

How do social technologies affect relationships between Brazilians living abroad and their families back home.



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Abstract: Due to increased migration the number of people living outside of their country of birth is bigger than ever before. As a result, more families exist whereby the members are spread over the world. However, there is little research done about how new forms of media and communication affect these transnational relationships. This research aims to answer this question via semi structured interviews with Brazilians living abroad to enquire how developments in communication technology have changed their relationship with family back home. This study explores how these technological developments can create new forms of intimacy and connectedness, and how families maintain their social bonds over long distances. Additionally, this research will address the specific case of how the use of WhatsApp during the 2018 elections has impacted communications between Brazilians abroad and their families back home as a result of increased political polarization. In doing so this study concludes that Brazilians abroad employ a series of different approaches to communication with those back home with differing political views, the most notable of which include rebuttal, avoidance and the breaking of contact.

Keywords: communication, politics, social media, social technologies, transnational families

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Introduction

Migration is one of humanities most ancient endeavors, since the very beginning of our species humans have been migratory (Hervella et al., 2016). As advancements in technologies have permitted humans to move farther and faster so too has migration steadily increased. According to reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), migrants make up 3.6% of world population, which comes out to 281 million people, both these numbers are the highest they have on record and also represent an increase of around 80 million since the turn of the century (International Organization for Migration, 2019). This increased worldwide interconnectedness has led to the creation of transnational families, which are families that are interconnected despite living in different geographical locations (Bryceson, 2019), despite this not being a recent phenomenon these families are more numerous now than ever. Diaspora studies have aided in the exploration of these new social relations, but due to rapid advancements in social technologies there is more to be learned about how these new technologies lead to new ways of creating and maintaining familial social bonds (Sahoo, 2019). To combine those two aspects my research question is: *How do social technologies affect social relationships between Brazilians living abroad and their families back home.*

As the 6th most populous nation in the world Brazil also possesses one of the biggest populations of people living abroad. Over 4 million Brazilians currently live outside of their home country (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2021). This number has steadily been rising over the past 10 years, but has seen a sharper uptake in the past 5 years as a result of political turmoil in the country following the impeachment of then president Dilma. One of the most common ways by which Brazilians abroad maintain their transnational relationships is through the use of social media, WhatsApp in particular is a medium which holds significant importance for communications for Brazilians. The application has a userbase of over 120 million users and is used by 93% of Brazilians smart phone owners on a daily basis (Pereira, Bojczuk & Parks, 2020). This platform has enabled a higher level of connectivity between Brazilians and their families abroad. Despite WhatsApp being marketed primarily as a peer-to-peer messaging service, it is used somewhat differently by Brazilians. Communications via WhatsApp take place primarily through many different groups, all of which have different purposes and participants such as family, co-workers, church friends, but also groups

dedicated to social activism, religion, sports, and other issues. During the 2018 presidential elections this way of use was exploited illegally through a scheme of bulk messaging whereby some candidates took advantage of the large number of groups to spread fake news and conspiracy theories about their political opponents. Because of the level of digital development in Brazil many citizens use WhatsApp as a primary source of information, and often don't have the resources to verify the veracity of the content they receive (Mello, 2019). As a result, a lot of distrust emerged surrounding the platform and led to conflict among citizens, as they argued the veracity of the messages. Although research has been done in Brazil on the effects of the spreading of fake news there has been insufficient exploration of how this has affected citizens abroad, who utilize the same social media platforms as those back home, and how that has affected their relationships with their families back home.

Migration is a multifaceted phenomenon which is complex and influences the lives of many people around the globe. Globalization along with developments in communication technology have altered the way families can stay in contact even when separated by national border. This research aims to combine insights from diaspora studies related to the maintenance of family relationships at a distance and combine those with studies on contentious politics within families. By combining insights from these different bodies of literature the goal is to be able to shed light into the way family relationships are done (and intimacies and conflicts are handled) through modern communication technologies. In the literature review these bodies of work will be thoroughly explored and set out, with the intent of both exploring the current literature as well as showing how the focus on media studies can aid into gaining new insights. After discussing the literature, the methodology of the research will be set out. Lastly the result shall be discussed and a conclusion shall be drawn regarding the research question.

