



Virtual Ethnography of Female Migrants: a WhatsApp Group as a Support Tool During Their Migration Process

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Abstract

This research aimed to describe the use and functionality that migrant women provide to social networks and the role they play in the social integration of migrant women. Using a qualitative methodology design, a virtual ethnography approach, and with the support of ATLAS, this research analyses 863 discursive threads of a WhatsApp group comprised of 123 migrant women belonging to an association related to the social and labour integration of the migrant population. The results indicate that the WhatsApp group is a reliable source of information as well as spaces of solidarity and emotional support among women who experience similar situations during the migration process. The originality of these results is that they provide insight into the uses of social networks by migrant women, on which there is little research, through observations in a WhatsApp group. Organisations working with migrant women should rethink the functionalities of these social networks and the importance of these tools in improving the social and labour integration of migrant women.

Keywords Migration · Social media · Ethnography · WhatsApp · Networks · Virtual communities

Introduction

Digital communication practices have been transformed over the years due to user demand of innovative functionalities from online platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Van Dijk, 2013). In this context, the role played by communication and information technologies in the mobility processes of migrants and refugees is described in the academic literature as facilitating devices or survival tools that make certain

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actions possible during migration trajectories (Alencar, 2020, p. 9). Authors have focused on how social networking platforms and smartphones facilitate migratory processes, specifically access to information about migrants' practical use (Baron & Gómez, 2017; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Kuschminder et al., 2015; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2019; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017;) in maintaining contact with friends and family in hometowns (Baron & Gómez, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2018; Guberek et al., 2018; Newell et al., 2016), in building new social relationships with migrants in the same precarious situation (Newell et al., 2016), or even in accessing real-time information about basic needs such as medical care, food, or housing (Latonero & Kift, 2018). Other research has focused on the use of digital media (mainly, social networks) by unaccompanied minor refugees as a tool to maintain contact with family, create new social ties, exchange news on migration issues, or share information on emotional and health status (Kutscher & Kreß, 2018).

On the other hand, some studies address the purpose of WhatsApp use (Dhahir, 2020; Harris, 2021) either for political marketing (Nizah & Bakar, 2021) or for pedagogical benefits in the educational field (Costa-Sánchez & Guerrero-Pico, 2020; Gaur & Bohra, 2019; Kaieski et al., 2015). However, there is a paucity of studies on the usability of WhatsApp groups by the migrant population, specifically the female population, even more so once they settle in the destination country after the migration trajectory. It has been found that several authors analyse the use of social networks by migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers (Alencar, 2017; Alencar & Tsagkroni, 2019; Baron & Gómez, 2017; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Dekker et al., 2018; Komito & Bates, 2011; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Jauhiainen et al., 2019; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2019; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017), but no evidence has been found of studies examining the usefulness of online communities in social networks, specifically WhatsApp groups. In other words, most of the academic literature focuses on how new communication and information technologies, particularly social networks and mobile applications, are used to keep in touch with family in the country of origin, create new friendships, or as a means of finding information about the destination city (Dekker et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito & Bates, 2011; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2019; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017). However, the aforementioned studies do not delve into the practical uses of online communities, e.g. WhatsApp groups, for the migrant population, such as buying and selling products and offering services or information to foreigners.

It is relevant to study digital communication, or in our case, the use of social networking platforms because it allows us to analyse multiple ways of communicating, sharing content, establishing social links without spatial-temporal barriers, accessing information, and other "social affordances" material artifacts (e.g. technologies) that are within the user's reach and that facilitate their interaction (Gibson, 2014). These platforms are used by migrant women who lack the legal documentation to settle in another country and, therefore, must develop strategies to survive situations of vulnerability (Gordano Peile, 2018). Against this background, the main objectives of this article are to describe the purposes of the use of WhatsApp groups by migrant women once settled in the host country and to identify discursive themes in WhatsApp group conversations specific to migrant women.

The following research questions are derived from these objectives:

- (1) What are the discursive themes in WhatsApp group conversations involving migrant women once they are settled in a host society?
- (2) For what purposes do migrant women use WhatsApp groups after arriving in a host country?

