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Roma Networks: Ethnic Solidarity in an Internet Age?

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Abstract

Ethnographic studies have hitherto focused on relationships among mobile actors, groups and how inter-ethnic relations are shaped by technologies and online information exchanges. However, little research has included the effects of virtual networks in relation to intra-ethnic structures. Facebook, as a media environment, facilitates 'doing family' across distance within transnational families. These routines shape intergroup solidarity through geographic distance by transmitting a selection of inter-ethnic references. What causes people to avoid inter-ethnic references on their Facebook timelines that are controversial, through self-censorship? And what are the social impacts of those choices – if any? How do these transnational socialisation practices ensure solidarity among Roma across borders? These are the questions answered in this paper based on offline and online ethnography of Roma migrant communities. The paper claims that although many coping strategies were learned from other ethnic minorities in the UK, stereotyped messages transmitted a selective narrative about other ethnic groups back to the participants' countries of origin to uphold ethnicity-based social assurances explained as instruments of ethnic solidarity. In short, the potential liberating power of virtual transnationalism was rather limited, while its potential to help reproduce social asymmetries was more apparent.

Keywords: mobility, social media, co-presence, intra-ethnic solidarity, self-censorship.

1. Introduction

Though online networks like Facebook groups are often seen as additional 'virtual' spaces or a representation of previously studied offline networks (Komito, 2011; Slater, 2002; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014), it has been argued that online and offline interactions cannot be separated, as they mutually shape social relations. While migration studies embrace the role of social media use in Roma transnational networks and how this shapes the opportunities of Roma migrants (Vermeersch, 2014), it has not yet been discussed how the use of different social media platforms among transnational Roma networks maintain their intra-ethnic solidarity from distance. Considering ethnicity is a social construct and therefore ethnic solidarity can only be understood in situationally constructed cultural terms, this paper aims to identify those online contexts where ethnicity is primarily used for maintaining social solidarity in the transnational Roma network. Therefore, 'cultures of solidarity' refers here to the emergence of a sense of belonging that results from engaging in collective actions online. By scrutinising the role of polymedia use (simultaneous use of media channels such as Skype, Facebook, email or Snapchat) among Hungarian Roma migrants living in multi-ethnic suburbs in the UK, I will explain how online communication shapes Roma intra-ethnic solidarity.

2. Research methods – ethnography on social media

Online ethnography is a relatively new field in migration research, but it plays a significant role in understanding the interrelationships between media technologies and mobility (Hjorth, 2007). In short, this online ethnographic method is not independent of offline ethnography but it should be considered as a subfield of that. Beneito-Montagut (2011) describes social interaction that intrinsically takes place online and offline as an 'expanded ethnography' in which online experiences are expanded enhancements of real relationships. Participation in computer-mediated spaces, like social media sites, and in particular participatory observations in Roma network discussions not only enable the recruitment of research participants, but also enable access to offline contacts, and their traces in different social contexts at home and abroad (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). These routes mirror the changing patterns in participants' decision-making and show how these new media representations of inter-ethnic relations shape their existing social ties, transforming and facilitating migration paths and future expectations.

This paper is based on a multi-sited ethnography completed as part of a PhD study on financial surveillance of CEE migrants (Nagy, 2016). Besides the content analysis of Social Media platforms, fieldwork was completed between January 2013 and September 2014 in the Roma settlements of Visegrád countries and in larger UK cities. Engaging with these migrant networks online and offline helped me to identify ethnic references on different social media sites, in particular on Facebook pages. Research participants provided a better understanding of shifting representations of inter-ethnic relations within the host society in line with their constantly changing self-presentations as Roma migrants on ethnicity-based social media platforms. The selected platforms on Facebook (the site users are anonymised to ensure

confidentiality) are set up by Roma with the purpose of social networking, data sharing, political activism and to support practical transactions. The sampling for this paper has been limited to Hungarian Roma transnational networks, in particular Hungarian speaking participants being aged 16 or older, self-identifying as Roma, residing in the UK or returnees. For the contextual framework of this paper, three layers of online platforms are differentiated: publicly available social media platforms, membership-based social media groups and online private messages. I also volunteered at an NGO in the UK as an advocacy worker and conducted interviews with experts, activists and migrants. For this study on intra-ethnic polymedia use, only Hungarian-speaking Roma participants are included as regular users of Facebook, Skype and the phone applications WhatsApp and Viber.