Theoretical Framework

Transnational families

The growing trends in global connectivity have given migrants more opportunities to connect with their families and friends back home. The surge in accessibility of mobile devices and the growing number of social media platforms have changed the way transitional relationships are formed and developed. Due to their instant nature, many of these platforms have changed the way space can be perceived in transnational relationships (Marlowe & Bruns, 2021). Instead of having to wait for long periods for physical forms of correspondence migrants can now instantaneously message their relatives abroad, and can now often even look at them through video calls. This has in some ways decreased the emotional distance many migrants often felt to be one of the main challenges of moving abroad. Even though a physical reunion might still be impossible, social media can provide alternative forms of unification, and can help maintain intimacy and strengthening relationship with family in the country of origin (Marlowe & Bruns, 2021). Unlike migration in previous centuries, when leaving one country often meant never coming back and having limited contact with family (Moberg, 1951), developments in transportation and communication have afforded migrants with a multitude of ways of maintaining familial contact, transnational family coherence and nurturing emotional connections (Bryceson, 2019).

Traditional positivist social science has often treated the outcome of migration as being part of an individual decision-making process, in doing so the family strategy and family group decision making that takes place was often overlooked (Epstein & Gang, 2006). Immigrants are often not only thinking of themselves and how migration will affect their lives when making migration decisions, they also take other factors into consideration such as material and emotional needs (Bryceson, 2019). Transnational families are not new, but as a result of surging migration they are more frequently occurring. Transnational families are evolving forms of human interdependence, which provide emotional and material support for members in different geographical areas (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002). Additionally, family is often cited by migrants as one of the driving factors for migrating, as providing financially for their families is many times the driver behind moving abroad (de Jong et al., 1985).

Many migrants harbor a sense of obligation towards their family and feel a need to care for those back at home. This care however does not only have a material dimension but can have an affective dimension as well, 'family care regimes' involve the day-to-day process of nurturing and care for family members and their support roles during different stages of life (Bryceson, 2019). These regimes are not exclusive to transnational families, however these families experience greater challenges in this process due to the geographical distances between members. Maintaining these care regimes are then one of the difficulties which have been made less strenuous as a result of the developments in communication media and technologies, as they have allowed family members in different geographical locations to play more meaningful care roles while in a different country (Baldassar & Merla, 2013). Innovations like video calls have made it more accessible for family members abroad to keep in touch and provide emotional support and advice to those back home, allowing for a better maintenance of the emotional care regimes within the family (Schröder-Butterfill, & Schonheinz, 2019).

Social technologies and communication with home

Social technologies allow transnational families to maintain connection with each other, and can be used as a resource to strengthen family bonds. In the meantime, some scholars emphasize that social technology can also add complexity to the family dynamics and relationships within the family by adding new behaviours and contexts across multiple platforms (Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman, 2008). Social technology has characteristics which can potentially facilitate aspects which are connected to family closeness, and thus increase connectedness among family members. Social media technologies can aid and facilitate communication between family members, and create a more direct bond between them, furthermore these technologies possess potential to always be connected across space and time (Williams & Merten, 2011). The use of these technologies however can vary and are specific to the families which use them and to how they operate within their family system. The way in which different family members experience feelings of connectedness is also an important factor to consider and can also vary between members of the same family.

Literature shows how these opportunities to participate in a more active way in the lives of loved ones back home can improve the sense of belonging for those living apart from their families. These social media platforms present opportunities to participate in a so called 'absent presence', where someone's physical presence is absent, but emotional presence can

still be felt through audio-, video-, and text-based communications (Gillespie, Osseiran & Cheesman 2018). This 'absent presence' can help foster a sustained sense of belonging in their relationships with family and friends in their country of origin. When looked at this way these new developments can also be seen as a digital life line, which can help immigrants when physical reunion is impossible (Gillespie et al., 2018). Some scholars have also emphasized that these social technologies can also have downsides, this can be observed in the fact that maintaining these connections can be draining. Having to uphold these online connections in addition to their offline connections individuals can feel emotionally and physically tired. This is referred to as 'digital care labour', when individuals perform too much of that labour it can lead to feelings of guilt, as they seek for a break (Gillespie et al., 2018). In addition to this being more connected to family back home can potentially lead to feelings of powerlessness, as they gain information about potential conflict or danger, but are unable to do something about it.