Use of Social Media Platforms in the Migrant Population

In the study of migrant populations' use of social networking platforms, several moments should be distinguished according to the migration process. Thus, some studies (Baron & Gómez, 2017; Dekker et al., 2018; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito & Bates, 2011; Leurs & Smets, 2018; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2019; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017) have analysed the use of social networks in the pre-migration and transit contexts, while other studies have focused on the functions of these social networks when migrants are settled in host countries.

Among the studies focused on the use of smartphones, apps, and other information technologies, authors such as Dekker and Engbersen (2014) studied how social networking platforms facilitate the migration process for migrants in Germany. Specifically, they simplify migrants' contact with friends and family through virtual communication. Through these platforms, they enable new forms of weak ties consolidation (construction of new social relationships) that favour the mobility of migrants and simultaneously create sources of information that offer certain advantages over institutional information (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014).

Likewise, Komito and Bates (2011), and Zijlstra and Liempt (2017) emphasised that social networks propitiate facilities for those who leave their home countries as they allow them to be informed about their friends and family's daily activities without being constantly connected to the network, although there is evidence that this connection hinders their integration in the host societies.

Years later, Dekker et al., (2018) highlighted the role of social networks in accessing information, thanks to the personal experiences of existing social ties that impacted decisions about migration routes and destination countries. Asylum-seeking migrants accessing various information also had to cope with what Wall et al., (2017) call "information precarity", i.e. access to information that can be, at times, insecure, unstable, and risky (p. 3). This is because the information that comes from unknown sources in social networks and is often publicly accessible is more suspicious and less trusted by the immigrant population, whereas that which emanates from existing social ties or personal experiences is more trusted (Dekker et al., 2018, p. 9).

This idea is also shared by Baron and Gómez (2017), who argued that the use of Facebook, WhatsApp, or Instagram serves as emotional support for irregular migrants by allowing them to stay connected with their families and friends in their countries of origin, as well as with the socio-political traditions of their cities (pp. 153–154), as regular communication with strong ties is crucial for migrants' adaptation and integration (p. 152). These strong ties may reduce some negative

consequences of the migration process such as loneliness, anxiety, or separation. The distance between communities of origin (including loss of social relations) fosters the appearance of homesickness, defined as the commonly experienced state of distress among those who have left their homes and find themselves in a new and unfamiliar environment (Tilburg et al., 1996, p.899). This occurs because the transition from a familiar to a new environment may result in a period of loss of control (Fisher, 2016, preface xiv).

This phenomenon (homesickness) requires further research attention, as highlighted by Hack-Polay (2020), who explained that “adjustment can cause social isolation and homesickness”, and, consequently, lead to physical and cognitive symptoms, including stomach discomforts, lack of sleep, eating disorders, headaches, and recurrent exhaustion, as well as fixated thoughts about the homeland and idealisation of the past (p.2).

In addition, healthcare access barriers, uncertainty regarding work permits, and cultural differences can worsen migrants’ mental health. Ventevogel et al., (2015) identified several factors that can impact the mental health of migrants, including lack of information, uncertainty about migration status, potential hostility and discrimination, and changes in immigration policies or the possibility of deportation (p.3). These challenges may result in extreme fear, worry, anger, and sadness, as well as nightmares and sleep problems for many migrants and refugees (Ventevogel et al., 2015, p.3).

As for the use of social media, it not only occurs before or during the migration journey but is also used as a means of adaptation and integration in the destination country. Alencar (2017) studied the functionalities of social networking platforms for refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan living in Germany, and observed that less than half of the participants used social media platforms to acquire information on employment, accommodation, or training courses. This is because they prefer offline interpersonal contact between friends or acquaintances to obtain truthful information about certain topics, such as the labour market or the German education system (p.1597). On the other hand, Alencar’s (2017) study revealed that refugees use social networks as emotional support to cope with the challenges of living in a new country, while at the same time serving as an aid for them to adapt and get to know the culture of the host society (p. 1597). This idea was also shared by Croucher, (2011) when he stated that social networks influence migrants’ interactions with the dominant culture of the host society, while at the same time affecting communication and group identity (p. 261).

Through interviews and focus groups with unaccompanied minor refugees (mostly boys), Kutscher and Kreß (2018) found that the use of digital media is on the same level of importance as basic requirements such as food and is perceived as indispensable during the migration journey to Europe, as well as in their day-to-day life once settled in the destination country. To connect with friends and family living in different parts of the world, social networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp are essential (Kutscher & Kreß, 2018).

