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PORTRAYALS OF COLOMBIAN AND VENEZUELAN IMMIGRANT ORGANISATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

This article compares the public images of Colombian and Venezuelan immigrant organisations in the United States. Immigrant organisations' webpages and the expression of their main aims and goals serve to identify their major concerns as they create public images not only for the organisation but for the immigrant community itself. To interpret the immigrant organisations' public images and their goals, we offer a multilevel study that considers immigrants' contexts of exit, which are related to the motivation of migrate and the particular sociodemographic makeup of immigrant groups. This paper adds the Venezuelan immigrant experience to the literature on immigrant organisations.

Keywords

Colombia; Venezuela; international migration; Latinos; immigrant organisations

In this global age, constant flows of people and information are shaping social spaces. To enhance our understanding of the transformation of the social space for immigrant populations in host societies, this article studies how Colombian and Venezuelan immigrant organisations in the United States portray themselves through the internet. In order to identify the self-portrait that immigrant organisations create and share over the internet, we study the immigrants' contexts of exit and the waves of immigrant arrivals in the United States. We understand that immigrant organisations create social spaces in which international migrants, usually with a shared national origin, band together to identify activities that they could not otherwise accomplish by themselves.

Although literature on immigrant organisations has suggested that the history of migration, the modes in which migrants are received, and the patterns of civic and political association in their countries of origin shape the character and emergence of immigrant organisations (Portes, 1999), few pieces have incorporated macro level data into the study of immigrant organisations (Smith and Weist, 2005; Fox and Xochitl, 2009). Several studies have connected the effects of structural transformations in the 1980s and 1990s in the countries of

origin to the growth of international migration (Massey and Capoferro, 2006; Delgado-Wise and Guarnizo, 2007; Pellegrino, 2011; Sanchez-R, 2011c). In this article we describe macro level indicators of economic performance and violence, we describe the profile of Colombians and Venezuelans in the United States, and we compare data from our research on immigrant organisations formed by nationals of Colombia and Venezuela in the United States. We compare the Colombian and the Venezuelan cases because: a) both countries share several characteristics, b) the inflow of immigrants to the United States from these countries has increased particularly at the end of the 1990s, and c) comparing the Venezuelan to the well-documented Colombian case (Portes, Escobar and Arana, 2009; Portes, Escobar, and Radford, 2005a) enhances our understanding of the dynamicity of these recent immigrants in the United States.

This article contains five sections. In the first we identify the concepts of landscapes and specifically ethnoscares (Appadurai, 1996) and transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2003), as well as other literature on immigrant organisations. In the second we assess contemporary macro characteristics of Colombia and Venezuela which influence the decision to migrate. Third, we describe both immigrant communities in the US. Fourth, we present our methodology and analysis of the goals and mission statements posted on the websites of 46 immigrant organisations. Fifth, we discuss how the conditions in the origin country are linked to the profile of the immigrants and provide potential explanations for the way the emergent South American immigrant organisations have framed their images.

PORTRAYALS OF IMMIGRANT ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR TRANSNATIONAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSION

Immigrants, immigrant communities, and their use of technologies to disseminate information and create deterritorialised global nations (Smith, 1988; Robertson, 1990) is a practice identified in the literature on globalisation and transnationalism. In this paper we study how Colombian and Venezuelan immigrant organisations use websites to portray organisation leaders' interpretations of the identity and concerns of their immigrant communities. They create an image for their unique cultural and national identification or what has been called a long distance nationalism of ethnic diasporas (Anderson, 1983). Appadurai's 'ethnoscares' or landscapes of group identity address concerns of the study of deterritorialised cultural forms of transnational character, where the homeland exists in the imagination of members of transient communities (Appadurai, 1996). For our analytic purposes, we also adopt the concept of 'mediascares' which in our study refers to the production and dissemination, via websites, of 'ethnoscares or imaged-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality of both immigrant communities' (Appadurai, 1996: 35).

Transnational theory has been central in our understanding of the dynamics of the immigrant communities, their links with their countries of origin, and their mobility and incorporation into the host society. Transnationalism has been defined empirically as regular involvement in activities across national borders, most commonly with actors or organisations in the immigrants' home countries (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 2003; Portes et al., 2009). We study messages and self-portrait images that emerge from the immigrant organisations and are shared with the world. We employ a different analytical approach distant from the

analysis of behaviors. Instead we use the concept of the transnational social field, put forth by Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2003), which proposes a view of society and social membership that distinguishes between ways of being and ways of belonging. Ways of belonging refers to practices that demonstrate connection with a particular group. In this sense, the transnational social field and ways of being appear as a conceptual instrument for the analysis of portrayals of immigrant organisations (Levitt and Schiller, 2003; Levitt and Waters, 2002; Levitt, 2001, 2002; Portes and DeWind, 2007).

At the intersection of globalisation and transnationalism, other authors (Roudometof, 2002; Roudometof and Robertson, 2001) refer to transnationalism as an emerging new reality of social life under conditions of globalisation, glocalisation, and internal globalisation, where people can choose to be global or local with open or closed attitudes respectively. They distinguish three levels of transnational interaction: social spaces, social fields, and networks.

Social spaces are created by high density of interstitial ties on informal and formal cross border social relations (Faist, 2000; Faist and Özveren, 2004). Social fields are a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are exchanged, organised, and transformed (Levitt and Schiller, 2004). The study of images and immigrant organisations' public messages examines the outcomes of unequal exchanges in a deterritorialised space when a group of individuals sharing different experiences but a common identity attempt to create a discourse and create images of their community, their organisation, and themselves as collective immigrants.

