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Online Communities of Spanish Migrants in Times of Austerity

Ruth Sanz Sabido

Canterbury Christ Church University

Email: rs456@canterbury.ac.uk

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Abstract

This article examines the perceptions held by Spanish migrants of the extent to which social media facilitate the development of a sense of community within their host towns and cities. Focusing particularly on the creation of Facebook groups called '*Españoles en...*' ('Spaniards in...'), the study explores the role that these online tools play in the development of connections between Spanish citizens who reside in the same locality. The aim, therefore, is to ask how they try to maintain their socio-cultural identities within a diasporic community, especially one that has suffered the effects of economic austerity. Based on the results of a qualitative survey answered by Spanish migrants living in Britain, France and Germany, the article sheds light on the relative usefulness – as perceived by the migrants themselves – of online engagement in the maintenance and development of a communal mind-set. The piece suggests that the migrants' individual backgrounds and experiences, including their individual political stances, skills, socio-economic circumstances, and regional affiliations, seem to play a more important role in shaping their conceptions of the online 'community', than any broader assumptions made about unitary national identity or the role of technology.

Contributor Note

Dr Ruth Sanz Sabido is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. She is the author of *Memories of the Spanish Civil War: Conflict and Community in Rural Spain* (2016), and co-editor of *Sites of Protest* (2016), *Contemporary Protest and the Legacy of Dissent* (2015) and three journal special issues. She has also written several book chapters and journal articles on memory and the Spanish Civil War, media discourse, conflict and social movements. Ruth is founder and Chair of the MeCCSA Social Movements Network, and co-editor of the book series 'Protest, Media and Culture' (Rowman and Littlefield International). She also coordinates the project *Herencias del 36* (www.herencias1936.com).

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Introduction

Based on the results of a qualitative questionnaire taken by 309 Spanish migrants living in Britain, France and Germany, the aim of this pilot study is to examine the participants' conception of social media as a tool for the development of communities in the towns and cities that play host to Spanish migrants. In his analysis of the Basque diaspora and social media use, Oiarzabal argues that the Internet, as a 'global network' of computers or nodes, is similar to transnational 'migrant communities', in the sense that they too are composed of intersections that enable the flow of messages and the formation of relationships (Oiarzabal 2012: 1470). Diasporic flows have, of course, always been enabled by communication technologies, as evidenced by Karim's (2006) study of the media of diaspora, which explored the ways in which community ties are developed through the use of media forms, on both a local and a transnational level. Besides their practical application, electronic and other types of communication have come to exemplify the turn from a focus on human migration *per se*, towards studies that attempt 'to integrate the study of human mobility and diasporic experience into the broader context of debates on citizenship, identity and culture' (Fazal and Tsagarousianou 2002: 6).

In the Spanish case, as in many other examples of life under the rule of austerity, the stability of an 'embedded' cultural identity, experienced when individuals are settled in their country of origin, is undermined by the need to escape an economy that cannot support an individual's professional and private

aspirations. Consequently, emigration from Spain has grown considerably in the past eight years. In this context, dozens of Facebook pages called '*Espanoles en...*' ('Spaniards in...') – followed by the name of a town or city outside Spain – have been created with the aim of providing Spanish migrants with a means of contacting fellow Spaniards residing in the same locality. The instrumental purpose of these online spaces is to obtain information and ask for advice, but social media sites like Facebook can also play an important role in the maintenance of socio-cultural identity within a much wider diasporic community.

Spanish Migrants in Times of Austerity

The recent waves of Spanish emigration are determined in large part by the severity of the economic downturn. For example, in 2013 there were 'about one million people aged between 15 and 24 out of employment' (Eichhorst et al 2013: 1); in percentage terms, this meant that, in the first quarter of the same year, '57% of the under 25s' were unemployed (Legido-Quigley et al. 2013: 1). Both of the dominant mainstream political parties – *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* and *Partido Popular* – carried out austerity programmes that included 'cuts to public sector employee salaries; cuts to budgets for education, science, health, and social services', and the introduction of 'more restrictive labour laws' (Legido-Quigley et al. 2013: 2).