According to Jauhiainen and Tedeschi (2021), these digital tools offer, not only the opportunity to be in contact with family—an idea that was also shared by Vancea and Boso (2015)—but also unofficial information and knowledge that becomes, at

times, vital and essential for the migrant and refugee population in matters such as job searches or access to information about accommodation in Finland.

Even though authors such as Alencar (2017), Alencar and Tsagkroni (2019), Baron and Gómez (2017), Dekker and Engbersen (2014), Dekker et al., (2018), Komito and Bates (2011), Jauhiainen and Tedeschi (2021), Jauhiainen et al., (2019), Merisalo and Jauhiainen et al., (2019), and Zijlstra and Liempt (2017) highlighted in their studies the utilities or purposes of social networking platforms for refugees and migrants. Other scholars (Borkert et al., 2018; Newell et al., 2016) emphasised the drawbacks of using these digital tools. Borkert et al., (2018) highlighted that even though social networks allow Syrian refugees to stay in touch, over long distances with family and friends, these platforms also promote misinformation.

Newell et al., (2016), through their study on how migrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras access information, established that smartphones can be a double-edged sword because they could exacerbate or add to vulnerability, but they can also facilitate communication with others and access to relevant information (p. 188).

Most of the research conducted in the field of digital migration (digital migration studies; Leurs & Smets, 2018) has focused on analysing how migrant populations use different social and digital platforms during the migration processes (both during migration and when they land in the destination country) and for what purpose they use them. However, we found a lack of proposals with a gendered approach in the post-migration context, since research focuses on the use of social networks by male migrants or refugees without considering that women are also agents of the migration process. In fact, according to Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta (2020), it is estimated that of the total number of migrants in an irregular administrative situation residing in Spain (between 390,000 and 470,000 people), 55% are women (Fanjul & Gálvez-Iniesta, 2020).

This research is an opportunity to learn about and analyse the use of social networks, specifically WhatsApp, once in the host country and by a majority group of migrant women. Collaborating with an association comprised mainly of migrant women (men participate in a smaller proportion) made it possible to gain access to a community of women who share the characteristics of being migrants, Spanish-speaking, and meeting in a WhatsApp group, which allowed for prolonged observation, something unusual in the research analysed. Therefore, the objective of this research will study the digital communicative strategies used by this group when they settle in the destination country. To do so, it will rely on the technique of virtual ethnography as the most appropriate tool to discover in the content of the conversations held on WhatsApp what uses the participants give to the social network.

Materials and Methods

The irruption of digital spaces in everyday life has led to a new way of investigating social reality. Beyond epistemological and methodological debates, this research relies on the ethnographic paradigm of new places of technological mediation such as social networks, which differs from classical ethnography because of the opportunities provided by the

digital environment, as opposed to the observation and interpretation of the face-to-face space. However, as Angelone (2019) points out, the notion of “virtual ethnography” does not imply a certain research paradigm or pretend to be something other than classical ethnography.

Virtual ethnography for Sádaba and Barranquero (2019) (see also Coffey, 1999; Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2019) is the set of methods of recording and interpreting digital environments that attempt the notions and guides of classical ethnography to the new sites of technological mediation. The principles of virtual or digital ethnography are adapted to this research because it is an empirical and exploratory tool for an unfamiliar communicative environment such as a WhatsApp group (Hjorth et al., 2017). In this research, the use of virtual ethnography consisted of “continuous immersion” (Lemmetty et al., 2022) in a community of Spanish-speaking immigrant women and familiarising ourselves with their codes and behaviours (Sádaba & Barranquero, 2019, p. 8) as a non-participant observer.

Sampling

A non-statistical purposive sampling was proposed to discover the participatory, collaborative, and dialogic dynamics in a virtual community through a series of categories adjusted to the research objectives.

In order to execute this research, a search for associations of emigrated women was carried out and they were proposed to participate in the research. The “Asociación Latinoamericana Huelva para Todos y Todas” accepted the invitation to participate after agreeing the conditions for non-participant observation of the WhatsApp group with the consent of the participants in this group. In this virtual community, there was no certainty and precision of how many users belong to the group since there is a certain degree of flexibility in the acceptance of new members and in the possibility of leaving the group. The only identification available is the cell phone number ($n = 123$) that appears in each of the interventions of the discursive threads.

