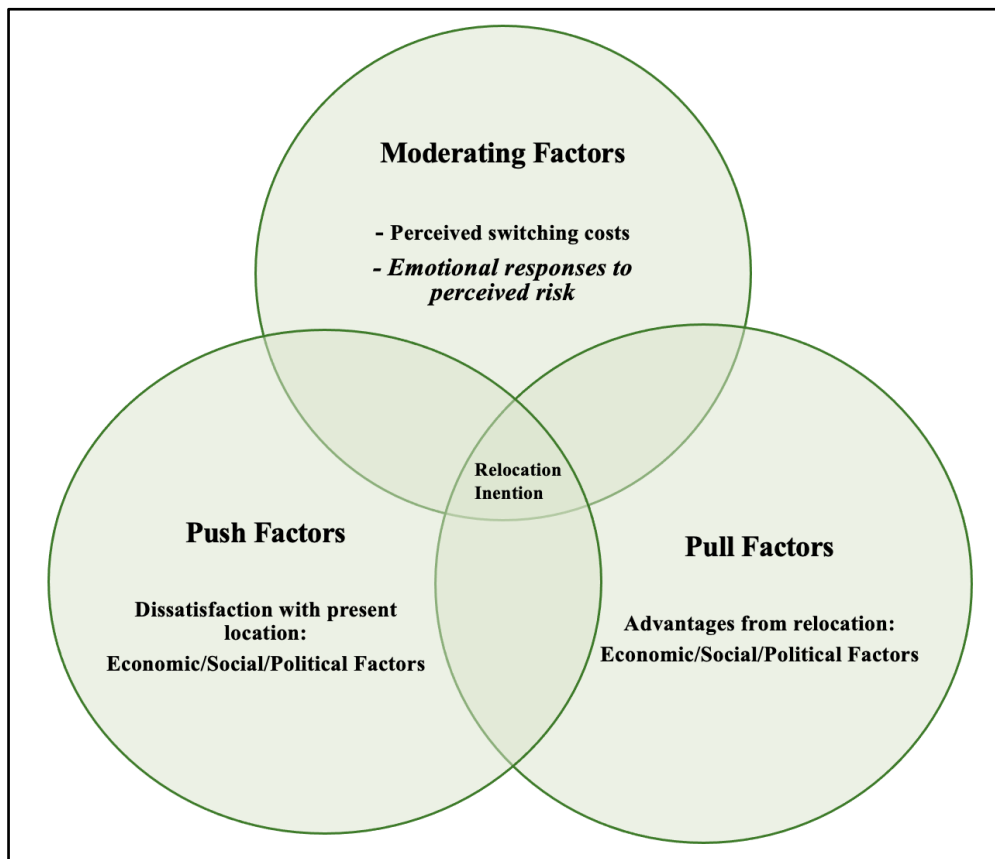
concerns about environmental risks, thereby influencing her decision to move. Chinedu noted that he believes Sweden has always been a neutral and safe country, which emphasises Sweden's image as a safe country, making him feel that Sweden remains an attractive choice, even though the country may now be facing some social and political challenges. Their statements illustrate that relocation decisions are not solely based on objective risk assessments but also positively influenced by a strong national brand. In this uncertain period, the resilience of Sweden's national brand has helped maintain its global image as a safe country that values environmental protection and high quality of life, attracting skilled immigrants.

5.3 Merging Risk Perception and Push-Pull Framework

As highlighted by Kanayo et al. (2019), the traditional push-pull model often oversimplifies migration decisions by depicting migrants as mostly passive responses to external conditions. The model tends to overlook the complex, proactive ways in which migrants perceive and respond to risks during their decision-making processes. Through our analysis, we have validated that the economic, social, and political factors emphasised by the traditional push-pull model can attract or deter people from migrating (Urbanski, 2022). However, extending on this, our research proposes the integration of a 'risk perception' dimension. This addition views migrants as proactive agents, deeply influenced by their assessments and emotional responses to potential risks, thereby adding a crucial psychological layer to understanding migration behaviours.

Although Lee (1966) incorporated intervening obstacles like physical distance, immigration law restrictions, and economic costs into his migration model, and Alessandro & Bassu (2015) added monetary or psychic switching costs as moderating factors – these models do not comprehensively account for emotional costs. While Alessandro & Baum (2015) acknowledged psychic costs, this consideration only partially addresses the broader spectrum of psychological impacts associated with migration. Therefore, we propose adding a specific moderating factor: '*emotional responses to perceived risks*' (Figure 4). This factor focuses on migrants' emotional reactions when assessing potential risks such as socio-political changes—elements that deeply shape their willingness to migrate and overall relocation intention. This addition will help to more comprehensively understand the decision-making process of skilled migrants, as shown in our data, where emotional responses play an important moderating role in migration decisions.