Social technologies can also be a form of identity construction for those living abroad, by engaging not only family back home but fellow immigrants they can make use of their shared language as a means of constructing their identities as migrants. While the construction of migrant identities is often framed around the tension between their old and new homes social media then gives migrants an opportunity to explore a third space, in between both countries (Chang & Chang, 2019), thus giving more nuance and complexities to their identities through sociolinguistics. Research has shown that by communicating with others from the same country, whether they live abroad or not, migrants can explore emotional and culturally specific aspects of living abroad, as well as reinforcing aspects of the culture from their home country (Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Because of the way in which social technologies are currently set up they allow for the forming of communities of people regardless of the physical distance between them. This lends itself to the fostering of relationships of people who share a common language, cultural background or life experiences. By interacting with each other user of these platforms can then build communities and construe nuanced identities regarding themselves and their experiences. Migrant communities are interesting in this respect as their interactions are often not limited to a single language, but are instead multilingual, consisting most often of both their mother tongue as well as the language of the country they have moved to (Lyons and Tagg, 2019). This multilingual approach sets these communities apart from others and gives insights into the importance of language and communication in the process of community and identity forming.

Long distance feuds

Communication however does not always mean agreement, especially when it comes to politics. Research shows that one of the key disagreements between family members tend to be regarding different political opinions (Warner, Colaner & Park, 2021). Family relationships are not easily dissolved or broken, and as a result it becomes important for members within that relationship to navigate these differences in opinion. Differences in political opinions are also some of the most divisive differences within social relationships, as they are most often associated with hostile feelings towards those who do not share the same opinions (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). These heightened feelings of hostility combined with the entanglement of familial relationships mean that the communication between family members becomes a key aspect when navigating political differences in opinion.

Navigating these delicate situations becomes an even bigger tasks for migrants living abroad, as their geographical distance to other family members means that they do not have all the communication tools available to them. Having to rely on social technologies for communication means that some they cannot talk face-to-face which hinders the communication which happens via body language (Harwood, Soliz & Lin, 2006). Another aspect which can hamper political discussion between migrants and their families back home is the non-validation of opinions. Due to the geographically bound nature of politics opinions of migrants away from home are often dismissed due to the fact that they are not 'really here to know what is happening'. This can lead to frustration and in turn widen gaps in relationships between family members (Warner, Colaner & Park, 2021). Political disagreements can also lead to a complete breakdown in communications, family members may try to completely avoid political conversations with their family members, thus putting a strain of family dialog and ultimately negatively affecting the relationship between family members (Oliphant, 2018).

One recent trend which has also negatively impacted the conversations between those who disagree politically is increased polarization. Trends among millennials indicate that they lean towards more progressive attitudes on topics such as the environment, finances and social policies (Pew Research Center, 2018). When paired with the fact that young adults are increasingly supporting values which differ from their collective family values this leads to differences in beliefs amongst different generations, leading to troublesome communication between both groups (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Rising political polarization is however not an

issue that plays only in relationships between family members, it has also more widely affected social relationships. Political polarization has been defined as a rise in the difference between how people view the difference between those who align with their political views and those who do not (Mason, 2018). The trends also show that this gap has steadily been increasing, leading to stronger feelings of dislike for those that disagree with each other's political views (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

This heightened animosity is increasingly damaging to those relationships which are non-negotiable, like those between family members. The result of those repeated negative interactions is that relationships can become less resilient over time as political disagreements can become quite personal and at times disrespectful. Another possible negative effect is that people often withdraw or avoid conversations with those who they disagree with, leading to an altogether breakdown of relationships (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018). When combined with heightened polarization between generations it becomes clear to grasp how heightened polarization erodes and jeopardizes relationships between family members with different political views. To understand how families navigate these relational difficulties we must understand which techniques of communications they use to explore their differences. As a result of the long-term nature of family relationships and the difficulty involved in breaking them off, they must find a way to navigate them through effective communication (Soliz, & Rittenour, 2012).

Methodology

To collect data for this research, 10 in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with Brazilian Living in The Netherlands. This method was chosen because it fits well with the research question, the research question is descriptive in nature and by using in-depth interviews, respondents can explain their experiences in more detail (Babbie, 2014). As a result, more depth can be achieved during the research, so that the main question can be answered more thoroughly. Prior to the interviews, a topic list was drawn up that served as the basis for the interview, incorporating themes that appear to be relevant from the literature (Babbie, 2014). This is in line with the grounded theory of case studies. The grounded theory method is used in the absence of a hypothesis, this is in line with the exploratory nature of this research question. (Babbie, 2014). To ensure the success of this approach it is critical to follow a few guidelines such as comparative thinking, periodically stepping back and maintaining an attitude of skepticism. Grounded theory however is not without its disadvantages, as it often creates large amounts of data which can be difficult to manage, also there are no standard rules to follow for the identification of categories, so results are often left to the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Data collection