3. Social media use of Roma migrants and its social implications concerning intra- and interethnic solidarity

With the cheap accessibility of technological developments, Skype contacts or Facebook chats are part of the migrants' social connectedness in every Roma household. Smartphones are essential for everyday interactions and internet connection is facilitated even in the poorest Roma households not only in the receiving but also in the sending countries. Sharing daily information about local events, gossip, financial dilemmas or celebrations in the Roma community is part of life on online social networks. Roma households switch on their Skype cams in the morning to ensure their availability at home, and Facebook access is ensured by having at least one mobile phone per family, which makes it easier to keep in touch with those who have no computer, or are internet illiterate. The ease of internet access in different spaces and the common use of social media platforms among Roma networks create ever more possibilities to maintain strong ties with family and friends abroad, and to monitor each other's daily activities. These 'virtual fields' on social media not only maintain existing relationships at a distance, but provide information on migration processes, opportunities, practical knowledge about resources, cultural translation for newcomers and locally constructed images about other minorities in the receiving country. Although these online connections are often described in migration studies in terms of social integration (Erdal and Oeppen, 2013; Vertovec, 2010), they also facilitate social surveillance and provide a narrative that ensures intra-ethnic solidarity in one's transnational ethnic network. In the case of Hungarian Roma Facebook users, with the democratisation of information and communication technology, these routines of ordinary online co-presence have increased new modes of transnational communication that impact intra-ethnic relationships from a distance by the selection of social media platforms.

Roma migrants do not create a universal ethnic self-presentation, but a strictly calculated one in which they do not publicly share information (like inter-ethnic friendships) that might threaten ethnic bonds with co-present users in a shared online environment. Yet, these practices cannot be generalised to Facebook use. Though all the participants were familiar with social media, they displayed different patterns of use. They varied in the types of social media used, the frequency of use and the way in which they used social media (actively or passively). Facebook serves as a key

ethnographic site to trace these actions and the meanings of inter-ethnic relations via multiple channels. The following analyses will differentiate between three social media channels to present the implication of selections in polymedia use of Roma migrants.

Based on the data collected about the online participation of Roma migrants and how they use polymedia in their ethnic network, I have differentiated three types of platforms where co-presence and information exchange are taking place. The first is open access platforms that require no authorisation for registered members to access them (e.g. timelines of Roma events, radio stations, platforms for Romani transnational networks on Facebook). The second platform is closed groups where only group members are authorised to participate and post messages (e.g. Romani activist groups, location-based sites like Roma in London). The third and most intimate platform is personal conversation via Social media messengers or online video chat.

4. Ethnic references as tools of solidarity

Social media provides new platforms for migrants to select and exchange information that includes inter-ethnic references (e.g. Roma migrants reflecting on their Pakistani neighbours online, of which more to come in this paper). The use of polymedia (Oiarzabal and Reips, 2012) provides inherent features of everyday life, which function like any other face-to-face interaction (e.g. enables even babysitting on Skype). In most cases, social media facilitates ordinary co-presence routines, nourishing a sense of proximity across distance within transnational networks. More importantly, each social media channel is selected for a specific type of reference, transmitting often controversial opinions about other ethnic groups based on the audience. These online routines not only shape inter-group solidarity between Roma and other minorities at a geographic distance, but also transmit stereotyped inter-ethnic references about other minorities through selected channels that affect trust relations among different nationalities and subgroups, even in the sending communities. Current hostile discourses about Muslim communities discussed among Roma minorities in Central Europe[1] are not only shaped by the media and anti-immigrant political narratives but also by narratives of migrant family members shared online and offline.

