

Digital solidarity and migrations: analysis on the use of digital technologies among Venezuelan citizens in Quito, Ecuador

Solidaridad digital y migraciones: análisis sobre el uso de tecnologías digitales entre ciudadanos venezolanos en Quito, Ecuador

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the use of digital communication technologies in the solidarity processes of Venezuelan migrants in Quito, Ecuador. The methodology applied was based on in-depth interviews and content analysis of WhatsApp groups. The research was conducted between June 2020 and March 2021. A non-probabilistic strategy (snowball sampling) was applied for the sampling. The results illustrate the dynamics of digital solidarity both in groups with strong ties (families) and weak ties. However, due to its qualitative nature, these results cannot be generalized. The conclusions show that in transnational families, solidarity develops from a sense of co-presence that allows the fulfillment of moral obligations, the generation of an economy of care, and emotional support. On the other hand, in the case of migrants without connective ties with each other, solidarity occurs through the construction of digital communities in large and impersonal groups.

Keywords: digital solidarity, transnational migration, Venezuelan migration, Ecuador.

Resumen

El objetivo principal del artículo fue analizar el uso de tecnologías de comunicación digital en las prácticas de solidaridad desarrolladas entre migrantes venezolanos en la ciudad de Quito, Ecuador. La metodología aplicada se basó en entrevistas a profundidad y análisis de contenidos en grupos de WhatsApp. El trabajo de campo fue realizado entre junio de 2020 y marzo de 2021. Para el muestreo se empleó una estrategia no probabilística (*snowball sampling*). La naturaleza cualitativa del estudio no permite generalizaciones estadísticas. No obstante, los resultados obtenidos caracterizan las prácticas de solidaridad digital en grupos con lazos

Received on September 27, 2021.

Accepted on August 30, 2022.

Published on September 19, 2022.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



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CITATION: Mantilla, J. (2022). Solidaridad digital y migraciones: análisis sobre el uso de tecnologías digitales entre ciudadanos venezolanos en Quito, Ecuador [Digital solidarity and migrations: analysis on the use of digital technologies among Venezuelan citizens in Quito, Ecuador]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 22, e102. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2218102>

sociales fuertes (familias) y débiles. Las conclusiones indican que, en las familias transnacionales la solidaridad digital se basa en sentidos de co-presencia que facilitan el cumplimiento de obligaciones morales, la generación de economías de cuidado y el soporte emocional; mientras que, en grupos sin conexiones previas la solidaridad se construye mediante comunidades digitales en espacios masivos e impersonales.

Palabras clave: solidaridad digital, migración transnacional, migración venezolana, Ecuador.

Introduction

María José is a Venezuelan migrant in Quito. Her experience in this city has been complex. In her country of origin, she obtained a degree in teaching; however, since her arrival in Ecuador in 2015, she has not been able to work in her profession. Instead, she has had occasional jobs as a sales clerk and DJ in bars and restaurants. The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be especially hard on her, as she lost her job during the months of lockdown. Even worse, one of her cousins in Venezuela died during this crisis. Faced with this, her family, scattered across multiple countries in Latin America and Europe—Chile, Guatemala, Spain, and Italy—organized meetings through the Zoom platform to carry out a Catholic *novena*¹ and other funeral rituals. Beyond the physical distance and her complex situation, the contact with her family through video calls turned out to be key from an emotional point of view. In her words:

every night we did the *novena*, the nights of the deceased, so every evening, we met for an hour to pray the rosary. I am not Catholic and do not believe in God or anything like that, but I did it anyway to be in contact with them and mourn our loved one. We could not go to the wake or burial, or anything like that, but at least we met on Zoom.

The previous vignette illustrates the importance of information and communication technologies in migration trajectories. This is not an isolated case, as digital media—including social networks—facilitate interactions within transnational fields in real time, regardless of physical distances (Cooke & Shuttleworth, 2017; Pelliccia, 2019). An important consideration for transnational studies is that the dynamics inherent in digital communication can potentially enable processes of social cohesion and collaboration among migrants, both for people with previously established connections in the physical world and for individuals without face-to-face relationships. Nevertheless, this phenomenon has not been fully documented in the literature, especially that on the Venezuelan diaspora in Latin America. Accordingly, this article aims to analyze the use of current digital communication technologies in the solidarity networks developed among Venezuelan migrants in Quito, Ecuador. As specific objectives, it is proposed to study the use of the following digital communication tools in solidarity

¹ Catholic ritual. After the death of an individual, their family or people close to them gather for nine consecutive nights at the house of the deceased to pray, especially rosaries (Pineda & Moreno, 2009).

networks: 1) transnational families (i.e., groups with strong social ties), and 2) large groups of Venezuelan migrants on the WhatsApp platform (i.e., collectives with weak social ties).