The sample for the interviews consists of Brazilians living in The Netherlands. Because this group is specifically the target group of the study, the previously mentioned categories are essential to be able to participate in the interviews. During the recruitment process, the aim has been to find a distribution among respondents so that external factors do not influence the answer to the question. Brazil is a large nation with many different regions, all of which have different cultural values and customs. To better represent this variety within my sample I have interviewed Brazilians hailing from numerous regions within Brazil. By representing the different regions of Brazil within my sample the aim is to paint a complete and more accurate picture of what happened across Brazil and the possible differences or similarities which can be found throughout the country. Furthermore, there has been an emphasis on selecting participants who have lived abroad for different lengths of time. By diversifying the lengths of time that the interviewees have been abroad the goal is to diversify the range of experiences

of the respondents as well as reach different demographics within the community. This manner of sampling is called purposeful sampling, whereby participants are selected on the basis that they have characteristics that are necessary for the research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Data analysis

The ATLAS.ti program was used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews. The transcribed interviews were uploaded to this programme, after which they were coded using primary and secondary codes. Coding has taken place in three steps, first open coding, followed by axial coding and lastly selectively coding. The coding process underwent these steps with the aim of refining the codes and categorizing the information. This is done to better understand the respondents' answers and to place them within the conceptual framework (Babbie, 2014). The coding took place in an inductive manner because no codebook was drawn up prior to the interviews, in accordance to grounded theory.

Reliability and validity

A number of strategies were used to ensure reliability and validity. Firstly, ecological validity was used, which means that respondents and interviewer agree on which setting is most comfortable to conduct the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This could include, for example, holding the interview online, or in a neutral location, to make it as pleasant as possible for the respondent. In addition, construct validity was used. The interviews are also recorded, allowing the researcher to check the transcripts for errors (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Construct validity was ensured through accurate formulation of the questions in the topic list. As a result, the questions are a more accurate reflection of the constructs to be measured from the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Some validity is lost however due to the lack of a second researcher to analyze the codes. By having more researchers critically analyze the data Inter-coder reliability can be achieved which heightens the validity of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Ethics and Privacy

It is also important to handle the data obtained from the respondents in an ethically responsible manner. To guarantee the privacy of the interviewee, pseudonyms have been used in the results section, so that possible quotes cannot be traced back to the interviewee

(Babbie, 2014). Informed consent forms were also used prior to the interview so that respondents are informed of what will happen with their data and personal information. In addition, the option always exists for the respondents to close the interview if they do not feel comfortable with the content of the questions asked. Communicating this information clearly is important as it contributes to creating a safe and open interview environment (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012). Participants were also notified that their interview was being recorded. Additionally, all data such as audio files and transcripts are only be accessible to the researcher, and these data files will be deleted upon termination of the research process. By following these procedures, data collection can happen ethically and with respect for the interviewees (Babbie, 2014).

Sample description

The sample of interviewees is composed of 10 Brazilians who live in the Netherlands. The sample consists of eight women and two men. The interviewees have been selected on the basis of how long they have lived abroad, for this sample this ranges between two years and twenty years. Other than their nationality their length of time abroad was a key factor for selecting participants, this selection of participants on the basis of having the necessary characteristics for the research fall under purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Results

To answer the research question *How do social technologies affect relationships between Brazilians living abroad and their families back home* interviews were conducted with a group of respondents consists of 10 Brazilians aged 21 to 45. A purposeful choice was made to include such an age gap with the intent of gaining a wider understanding of different issues which may affect different age groups. The length of time they have lived abroad varies from 2 to 20 years, and some respondents have experience living abroad in multiple countries. The amount of time lived abroad was also considered when selecting participants to gain an in depth understanding on how the issues surrounding the target group evolve over longer periods of time. Furthermore, participants who have lived abroad longer can give a good overview on the changes which have taken place in regards to communications technologies and how that has impacted their relationship with their family back home.

As a result of these interview some themes have come forward as being key, firstly how easy and accessible it has become to communicate across long distances. Due to rapid advances and widespread access to the internet it has become more viable to regularly communicate with family back home through a number of different ways. In addition to this the importance of having strong a support network has been reinforced in this study. Many of those who moved abroad cited the lack of a support network as one of their main difficulties when it came to adapting to life in a new country. Moving to a new country means having to leave behind the support network and the social connections you have built up in your home country. Having to build those up again is a big challenge faced by those who move abroad. Lastly participants opened up about the difficulties faced dealing with heightened political polarization while communicating with family at home. Participants explained how they dealt with family and close friends whom they disagreed with, and how they employed different strategies to communicate with them. The pros and cons of these strategies were discussed along with how these affected their specific relationships with those back home. In doing so the hope is to gain a better understanding of what considerations those abroad make when communicating and maintaining their relationships with their family back home.