To obtain the data, a six-month prolonged non-participant observation was carried out in a WhatsApp group in which 123 women from different Latin American countries participate with the exception that they are all Spanish-speaking women. Although this lack of demographic information of variables, e.g. family burdens, educational level, and culture, could be seen as a gap, this study advocates the exploration of other variables that present the nuances of the social and labour integration of women. The assumption is that another series of factors that explain the difficulties of socio-labour integration will be presented (Boussif & Dricot, 2020), such as the need for training courses adapted to the needs of the host labour market, regularisation, and the homologation of professional and academic qualifications.

The observation period lasted from October 2020 to March 2021, noting in fieldwork diary behaviours, reactions, and emotional expressions through emoticons, but which are excluded from this analysis because when performing the capture and conversion of the group’s content such evidence is lost. There were 863 discursive threads and a total of 1437 corresponding interactions that were analysed, with the

months of November 2021 (159 threads and 425 interactions) and January 2022 (164 threads and 322 interactions) showing the highest activity (Table 1).

Coding Strategies and Analysis

Relying on the analytical software ATLAS.ti, two of three researchers independently coded each message to ensure reliability in the process (Fernández-Amaya, 2021; Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2020), conducted a content analysis of the messages, and drew up a list of common themes that they identified (lowercase) from the discursive threads of a first set of messages during the month of September.

The next phase of coding took place after the first coding, in which the findings were discussed, and, through contrast, the consensus was reached on the initial thematic categories and sub-themes or codes. The next step was the independent classification of the discursive threads in the selected months (from October to March). Any points of controversy were resolved by consensus. Through the inductive approach, the main themes, characteristics, and categories emerging from the data collected in the participants' testimonies were first identified thanks to the use of ATLAS.ti 22.1, which allowed to share files, identify the categories separately and search for consensus. After this first phase, an initial codebook was generated, which resulted in 15 themes and sub-codes that allowed a consensus to be reached for the next phase of coding and analysis (Table 2).

Analytical Strategies

Two types of analytical strategies were used: quantitative content analysis and qualitative content analysis (Creswell, 2013). The analytical strategies proposed respond to the main objective of exploring this type of online group, its internal functioning, and its participatory dynamics to explore the uses and functionalities of these social networks in groups of immigrant women. In this way, it is possible to detect the potentialities or difficulties of these people in their social and labour integration through an analysis of online communities. In short, in this first stage, the potential of these networks for both the social and labour integration of immigrant women was discovered. A descriptive quantitative content analysis of the discursive threads and thematic categories was carried out. With the resulting data, frequency tables

Table 1 Number of interactions in the threads by month

	1 interaction	2–3 interactions	4–5 interactions	> 5 interactions	Total
October 21	88.89	10.10	0.51	0.51	100
November 21	43.71	30.46	12.58	13.25	100
December 21	87.27	10.91	1.82	0.0	100
January 22	59.26	27.78	7.41	5.56	100
February 22	87.90	12.10	0.0	0.0	100
March 22	69.23	22.12	3.85	4.80	100

Table 2 Rationale in themes and frequency of sub-codes linked to these themes

Themes	Frequency	Percentages
Employment supply	184	13.9%
Association information	161	12.2%
Immigration	142	10.7%
Employment characteristics	138	10.4%
Accommodation	116	8.8%
Association reminders	114	8.6%
General information	113	8.5%
Social support	108	8.2%
Services	84	6.4%
Products	63	4.8%
Second-hand	35	2.6%
Travel	22	1.7%
Employment demand	19	1.4%
COVID	19	1.4%
Discrimination	10	0.8%
Total	1322	100%

were obtained for the messages within each identified theme (initial thematic categories) and by discursive/conversational thread. Quantitative measure of frequencies is employed alongside qualitative analysis techniques to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the data (Krippendorff, 2004).

The discursive threads were analysed to understand the different interventions of the participants with the same theme, while the qualitative textual data of the WhatsApp messages were analysed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques to elucidate participatory and collaborative dynamics in the virtual community.