The notion of solidarity has been present in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology since the 19th century and has been key to analyzing issues related to social cohesion, collaboration, or reciprocity. Transnational studies have also been nourished by this concept based on works that delve into forms of collaboration exercised beyond national boundaries (Bauder & Juffs, 2020; García Agustín & Bak Jørgensen, 2016; Rygiel, 2011). Classical social science postulates have historically limited the concept of solidarity to interactions in fixed, static, and delimited terrains. However, today, digital media can enable forms of solidarity within dynamic, flexible, and even virtual spaces, which is especially relevant in contexts of human mobility that crosses borders. In recent years, a body of literature aimed at studying solidarity from this angle has begun to emerge (Chayko, 2020; Stalder, 2013). However, this is an emerging area that needs to be expanded both conceptually and empirically. The contribution of the present research to the existing literature stems from the geographic spectrum in which it takes place (Venezuelan migrations in Ecuador), given that most of the studies on solidarity, technology, and migration have been carried out in the Anglo-Saxon world, particularly on south-north or north-north movements. Moreover, this work is especially necessary for the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which digital tools have expanded considerably (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).

This research focuses on one of the main migratory movements within countries of the global south in recent times: the diaspora of Venezuelan people in Latin America. Since 2013, Venezuela has experienced one of the biggest economic, political, and social crises in its history, reflected in the fall of the gross domestic product (Bull & Rosales, 2020), hyperinflation, the decrease in oil production—the main engine of the country's economy—(Buxton, 2020), or the increase in poverty (Van Roekel & De Theije, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further aggravated this critical situation (Lopez Loyo et al., 2021). In this scenario, more than 3.4 million people have left the country, heading mainly to other areas of South America and the Caribbean (Palotti et al., 2020). Therefore, migration has become one of the main crisis mitigation strategies for the Venezuelan population.

Ecuador—historically a source of migrants—has received more than 443 000 Venezuelans and is one of the region's main destinations for these migration flows (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones [OIM], 2021). Of this total population, about 40% live in the city of Quito, the capital of the country (Banco Mundial, 2020). Demographically, this group is mainly young, as 74% of them are between 18 and 35 years old (OIM, 2021). At the social level, the situation for migrants is complex; about 81% have a non-regularized migration status, poverty rates are high (Banco Mundial, 2020), and phenomena such as xenophobia and discrimination are common (Mantilla, 2020; Ramirez et al., 2019). In addition, COVID-19 significantly affected this sector, mostly engaged in informal economic activities. Within this panorama of crisis

in countries of origin and destination, understanding the transformations that digital media bring about in solidarity networks is essential to shed light on migrants' capacity in complex contexts.

The design of this research does not seek to establish generalizations but rather to present qualitative inputs that can contribute to a better understanding of digital solidarity networks in transnational contexts within the global south. This paper begins by presenting the methodology applied. Subsequently, the results are presented in two parts. The first part analyzes digital solidarity within transnational families, that is, in groups with strong social ties. In the second, a large group of Venezuelan migrants' solidarity on WhatsApp is analyzed. Finally, the conclusions of the study are presented.

Methodology

Fieldwork for this article was conducted between June 2020 and March 2021, so the health crisis caused by COVID-19 had a considerable impact. Authors such as Fine and Abramson (2020) have exposed the challenges for fieldwork in the circumstances of this pandemic, especially regarding the maintenance of biosecurity measures. In this context, the techniques used were designed to be applied mainly through digital means; face-to-face encounters were held to a lesser extent, only when circumstances made it possible and taking the necessary precautions, given the extraordinary conditions.

The study uses a qualitative approach, combined from two research techniques: 1) in-depth interviews with Venezuelan migrants and 2) analysis of texts within a WhatsApp group of Venezuelan migrants in Quito. The interviews were carried out mainly through video calls via Zoom and WhatsApp or by phone calls. In total, there were 17 interviews with people from diverse socioeconomic contexts and genders, selected through the snowball sampling² technique (TenHouten, 2017). Due to the design employed, the information does not seek to present statistical generalizations about the Venezuelan population in Quito. The interviews were semi-structured and had an approximate duration of 40 to 80 minutes. The form that they took started from the premise that contemporary forms of solidarity constitute a hybridization of online and face-to-face contact (Stewart & Schultze, 2019). Therefore, the dialogues sought to account for online contact without neglecting their connection with the face-to-face sphere. In this sense, this methodology is close to the work of authors such as Pink and collaborators (2015) on digital ethnography: to analytically transit between digital content and its implications in the face-to-face world.

² This sampling is based on a limited number of people contacted by the researcher, who referred new participants (Allen, 2017). The sample was composed of migrants between 21 and 60 years old (average 33 years). Their professions are diverse, ranging from precarious jobs such as valet parking attendants to more stable professions such as university professors. Parker and collaborators (2019) claim that the sample size should be defined in terms of reaching a saturation point or the goal proposed by the researcher. The number of informants, 17, is adequate for the objectives set, since through the fieldwork it was determined that this size was ideal to obtain sufficient information in relation to the goals outlined.