Communicating with family back home

One of the main difficulties faced by people who move to a different country is the distance and diminished contact which exists between them and their family. Brazilians have reported that homesickness as a result of this distance is one of the key factors which discourage them from moving abroad (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2010). This emotional distance paired with the physical distance can make it adapting to a new country challenging due to a lack of a support network:

“At first I suffered a lot more from being away but now I'm used to feeling homesick, but what I miss the most is the lack of a support network, there's no one to turn to, there's no one to ask, where's my father, where's my grandfather, you have to get by. Homesickness has improved, but the support network is still weak”

Advancements in communications technology have allowed for more and more frequent contact between those who move abroad. Social media applications combined with advancements in internet speed have allowed those who live abroad to communicate more often with those back home (Bryceson, 2019). For Brazilians abroad one platform stands out above all others in terms usage: WhatsApp.

“WhatsApp allows us to have more frequent contact, but it is not as personal as face-to-face contact, but it provides a way to keep up to date with the family even during the everyday rush. And it's easy because everyone has it, it's very accessible.”

WhatsApp is by far the most used communications platform amongst Brazilians, not only within the country where 93% of those who have a mobile phone have the application downloaded. Brazilians abroad who wish to talk to those back home also make use of this application. Aside from being just a messaging app WhatsApp introduced the ability to make video calls in the end of 2016 (O Globo, 2016), this feature is hailed by those abroad as one of the key aspects which keeps them using the application. This addition is popular with those living abroad for a couple of reasons, firstly it allows them to literally see (albeit through a screen) those back home in Brazil. This functionality takes away from the impersonality of only communicating through text and generates proximity between those participating in the call.

“I try to call once a week, and talk for an hour, for me that makes more sense, and the video I feel is closer than a message or just a call. Video calls give you the opportunity to have a more in-depth conversation than with text.”

This ability to see each other through video calls helps strengthen and maintain the social bonds between Brazilians abroad and their family back home. Interviewees expressed that they felt that video calls were better as they allowed for more natural conversation between themselves and those back home. It was remarked however that setting these calls up could sometimes be an issue given the time difference of 4 to 5 hours to Brazil. The fact that these video calls lack a bit of spontaneity sometimes seemed to bother them, and also made it so that it required some planning to execute. Nevertheless, video calls were overwhelmingly named as the preferred method of communicating with family back home.

“I prefer video calls a thousand times, I like to send messages because sometimes you need to send a message, but to have a conversation a video call is better. I try to find moments to talk via video call, to have full focus on the conversation, but it's hard to maintain that, text is good for giving information, but not for maintaining a conversation; but because of time zones and different routines it ends up being a challenge to find those moments.”

Despite the improvements made to communications by way of video calling interviewees were quick to point out that despite these new improvements that they still cannot replace the same feeling of face-to-face communications and being with their family in person.

Support networks and social circles

The lack of a support network is one of the big difficulties for those moving abroad on their own. Moving to another country often means leaving behind everything you've built in a country, be it professionally or socially and moving to somewhere where you have to start over again. The process of creating new support networks can be one of the most challenging aspects for those who move abroad (Marlowe & Bruns, 2021). Creating these new social networks from scratch can take time and leave them feeling isolated in their first few months abroad.

“You have two societies in Holland, there is the Dutch society and there is the international society, which at times they interpose, but in general they are quite separate. My social network in Brazil supported me, gave me strength, assured me, but at the same time it also made me feel more like going back, because it was easier, because here it was like starting from scratch”

Despite the advantages these new technologies offer to maintain social contacts at long distances, they also offer the pitfall of replacing the new social bonds formed when arriving in a new country. Especially during the first few months after moving abroad Brazilians have conveyed that they felt that overly relying on their social bonds in Brazil could sometimes lead to them not fully committing to developing new social connections in their new country.