According to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*), the official figures for Spanish migration indicate that 137,147 Spanish people had left Spain to go to other countries within the European

Union between 2008 and the first semester of 2015 (INE 2016). During this period, the most popular destinations for Spaniards within the European Union have been Britain (38,386 Spanish migrants), France (30,948) and Germany (27,425). The National Institute also reveals that a total of approximately 300,000 Spanish people have left Spain since the beginning of the crisis in 2008. These figures, which only include Spanish-born citizens, do not take into account the foreigners who, having acquired Spanish nationality and settled down in Spain, have left the country since the crisis began either to return to their original homes or to find work in a third country (if we include them, the official figure rises from 300,000 to over 400,000 migrants within the same period). However, alternative sources suggest that, in 2012, the figure was in fact already closer to 700,000 (González-Ferrer 2013).

These statistics provide only a partial description of the migratory trends that have developed in Spain's current socio-economic context. These conditions have also led to the parallel formation of activist initiatives, such as *No nos vamos, nos echan* ('We don't leave, they throw us out'), also known as the *Marea Granate* (the maroon tide). This is one of the multiple 'citizen tides' (*mareas ciudadanas*) that have emerged in post-15M Spain in order to denounce the economic and political agents that caused the economic 'crisis' and imposed austerity measures affecting all public sectors. According to their own description, maroon – the colour of passports – becomes a symbol of their '*emigración forzada*' or 'forced emigration'. This particular 'tide' defines itself as a 'transnational and non-partisan collective formed by emigrants

from Spain'. Their objective is to contribute, from abroad, to the struggle of the new social movements that have developed within Spain's borders, especially since 2011 (Marea Granate 2015).

It is clear that the existence of such collectives is a reaction to a series of political developments that have had a negative effect on social and economic life. In order to understand the full extent of this phenomenon, it is important to realise that, on the whole, Spanish culture is characterised by close familial ties, links that limit citizens' desire to move away from their hometowns (González Enriquez 2013). The use of the term '*emigración forzada*' or 'forced emigration', mentioned above, is also better understood from this perspective – as a political critique that focuses on the unwillingness of citizens to put themselves and their families through the dramatic and life-changing effects of migration. As a result, the political and the familial become intrinsically connected.

Furthermore, Spain's recent history plays an important part in the collective understanding of migration, which is by no means a new phenomenon for its citizens. Indeed, the most significant phase of Spanish migration took place in the 1950s and 1960s, when individuals and entire families sought a better life abroad, escaping the repression of Franco's dictatorship, rising unemployment rates and a stagnant national economy. According to Torres (2009), in 1965 there were 3.5 million Spanish migrants living and working abroad, which equalled 10% of the Spanish population at that time. Although the social, political and economic context has changed since

Franco's era, this historical background still provides an important point of reference for the Spanish population. The individual and collective memories of those who migrated, accompanied by media references to the earlier period, provide an enduring framework for the formation of present-day identities, and for understanding the conditions of contemporary migrations when compared to those that took place in the past. Those conditions are not merely concerned with the fact that the socio-political context is now different, but also take into account that contemporary migrants usually have qualifications, training and language skills that were very rare amongst the working classes fifty years ago.

Another key aspect that emerges when considering the differences between past and contemporary migrations is the role of technology: social media and mobile communication allow migrants and their families to stay in touch more easily and comprehensively than was previously the case. Previous studies of diasporic communities and the use of new technologies have mainly focused on long-term, non-European migrants, such as those coming from Trinidad and Philippines, who leave their families to work abroad and send money back home (Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Madianou and Miller 2012; Miller and Slater 2000). Their uses of new technologies are mainly motivated by a need to keep in touch with their children and other relatives, and to send remittances (Madianou and Miller 2012). However, current migrations from Spain seem to be defined by a transitory nature, since the objective is usually to return home when job opportunities become available. Moreover, contemporary Spanish migrants do not

normally work abroad in order to maintain the families they have left behind. Instead, their motivation is to find a source of income in order to make a living and to gain work experience while they are away, until the economic situation improves in the home country. Therefore, in the case of Spanish migrants, new technologies serve the purpose of allowing families to maintain their relationships and commitments, while also helping migrants deal with their feelings of being uprooted from their communities (Ramírez Martínez 2014). Modern forms of communication enable migrants to follow the latest news from and about their home country, watch television programmes, and find groups of migrants in the host country who share the same culture and frames of reference. These technological advances can also act as determining factors in the decision-making process, when individuals decide whether to migrate or not. It is not unusual for older generations to make comparisons and point out that, thanks to the new means of transport and communication, the whole experience is now 'easier' than it was 'in their own times'.