For the content analysis, WhatsApp was selected due to its popularity³ and frequent use among Venezuelan migrant groups. This platform allows individual or collective communications, including up to 256 people. Although the informal characteristics of these spaces make it impossible to determine exactly how many of them exist in Ecuador, the group selected for this study is quantitatively and qualitatively significant, as it is composed of more than 200 members and is oriented to exchange and cooperation among migrants, which makes it important for this research's objective. Access to this group was obtained through the recommendation of one of its members and the acceptance of its administrator. Group participants were informed of the work, its characteristics, and its scope through messages on the same platform. The analytical basis was the text messages exchanged in the group. The analyzed contents correspond to September 2020 and February 2021, so they are also framed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Data processing was done using qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo). All data obtained are kept on condition of anonymity, guaranteeing participants' personal information protection.

Theoretical references

The concept of solidarity has been present in the social sciences since the 19th century and is a fundamental tool for the analysis of phenomena such as social cohesion, cooperation, or reciprocity between groups and individuals (Bauder & Juffs, 2020). Thus, foundational works of sociology such as those of Durkheim (1987) and Weber (2021) used conceptualizations of solidarity to study the influence of the industrialization and modernization processes on the cohesion of nineteenth-century European societies. In classical anthropology, Malinowski (1973)—in his analysis of commercial and symbolic relations in the Trobriand Islands—associated solidarity with the social cohesion generated by the exchange of gifts, status, and prestige. This theory was further developed by Mauss (2009), who demonstrated that exchanging gifts establishes moral obligations of reciprocity. These classical approaches have influenced contemporary studies in multiple areas. Examples include works on intergenerational cohesion (Baykara-Krumme & Fokkema, 2019; Komter & Vollebergh, 2002), the actions of social activist groups (García Agustín & Bak Jørgensen, 2016; Loopmans et al., 2020), or cultural ties between ethnic minorities (Yoon, 2017).

Classical theories of solidarity focus on interactions within defined and limited territories. Nonetheless, contemporary social practices are increasingly produced in a deterritorialized manner, flowing beyond fixed territories or state boundaries through

³ In Ecuador it is used by more than 8 million people (about 47% of its population) and is the second most popular network behind Facebook (Del Alcázar Ponce & Mentino-Innovation & Lifetime Value Partners, 2020).

⁴ These were months with high mortality rates due to this disease in Ecuador. On October 8, 2020, there were 39.58 deaths per million inhabitants. In comparison, the average for high-income countries was 7.71, for middle-income countries 6.36, and for low-income countries 3.47 deaths per million inhabitants (Our World in Data, 2022).

the use of new technologies. This is especially notable in transnational migration, where it is difficult to maintain theoretical or methodological approaches based on static spatialities. For example, Bruneau (2006) has described how refugee groups generate processes of symbolic appropriation of spaces in host countries in order to maintain their identity and collective memory. In other words, physical places can be re-signified in contexts of human mobility. Transnational spaces mediated by digital communication are particularly prone to transformations capable of shaping social interactions. Understanding how solidarity networks can develop in transnational contexts in the digital era is an important challenge for contemporary social sciences.

The analysis of solidarity processes must consider interactions filtered through virtuality. Digital platforms⁵ have the potential to create feelings of social cohesion and cooperation, or exclusion and discrimination. For Stewart and Schultz (2019), contemporary solidarity is a hybridization of online and face-to-face actions that constantly transits between virtual and material spheres. Digital media can be an extension of cohesion, cooperation, or exclusion relationships present in the physical world. At the same time, digital communities with anonymous individuals on virtual platforms can acquire materiality in physical spaces. Stewart and Schultze (2019) show that the My Stealthy Freedom movement (against the mandatory wearing of the female veil in Iran) was structured through feedback from activities taking place online and on the streets. Initially, the movement employed the virtuality of Facebook to create a collective identity through elements such as posting pictures of women shedding their veils in public spaces. Once solidarity was built in virtual spaces, the campaign moved to the physical space through White Wednesdays, an initiative in which women wore a white garment on Wednesdays to protest against the compulsory wearing of the *hijab*, in addition to face-to-face meetings between activists.

Migration usually weakens social networks, negatively affecting immigrants' quality of life and social inclusion (Millán-Franco et al., 2019). To counter this, digital communication platforms, especially social networks, facilitate relationships between close people (strong ties) and the connection of anonymous subjects without previous face-to-face contact and, therefore, with weak ties (Shen & Gong, 2019). In the first case, current communication technologies allow groups of people who are physically distanced, but extremely close, to maintain forms of emotional and material cohesion. In contexts of physical separation, digital media generate a sense of simultaneity (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) that encourages the maintenance of relations of solidarity. Along these lines, Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) and Baldassar (2008) put forward the concept of co-presence to refer to the capacity of digital technologies to generate feelings and sensations of simultaneity, allowing people to share activities and their everyday lives beyond physical spaces. Co-presence processes support relationships of solidarity and cooperation between migrants and their families or people close to them in the country of origin.