“In the beginning, I was much more in touch with people in Brazil than I am today because I didn't have a life here, I didn't have friends here, and that helped me to maintain a social network, but that was also a period for a while I wasn't trying to assimilate here because I was still trying to keep this contact in Brazil; so I think it can make this process of creating new social ties more difficult. If you stay in Holland trying to live in Brazil, you won't move on”

This duality showcases one of the toughest aspects of moving abroad, achieving a balance between maintaining social connections in their country of origin while simultaneously creating a new range of social bonds in a new country. Brazilians who have moved abroad feel like they have to juggle multiple social circles at once, at the same time in which they want to maintain their social bonds developed over many years of living in their home country they want to create a new social life for themselves in the new country they have moved to. Trying to do both these things at the same time can be taxing, participants revealed that often times despite their best attempts to conciliate both of these social groups it became impossible to do so (Gillespie et al., 2018).

“There is a fear of losing the relationships that we create in Brazil, blood relationships are easier for us to maintain, but it is difficult to maintain them and talk openly with them,

although the feeling does not change the way of dealing with them, communicating changes, but this acceptance is difficult”

Contentious politics

The 2018 presidential election in Brazil was a landmark in the history of social media use within the country. The election cycle was marked by the spreading of fake news and conspiracy theories on many of the most used social media platforms within the country. In the years following that election a heightened polarization has taken hold within the Brazilian population, this has led to many cases where family members and friends have ended relationships and ceased communicating with those that hold opposing views to their own (Garcia, 2023). Many view social media as being one of the drivers behind this heightened polarization in recent years. This has become a sensitive topic to some Brazilians living abroad, as social media applications are often the manner by which they can still keep in regular contact with their family and friends back home. Brazilians living abroad have unfortunately also had to deal with the ramifications of this landmark election cycle.

“We had to deal with that, it was difficult for many people, there were very big changes in my relationship with people that I know other people would cut them off, but I decided not to be so radical because of my mother, I think that it would be a heavy thing for her, seeing that family members are fighting and dividing like that, but I don't know after she's not here, I don't know, maybe I will stop talking to them”

For many in Brazil it has been the subject of debate and deliberation how to handle these relationships moving forward. At the same time that these people had some extremely differing opinions those opinions still came from those who they cherished and had strong emotional connections with. These made decision on how to move forward with these relationships were not easy, and were thought about a great deal. One of the factors which weighed heavily in the decision making process behind cutting someone off is the proximity they had with that person. It is easier to end contact with those who you have less proximity to, especially being abroad. Another factor which was important in these considerations is someone's character, respondents seemed to differentiate between those who had an active role in disseminating fake news and those who had a passive role. Members of the latter group

were better perceived whereas those taking a more active role were perceived as having bad moral character.

“if I put everything at the edge of what I believe in terms of principles I would cut them off, I would cut it without batting an eyelid, but there are things in this process that as I feel they are not exactly to blame for, some of them are, others maybe not, that they have a doubtful character in that sense, but there are many people who are good people who ended up falling for a story and getting strung along, and you have to try to understand that too”

Participants indicated that they felt that social media usage is a factor which has helped drive people further apart, as the algorithms used on these platforms are geared towards engagement. Some indicated that they felt that this search for engagement paired with a lack of oversight led to the dissemination of fake news among many of these platforms. Furthermore, this election in Brazil was heavily marked by the dissemination of fake news through WhatsApp. The use of ‘bulk-messaging’, whereby private companies sent mass messages through automated systems to potential voters, was heavily used to disseminate information both real and fake during the elections (Mello, 2019). This mass envoys of fake news caused many to become skeptical of the platform and the content on it.

“In my family group, my grandparents and uncles send fake news and stuff, I found out that my father got involved in that direction too. It is complicated because we trust WhatsApp a lot but the older generation does not understand that it can be dangerous too, that people can lie and make up things on WhatsApp. And even more so that you can know that it was a fake news machine, so as time went by, the machine was disassembled in the sense that it was revealed how it worked, and so I decided to not argue with a robot.”

Another added layer for those living abroad is the fact that the contact with those at home is already limited and not face to face. This has increased the difficulty in dealing with family members who have differing opinions. Due to the fact that contact is limited they would rather not focus on topics that divide them, but rather talk about what unites them. They do not want to spend limited amount of contact focusing on confrontational aspects of their relationship.