Figure 4. New Conceptual Model of the Decision-Making Process of Skilled Migrants



(Authors, 2024)

Our developed model integrates the traditional push, pull and moderating factors with an additional dimension—emotional responses to perceived risk—to illustrate the complexity of skilled migrants’ decision-making processes. Our model also contends that to fully understand the decision-making process of skilled migrants, all influencing factors—push, pull, and moderating—must be considered collectively rather than in isolation, as is often done in traditional models. By integrating these factors, the model captures the nuanced and multifaceted nature of migration decisions:

- **Push Factors:** These are primarily the disadvantages or negative aspects of the current location that propel migrants to consider moving - economic, social and political factors (Urbanski, 2022)
- **Pull Factors:** These represent the advantages or attractions of a new location - economic, social and political factors (Urbanski, 2022)

- **Moderating Factors:** Introduced in our model are elements like perceived switching costs (Alessandro & Baum, 2015) and notably, *emotional responses to perceived risks*. These factors regulate the decision-making process by either amplifying or reducing the effects of push and pull factors.

The central concept in our model is the **relocation intention**, which is defined as “concrete plan to relocate abroad in the near future” (Weisheit, 2018, p. 133). It is important to clarify that intention does not necessarily culminate in the actual decision to relocate. Various unforeseen personal or global events might alter the course. Hence, *intention* captures a preparedness or likelihood rather than a definitive decision.

In contrast to the existing moderating factors in the push-pull model—specifically switching costs which primarily stood out as the logistical and language/cultural barriers to migration in our study—emotional response to risk encapsulates a broader spectrum of psychological considerations. In our analysis of the decision-making processes of skilled migrants, we found that while several key risks were perceived as significant, they did not ultimately deter migration to Sweden. This highlights the complexity of how migrants weigh risks against the potential benefits of relocation, integrating these factors into their broader migration strategy.

For example, criminality and safety concerns were prominent, particularly regarding the increasing rates of gang violence and general criminality in urban areas. Despite these concerns, many interviewees considered these risks manageable. Migrants often chose to settle in less populous areas outside major cities to minimise their exposure to crime, showing a proactive approach to managing perceived risks. Similarly, geopolitical changes, such as Sweden's inclusion in NATO, raised fears of regional conflicts/wars potentially affecting Sweden's security landscape. While such geopolitical risks were significant concerns, the historical peace and stability of Sweden provided a counterbalance in the perceptions of potential migrants, suggesting a nuanced evaluation of current versus historical socio-political contexts.

As illustrated earlier, interviewees often use a comparative perspective to assess and compare risks with their current location (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020). This highlights that individuals from countries with higher crime rates may have a relatively diminished perception of risk in Sweden after comparing it with their homeland. This brings us to the importance of subjectivity in risk

perception, which challenges the creation of universal models in migration studies. Migrants' perceptions of risk are deeply influenced by their cultural backgrounds, demonstrating that individuals from different parts of the world may perceive the same risks quite differently. This variability underscores the need for migration models to be adaptive and culturally-aware, integrating these subjective experiences and responses to risks into the push and pull framework. Our model aims to address this by capturing a wider spectrum of moderating factors, thereby enhancing its explanatory power.

Moreover, issues around racism and challenges in cultural integration were particularly notable for non-European migrants or those from racially diverse backgrounds. However, Sweden's reputation as a progressive and tolerant society helped mitigate these concerns, illustrating how migrants balance individual fears against the broader societal context. Furthermore, economic and social stability were also significant considerations, including changes in immigration policy, rising costs of living, and potential barriers to employment and housing. However, Sweden's reputation for high quality of life and robust social welfare system often outweighed these potential risks.

An important aspect of how migrants perceive and assess these risks is through the information they obtain, particularly through media. The vast majority of our interviewees utilised social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to gather information about Sweden, reflecting the role of digital media as a primary information source in today's digitised world. This reliance on social media and informal channels, as described by the Social Amplification of Risk Framework (SARF), highlights the media's role as an "amplification station," significantly influencing risk perceptions among skilled migrants (Kasperson et al., 2022). Research also shows that negative media portrayals can lead to a deterioration of the country's affective image (emotional perceptions and attitudes towards the country) (Tasci, 2003). This, in turn, could diminish the intention of skilled migrants to migrate to Sweden (Alvarez & Campo, 2013).