Taking into account the particular character of Spanish cultural values and familial relations, which play a crucial role in the ways in which the eventual return home is imagined (King and Christou 2008), it is important to test the claim that digital technologies, such as social media, have a significant impact on migrant communities, their communicative practices and their cultural identities. The default assumption would seem to be that the Facebook groups '*Españoles en...*' play a role in the process of community-building abroad and in the transformation of the experience of

migration, by providing new tools of communication that help make the migrant experience of disconnection and absence more bearable, and the challenge of separation from familial and cultural roots less difficult. Indeed, these Facebook groups tend to describe themselves as promoters of activities and events for Spanish people living in a particular city, and as providers of help for fellow Spaniards who need assistance or have questions about life in their host country. However, these assumptions are problematized in light of the emergence of community divisions, rooted in a variety of socio-political stances, nationalisms and the different regional cultural identities that exist in Spain.

Method

The questionnaire was distributed through Facebook groups ('*Españoles en...*') run by and for Spanish people living in specific foreign towns and cities, including Glasgow, Leicester and London (UK), Marseille, Nantes and Paris (France), and Berlin, Hamburg and Nuremberg (Germany). Users of the Facebook groups were invited to complete the survey, which includes both quantitative and qualitative questions. The discussion is based on the responses of a sample of 309 Spanish migrants, distributed by age as follows: 3.88% were 18–21 years old; 29.45% were 22–25 years old; 31.39% were 26–30 years old; 15.86% were 31–35 years old; 12.62% were 36–40; and 6.79% were 41–50 years old. None of the surveyed migrants were 51 or older.

In addition, 4.85% of the participants had completed their studies up to *Secundaria* or equivalent level (comparable to GCSEs), 11.97% had studied up to *Bachillerato* or equivalent

(comparable to A Levels), 53.73% had finished their first degrees (*Diplomatura*, *Licenciatura*, *Grado* or equivalent), 22.66% had completed a Masters degree, and 5.82% had a Doctorate. Only 0.97% reported not having any formal qualifications. Of those who had studied up to *Bachillerato* or equivalent level, 32% pointed out that they were engaged in further studies at the time of taking the survey.

This distribution of participants begins to point to the variety of backgrounds that make up the fabric of a hypothetical migrant 'community', in which individual experiences of migration are determined by a number of factors that include – but are not limited to – the use of, and participation in, social media. Whilst generally motivated by a common goal – essentially, as noted above, to make a living – the data indicates that this is a heterogeneous group of persons, in the sense that it begins from a diverse set of circumstances (such as professional qualifications, language skills, financial backing, and so on), holds a variety of expectations, and looks for a diversity of opportunities.

Preparing to Migrate

In order to gain further insight into the process through which participants made the decision to migrate to their chosen destinations, respondents were asked to state whether they already had any relatives or friends living in their host country. Just over half of the respondents – 51.45% – answered that they did, with some of them stating how important this was in the process of planning their strategies. For example, one participant recalled: 'I arrived on my own, without a job or accommodation. I

only stayed at friend's house for five days, and then I moved to a house that I found'. In fact, only 36.89% of the whole sample had secured a job before arriving at their chosen destination, and only 35.92% had already found accommodation. For other migrants, the arrival was more structured, either because they were following their partners, who already had a job there and had settled in, or because their occupations included accommodation (as in the case of au pairs and University students).

In addition, the data indicates that the existence of Facebook groups for Spanish people in various foreign cities plays only a *modest* part in the migrant's preparations before travelling: only 35.92% reported having checked the Facebook group 'Españoles en...' in their chosen city, and an even smaller number – 14.56% – used the facility to ask questions prior to their arrival. In addition, a much smaller number of participants, 6.79%, stated that they had also checked similar Facebook groups in other cities as part of their decision-making process.