⁵ A digital platform is a socio-technical assembly, combining software elements and social, commercial, or productive interactions (De Reuver et al., 2018). Digital social networks (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp) are digital platforms designed to facilitate interaction and communication between users.

Conversely, the dynamics of collectives with weak social ties—such as large groups on social networks—do not necessarily allow for co-presence processes but do allow for other forms of support and exchange. For Chayko (2020), the notion of community must be rethought in the digital era since the connections established through virtual media are of growing importance in individuals' daily lives. According to this author, new technologies have produced digital and portable communities (she calls them “communities to go”), where people share experiences and meaningful social interactions through the use of digital platforms without the need for the prior existence of strong social ties. These communities do not necessarily replace traditional forms of social interaction, but their impacts on people's lives are equally important. Within transnational environments, digital communities potentially facilitate dynamics of cooperation and solidarity. For example, Nikitina et al. (2019) argue that shared economies⁶ can arise directly from exchange through internet platforms reinforcing the atmosphere of social solidarity within communities linked to such practices. In this context, internet technologies can be an input that potentially facilitates solidarity among migrant groups without pre-existing social relations.

Sustaining social ties through digital platforms is also fundamental for emotional well-being. Migration can cause multiple social and psychological effects, which can be mitigated by social support networks generated through digital media (Millán-Franco et al., 2019). Social support has been defined as the links between individuals or groups (at the level of community, networks, or intimate relationships) that serve to offer emotional support or guidance (O'Hara, 1986). The literature shows that the existence of support networks among immigrants has positive effects when they face the emotional stress caused by separation from their place of origin (McKay et al., 2003). Social support is nurtured by social ties established through virtual interactions. In other words, digital media enrich migrants' social relationships, which helps their emotional well-being (Millán-Franco et al., 2019).

Results and discussion

Solidarity and co-presence: digital social networks in family spaces

Transnational migration does not eliminate solidarity networks but rather generates new expectations of collaboration, cohesion, and obligations among migrants and their networks in the country of origin. New communication technologies play an important role in fulfilling these expectations. In contexts of physical separation, these technologies foster a sense of simultaneity (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) that facilitates the maintenance of solidarity ties in transnational spaces. Ethnographic work among the Romanian population in Switzerland and the Italian population in

⁶ In other words, exchanges without intermediaries, outside the company-customer scheme.

Australia by Baldassar (2008) and Nedelcu and Wiss (2016) shows that digital media facilitate feelings and sensations of simultaneity (co-presence), which allow individuals to share activities and everyday life beyond physical distance.

It is necessary to consider some socioeconomic and cultural characteristics to understand how this co-presence may develop in the case of Venezuelan migration in Ecuador. First, while digital platforms such as social networks are widely popular in both countries (Bolgov et al., 2017; Serra et al., 2017), connection problems are relatively frequent. This is usually due to a lack of economic resources to access these technologies in Ecuador. In the case of Venezuela, financial difficulties are accompanied by greater deficiencies at the infrastructure level, including power outages, poor quality of service, or problems associated with crime. For example, the communication of Nataly, a Venezuelan migrant in Quito, with her mother in Petare—a Caracas neighborhood with high crime rates (Cedeño, 2013)—takes place only inside the home for fear of assaults. In fact, on one occasion, the connection to their home in Venezuela was lost due to the theft of an antenna. In this context, family communication often occurs asynchronously through WhatsApp messages that can only be read after a while. Secondly, the crisis in Venezuela makes the sending of remittances and other forms of collaboration an imperative need for most migrants. Such remittance flows are sustained by the stability of Ecuador's official currency, the US dollar. However, the Ecuadorian economy has experienced a severe contraction in recent years (Vera Ortiz et al., 2020), so sending remittances usually causes great difficulty for migrants. Third, Venezuelan migration is a completely transnational phenomenon, with networks beyond Ecuador-Venezuela, incorporating people in multiple countries in South America, North America, and Europe. Finally, Venezuelan society attaches great importance to the sense of family belonging at the cultural level. The family constitutes more than a kinship unit, as it plays an important role in the organization and ways of understanding life (Barbosa Neves & Casimiro, 2018). Venezuelan migratory waves have not eliminated the family's central importance, but have generated transnational families (Bryceson & Vourela, 2002) that extend across borders.

With this in mind, this article proposes that the co-presence of Venezuelan migrants and their families through digital media develops mainly in three areas: the fulfillment of moral obligations, the generation of an economy of protection, and emotional support.