However, the limited coverage of Sweden by international media often leads to an underestimation of socio-political changes and potential risks, affecting the migrants' risk assessment (Paek & Hove, 2017). For instance, migrants from regions with extensive coverage of their local issues or more known nations like the US may find Sweden's less publicised socio-political landscape seemingly less risky by comparison. Contrastingly, individuals who

regularly listened to or watched Swedish national news were more aware of the socio-political shifts taking place in Sweden. This is because the socio-political events became more memorable to the respondents, which activated the availability heuristic (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2010). People's perception of these hazards is heightened by this psychological process, which makes people judge the frequency or likelihood of occurrences depending on how easily they can be remembered. This demonstrates how different information sources have different effects on risk assessment and how important digital media is to how countries handle socio-political changes in our increasingly digitised society.

The inclusion of 'emotional responses to perceived risks' as a moderating factor in migration models acknowledges that migrants are not merely passive respondents to external conditions but are actively engaged in interpreting and managing these risks. Our model not only highlights the complexity of migration decisions but also underscores the need for migration theories to accommodate these layered dynamics. By capturing this wider spectrum of moderating factors, we enhance the model's explanatory power, showing why some migrants proceed with relocation despite apparent risks. This addition emphasises the active rather than passive nature of migration decisions, allowing us to capture the complexity of the migration decision-making process in greater depth and the key role that emotions play in it.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, we synthesise the findings of our study, which explores how skilled migrants assess risks and make decisions about relocating to Sweden. Here, we give out the answers to the research questions and summarise the research contributions, its limitations and propose directions for future research.

6.1 Concluding Discussion

In the context of intensifying global competition for talent and a series of recent social and political changes in Sweden, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how skilled

migrants evaluate risks when making migration decisions, and how Sweden's changing socio-political environment influences their decision-making process.

This study is guided by two research questions, the first of which is "*How are perceived risks evaluated by skilled migrants in their decision-making process when considering relocation to Sweden?*" Through our data collected from interviews, we have confirmed Urbanski's (2022) findings: many skilled migrants, due to limited educational and employment opportunities, safety issues, and political instability in their home countries, wish to migrate to countries that offer a sense of security and greater opportunities for career and personal achievement. Meanwhile, Sweden's well-developed welfare system, progressive democratic values, and high quality of life have a clear attraction for skilled migrants. Notably, the recommendations of family or friends already settled in Sweden reinforce this attraction, leading potential migrants to form a positive perception of the country. However, the risks associated with moving to Sweden have increased due to recent social and political changes, including fears of rising crime rates, geopolitical risks associated with Sweden joining NATO, heightened terrorism threats, racial issues, economic challenges, and difficulties in immigrant integration. These changes have added to the perceived risk of skilled migration.

This study found that skilled immigrants typically rely on past experiences, different sources of information, cultural background, and personal beliefs to evaluate risks, resulting in different risk assessments. They often adopt a comparative perspective, evaluating the socio-political risks in their home country with those in Sweden, which leads to different emotional reactions that can amplify or diminish their decision to migrate to Sweden. Moreover, optimism bias often leads them to downplay potential challenges and focus more on the positive aspects, which makes these risks more of a moderating factor rather than an obstacle in migration decisions. Hence, the decision-making process of skilled migrants is very complex, they evaluate perceived risks based on a combination of rational assessments and emotional responses and rely on their emotional connection to Sweden or optimistic mindset to mitigate concerns. Thus, the decision-making process of skilled migrants is fundamentally a balance between risks and rewards, akin to the two ends of a scale where migrants weigh the perceived risks and benefits of relocating to Sweden.

Our second research question is "*How do socio-political changes in Sweden influence the relocation intention of skilled migrants?*" The study found that skilled migrants gather

information about Sweden through various channels, with official channels playing a relatively limited role. The skilled migrants participating in this study mainly used social media platforms to obtain more immediate and relatable insights. Some recent socio-political changes in Sweden have inevitably attracted the attention of skilled migrants. In addition to the general concern about rising crime, changes in Sweden's foreign policy (e.g. NATO membership) have added a new level of uncertainty to the security situation in the region. At the same time, the rise of right-wing politics has caused skilled migrants to worry that immigration policies will continue to tighten in the future. The increase in nationalism and discrimination may also deter potential migrants who are worried about social exclusion or racial discrimination, especially those from racially diverse backgrounds, as they are more concerned about social inclusiveness. However, despite the risks posed by socio-political changes in Sweden, most respondents concluded that Sweden remains relatively safe and stable compared to their current country. Therefore, although the socio-political changes in Sweden have indeed influenced the migration intentions of skilled migrants to some extent, these changes have not fundamentally prevented most of the participants in this study from realising their relocation intention.