Although the number is very small, it is worth noting that 6.79% of migrants who participated in the survey reported that none of the variables included in the question applied to them. In other words, these individuals had arrived in their chosen destination with no relatives or friends in the city, with no job or a place to stay, and without having used Facebook as a tool to make contact with compatriots. As one participant put it, 'the truth is that I arrived without rhyme or reason, without having a clue about what I might find'.

Facebook groups, migration and community-building

Participants were asked to assess the extent to which they agreed with a number of statements, each of which was intended to measure the perceptions of the migrants' experiences of the availability of communication forms. There was an overall consensus amongst participants, when asked to assess the extent to which the experience of migration had become more bearable for them, in comparison to the testimonies of older generations that were compelled to leave Spain in the 1960s. A combined total of 97.42% of participants either 'completely agreed' (59.88%) or 'agreed' (37.54%) that migration had become more bearable thanks to the media, and a total of 94.51% either 'completely agreed' (54.06%) or 'agreed' (40.45%) that there was an improvement in their experience thanks to the availability of improved means of transport (such as frequent flights). However, when participants were asked to reflect, more specifically, on the role of social media in making the migration experience easier, a combined total of 73.79% either 'completely agreed' (30.74%) or 'agreed' (43.05%) with the statement. While the response is still predominantly positive, not only is the overall level of agreement reduced when compared to the more general questions mentioned above, but the option to 'completely' agree with the statement also becomes less prevalent. Moreover, it must be noted that a combined total of 18.77% either 'disagreed' (16.18%) or 'completely disagreed' (2.59%) with the suggestion that social media made the experience of migration any easier, while 7.44% reported that they did not know what to respond.

The data indicates further decreases in the level of positive perceptions of social media when respondents are faced with more specific questions. So, when participants were asked whether they found the Facebook group '*Españoles en...*' useful for asking questions and obtaining information, 22.33% 'completely agreed' and 59.55% 'agreed', giving a combined total of 81.88%. The decrease is less obvious here if we consider the total sum of positive responses, but the fact that the majority of participants chose to 'agree' rather than 'completely agree' suggests that the overall feeling towards the Facebook group is less certain than that revealed in responses to the first two statements (in which the majority of respondents chose to 'completely agree').

This downward trend is clearer when participants are asked to consider the extent to which the Facebook group is useful for making friends. Approximately half of the respondents stated that they 'completely agreed' (13.27%) or 'agreed' (39.49%) that this is a tool that enables members to develop new friendships. Although 12.62% answered that they did not know how to respond, more significant is the fact that 31.71% of participants 'disagreed' and 4.21% 'completely disagreed' that the Facebook facility enabled migrants to make friends in their new city of residence. In this respect, some participants commented that the Facebook site of which they are members is not so much a 'place' to make friends as a 'noticeboard for messages advertising things, which are not useful'.

With a view to contextualising the latter statement in relation to the migrants' perception of how close they are to other Spanish people who live in the

same city, participants were asked to express their level of agreement with the idea that being outside Spain makes the Spanish migrant community more cohesive. Once again, the majority of participants 'completely agreed' (25.57%) or 'agreed' (29.78%) with the statement (adding up to a combined total of 55.35%), but the number of participants who 'disagreed' (29.78%) or 'completely disagreed' (7.12%) is also substantial, providing a combined total of 36.9% of those surveyed. For some participants, there is, in fact, a strategic reason not to develop friendships with other Spanish people. As one participant put it succinctly, 'all support is good when you leave home, but if the reason why you left is the language and the culture, then there is no point in surrounding yourself with Spaniards'.

A Migrant Community?

In order to examine the latter point further, the survey required participants to answer two related questions: first, they were asked to state whether they felt that they are part of a community of Spaniards abroad; and, second, they were required to assess the role that the Facebook group plays in this hypothetical or 'imagined' (Anderson 1991) community (see following section). On the first point, more than half (56.96%) considered that they did not feel part of a Spanish community in their place of residence. According to the participants' responses, reasons for this prevalent sentiment are varied, but can be summarised in three key points: (1) the importance given to one's immersion in the host country's culture, and to the opportunity to learn the language; (2) the advantage seen in being in contact with a broader array of nationalities; and (3)

the limited worth of being acquainted with specific groups or individuals simply because they are Spanish. Several participants reported having Spanish friends, but also native ones. So, for instance, one respondent stated that

I do not actively isolate myself from Spaniards, but I do try to fit into the British society, at least in my neighbourhood, and to meet people with other nationalities. To be in a Spanish community, I might as well stay in Spain. This doesn't mean I have no Spanish friends. The homeland pulls, a lot!