4. 1 Inter-ethnic references on open access social media

Open access social media sites with ethnicity-based audiences (e.g. Facebook pages for Roma networks) contain far fewer (or no) inter-ethnic references than sites with no such audiences from the home country (e.g. pages about retail or housing issues). On these ethnicity-based websites where network members from the sending countries share their posts with their transnational networks, Roma use symbolic references of belonging by posting images of Romani dishes, music, and even political messages about ethnic discrimination of Roma in different localities. Participants use these platforms to express their ethnic solidarity by discussing cases internationally in which

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[1] http://kettosmerce.blog.hu/2016/09/18/migransok_a_ciganyok_ellen_2_0_habiszti

Roma are subjected to injustice, violence, political representation or corruption by Roma representatives. Followers share images of incidents against Roma, comment on each other's posts and share their collective experiences transnationally in which ethnic identity is considered as the shared ethnic attribute that emphasise social belonging and the shared experience of disadvantages based on ethnic identification. Although these intra-ethnic references emphasise the importance of the stigma of Romani minorities, Hungarian Roma do not share these experiences in their publicly available social media platforms with Roma from other countries like Vlach Roma from Romania or Bergitka from Poland (e.g. Polish or Slovak). Some platforms are even said to belong to specific Hungarian Roma subgroups, such as Romungro, also known as 'musician sites'.

Differentiations among intra-ethnic groups facilitate stronger ties among smaller networks where offline contacts are maintained by these online expressions of availability and community engagement. Hungarian Roma participants are said not to share with other Roma subgroups those platforms where their relatives from the sending countries are also active, because they have different cultural values and social concerns. They claim that there is no need for cooperation between them and argued that self-representation among different subgroups would only represent conflicting values and increase tensions, in particular between Romungro and 'Olah Roma' families. Vlach or Olah Roma families generally consider themselves to be more traditional, while Romungro Roma migrants represent themselves as modern and better versed in local integration processes. However, these differences were never emphasised by social media users in this study and the websites I reviewed did not contain references to subgroup relations, not even in relation to other Roma groups living in the same neighbourhood. Hungarian Romungro Roma participants emphasised that other subgroups are not investing in their education but focus on short term financial benefits. In the meantime, Olah participants described Romungro migrants as Roma who lack traditional Roma values and have thus lost their dignity. These values are also evaluated in closed discussions, where examples of Roma women who wear clothes associated with the black British subculture are often described as lacking self-respect. Inter-ethnic references are also absent on these sites. Older generations of migrant Roma claim that multi-ethnic closeness is a threat to Romani traditions and to the dignity of Roma women. According to one Facebook user, Roma participants living in London are concerned that having publicly visible references to their contacts with other minorities might give the impression that they are betraying their Roma kin and that they are losing their cultural values, which might lead to rejection by their home communities, which is a concern as they need support from them. There are references to young adults in migrant Roma families, who are mixing with other minorities or even get married to Pakistani men as negative examples. These inter-ethnic relations are used as illustrations for perceived risks of losing the security of intra-ethnic bonds and the reason to justify social exclusion by Roma network members.

However, it does not mean that these social ties with other Roma subgroups or with other ethnic minorities are not important in the daily lives of these Roma families. Those who move around and therefore often find themselves living in communities of strangers tend to look for commonalities that make strangers into

neighbours. Participants referred to Pakistani entrepreneurs in their boroughs as exploitative, unclean, but successful. These descriptions illustrate the tensions in ethnic relations due to the relative deprivation of the newcomer Roma who felt vulnerable in the new social environment. In face-to-face reflections, many participants in the same conditions explained that they are glad to live around Pakistani and Indian minorities, because they are able to hide their Roma identities in these mixed neighbourhoods due to their skin colour and the similarities in their clothing. As one of the participants explained: 'You know, we are similar to these Pakistanis. We do not let you in, we have our own rules, protect our dignity and safeguard our femininity.' As another young Olah women explained to me: 'You know who was willing to help me out when I was in trouble? My Pakistani English teacher! He lent me 200 pounds to pay the rent.' Similarly, another participant emphasised: 'You know who told me [how to fix my credit]? I was standing in the queue in the bank and there was a Pakistani entrepreneur guy who was standing behind me [...] He gave me that hint.' However, Roma network pages on publicly visible sites rarely reflect the inter-ethnic relations between Roma and Pakistani immigrants, at least not in terms that might disclose social or financial dependency relationships. Also, shared experiences with institutional discrimination in the UK or cultural similarities between Roma and Pakistani minorities remain hidden in these social media platforms.