“it's the way I found to deal with the situation, not to talk about it anymore because otherwise we fight, I already live far away, so I prefer peace, our contact is already limited so I don't want to spend it fighting. We talk about other things, and avoid talking about it, I'm not going to lose my sister, but we disagree about it so we don't talk about it. We will continue to love each other, we will continue to see each other, but I will not go through this”

As a result, Brazilians abroad developed certain strategies to deal with this conflict; these strategies varied per respondent. The strategy adopted also varied depending on the person who they were talking to. When there was more proximity between those communicating, these political differences were initially met with a discussion, as they tried to engage with the ideas presented to them. Due to the heightened polarization and a lack of willingness to engage in dialogue from both sides these discussions often did not amount to anything. As a result of this both sides felt like they could not convince each other, this led to communications being scarcer, as both sides of the conversation felt like engaging in these talks was a waste of energy.

“At first I tried, that's why I even got into conflict with my uncle, because everything he sent me I tried to refute. When the fake news started, I tried to counter but then I lost energy very quickly doing that, so I said it wasn't worth it. But my cousin always replied, he would go deep, until the right news, look for the source, show which sources did not exist, send paragraphs, and my uncle wouldn't read, he just said no, you're wrong, that's frustrating”

This approach however led to much frustration on both sides. By engaging in a back-and-forth argument both sides grew resentful of each other, which started to strain relationships. Because of this another strategy was implemented: not talking about it. To relieve the tension put on the relationship as a result of these political differences many Brazilians have utilized this strategy of silence to preserve their relationships. While this did not necessarily resolve any underlying tension between both parties it helped maintain the relationship on a healthier more functional level.

“Because there isn't much to talk about and normally they don't want to walk about I either, so then I won't waste my energy, because I was in damage containment at that moment, I

couldn't spend my energy because I wasn't going to change anyone's opinion there. That's the way I found to deal with the situation, not to talk about it anymore because otherwise we fight, I already live far away so I prefer peace, our contact is already limited so I don't want to spend it fighting"

This strategy of avoidance does not resolve the cause of the conflict, but it enables those who disagree to engage with each other with lower levels of attrition. As such the objective of this strategy is not to convince the other of your stand point, but to maintain the relationship at a working level.

Conclusion

This research had the goal of exploring the experiences of Brazilians living abroad and their relationships with their family back home. To gain insights into these experiences 10 in depth interviews were conducted with Brazilians living in the Netherlands. Through these interviews it was possible to gain a better understanding of the nuances of their everyday life and the manners in which they strive to maintain social connections in their home countries. Furthermore, this research has the aim to shed light on how transnational family relationships, and the intimacies and conflicts within those relationships, are experienced by its members. It has done so by combining insights from diaspora studies about the familial relationships and their maintenance at a distance, together with literature on contentious politics within families. By using media studies and as the convergence point between both of these, I have explored how modern communication technologies have changed how these families explore and experience transnational social relationships.

The first insight from this research concerns the ability and ease of communicating with family back home. Advancements in communication technologies have made it exponentially easier to communicate at long distances. Those who have lived abroad for longer report that the lack of communication with family back home used to be one of the hardest aspects of moving abroad. Meanwhile those who have moved abroad more recently cite the ability to regularly communicate with those in their home country as one of the aspects which have helped them adapt to moving abroad. Both groups however can agree that one of these new methods reigns above all other: the video call. The ability to physically see those who are far from us has been cited by the majority as groundbreaking. Video calls allow for more natural conversations between participants than text messages, and provide an upgrade over audio only calls, as all participants can see each other and react not only to each other's words, but also their physical communication. This reinforces existing theories about the role these social technologies can play when physical reunions are an impossibility (Gillespie et al., 2018). Furthermore, participants indicated that video calls were better at maintaining a natural flow of conversation, as opposed to text or voice messaging. Video calls helped them be more focused and present in the conversation, as they had no other distractions. All in all, this helped

them better maintain contact with family at home, as they had an accessible option of reliably having conversations with their loved ones back home.

These loved ones are back home are also key to another important finding of this research, the importance of a support network. One of the main reported difficulties by those who move abroad is the feeling of loneliness and disconnect in their new country. When moving abroad people leave behind much of what they have built towards their entire life. It can then be difficult to arrive in a new country with nothing to fall back on. It can be hard and take time to create new social connections and support networks when moving to a new country. This is another reason why having the ability and accessibility to communicate with those back home is crucial for those who move abroad. Having access to the support network you have built back home can give those moving abroad a cushion to rely on while building up new connections abroad, which can help combat the loneliness of moving abroad. Additionally, this is in line with existing literature about how these connections allow those who move abroad to play a more active role in their family life even though they are physically absent (Bryceson, 2019). Interviewees however have told a cautionary tale about these support networks at home, though they are a good help, and an important crutch for those facing difficulty in their first months abroad, they are not a replacement for the creation of new social connections. Though it is important to maintain these relationships back home, it is also important to build up new ones in the country you have moved to. This duality is one I believe would be interesting to explore in further research, as online social spaces are increasingly becoming a more influential in daily life (Pereira et al., 2020).