Furthermore, some participants pointed out that the act of providing assistance is not exclusively reserved to one's compatriots, insofar as native citizens can also help migrants. One respondent, for example, explained that they barely have any Spanish friends, 'as most of them are German and they help me a lot to get used to life here'. Another participant emphasised that it was never his or her

intention to be part of a Spanish community. I have Spanish friends, but most of my relationships are with natives. I don't think that you have to get along with people just because you are from the same country. It happens here just as it does back in Spain: you connect with some people, and with others you don't, regardless of where they come from.

Despite the emergence of these observations regarding non-Spanish nationalities, the survey responses also include comments that hint at the heterogeneity of the 'Spanish identity' in relation to various internal regionalisms

and nationalisms. So, for example, one participant stated that the Spanish 'community' of which he is part is, in fact, a group of friends that came from his own hometown and region. It remains unclear whether, in the case of this migrant, the arrangement of his group of friends was the result of a conscious process of selection, or whether it was simply coincidental. From another perspective, one migrant reflected on the question of internal nationalisms, stating that 'it's funny, because I am pro-independence [presumably from Catalonia], but here, we are all the same. In fact, I am one of the creators of a Facebook site for Spanish people'. Therefore, according to these testimonies, the composition of the migrants' social capital (Bourdieu 1986) is not only fairly diverse in terms of regional, national and cultural backgrounds, but also appears to be formed predominantly offline.

A Migrant Community Online?

When participants were asked to assess the role that the Facebook group plays in the process of building this hypothetical 'community' of Spaniards, only 6.15% stated that they thought that the Facebook group plays an essential role in the formation and maintenance of this community. The majority of participants (68.28%) believed that the group is important to some extent, but is not essential. The number of respondents who rejected the idea, stating that communities are formed in other ways, was significant at 25.57%. In light of the comments discussed in relation to the previous point, it is not surprising that the overall perception of the Facebook group as a community-building platform

presents an important degree of scepticism.

While some participants pointed out that, in their groups, they use the group to 'arrange opportunities to meet, be together and talk about our experiences', others insisted on the online-offline divide in terms of forming a community through the online facility. So, for example, one migrant stated that 'generally, group members are kind and if you ask anything, they try to help. However, when it comes to the crunch, you are actually on your own'. On a similar note, another wrote that he or she thinks that 'it would be important for the friendliness we display online to spill over to the physical world, so we also help people who are in our same position and need assistance'.

The split between the online and offline realms in constituting a Spanish community of migrants is further reflected in the argument that the community actually takes place in the physical world. In this respect, one respondent emphasised that, for him or her, social relations take place with those who are part of the daily routines: 'I mix with people in my work and social environment. I do not make an effort to mix with Spanish people. There are barely any Spaniards in my work and social environment'. There are also examples of participants who, despite the fact that they are members of the Facebook group – and therefore receive daily updates about group announcements and activities in their news feeds – state that they have met no Spanish people since they arrived in their host country. The underlying argument is also true for those who do mix with Spanish people, as illustrated by the migrant who stated that 'I feel that

I am part of a Spanish community because I live with several Spaniards and I mix with other Spanish people regularly'.

Furthermore, some migrants point out that the existence of an online facility does not resolve the schisms that exist amongst Spaniards (or, for that matter, amongst the members of any other community):

Although it provides you with a facility that can help you resolve certain issues, the current problems in Spain make many people feel that they are not part of a group, and this is also true for people who come abroad. Besides *paella* and Spanish omelette, I don't feel as though I have anything in common with 90% of the members of the group '*Españoles en Londres*'. Certainly, there is nothing I cannot share with people from here or from other countries.