New media platforms not only help migrants maintain strong ties with family and friends and lower the threshold for migration but they also help to establish a digital infrastructure consisting of latent ethnic ties that serves as a social security mechanism. However, by hiding inter-ethnic relations in the host society, these infrastructures create strong self-censorship among migrants in order to ensure ethnic solidarity at a distance. Hungarian transnational Roma networks use co-presence on Facebook in order to maintain social ties within their intra-ethnic networks that fosters their social organisation, which facilitates informal commitment to ensure social security by expressions of solidarity. In this transnational ethnic context, solidarity stands for 'socio-moral responsibility of one individual towards the other; or "one for all, all for one", which is associated with the feeling of togetherness and commonality of interests, as well as the sharing of resources with people in need' (Martinovic, 2015: 336). Solidarity means affiliation in spite of differences and in spite of inequality, but it also means affiliation because of differences (Stjernø, 2004: 327). Consequently, in the ethnic narratives presented online, Roma differentiation from other ethnicities ensures latent reciprocity (Puljiz et al., 2005: 467). In the context of Facebook use of Hungarian Roma ethnic platforms, the social construction of ethnicity and belonging through polymedia use reflects the social security purposes of users when they use symbolic values of Roma ethnicity online. The selection of ethnic references and the differentiation from other groups aim to maintain a social insurance within the ethnic community, through affective reciprocity at the horizontal level. Participants select their inter-ethnic references to other minorities or ethnic groups consciously to prevent the loss of intra-ethnic security. Offline experiences are filtered for different media platforms for those who stay in sending countries and how perceptions about ethnic others effect intra-ethnic relations among Hungarian Roma migrant Facebook users.

4.2 Inter-ethnic solidarity in membership-based Social media groups

Transnational intra-ethnic solidarity among Hungarian Roma is also impacted by their co-presence at other Social media platforms. Besides open access social media platforms, Roma migrants participate in membership-based social media groups that are defined along Roma ethnic group activities (monitored by group admins). Participants living in the UK were generally referred to their use of social media groups on Facebook as International Roma Internet network, Ide tartozunk (We Belong Here), Romák és nem Romák Antirasszista csoportja (The Anti-racist Group of the Roma and Non-Roma) and local Facebook groups such as Roma in Manchester and Londoni Romák (Roma of London). As a member of these closed groups, and as an advocacy worker, I was also addressed on these sites to provide information for network members: I was asked questions about the costs of rent in East London, barriers to benefit applications, educational challenges and labour opportunities for newcomers. Reviews on activities of Roma entrepreneurs who recruited newcomers for unskilled jobs were also discussed online among Roma returnees and those who were planning to move to London (e.g. how expensive are these services, do they really help with bureaucracies, do they really arrange housing and jobs). The public nature of such websites facilitated a transnational digital community among Hungarian Roma with migration aspirations. Since the members of these Facebook groups are visible online and many of their profiles contain photos and visible lists of associates, these public sites not only safeguard ethnic social ties but they also create social transparency that enables members to determine what kind of relations are maintained abroad by whom, what the socio-economic impact of their national or ethnic identity is, and how the reception of Roma in the foreign context affects their Roma cultural practices. By constantly checking personal profiles and timelines, members obtain information about each other that they can use in offline discussions. My offline interviews and conversations on these sites confirmed that participants consciously screen each other and judge their foreign lives based on the data available online.

In comparison with open access Facebook platforms, Roma migrants present their inter-ethnic relations differently in membership-based social media groups. One reason is that these groups are not primarily framed by Roma ethnic group consciousness, but by other main attributes Roma migrants are involved in. As the Romani in Liverpool Facebook group illustrates, online communitarianism among Roma migrants presumes some shared history, language and culture that provide the symbolic capital for the reproduction of a community in online meta-space, but this may also provide platforms for other shared interests. Information exchange on this website includes members from different ethnic groups where Hungarian Roma use English to share their questions and interest. Most of the posts shared in the group are practical issues about housing, selling second-hand goods or advertising job opportunities. This communitarianism is based on existing offline networks (many of the group members know each other already) that create online social media platforms that grow as other ethnic migrants with similar interests join them. In these social media groups, Hungarian Roma participants commit their personal selves to

new socialisation processes of learning and acculturation, adopting and abiding by the rules, norms, cultural codifications and hierarchies of the groups they join.