Ethical Considerations

From an ethical point of view, all precautions regarding the protection and avoidance of risks to the participants and respect for their autonomy were taken in this research. Once they were previously informed about the proposed observation group and about the objective, participants gave their consent. No risks of any kind were observed for the participants and adequate measures were established to provide ethical guarantees throughout the research process.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed the different functions of the WhatsApp group. The so-called formal function is the one for which the association created the group among its members, i.e. it is the primary function of this online community. However, there are other uses of the network beyond the formal function for which the

WhatsApp group was created. In this case, the point of view of usability was determined by the participants. That is, it is the users of the group who request certain information, offer services or products, or even use the WhatsApp group to search for accommodation. These uses have been collected under the denomination of “informal use of the network”. This term also includes an activity of solidarity and support (Baron & Gómez, 2017) towards the rest of the women, which, despite not being the intended use, is no less important.

Formal Uses of the WhatsApp Group in the Post-migration Context: Informative Function

In the formal use, the one for which the group was constituted, the figure of the WhatsApp account administrator plays an important role. From the “Asociación Latinoamericana Huelva para Todos y Todas”, the interest in providing information on informative workshops and training courses, as well as in promoting leisure activities to stimulate the participation of migrant women, leads the account administrator to send the group all the information related to workshops, courses and activities, schedules, places or speakers (C04 Association), as well as reminders (C05 Reminders) on all planned activities. In conjunction with the start of workshops and courses, the administrator’s activity is more intense during October and November.

The administrator also manages the group by putting certain restrictions on some threads that are started and do not correspond to the objectives of the association. The administration’s aim is to put limits on discussions that raise political controversy or turn the WhatsApp group into a space for the sale of products. In this sense, the administrator reminds us that the appropriateness of conducting such discussions or proposals should be done outside the group “in private”.

With regard to the internal interaction within one dialogic thread, being that, when a given thread is raised, a topic or aspect can elicit several interactions or impacts by different people. This distinction makes it possible to describe the characteristics of the discursive threads and to find which discursive threads elicit the most participation. The analysis of the discursive threads showed that between 70 and 90% of the discursive threads are characterised by one interaction or at most two or three interactions that can be from different people, or by two people talking about a specific topic. The analysis of topics linked to the discursive threads revealed that the WhatsApp group plays a fundamental role in providing information on courses and workshops, regularisation, and consulate appointments (see Table 3).

Mention should be made of the need for information on homologations, equivalences, and validations of university and non-university degrees (Table 4).

Arrival in a new country implies the need for a labour insertion that does not always take place under the same conditions as in the country of origin. Since professional performance is not possible due to the difficulties with the homologation of professional and academic qualifications, but also because there is a greater supply of jobs in low-skilled sectors, those that the native population rejects (Piore, 1979), the effect of this incompatibility and the demand for

Table 3 Sub-codes related to regularisation

Sub-codes	ID	Frequency	Percentages
Census	C14.7	31	22.8%
Regularization process	C14.5	22	16.2%
Consulate appointments	C14.8 C14.18	21	15.4%
Homologation of diplomas	C14.22	13	9.6%
Asylum application process	C14.15 C14.6	9	6.6%
Digital certificate	C14.20	7	5.1%
Nationality application	C1.3	6	4.4%
Lawyers	C14.21	5	3.7%
Others	C14.4 C14.12 C14.13 C14.14 C14.16 C14.17 C14.19	22	16.2%
Total		136	100

Table 4 Example of thread/conversation on degree recognition (C14.22)

10/02/2022	17:16	Please, does anyone know the page where you can make an appointment to validate your degree?
10/02/2022	17:26	Good afternoon, is it necessary to pay the fee for the appointment?
10/02/2022	17:52	With a digital certificate you can request an appointment
10/02/2022	17:53	It is requested on the page of the sub-delegation
	18:02	http://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/servicios-al-ciudadano/catalogo/gestion-titulos/estudios-no-universitarios/titulos-extranjeros/homologacion-convalidacion-no-universitarios.html

foreign labour in low-skilled sectors (Piore, 1979) results in the acceptance of jobs below the professional category in their countries of origin.

Along with the informative function that the “Asociación Latinoamericana Huelva para Todos y Todas” makes of the WhatsApp group, the administrator uses this group to offer jobs through the WhatsApp group. It is not an intermediation function per se, but it does have the possibility of facilitating contact between parties, those who need workers, and the women who are in search of employment or may be interested in the specific job offer.