The data also suggests that, to a great extent, the real possibilities for community-building offered by the Facebook sites do not depend so much on the tool itself, but on the uses that members make of it. For instance, some migrants admitted that they visit the site to check if there is anything useful to them, or as a leisure activity in itself. One participant said: 'I am in the Facebook group and I mainly use it as a source of entertainment. Some of the comments that people post are funny. But then, other people think the group is Google. Those people... uffff'. This participant also referred to the arguments and controversies that sometimes develop in the group, which he or she thought were entertaining. Along the same lines, another respondent commented that 'I

use it to look at buy-sell announcements, and to laugh at people's funny comments. But I do not see it as a way of meeting people. You sometimes read useful stuff, but this is not my main source of information'.

The remaining survey questions were aimed at further deconstructing the participants' notion of community in the context of migration and in relation to the opportunities offered by social media. Departing from the observation that clashes sometimes arise amongst members of the Facebook group, participants were asked why they thought that these conflicts emerged. To gather the data, seven statements were presented as possible explanations, with an additional option to state that, in their opinion, none of the statements explain these disputes (an option that was only chosen by 1.94% of the respondents). Surveyed migrants were able to choose as many options as necessary to express their opinion, leading to the distribution shown in Table 1.

The data suggests that a significant number of migrants blame trolls (31.07%) and political differences (21.36%) for these clashes. One participant, for example, claimed that 'it seems that some people would do anything, even pay money, to create controversy', while another pointed out that 'people's backgrounds and profiles show vast differences between different people. For example, there are several religious or patriotic comments with which I do not agree at all'. However, despite the nature of many arguments and comments posted by users within the Facebook group, only a small proportion of participants admitted that the disagreements had patriotic undertones, either because 'excessive'

exaltation of the fatherland is seen as a problem (14.56%), or because of the opposite stance, in which various national drawbacks, expressing shame, are brought into conversations – an attitude that is seen as problematic to a lesser extent (6.80%), according to this survey. The latter viewpoint is also partly reflected in the statement – characterised by a self-deprecating nuance – that 'we, Spanish people, are always like that. We never agree on anything' (17.47%). In other cases, however, the problem is found more specifically in individual behaviours, which may be explained, as one respondent put it, by the 'very different backgrounds and profiles' of group members, or by sheer 'lack of respect'. Another participant was more blunt in his or her own analysis:

The discordant group is usually also the same that gets offended easily by any little thing and thinks that every message in the group is related to them, either because they have serious self-esteem issues, or because they are bored, or because they lack some intellectual ability. These people are also the same ones that ask questions that they could easily answer themselves by searching on Google. Like, opening hours of a specific shop in a specific street. Google it! And then, these are the ones that cannot have a civilised conversation. Coincidence?

While these figures shed light on the variety of viewpoints that exist within the group, regarding their perception of the cohesiveness or otherwise of these online communities, the survey results indicate that there is a stronger consensus when the characterisation of

the online group as a community is challenged. This challenge has to be understood at two levels: first, at the level of it being an 'online' community, insofar as 52.42% of participants stated that 'in reality, we are not a community. We are only Spanish people who happen to live in the same city'; and second, at the level of it being a community abroad, insofar as 65.05% of participants noted that these differences of opinion would also arise if they were in Spain.

Having identified this lukewarm perception of the Facebook group as a community-building tool, the question that follows is concerned with its functionality in a broader sense. Participants were asked to choose as many statements as necessary to record the ways in which the Facebook group had helped them as individuals. Response rates indicate that the majority of group members regard the Facebook page solely or mainly in utilitarian terms, as 61.16% reported that they use it to obtain information about new opportunities. While some participants are cautious about the accuracy of the information provided, the discussions seem to be valued positively by a significant proportion of respondents. However, these opportunities become problematic when personal financial interests are identified, particularly when the migrants' sense of nostalgia and need to connect with their Spanish culture, are used for commercial purposes. As this participant put it: 'there is too much financial interest: I bring oranges from Valencia, we do house moves, come to my bar because I play Spanish music... *'Españoles en Marsella'* is practically a business-oriented group, more than anything else'.

To a lesser extent, migrants find the group useful because it makes them feel less lonely in a foreign country (22.33%) and to adapt better to the host country (21.36%). According to this survey, in 10.68% of cases, the existence of, and participation in, the Facebook group had encouraged users to decide to stay abroad. This is illustrated by the response provided by a migrant, who explained that the site had enabled her to 'realise that, if so many people can go abroad and find their way, I can do it too. And I must say, the nice 10% that I have met, has helped to feel less lonely'.