Many participants were interested in other people's opinions and ways of life in the UK and mentioned that these online interactions changed their images of others. When they reflected on these interactions, they also stressed inter-group differences such as traditions and values. However, these experiences were hardly ever framed as inter-ethnic relations and Roma participants did not emphasise the relevance of these contacts when they were transmitting their ideas about other minorities to their home communities. This could be a result of the implicit role ethnic differences play in these topic-based social media groups.

Participants claim to avoid Roma ethnic references, as they explained offline, not because they use censure but because these are not relevant in their interactions about the goods or services they discuss here. Hungarian Roma participants learn many local trade and social communication skills from others and use them according to the communication style of other Facebook users in the group. Even references to other Roma ethnic minorities are denied on these pages. Through these meaning-making processes, such online communities become new habitats for social experience in a transnational context. Inter-ethnic relations are valued differently in these virtual groups than on open media websites. Participation in a membership-based social media group sends an implicit message about the users' intentions and the role they intend to take in inter-ethnic contacts, such as selling goods, collecting information about accommodation or promoting events to socialise with other Hungarian speakers. These social media groups are on the edge of two types of inter-ethnic references: those that reflect self-censorship practices where Roma hide their own ethnicity (e.g. 'LION) and those that explicitly use such ethnic references to emphasise common interests (e.g. FB Ide tartozunk! or Romani Čhib for Romani speakers).

In ethnicity-based online groups, web technologies are producing, representing, consuming and articulating various aspects and new figures of ethnicity, nationhood and community in closed controlled social networks. The controlling mechanisms and exclusivist norms of Roma communities invite participants to publicly open up about their inter-ethnic relations and reflect on their ethnic closure or solidarity with other migrant groups. On these platforms that facilitate contact for Roma to sustain their relationships with their networks, group members use ethnic references to express intra-ethnic solidarity and claim virtual support from each other at a distance. These relationships might function as 'virtual insurance', providing network members with emotional support and information about risks in foreign countries (e.g. cases of labour exploitation collected from newspapers). While on open access social media websites, inter-ethnic references were hidden by lack of references to other ethnicities or migrants; in closed social media groups, Hungarian Roma migrants might hide their own ethnicity to avoid inter-ethnic references and ensure social inclusion online. The first type of social media group is meant for information exchange among Hungarian-speaking migrants in London, where Roma participants might self-censor references to inter-ethnic differences that could make them vulnerable in a group that includes Hungarian non-Roma migrants. This is generally to avoid racist comments and Romophobic notions of other network members. The second group encourages

the use of ethnic references, since it targets Roma and non-Roma who are interested in exchanging news and information about Roma or the Romani language. Also, many of the posts are meant to trigger offline action against social injustices and encourage Roma protests. Inter-ethnic references serve different purposes in these narrow social media contexts than the previously discussed purpose of maintaining social security and mostly refer to Roma Non-Roma relations in the sending countries. From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), groups in society stand in specific status and power relations to one another; thus, social change processes have the potential to alter those relations. Such alterations may in turn lead to the need for individuals to renegotiate their ethnic identity and group membership. Threat perception has been found by research to be a function of the relative status of groups, their history, and the way they traditionally interact with each other (Grant, 1992; Milburn and Waltman, 1981). Bowman (2001) suggests that just like individuals, communities draw boundaries not so much to assert presence, but to mark exclusion of that which is perceived to be threatening. Bowman posits that autonomous communities are 'inherently antagonistic to any extra-communal logics of generalised exchange because such logics call on the members of autonomous communities to identify with others beyond the bounds of that community' (Ibid.: 29). These autonomous communities 'see social concourse beyond the demographic limits of their immediate communities as antagonistic to the "we" in which they find their identities' (Ibid.).

In Facebook groups where inter-ethnic references are highlighted in the posts of Roma migrants, these contain mainly negative connotations of other ethnic minorities. In these closed Roma social media groups, selective images of Pakistani minorities are transmitted which become common knowledge among the network members of migrants in the sending countries. Relatives of Roma migrants who remained in sending countries provided detailed outlines of the inter-ethnic frames of their relatives abroad. They often referred to exploitative Pakistani entrepreneurs who set up sham marriages or engage in labour exploitation. Though they noted that Pakistani immigrants live in the same neighbourhoods as many Roma families in Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester and London, they described the Pakistanis as unintegrated and filthy. This migrant phenomenon is often explained by relative deprivation and relative whiteness (McDowell, 2008), or deflecting ethnic stigma (Moroşanu and Fox, 2013). Although much of the social media platform is not used to emphasise ethnic belonging, Roma members might emphasise their identities in comparison with other minorities when sharing sensitive content (e.g. experiences with inter-ethnic solidarity) to stress their success in protecting ethnic dignity in order to ensure ethnic solidarity from their sending community. Although participants often argued offline that they got support from their Pakistani employers or Indian neighbours, they felt that these opinions would elicit moral disapproval from their online Roma networks.