As Table 5 shows, the employment offered in the WhatsApp group is unskilled employment: the first group of jobs is closely linked to caring for the elderly (41.1%) and cleaning and childcare tasks (4.5%), and the second group is comprised of jobs related to agricultural work (18.8%), mainly in fruit picking. The context in which the association carries out its work is the south of Spain, where the labour market is marked by agriculture, so that this job offer may be a differentiating element from jobs offered in other communities.

Table 5 The rationale codes of the job offer category (%)

Sub-codes	ID	Frequency	Percentages
Elderly care	C01.1	46	41.1%
Shop staff	C01.3 C01.4 C01.15	21	18.8%
Shop staff	C01.13	11	9.8%
Other jobs	C01.12 C01.14 C01.9	11	9.8%
Bars and restaurants	C01.6 C01.16	8	7.1%
Home care ¹	C01.10 C01.11	5	4.5%
Distribution of products	C01.5	5	4.5%
Sending CV ²	C01.12	5	4.5%
Total		112	100%

¹Includes childcare and nursing assistant work

²Includes fruit picking

Informal Use of the WhatsApp Group in the Post-migration Context: Alternative Function

The objective of the use of the WhatsApp group by the association is, as noted, to provide information to the group members established in the geographical context to facilitate integration strategies in the host society (Alencar, 2017; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021). This is a preferred medium due to its quick accessibility to information shared by a community of users in a situation or context of vulnerability.

The social network is a means of bidirectional communication so that users contribute their daily use, more or less frequently, to another series of functionalities. The analysis of WhatsApp conversations by users indicated that the main interest in this network, as reflected in the messages analysed, is information on basic needs, mainly the search for accommodation in the host city. Migrants use the WhatsApp group to search for accommodation (rooms and houses) in the destination country, but also to send offers about available accommodation and thus help third parties. Of the total number of sub-codes analysed in reference to the demand for accommodation, specifically, the demand for rooms (56%) represents the most requested form of accommodation. This seems to indicate that migrants use online communities in social networks—such as WhatsApp groups—when they arrive in the destination country and need to find accommodation to live in. They also use it in solidarity to help third parties, since requests are made even for those who are not part of the online community (Table 6).

In this alternative use of the group, users also share on the network different types of services and products that they make available to the online community, such as typical foods from their places of origin (e.g. fritters and sweets) or second-hand products (e.g., sofas and mattresses). Specifically, in January, conversations revolved around food and drink, which could be because it coincided with the New Year holiday. In general, content about products was not abundant, accounting for 4.8% of the codes. Information shared on the supply and demand of second-hand products was not excessive either, as this type of content accounted for 2.6% of the codes analysed.

Table 6 Rationale sub-codes of the accommodation category (%)

Sub-codes	ID	Frequency	Percentages
Accommodation demand	C06.1C06.7 C06.6	25	21.6%
Lodging supply	C06.2	14	12.1%
Price	C06.3	2	1.7%
Send contact	C06.4	8	6.9%
Roommate	C06.5	1	0.9%
Room	C06.8	66	56.9%
Total		116	110%

Concretely, users posted second-hand products about furniture (beds, sofas, cribs, and bedsteads) and clothing. This is shown in the following thread (Table 7):

In addition to this offer of products, and as an alternative to the formal job offers made by the association, the group shares an offer of services that would fit into a category of “informal” employment. For the most part, these are services provided by the participants, such as hair straightening, manicures, or pedicures, as a way of obtaining potential clients among the group’s users. This type of content represents 6.4% of the total. At the same time, a series of trades are requested, such as electricians, porters, or an alternative transportation, as a way of finding people in the community who may be interested in offering these services at lower prices.

The third informal use of WhatsApp is the dissemination of information among the online community, particularly web news, information related to COVID-19, or travel between the country of origin and destination. Within this third use, the category “general information” was included, representing 8.5% of the total content. Users shared web links to content on foreigners (new regulations, requirements, etc.) and on the domestic employee regime. Likewise, the WhatsApp group seemed to facilitate users’ access to content about flights, travel requirements, documentation needed to fly, or travel requirements due to COVID-19 (inquiries about vaccination, use of masks or PCR/antigen tests). However, travel-related content stood at 1.7% of the total, a relatively low percentage compared to other topics.