Meanwhile, only 3.88% answered that the Facebook group had made them value their country and their compatriots more. As a final point to note in relation to this particular question, it is significant that 16.50% of the respondents stated that none of the options given described the ways in which the Facebook group had helped them. One participant, for instance, explained that he or she had arrived in Britain before Facebook came into existence, so it has never helped them. Another respondent wrote that he or she did not choose any options because 'the site does not fulfil its purpose'.

Participants were asked to describe which factors are the most important in their notion of 'community' within this context. They were allowed to choose as many answers as necessary to express their views, which can be summarised as follows: helping or advising others (76.70%) and being helped or advised by others (64.08%) were, by far, the most frequent responses, thereby emphasising the functional or utilitarian nature of the group as perceived by its users. One participant stated that 'an online page can never fill the void that you feel when

you are abroad on your own, although it is true that it can help with job searches thanks to people who upload messages and provide details'. However, traditional ways of making friends and building communities – which, as suggested by a quarter of the participants, are formed offline (see above) – only appear in third place (32.04% considered going out and participating in activities that are done in person as a key factor). Indeed, only one participant added a comment to state that, according to him or her, the 'community' is about 'organising a meetup, having some beers, and meeting some Spaniards'. Getting on well with the rest of the group (20.38%) and being able to communicate online, even if they have not previously met in person (17.48%) appear in fourth and fifth place in the migrants' order of importance, with an additional 3.88% stating that none of these factors are important to them. Some comments suggested that the point is not whether it happens 'online or face-to-face', but the very fact that it happens:

The link that makes us a community is based on the fact that we help one another. I don't think that groups created on social media achieve it 100%, but until something does achieve it, this is the best tool we have to express and listen to opinions, find help and, when you have more experience, assist others.

Conclusion

At a time when the effects of austerity measures continue to be felt across the European Union, more people are making the decision to migrate and find employment abroad. In countries where

the existence of strong familial ties is one of the key cultural cornerstones, social media can provide useful tools to facilitate both the maintenance of existing connections back home and the establishment of new ones with fellow migrants in the host country.

In this context, the results of this pilot study shed light on the relative usefulness of online groups to form communities in the context of migration and austerity, according to the perceptions that group members have of these tools. Even though the analysed Facebook pages define themselves as sites in which Spaniards can get in touch, meet, share relevant news stories and help each other, the findings present a much varied picture and suggest that the original purpose of these tools does not necessarily materialise in the formation of communities of Spanish people in particular cities.

Focusing on the specific case of Spanish migrants in the European Union, the discussion has also considered the extent to which Spanish culture and history shape these perceptions and attitudes, as well the value attached to the existence of the '*Españoles en...*' groups as community-building tools. Even though the circumstances of all concerned individuals are defined by the migratory experience, and are partly shaped up by the availability of media forms such as social media, the statistics suggest that the development of a sense of community is not necessarily decided by the fact that the migrants come from the same country, speak the same language and share the same cultural values. Neither does the existence of a tool that enables them to 'gather' online work as a determining factor in terms of community-building.

In fact, the findings suggest that the migrants' individual backgrounds and experiences, including their political stances, skills, socio-economic circumstances, and regional affiliations, seem to play a more important role in shaping their individual conceptions of the online 'community', than any broader assumptions made about unitary national identity, which does not exist. This diversity of personal interests and

goals also seems to be more influential than the role of technology, which may be used – to different extents – for a variety of purposes (such as providing and asking for information, meeting new people, promoting services and selling or buying items, and discussing certain issues), which are not generally perceived as decisive factors in the development of a sense of community.

Clashes sometimes arise in the Facebook group. Why do you think this is? (Choose all the answers that apply)	
We, Spanish people, are always like that. We never agree on anything	17.47%
Some people are too proud to be Spanish	14.56%
Some people seem to be ashamed of being Spanish	6.80%
There are political conflicts	21.36%
There are too many trolls in the group	31.07%
In reality, we are not a community. We are only Spanish people who happen to live in the same city	52.42%
They are differences of opinion that would also arise if we were in Spain	65.05%
None of the above	1.94%

Table 1.

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