In one of the most popular local Facebook groups like Londoni Romák (Roma of London), respondents transform or amend ethnic boundaries in specific de-stigmatising discourses and regularly capitalise on ethnic resources in managing their everyday problems. For instance, by jettisoning the Pakistani and other ethnic Roma subgroups, group members transfer the stigma to others and position themselves

more advantageously in Britain's ethnic hierarchy. In response to stigmatisation efforts by others, they dissociate themselves from the stigmatised group by blaming other Roma. This contributes to redrawing ethnic boundaries. Diverting the stigma to other minorities in inter-ethnic references online increases ethnicity's everyday relevance in social media interactions. Some Roma erect a boundary between themselves and other minorities by 'educating' others in closed groups about their ethnic difference, their roots and the consequences. By diverting stigma to the economically less deserving, they also emphasise their own dependency position. When they suggest that Pakistani women are uneducated and dirty, though they have spent far longer in the host country, Roma respondents are conflating stereotypes to redress their own minority status (Moroşanu and Fox, 2013: 447).

In short, offline inter-ethnic relations among Roma families in East London were hidden in the semi-public or public online platforms. Positive references about supportive ethnic minorities in the host countries were hidden too. The fear of accusation that they had lost their ethnic identity was a common argument when participants reflected on these issues offline. Such identity loss was explained in terms of social exclusion, lack of social support in the sending communities and in case migrants failed in their host society. Inter-ethnic references and images of closeness to other minorities, whether negative (e.g. exploitative Pakistani employers who did not pay Roma employees) or positive (e.g. Pakistani entrepreneurs who helped newcomers learn English), were never made in group conversations. Although many coping strategies were learned from other ethnic minorities in the UK, stereotyped messages transmitted a selective narrative about other ethnic groups back to the participants' countries of origin to uphold ethnicity based social assurances explained as instruments of ethnic solidarity. In short, the potential liberating power of virtual transnationalism was rather limited, while its potential to help reproduce social asymmetries was more apparent.

Based on the examples above, it can be concluded that, in closed groups, transnational ethnic networks expand the spectrum of contested social spaces into the digital public sphere (Karatzogianni, 2006), where avoidance of inter-ethic references is a tool of identity formation to ensure social inclusion from distance. These virtual platforms therefore visualise the power relationships in extended transnational Roma networks (e.g. Madianou and Miller, 2011). When Roma migrants choose closed groups to create discursive spaces, these are not meant to extend the content of online discussions beyond practical information. Still, based on the shared content and images of success and family life, these closed group interactions provide insights into the self-perceptions of group members, their views on integration processes and the socio-economic conflicts between different groups (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Everett, 2009; Mallapragada, 2000).

Roma migrants consciously choose to share and discuss their concerns, such as their conflicts or debts, in closed groups where inter-ethnic references are filtered. This confirms the intimacy and secrecy of these interrelations, especially when they occur in the private sphere of Roma migrants. These selections also confirm why only interpersonal communication contains these references, which are treated with high confidentiality. This can be considered to be censored information for the extended Roma network, in particular the selection of data for those who stay in the sending

countries. Polymedia use provides a multifocal analytical framework for identities, social positions and the power relationships that exist between various social actors with varied degrees of openness to different cultural and territorial commitments to specific places, traditions and institutions. This also imparts meaning to migrants' conservative or transformative behaviours in relation to the transformation of social roles and status in a foreign context (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2003; Vertovec, 2009).