6.2 Contributions, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The contributions of this study are primarily reflected in two aspects. Firstly, the research identified the moderating role of risk perception in the decision-making process of skilled migrants—a factor often underemphasized in previous migration studies. By integrating a new element, "emotional responses to perceived risks" with previous insights from Urbanski's (2022) push and pull factors, and Alessandro & Baum's (2015) moderating factors, this study constructed an innovative model that introduces the psychological aspects of migration, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of the complex decision-making processes of skilled migrants. In this model, the interplay of push, pull, and moderating factors are all indispensable elements in forming migration intentions; it illustrates the critical need to consider all aspects collectively rather than in isolation to finally determine relocation intention. This new understanding not only enhances our knowledge of the complex decision-making process of skilled migrants but also highlights their role as proactive agents who assess potential risks and respond emotionally, contrasting with the traditional push-pull theory which usually views migrants as passive respondents to external conditions.

Secondly, our findings reveal the considerable influence of Sweden's national brand image in the skilled migrants decision-making processes. Despite the diverse backgrounds of potential skilled migrants, who may perceive Sweden's image differently, organisations or authorities hoping to attract more talents can enhance Sweden's national brand by leveraging the positive aspects recognized by these migrants. They should focus on promoting democratic values, a commitment to sustainability, a strong work-life balance, an advanced welfare system and equal rights—elements that attract global talents. The resilience demonstrated by Sweden's national brand during this challenging period is crucial for maintaining its status as an attractive destination on the global stage. Equally important is for official Swedish organisations to utilise social media platforms to enhance communication with potential skilled migrants, given that our findings show how they often rely on informal information sources. This strategy will improve the accessibility and accuracy of official information about migration, lifestyle, and risk. Proactive collaboration with international media will further elevate Sweden's global presence by highlighting continuous improvements and initiatives to enhance quality of life and mitigate risks. Addressing migrants' concerns while emphasising Sweden's strengths and providing accurate information through multiple channels will help alleviate potential fears around security and integration.

However, it is not only Sweden that can gain insights from our study, other nations experiencing periods of change can benefit from it as well. The developed model in this study helps countries understand the decision-making process of skilled migrants, enabling them to remain competitive in attracting skilled migrants by emphasising national strengths while at the same time trying to address the potential risks perceived by skilled migrants.

This study provides a preliminary insight into how risks and socio-political changes regulate and influence skilled migration decisions. However, due to the limited sample size, time constraints, and the recency of Sweden's socio-political difficulties at the time of our investigation, it was challenging to fully comprehend their implications on the decision-making process of skilled migrants. Moreover, our developed model, which integrates risk perception with traditional push, pull and moderating factors, aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex migration decision-making process. However, this framework is exploratory and meant to enrich rather than replace existing migration models. Further development and validation of the model are needed through future research to enhance its applicability and accuracy under varying conditions.

Thus, we recommend that future research adopts a longitudinal approach to continuously track the evolving impact of changing socio-political environment on skilled migrants' relocation decisions. Such studies should focus on how changes in crime rates and political stability shape their risk perceptions. Additionally, our data also revealed the resilience of Sweden's national brand, suggesting that future research could explore how a nation's branding efforts can mitigate, or to what extent they can mitigate, the impact of socio-political changes. This study provides a foundation for more comprehensive analyses of migration decisions and invites further exploration into these dynamics.

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Appendix

Appendix A:

Interview Guide

Section 1: Introductory questions

Could you provide a brief overview of yourself (nationality, educational and professional experience?)

What country are you currently residing in, and how long have you lived there?

Have you lived or worked in any other countries before? If yes, where and for how long?

What motivated you to consider moving to Sweden for work or study?

At what stage are you in your decision-making process to move to Sweden (just considering, actively planning or has a date been set, etc..)?

Are you moving by yourself or do you have a family/pets coming with you?

Are you considering any other countries besides Sweden? (If so, compared to other countries you considered, what are the perceived advantages or disadvantages of Sweden?)

Section 2: Driving factors

Has Sweden always been on your mind as a potential new home or how did you hear about Sweden? (sources of information? influences from friends, family, professional networks, etc)

What are the key factors that influence your decision to move to Sweden? (Culture? Nature? Work opportunities? Diversity? Climate? Quality of life? Salary? Education? Government? Equality? Sustainability? Innovation?) (ECONOMIC / SOCIAL / POLITICAL)

Through what channels do you usually obtain information about Sweden?