First, family dynamics require the maintenance of contact and relationships among its members (Stern & Messer, 2009). In transnational contexts, maintaining contact among family members becomes a symbolic and moral obligation. Synchronous and especially asynchronous communication offered by digital media facilitate this. For example, Maria's interaction with her extended family in other Latin American and European countries occurs mainly asynchronously through Facebook by posting pictures and commenting on them. Interaction through these images helps to generate a sense of co-presence about the daily activities of the family members and, at the same time, fulfill the obligation to keep in touch. In their words,

Communication with my aunts and cousins (I have many cousins in Germany, Panama, and Chile) is through social networks. I upload a photo, they comment on it, *like* it, etcetera. So, we are in contact, we know about each other's lives; we do not really talk, but at least we know about each other's lives.

In this case, the management of visual (photographs) and textual (comments) material is not a banal act but the reproduction of a cycle of social reciprocity, where participants have obligations to give, receive, and return (Mauss, 2009) through the publication of photographs and comments ("knowing about each other's lives" in Maria's words), which is key to maintaining social ties in contexts of physical separation. Tools such as WhatsApp, Facebook, or Zoom allow audiovisual information flows through group connections, allowing members of family units to keep in touch, in an agile way and without losing feelings of co-presence or simultaneity. Thus, for example, Cristina, 31 years old, who was unemployed, states the following:

We have a WhatsApp group, so it has the family's last name, and it is the group where we upload all our photos every day, and we all say hello to each other. We are all there. And we also have a Facebook group where we upload our memories, our old photos, from when we were together, and those are the main networks where we communicate. We follow each other on Instagram, a few of us, the young ones, but mostly my family's WhatsApp is where we report every day, and there we upload things and all that.

In general, asynchronous communication in Facebook or WhatsApp groups favors social cohesion among members of an extended family, while closer relationships benefit from direct synchronous exchange. At the generational level, these tools are not limited to younger members but can also include older people with little experience in digital technologies. For example, Nataly taught her mother how to use a smartphone and its main applications just before leaving for Ecuador in 2016. The migratory movement of Venezuelan people took place in a context where social networking technologies were already prevalent.

Furthermore, the co-presence generated by new technologies also plays a role in sending remittances, medicines, and other supplies between Ecuador and the country of origin. Baldassar and Merla (2013) have shown how the circulation of care is a central element of transnational families. Digital media facilitate communication about the needs of family members, which can influence collaborative processes and, in a broader sense, the creation of a transnational care economy, which includes material as well as emotional remittances. For example, going back to María José's story, her cousin died during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, the different members of the family followed the burial process and rituals through Zoom, and the family—in different countries—sent remittances to cover the burial expenses. This extended family also sent remittances to María José, who was jobless and in a complicated situation during the pandemic.

The co-presence generated by social networks also influences intergenerational care. In the case of Venezuelan migration, most migrants belong to younger age groups,

with older generations being the ones who have mainly stayed in their home country. Social networks allow contact about the care needs of members of the older generation in Venezuela. Belén is a graduate student who migrated to Ecuador along with her immediate family, parents, and siblings. Her grandparents remain in Venezuela, living alone and with no intention of migrating, given their age. The sending of remittances and medicines is constant and is often prompted by communication through audio and video calls. In their words:

But we are always in contact, always, and especially with my grandparents, because they are there. They are older now, so... but yes... I mean, I would say that we are here, but we are also there, but we are always in touch about their needs and how they are and how we can help. So I would say that we are in both places, that is, virtually.

Digital means of communication facilitate contact and the flow of information on the living conditions of the different members of family networks. This allows the collaboration of the members in better conditions through strategies such as sending remittances. All this is supported by what authors such as Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) call the “transnational moral economy of kin”. In other words, the imaginary, symbolic, or real responsibilities related to a family are extended through transnational connections facilitated by the existence of tools such as social networks.

Finally, transnational migration impacts at an emotional level (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; McKay, 2007). These effects have been even more noticeable during the health crisis and the 2020 lockdowns. In this context, co-presence and social support networks generated from digital media can play an important role. For example, for José—a migrant working in a call center—Christmas festivities are essential to his life. Being far from his family in Venezuela, contact via video call is key from an emotional point of view. In his home, shared with several migrants, during Christmas Day, they all gather together but individually call their families. In their words,

At 11 o’clock, which is already 12 o’clock in Venezuela, we’re all “glued” to our cell phones. Everyone’s on a video call, and those who can’t make a video call are texting with their families. And then it’s like that feeling of how your family’s doing.

Thus, co-presence and social support networks influence the emotional experiences through which migrants experience deterritorialized life. Physical and emotional distances can be shortened through digital communication, according to Belén:

This makes me feel closer to my family. If it didn’t exist, I’d feel the absence, I’d feel far away, I’d feel as if I didn’t have any. But this way, I know they’re there, I know what they’re doing anywhere. I know how they are; it’s like you are everywhere.

The spaces generated within these social networks become not only tools but also shared spaces (Hirsch, 2017), all of which influence the way transnational life is experienced, including emotional dimensions.

Co-presence and constant connection, however, can also be experienced negatively. For example, Domenica—a 40-year-old Venezuelan musician—mentions that the permanent connection with her family generates feelings of anxiety, sadness, and depression as she cannot share physical contact. Consequently, she has started to limit contact through these networks. The type of emotional impact will depend on whether it is structured on an individual level.