In the emergent virtual environment of polymedia, social media platforms serve the type of relationship being maintained among Roma migrants in London (Alampay, 2012). Weaving the social fabric of Roma is thus becoming a complex, de-territorialised process in which inter-ethnic socialisation shapes the learning process of cultural norms online and offline (Dubar, 2000). Transnational families are the exemplary social matrix generating new patterns of socialisation, since intergenerational exchanges and the transmission of values increasingly tend to take place within online deterritorialised contexts (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Nedelcu, 2010; Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). These can be illustrated by intimate private messages about decision-making processes of participants in the foreign context and their daily chats with family members. In the following and final part of this paper, I will analyse how polymedia use and personal messages are used to transmit affective inter-ethnic references in intimate online conversations.

4.3 Inter-ethnic references in personal online messages

'They do no harm. Really!' I was awakened by a loud Skype conversation between a Roma woman and her sister-in-law in Hungary, who she wanted to move into her house in London. She spoke in an enthusiastic tone while trying to convince her relatives that local Muslims are not as dangerous as they thought. 'These covered people are almost like us', she continued. 'You'll see! The blacks are different, but they also do not bother us. They just smoke all day.' The louder she tried to convince the others on Skype, the more I understood of the conversation as they tried to arrange for her mother-in-law's other sons to move to England. 'The landlord is Pakistani', she said. 'He also has houses in Manchester. We can move there if we cannot find a house to live together here.'

Although many Roma families do not keep in touch with other Roma ethnic subgroups when they are in their home countries, ethnic or minority identity is intensified in the foreign context. Interrelations with well-established minorities from different countries and daily inter-ethnic contacts in grocery shops, housing agencies and schools also shift the inter-ethnic experiences of Roma migrants. These experiences are then transmitted through Messenger chats and Facebook calls. Roma migrants express different affective relationships in personal messages and private video chats about their inter-ethnic relations than they do in Facebook timelines or in open virtual social media groups. Transnational Roma migrants share their friendships or intimate contacts with other ethnic minorities in confidential personal chats. However, there is a difference between the content of these references and the choices about polymedia use made by different migrant generations which deeply impact transnational socialisation processes when they are used in intra-ethnic interactions.

Older Roma migrants are more distrustful towards other ethnic groups, making judgemental references to their lifestyles, religions and public behaviour. These are the Roma newcomers who are most vulnerable to exploitation and extortion, or who have more lived experiences with discrimination and racism in their home countries. Their lack of language skills leads these Roma migrants to attribute more importance to their traditions, ethnicity and relationships with extended families. Conflating ethnic stigma to other ethnic minorities is common in their conversations, as are references to criminality and lack of integration. These references are made in their mother languages, which is also a central cause of intergenerational conflicts. As one Roma participant explained to his fellows: 'Sometimes, when you think how these blacks make you feel, it's just like the Gypsies you used to meet at home, as you walk into the street, and as they stare at you like you feel they are killing you now! What the hell is it, why do they behave like that? I hate them. We should move them to a special island and separate the blacks and whites there...'

Participants also told me that they had transformed or amended different ethnic boundaries in specific de-stigmatising discourses and regularly capitalised on various ethnic resources when managing everyday difficulties. For instance, by jettisoning the Pakistani and other ethnic Roma subgroups, several Facebook sites transfer the inferior stigma to position themselves more advantageously in conversation with someone considered 'white'. These strategies contribute to redrawing ethnic boundaries to emphasise the importance of social and cultural loyalty, even when in physical proximity. In these interplays of shifting identity management on different virtual platforms, the Roma 'ethnic lens' is in a state of constant fluctuation (Schiller et al., 2006).

By discursively invoking differences to describe both 'self' and 'other', differences between Roma become even more salient. The valorisation of differences, in turn, offers certain social-psychological benefits by giving expression to the migrants' anxieties and frustrations and helping them restore the 'reversals in status' that are part of the migration process. Roma migrants invoke and assert their own putative whiteness and Europeanness to darken 'less white' Jamaican and Asian segments of the labour market. In short, 'race' is often a culturally mediated interpretation, representation and reproduction of social differences (Brubaker et al., 2004). When Roma refer to Pakistani minorities in the UK as 'dirty' and 'illiterate', it draws on home-grown and local contextual referents to construct a meaningful framework for arranging the sorts of differences that Roma encounter in comparison with other minorities in the UK. The selection of online settings explains whether and how inter-ethnic contact is established. Fears of inter-ethnic relations are transmitted in personal chats, but these often conflict with other online narratives on inter-ethnic distance.