The fourth informal use of WhatsApp is emotional support. The configuration of this category is supported by codes linked to requests for help for certain activities that have nothing to do with the established purposes of the information. Some use to stand out, such as accompaniment for the completion of certain procedures or

Table 7 Example of conversation about second-hand products (C07.1)

02/10/2021	10:07	Good morning, we need clothes for a 4-year-old boy for winter. It is urgent, slippers too. This family has just arrived, and they are in a bad situation
02/10/2021	10:14	Children’s clothing is available in the Association’s warehouse
02/10/2021	10:39	In Cáritas
02/10/2021	10:39	I will tell him, thank you

Table 8 Example of a conversation about tributes (C09.6)

12/10/2021	18:46	Today Maria's family will offer a nice tribute for her passing. Thank you for joining them
12/10/2021	18:46	Family members are already here
12/10/2021	18:49	Is anyone going to the flower offering?
12/10/2021	19:46	Where is it? I am close by. I have time
12/10/2021	19:52	☺

Table 9 Example of conversation about solidarity (C09.1)

11/02/2022	10:10	There is a girl who needs help until the 17th when she gets her passport to leave. Do you know of any association that can help her stay and help her until that day? If anyone knows, thank you
11/02/2022	10:26	Please contact Cáritas
11/02/2022	10:40	Huelva Acoge and Cruz Roja are going fast, Cáritas has many people waiting with scheduled appointments

expressions of solidarity for the death of one of the members of the association. The textual conversations presented below show this (Table 8):

Social support is also shown in helping with questions about foreigners, as in the following case in which a participant asks for help from the association and the rest of the group to try to keep a third person from being deported (see Table 9).

Finally, it should be noted that among the discursive threads with the highest number of interactions is the month of November 2021. Some events outside the information and training offered by the association caused an unusual increase in the number of interactions around a topic. This was the case of the discursive threads corresponding to the month of November 2021, when a series of events such as the illness and hospitalisation of one of the associates raised a wave of volunteers who offered themselves for her care (see Table 9), which is collected in H052 (16 interactions), or the reactions of rejection to the complaint of an immigrant woman about the humiliating treatment experienced in her workplace (H096: 15 interactions).

Discussion

The lack of knowledge of the socio-demographic variables of the women users was not an impediment to finding in the social network a space for labour integration through an offer of jobs and workshops for training and orientation in employment, but also a space for sharing information on the different needs of migrant women. The results show that this social network plays an important role in the search for employment, providing an alternative to the job offers published by

public institutions, which may be distant from this group since in many cases their irregular administrative situation makes it impossible for them to access job offers through formal channels (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). However, thanks to the content shared by the WhatsApp group, users can find informal jobs where it is not a requirement to have regularised immigration status.

The results showed the practical usefulness of the WhatsApp group as a means of sharing information about job offers, in clear agreement with the results of other research such as other studies (Baron & Gómez, 2017; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021; Kuschminder et al., 2015; Merisalo & Jauhiainen, 2019; Zijlstra & Liempt, 2017). The migration journey can be a hard and difficult experience to cope with, and one that is aggravated when there is a lack of contact networks in the destination country (Massey et al., 1993). However, informal networks can help migrants to finance their journeys and find employment or living accommodations (Haug, 2008, p. 588). These digital platforms can be useful when information about services in the host country (housing, job opportunities, education, or health) is not readily available to newcomers (Ihejirika & Kralic, 2021, p. 53), as well as for the trading of products. There are a variety of options available for exchanging products and information, such as Facebook or Nextdoor. However, these applications, unlike WhatsApp, require a “monetary” exchange, address registration, and contact with an unknown person. Participating in a social network such as WhatsApp involves relying on a principle of “trust” between people, in this case migrant women, with the same interests and needs.

However, although interpersonal networks in the destination country may facilitate job search, they are usually beneficial only for those seeking work in low-skilled or unskilled sectors (Caces, 1986, p. 35), especially in the domestic and care sectors, as our results point out.

During the migration process, many women arrive alone or with children, without having any ties to the host society, which pushes them to devise strategies to facilitate their integration. The use of social networks has been shown in this study, as in others (Alencar, 2017; Baron & Gómez, 2017; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021), to be a way to access information and knowledge about basic needs, such as where to stay or how to find a job. However, it has also served to create new contacts that allow them to offer services, access second-hand products, or obtain labour or immigration information (regularisation of documents), which is quite difficult to find through formal or institutional channels.