If they say, social media groups:

- What do you like about the information you get from those groups?

How have international media representations of Sweden influenced your perception of the country?

Section 3: Concerns and socio-political changes

Have discussions with friends, family, or colleagues, or media reports about Sweden influenced your perception of risk there?

Can you share any concerns or reservations you might have about moving to Sweden? (If they mention jobs or legal matters) say:

- How do you think recent socio-political changes in Sweden might impact job security or the job market in your field?
- Navigating legal or immigration processes can indeed be challenging. Do you think socio-political developments in Sweden are affecting these processes, and if so, how?

Can you recall any recent social or political news or events related to Sweden that have particularly stuck with you? How have these affected your view of living in Sweden?

How do you assess the risks associated with moving and living in Sweden?

In terms of risks, what factors in Sweden concern you the most?

- How do these concerns compare to the potential opportunities you see in moving there?

How do perceptions of social stability and personal safety in Sweden influence your decision?

Let's imagine the future, you are living in Sweden, what kind of social changes in Sweden might lead you to want to move away?

How do you weigh the socio-political factors against the opportunities available in Sweden? Or let's say what positive factors of Sweden outweigh the negative factors? (such as the socio-political)

Section 4: Closing section

Is there anything else about your decision to move to Sweden that you think is important to share?

Appendix B:

Hello everyone!★ We are two Master's students at Lund University, working on a fascinating thesis project. Our research is all about exploring why people like you think about moving to Sweden. Plus, we're curious about how recent changes in Sweden might be playing a role in your thoughts about moving here.

We're specifically looking for individuals who are currently in the process of deciding whether to move to Sweden for work and life opportunities. We need as many people as possible for a little interview about the topic (just a casual chat over a virtual cup of coffee, nothing formal!)

If you're considering Sweden as your next big step and have some insights or feelings to share, we'd be more than happy to listen. Just drop a comment below if you're interested in talking with us. Your perspective is incredibly valuable, and by sharing it, you could help shape future efforts to welcome skilled migrants to Sweden.

Thanks so much to anyone willing to share. We can't wait to hear your stories!

Appendix C:



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Informed Consent Form for Global Talents

Consent to participate in a Master Thesis at the Faculty of Social Science

Research Study Title: Talent Attraction in Sweden

Researchers: Hanna Yar and Wu Xuan, Lund University, Campus Helsingborg

Study Overview:

I hereby agree to participate in an academic research study led by Hanna Yar and Wu Xuan from Lund University, Campus Helsingborg. The purpose of this study is to understand the factors influencing global talents in their decision-making process regarding relocation to Sweden. Additionally, the study seeks to assess the impact of socio-political changes on the relocation decisions of global talents.

Interview Details:

The interview, part of this study, is expected to last approximately 1 hour. However, the duration may be adjusted as necessary to accommodate the discussion's flow and depth.

Data Collection and Use:

- **Personal Data:** For the purposes of this research, we will collect certain personal data, including your name, occupation and current place of living.
- **Sensitive Personal Data:** We will also collect sensitive personal data related to ethnic origin, and information related to your views on any changes in Sweden's socio-political landscape and their impact on your relocation decision. It is important to note that you are not required to share personal opinions, only to objectively state any observations.

Participation and Withdrawal:

- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
- You have the right to omit any question and may withdraw from the interview at any stage if you feel uncomfortable.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

- Your personal data will be processed exclusively by the research team for the purpose of conducting and analyzing this study.
- All collected data, including audio recordings, will be securely stored, accessed only by the thesis authors, and will be deleted upon the thesis's submission.
- Audio recordings will be anonymized, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

- Although the findings from this research may be published or presented, your identity will remain confidential, and any potentially identifying information will be anonymized.

Data Sharing:

- Your personal data will not be shared with third parties.
- All research activities will comply with standard data use policies at Lund University, ensuring the protection of your confidentiality as a participant.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, with organisation number 202100-3211 is the controller. You can find Lund University's privacy policy at www.lu.se/integritet

You have the right to receive information about the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have inaccurate personal data about you corrected. If you have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer at dataskyddsbud@lu.se. You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority (the Data Protection Authority, IMY) if you believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

Consent:

By signing below, I confirm that I have been fully informed about the nature and purpose of this study. I understand my rights as a participant and consent to partake in this research under the conditions outlined above. I agree to the audio recording of my interview, understanding that I can withdraw my consent at any time.

Location	Signature
Date	Name clarification

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us on:
 Hanna Yar: +46793112703, ha0482ya-s@student.lu.se
 Wu Xuan: +46793519363, xu6544wu-s@student.lu.se