Re-imagining the nation: digital social networks in large WhatsApp groups

The previous section developed an approach to solidarity and digital technologies in transnational family contexts. However, these media also allow the connection of people with weak ties or even strangers (Phua et al., 2017), for example, through large groups on platforms such as Facebook or WhatsApp. These groups act as communities centered around particular topics. Their access can be open or restricted by moderators. The rules for participation are delimited both by the sites' policies and by the approach of the group's internal moderators. The literature has considered the main dynamics of these group platforms in educational (Bergviken Rensfeldt et al., 2018; Sheeran & Cummings, 2018), work (Pruchniewska, 2019), political (Sanfilippo & Strandburg, 2019), or healthcare spaces (Pernencar & Saboia, 2020).

The WhatsApp group analyzed in this paper is centered on a community of Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador. At the time of writing, this space consists of 242 participants with a moderator whose functions will be detailed below. Access to the group is given through direct invitation by the moderator or through an invitation link that the members can share. Therefore, most of the participants have no face-to-face contact with each other. The group generally aims to exchange information, trade, and support among migrants.

Participation in this group is open to any member who may submit text, image, audio, or video messages. Any content generated by a member is sent instantly to the rest of the group; however, reading or viewing it will depend on the recipient. Therefore, it is not necessarily a type of synchronous communication. The group moderator is responsible for filtering offensive, harassing, or sexually explicit messages. However, this moderation is not always instantaneous, which has been criticized by some members. Synchronous communication tools such as audio or video calls are not available due to the characteristics of the WhatsApp platform.

The main contents dealt with in this space are trade (generally informal buying and selling of goods among members), information about life in the city (including practical information, transportation, bureaucratic procedures), job offers and job searches (generally informal occupations), and—during the period of analysis—data related to the COVID-19 crisis (for example, status of the border between countries, transportation routes during lockdown, or health). Other materials found are related

to housing, news, remittances, and spaces for socializing. Therefore, the contents are associated with spheres linked to life in transnational contexts. Table 1 systematizes the type of information found in this group between September 2020 and February 2021.

Table 1. Types of content within WhatsApp of a large group of Venezuelan migrants in Ecuador

	Sep. 2020	Oct. 2020	Nov. 2020	Dec. 2020	Jan. 2021	Feb. 2021	Total
Lodging	3.65%	9.60%	0%	0%	4.67%	7.32%	4.21%
Jobseeking	2.72%	0%	0%	0%	5.72%	1.59%	1.67%
Trade	20.03%	49.18%	52.35%	57.35%	24%	7.25%	35.03%
COVID-19 Crisis	52.95%	0%	0%	24.41%	8.91%	2.58%	14.81%
Information about daily life in Ecuador	16.61%	27.74%	21.56%	0%	27.60%	36.79%	21.72%
News	0%	0%	10.70%	0%	1.36%	14.01%	4.35%
Job offers	0%	5.25%	8.91%	0%	15.03%	13.35%	7.09%
Remittances	4.04%	8.25%	6.48%	18.24%	1.55%	0%	6.43%
Socialization	0%	0%	0%	0%	11.15%	17.11%	4.71%

Source: created by the author

The information available in this group is especially relevant for migrants during the first years after their arrival. This coincides with trends in the movement of Venezuelan people in Ecuador, as it is a recent migration, which has intensified since 2015. The information flow through these spaces can be useful for daily life. For example, the process to obtain work visas in Ecuador is often complex due to multiple bureaucratic obstacles through which the State has sought to restrain migration flows. The lack of information on requirements, times, and necessary processes further complicates access to this documentation. Large WhatsApp groups facilitate access to the knowledge necessary to comply with these types of activities. In these cases, a group member generates a question about the type of procedure that needs to be followed, and the rest of the members can interact by sharing relevant data. Similarly, remittances are marketed through this group, generally through remittance agencies that post information on their rates and processes.

This WhatsApp group also generates a network related to the informal trade of goods among its members. Purchasing and selling items such as food (generally from Venezuela), used household appliances, and second-hand home accessories (such as

beds, furniture, or gas light bulbs) are extremely common.⁷ Likewise, information related to lodging is frequent.⁸ Information on the most convenient sectors of the city to live in from an economic and logistical point of view, as well as on spaces for shared housing among migrants, is often circulated.⁹ Employment is another issue addressed. Two types of messages are common here: on the one hand, people seeking access to employment in certain areas¹⁰ and, on the other, people sharing information on job offers they have found in different sectors of the city.¹¹ It should be said that this space can also be prone to scams through false or misleading advertisements.