While many Roma parents try to preserve their culture and values, the younger generations are raised though the popular multicultural media both in sending and host countries. Therefore, young Roma migrants frame their inter-ethnic friendships online by highlighting shared subcultural preferences (e.g. shared dress codes, hand signs, YouTube videos) or shared leisure activities. These friendships are normalised in foreign educational settings, but Roma parents try to hide these activities of their children from their extended Roma networks at home. I found that many Roma girls

were not allowed to have their own smartphones or social media IDs and all their family members intensively monitored their online activities. Consequently, migrant youth shift their preferences to different types of social media than their elders and use it for different purposes. Ethnicity remains a relevant factor for them and they are less conscious with their self-censorship online which results in unintended inter-ethnic encounters. Online and offline interactions are very much integrated and they co-construct notions of ethnicity and belonging (see e.g. Marotta, 2011). One of the key finding is that when using social media, young participants preferred to interact with others from their ethnic community in the country of residence than with someone from their country of origin. Social media serves, in contrast with elderly Roma, not as an alternative for telephone contact, but they use it to engage with other migrant youth in exploring their own decontextualized ethnic identity by intra-ethnic contact to compare their principles (one of many topics they are exploring on social media).

Roma migrants shape the meaning of their own mobility and build their own worlds in a dialogic relation within the social spaces and societies they encompass. Consequently, online migrants control the mechanisms that disengage their social relations from local contexts of interaction and transform space-time perceptions of social ties. By contacting participants offline and studying the broader range of their social media activities, I found that social media supports intra-ethnic contact, but counters transnational inter-ethnic solidarity as online socialisation processes filter and reinterpret these experiences of migrants for their home communities in terms of deflected stigmas. Inter-ethnic contact is mostly established in interest-based online venues where Roma users use these references to emphasise their ethnic solidarity with their home community.

5. Conclusions

The instrumental use of inter-ethnic references, or the avoidance thereof, can be traced in the polymedia use of Roma migrants on social media platforms. Self-censorship of inter-ethnic references on open access sites is meant to emphasise the importance of belonging and loyalty to the Roma community left behind. By emphasising ethnic cohesion among Roma groups, virtual timelines are used to reflect shared values with other Roma transnational groups. These references not only ensure intense co-presence of network members at a geographic distance but these also reflect the need of social security and affective support Roma migrants need in a foreign context. Restricted online communication channels like personal messages are used to transmit more confidential inter-ethnic references based on lived experiences in the host countries. These are not only reflecting the references of Roma migrants to relative deprivation in the host society, but also their fears of losing Roma network ties in the sending country due to their extended inter-ethnic relations abroad. These selections of personal channels are also indexical themselves. By using multiple media platforms, alternative personal messages might open new ways of transmitting ethnic references of similarity and share information about the fruitful inter-ethnic relations within the migrant's ethnic group in the host country. These secured invisible social

media venues might also open new opportunities for transnational socialisation of sending communities in migration networks.

Although intra-ethnic references are age and internet literacy specific, polymedia use of migrants shapes the role of intra-ethnic solidarity in transnational networks by ensuring the impression of social security for members who keep inter-ethnic distance. When ethnic migrants are afraid to publicly stand for an inter-ethnic relationship and pretend to keep a distance from other minorities in their daily lives, they transmit a censored social construction of their social identity abroad. This constructed boundary starts to live its own life among those who were left behind and creates a new inter-ethnic frame based on selected amplified images received online. When these images are challenged by those who receive other inter-ethnic references through private messages, it might create intra-ethnic conflicts, confusion and divisions between the receivers.

In short, transnational transmission of solidarity does not follow a linear path and is not necessarily and inevitably a progressive process. As Nedelcu (2012: 15) notes: 'The reach, scope and effects of transnational activities are contingent on the interaction of multiple contextual (state of origin–migrants' relations; state of origin relations with country of destination; context of reception of immigrants abroad) and group factors.' This study has highlighted the transnational dimension of socialisation processes, and thus the emergence of a transnational illusion. It has shown how online migrants develop a transnational habitus that combines heterogeneous cultural references inherited from their physical and virtual journeys. It has also highlighted the ongoing blurring of boundaries between migrants. Social life is gradually becoming a deterritorialised process for both mobile and sedentary populations.

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