The information offered and demanded is instantaneous (Latonero & Kift, 2018) and effective. The fact that migrants trust a WhatsApp group created by an association, whose head migrated years ago to Spain, shows that newly arrived migrants are more trusting, when it comes to accessing information, than those who have already experienced the migration process (Borkert et al., 2018, p. 9).

It cannot be forgotten that the “feeling of closeness” produced by having people willing to provide you with information brings credibility to whoever supports the group in its work as an administrator. In this way, the group is called upon and greater credibility (even more than official sources) is given to those who speak out in such a group since migrants in it have lived or are living in similar situations (Baron & Gómez, 2017; Dekker et al., 2018; Jauhiainen & Tedeschi, 2021) and share

roots, ethnicities, cultures, or traditions, which fosters mutual trust (Bucholtz, 2019). This trust has built a series of social relationships between women who have undergone the same situation of vulnerability and job precariousness. The online community provides them with accommodation, regularisation, and access to products from their home countries which causes an intensity in the relationships between women that, in other circumstances (outside the group), would not be maintained.

The results of this research are a clear example of the emotional support function (Baron & Gómez, 2017) that emerges in the network, because of interactions and trust in the community, which is evidently more than “posturing” thanks or birthday greetings. These findings are in line with those of Udwan et al., (2020), who highlighted that the refugee population seeks social and emotional support during the settlement phase in a host country, through different sources such as friends, family, organisations, and social networking platforms (p. 4). The emotional support function of the WhatsApp group also serves to reduce homesickness, especially when participants share content about cultural heritage from their home countries, such as typical food, traditional dances, or traditional costumes.

Conclusion

This study contributes to research on the social and labour inclusion of immigrant women by examining how they use WhatsApp. Through the analysis of discursive threads, the main uses of the WhatsApp group emerge, which take the form of an informative function (Alencar, 2017), and more interestingly, a platform for social support for these women (alternative and informal function). This is what Gibson (2014) described as “social affordances”, who saw in these social networks a space for sharing content and establishing social ties through facilitating interaction inside and outside the social network.

WhatsApp has turned out to be a network that not only works relationally but also informationally. Thanks to the WhatsApp group created by the “Asociación Latinoamericana Huelva para Todos y Todas”, migrant women have found in this medium a way to obtain news about events, workshops, talks, or leisure activities promoted by the association with total security and confidence.

Simultaneously, the WhatsApp group serves as a way to obtain information on issues related to the administrative regularisation of migrants. The association provides the content to the community via the group on ways to obtain residence or work permits, e.g. social or labour visa. However, the results show that WhatsApp is a space for the exchange of job offers outside institutional channels, mostly in low-skilled sectors. The lack of knowledge of socio-demographic variables, such as educational level or professional status, prevents us from knowing whether these women are accepting employment for which they are overqualified.

Beyond the informative function, the WhatsApp group proves to be an informal tool for migrant women settled in Spain, mainly in the demand for accommodation in both single rooms and whole apartments. Within the informal uses of WhatsApp, the participants also opted to use this network as a means for buying and selling

second-hand products, advertising services, searching for information on COVID-19, travel abroad, or simply web news.

However, beyond the purely instrumental function of the WhatsApp group, the users engaged this community as a small space for emotional support, mutual help, and solidarity with those in the same precarious employment situation. In other words, WhatsApp serves as a meeting place to feel accompanied and to comfort other women during situations of social vulnerability.

The results should also be understood considering some limitations. The analysis is based on a study of discursive threads over a certain period of time, and it cannot be drawn causal conclusions given the qualitative nature of the study. The lack of knowledge of any socio-demographic variable that could help to establish the situation or degree of social and labour integration of the women participating in the network makes it impossible to detect other benefits of its use according to different profiles. Although women participating in this study have smartphones, many of them live isolated from society as they work as interns in homes and barely have time to actively participate in a space such as the one provided by this setting. This lack of knowledge also necessitates the need to deepen the experiences of these women regarding their approach to what has been called transnational motherhood, a subject to which they could contribute.

As future research, a comparative analysis of the participation of migrant women in WhatsApp groups with respect to non-migrants should be carried out, with the aim of finding out whether their interests in forming part of a group are the same. Future research could focus on migrants coming from regions such as Morocco, Mali, or Algeria, who are highly represented in Spain. Their unique circumstances and socio-demographic characteristics (culture, language, religion, and traditions) make them an interesting group for study.

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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