The topics addressed in these groups are not superfluous, but are related to important elements within migration processes. The exchange of information generates possibilities for collaboration and solidarity that can be both in the digital realm and face-to-face. Therefore, this WhatsApp group is a tool and a community for interaction and cooperation (Hirsch, 2017). It is a tool insofar as technological possibilities facilitate direct communication between group members. It is a community insofar as the members share a collective sense of belonging. In this case, the WhatsApp platform replaces the physical space as the axis of interaction. Chayko (2020) has explored the idea that interaction in contemporary societies is increasingly through the generation of digital communities and 'communities to go'. These types of communities are not a replacement for physical communities, but their impacts on social life are just as important.

In the context of Venezuelan migration in Ecuador, digital communities present advantages related to the scale and ease with which group members can be reached, that is, the capacity and efficiency in disseminating information (Chayko, 2020). The main element that binds this community on WhatsApp is the sense of belonging to the Venezuelan community within the Ecuadorian territory. Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) have emphasized the importance of the sense of ways of belonging to social

⁷ The following are illustrative excerpts of the contents related to business:

P1: Who sells dining table chairs? I need 4 chairs. Who sells good, nice, and cheap furniture sets?
 P2 (Sends a photograph of furniture)
 P1: A lot of money for 4 chairs
 P2: Tell me how much you offer
 P1: 20 for the four! What is the condition of the chairs?
 P2: Final price, 30 dollars
 P1: Can't you see that they are scratched? They need to be painted. What is the condition of the fabric? 15 for the four.
 P3: My friend, why don't you buy a new set of 4 chairs and a plastic table for \$20 to \$30?

⁸ Illustrative excerpt about accommodation: "I live alone in an apartment. Anyone interested in sharing an apartment? There is a room available. I pay \$130 plus utilities. It is quiet, the area is in the north, everything is close, pharmacy, market, etc."

⁹ The following message provides information on the most affordable areas to find housing:

For 150 (dollars) you can get (an apartment) in (El Comité del) Pueblo, the bad thing is the deposit, they ask for 2 months, but they're very nice and the area is quiet. I know Guamaní, Pueblo, Ciudadela del Ejército and these areas are always quiet. Caupicho, Centro and La Martha Bucaram are also quiet.

¹⁰ Message about people looking for a job: "Good morning, people. I'm looking for a job, I'm a female student of good principles, however, I'm looking for whatever comes along as long as it's honest. If you could help me, I would appreciate it".

¹¹ Message about job offers: "A girl living in the north...! To work part-time in a pizzeria! Customer service. From 5 pm to 10 pm... Living in the north! Good appearance... Proactive. Tidy. And with experience in customer service..!".

fields within the logic of transnationalism. In this case, this digital community's sense of belonging is constructed to the extent that it imagines itself as such based on the dimension of national affiliation (Anderson, 1993).

Finally, it should be emphasized that the field of digital communities is directly related to face-to-face dynamics. It is not possible to establish dichotomous divisions between the digital and the face-to-face spaces. The interactions in this WhatsApp community relate to different practices in the face-to-face sphere through commerce, search for accommodation, and information about daily life, among others. Therefore, the dynamics of cooperation and solidarity are present in the digital field through platforms such as WhatsApp without losing ties with face-to-face contact.

Toward a concept of digital solidarity

The case of Venezuelan migration in Ecuador illustrates how solidarity networks increasingly occupy digital terrains. Without pretending to reach generalizations, this article shows two concrete situations. On the one hand are the interactions in family groups, which are based on a sense of co-presence created through digital media and which can impact transnational life in the field of moral obligations, the conception of an economy of care, and emotional support. On the other hand, some of the dynamics of a large group on WhatsApp, whose interactions open up a possibility of cooperation and solidarity through the exchange of information among its members, were addressed. These groups act as a mainly virtual community. With these considerations, it is possible to define digital solidarity in transnational contexts as those practices aimed at fostering social cohesion and collaboration between migrant groups beyond physical distances and face-to-face contact, using digital media as the main channel. The following are some reflections in this regard.

First, the interactions between migrants in virtual spaces are not disconnected from face-to-face reality. In other words, there is a *continuum* between practices in digital and face-to-face situations. Chayko (2020) has noted that all digital interaction requires corporeality, in the sense that the body must interact with technological devices to operate them. Beyond this, the digital dynamics examined in this paper interact with material spheres in that they are oriented toward improving aspects of migrants' daily lives, whether in economic or emotional spheres, especially in the face of pressing needs in the context of migratory movements in the global south. Identifying dichotomous distinctions that separate the virtual and the face-to-face spaces is becoming increasingly difficult as the barriers between these spaces tend to diminish. In fact, Stewart and Schultze (2019) state that contemporary solidarity networks are a hybridization of online and face-to-face actions.

Overcoming the dichotomies between the virtual and the face-to-face implies understanding solidarity from a different angle than that of classical theories. As previously mentioned, traditional conceptualizations of solidarity refer to societies

with fixed and static territories. The interactions between migrants described in this article show that solidarity networks can be generated in a deterritorialized manner. For example, the co-presence in networks of relatives facilitates feelings of simultaneity among migrants beyond physical distances, which translates into forms of emotional or material support.