Maintaining connections with those back home isn't always pleasant. Brazil has experienced a deepening of ideological crevices in the past few years. The fallout from the 2018 presidential election cycle has divided the Brazilian people on two opposite sides to each other. Those who live abroad are not immune to this heightened polarization, and many have seen members of their families take on opposing political positions than their own (Garcia, 2023). This has led to uncomfortable situations between for many living abroad, as they struggled in regards to moving forwards with relationships with those they disagreed with. Those living abroad have developed a couple of strategies for engaging in communication with those who hold opposing political views. Some have attempted to engage in arguments, by sending rebuttal texts, debating ideologies and by discussing different sources they have attempted to engage with family members who hold these conflicting views. This strategy

however is one that required a lot of effort, as one was constantly on an ideological battlefield. This friction which arose as a result of these discussions led to frustrations with both parties, as they could not convince the other of their standpoint. As a result, these interactions became draining, as communication turned from collaboration to disagreement. This means that employing this communication tactic of rebuttal of information was not one that was often long lived, as it increased existing crevices between family members and requires large amounts of energy and time (Cowan & Baldassarri, 2018).

Because of this Brazilians abroad had to search for an alternative method to deal with family members with disagreeing political stances. This led to the adoption of the avoidance tactic, whereby subjects that were deemed controversial, or more likely to generate disagreement were avoided during conversations. This approach brought less friction to relationships, as both parties could avoid talking about sensitive topics and could instead focus on things that had in common and share their daily lives. This approach also implies that both parties want to avoid talking about these divisive issues between them, and requires both parties to collaborate to keep the peace. This signals that both the person abroad and the one back home view their relationship as something bigger than their disagreements, and are engaged in continuing to maintain it despite their differences. Lastly there were those who decided to completely cut off contact and end their relationships with those who held opposing political views. This approach was less common within families and was usually reserved for friendships or acquaintances, yet up to one fifth of the Brazilian population reveals they have ended relationships with someone as a result of the election (Garcia, 2023).

The maintenance of long distance relationships within families has changed significantly as a result of the rapid development of communication technologies. This research has explored how Brazilians abroad have experienced and continue to experience relationships with their families back in their home country. From the wonders of videocalls to the agony of being sent fake news in the family chat, many of the ways in which these transnational families experience intimacy and conflict have been explored. Exploring these nuances can lead to a better understanding of how family relationships happen within a digitized world. Rapid globalization makes it so that these types of relationships have become more frequent thus raising the importance of their understanding.

Discussion

The results of this research are important for various parties. From a scientific point of view, this theme is important because the usage of social technologies and social media platforms has steadily increased in recent years. It is therefore interesting to understand what drives these people to use them, and how they interact and form social connections through use of these platforms. Additionally, many social actors such as universities and the government can benefit from this research. When there is a better understanding of the factors which drive people to move across borders and start a new life, governments can adjust and alter their policies to better accommodate them.

Despite the fact that in-depth interviews lend themselves well to researching the experiences of Brazilian living in The Netherlands, this research has to do with time and budget constraints. In an ideal world, more interviews would have been conducted with Brazilians abroad, and it would not be limited to those living in The Netherlands. My recommendation for follow-up research is to look at populations of Brazilians living in other countries, in order to contrast this with the experiences of Brazilian in The Netherlands. Another suggestion for follow up research would be to examine populations which come from countries other than Brazil. This would allow researchers to zoom in on the different strategies displayed when communicating with family at home, and can explain if the communicating strategies of Brazilians are specific to them or if they are generalizable.

Another aspect which was emphasized during this research was the role of modern communication technologies regarding the creation and maintenance of social relationships in digital times. Due to the rapid advancements of digital and communication technologies this theme will remain of relevance as humans continue to innovate and adapt to these new technological advancements. In addition, we also reflected on the considerations Brazilians abroad make when choosing communication strategies with those at home who have differing political stances. This can be of importance not only for those who live at great distances from relatives, but can also help those who have family members with differing political views within the same country. The strategies explained by the interviewees are not exclusive to those who live abroad, but are relevant to all those who communicate digitally, and as such can also be used within the same country.

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