The ideal types proposed by nineteenth-century sociology attempted to understand solidarity by differentiating between practices in local or community spaces, and impersonal spaces. Examples of this are the Durkheimian notions of mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1987), or Tönnies' approach to *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (social relations between individuals based on close personal and family ties, and social relations based on impersonal ties, respectively) (Thijssen, 2012). This article shows how solidarity networks in the digital field are not uniform but vary between transnational families' personal spaces and large groups on platforms such as WhatsApp. This paper does not seek to suggest new ideal types of solidarity in the digital world but rather to emphasize the complexity and diversity of experiences on digital platforms.

The ways migrants use technology as a function of solidarity networks reflect their capacity for agency. Marino (2021) argues that technological platforms obtain information (big data) on migrants for commercial purposes. These information mining processes are often undertaken with apparently humanitarian intentions, in what Saura (2020) has named digital philanthrocapitalism. Likewise, the literature points out that technologies can serve to limit migratory movements through biometric controls (Olwig et al., 2020; Van der Ploeg & Sprenkels, 2011) or surveillance (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2020). Beyond the fact that platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp can collect data on migrants or the capacity of technologies to establish surveillance and control mechanisms, this article has shown that migrants possess a capacity for agency to employ these media according to their interests, establishing collaborative dynamics. For example, in the group described, the WhatsApp platform is a tool and a community, which Venezuelan migrants have adopted for collaboration in areas such as trade, accommodation, or the dissemination of useful information for daily life.

The analysis presented in this article does not seek to romanticize the use of these technologies. If it is considered that the barriers between the digital and face-to-face spheres are not strong, phenomena such as discrimination, conflicts, or scams can also develop within digital areas. In fact, misleading and ill-intentioned job offers can be found in the large WhatsApp group analyzed. Ossewaarde and Reijers (2017) state that digital media presented as shared economies or digital commons can lead to false illusions and false awareness. This article does not intend to deny these possibilities but simply emphasizes the dynamics of solidarity that can also exist on digital networks.

Conclusions

The classic postulates of the literature on solidarity historically took for granted that social interactions take place within physical, fixed, and static spaces. However, the current digital media generate new social, dynamic, and virtual fields in which solidarity networks can be established. Within the migration of Venezuelan people in Ecuador, ITCS represent not only a channel for information flow but a space within which new

relationships and forms of collaboration are established and into which face-to-face interactions are extended. In transnational contexts, communication technologies can facilitate digital solidarity networks to foster social cohesion and collaboration among migrant groups beyond physical distances and face-to-face contact. Consequently, digital fields in migratory environments cannot be seen as a simple complement to the face-to-face world.

In the case of transnational families, digital media allow the generation of a sense of co-presence (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Baldassar, 2008) and simultaneity (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) that mitigates the emotional burden of physical separation and facilitates the fulfillment of family-related moral obligations and the development of a care economy. Digital spaces are experienced dynamically through synchronous and asynchronous communication (through textual, visual, auditory, or iconic content) and employing various platforms according to the specific needs of the economic and generational context. On the other hand, large groups of migrants on WhatsApp—where their members maintain little face-to-face contact—can facilitate both the generation of new social relationships and the exchange of information and collaboration between individuals, which would not be possible only through physical interactions. The notion of digital communities—present in recent anthropological literature (Chayko, 2020) and understood not as an extension of the face-to-face world but as a social field in itself—can be applied to describe the collaborative practices stemming from these groups.

The types of digital solidarity analyzed in this research are deterritorialized, constantly crossing national borders and regulations. However, in the case of Venezuelan migration in Quito, interactions within digital spaces are not necessarily disconnected from the face-to-face world. On the contrary, they usually have a concrete impact on migrants' daily experiences, for example, through the circulation of remittances, access to jobs, or emotional support. In this sense, within the migratory movements of the global south, the dynamics of digital solidarity can be seen as mechanisms of agency in the face of complex situations in countries of origin and destination.

The migration of Venezuelan people in South America is a recent phenomenon, and digital communication technologies have played a key role in its configuration. Nonetheless, few works in the literature have addressed the role of information technologies within these migratory movements, especially with regard to cooperation and aid practices. Through reflections on digital solidarity, this article seeks to constitute a point of reflection in this regard. From their capacity for agency, migrants can use contemporary technologies to foster social cohesion with transnational groups and foster collaboration and aid both in family spaces and in groups with weak social ties. This does not imply that digital communication technologies cannot be used for negative purposes, but rather that digital solidarity is one of the existing possibilities within the field of transnational migration in the face of the structural socioeconomic difficulties typical of developing countries.

Acknowledgments

The development of this paper was nurtured by the comments of Dr. Yolanda Budaque Puerta and Dr. Montserrat Soronellas, whom I thank for their observations and comments. I am also grateful for the suggestions made by the two anonymous peers and the editor of this article.

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