Although we study immigrant organisations and we expect to identify their transnational character, it is important to notice that not all immigrants are transnational migrants and not all transnational migrants participate in immigrant organisations. However, they have common characteristics; they are first generation migrants, morally tied to their family and communities in the countries of origin, highly educated, well-connected, and firmly established in the host country (Portes, 1999). We can say that some immigrants, in their roles as instrumental adapters or purposeful innovators, are the ones that will lead and participate in the formation of the immigrant organisations and therefore in the creation of images and discourses that shape not only their identity but the way they want to be perceived by other members of the community and by the host society.

Furthermore, the recent immigration from Latin American countries requires social spaces for immigrants' search for social integration and economic stability that links their identities to their Latino origins. In this analysis we focus on the manner that public portrayals of immigrant organisations serve as social spaces that allow for the negotiation of immigrants' new identity.

STRUCTURAL TRENDS: SIMILARITY OR CONTRASTING ELEMENTS

In order to contextualise the background of the immigrants who belong to the organisations we study, we provide a multilevel analysis which includes an approach to the structural trends and their impacts on Colombia and Venezuela in recent decades. During the 1980s and 1990s, structural adjustment programs were applied similarly and simultaneously in

Latin American countries, affecting their economies in unprecedented ways (Massey and Capoferro, 2006; Massey, Sanchez-R and Behrman 2006; Stiglitz, 2003). In general, the previous existing model of import substitution industrialisation (ISI) gave way to a new model of neoliberal globalisation which generated significant professional unemployment (Wacquant, 2001; Stiglitz, 2003). Moreover, the recent nationalisation of the energy enterprise in Venezuela is a factor determining the departure of professionals and high-skilled workers. In addition, insecurity and violence become important factors generating emigration pressures in the region. (Wacquant, 2000, 2001, 2008; Portes et al., 2005c)

Social inequalities are evident in both countries. The distribution of wealth and income illustrates the paradox of rich countries with high poverty levels (World Bank Indicators, 2007, 2009). Structurally rooted social inequalities have generated an increasingly violent environment. Under conditions of extreme social exclusion and economic isolation, interpersonal relations and institutions became adapted to the constant reality of crime that has legitimised violent social behavior (Pedrazzini and Sanchez-R, 1998; Sanchez-R, 2006).

The patterns of violence in both countries are different; Colombia experienced periods of violence in large areas of the country for the greater part of the twentieth century and recently seems to be under control and negotiation. However, in Venezuela, violence has become extremely complex and has increasing numbers of victims.. Today the Colombian government reports control and engages in negotiation on the territories of violence. In contrast in Venezuela there are large extensions of land controlled by paramilitary groups (UNODC, 2012). One common factor in the region is that networks operating illegal economic activities are expressed in the same ways (Arias and Goldstein, 2010).

The net economic cost of the Colombian conflict between 1991 and 1996 was equivalent to an average of 3.1 percent of the GDP annually, and the decline in life expectancy yielded an economic loss of about 3.2 percent of GDP (Garfield and Arboleda, 2002). According to Cárdenas (2001), the period between 1980 and 2000 was characterised by a vicious cycle of decreasing productivity, high crime, low growth, and increasing concentration of wealth. In contrast, Venezuela's insecurity and violence appears as a relatively recent problem, a shadow that progressively transformed public spaces, and created a general social fear that traverses all social groups, statuses, and neighborhoods. In regard to the structural adjustments and their deteriorating results, Venezuela shifted politically from a democratic regime based on agreements and alliances to a populist authoritarian military democracy.

The precarious economic situation of the poor and the social exclusion of disadvantaged youth caused the latter to turn to criminal violence in the form of youth gangs, sometimes linked with criminal mafias, drugs, and cartels' (Sanchez-R, 2005, 2006). Figure 1 shows a time trend of homicide rates in the region. The trend for Colombia has decreased since 2002 due to government efforts to end the armed conflict by implementing different strategies in various administrations. However, there is an increasing trend in Venezuela, with a sharp jump in 2003, and this trend shows that the crime rates have been constantly rising at increasing rates. Contrasting the trends expressed in Figure 1, the homicide rate in the United States since 1950 has never been higher than 10.2 (in 1980) and has decreased in recent years (Federal Bureau of Investigation and US Department of Justice, 2008).

Better quality of life and low levels of violence in the US attract Latin Americans familiar with the North American culture after years of commerce and trade and increasing communication. Once in the US, these immigrants create organisations and start to emerge as agents who try to frame their own portraits in a moment of increasing discrimination against immigrants (Massey and Sánchez-R, 2010).

The expansion of violence has been a growing significant factor explaining international migration, particularly recently for Venezuelans (Sanchez-R, 2011b, 2011c). Civil wars and internal conflicts have negative effects on human and social capital. and violence has been a factor in the out-migration of persons searching for better conditions outside the country (Pellegrino, 2011).

Clearly, out-migration is related to several factors converging with conditions of life. If insecurity and violence are dominant, other elements also become compromised as economic stability, job security, and technological advancement play a joint role in international migration. We will follow with the description of sociodemographic characteristics and the analysis of the organisations formed by some of these immigrants.

COLOMBIAN AND VENEZUELAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Colombian and Venezuelan immigrants are similar, more educated than other Latino immigrant groups, are from countries where violence and insecurity expansion has been affecting quality of life, and share an international border and a history of international migration among them (Pellegrino, 2011). However, the history of their migration to the United States differs. Colombians began to arrive and settle in large numbers in Venezuela and the United States in the 1960s, a time that marks the end of the period known as *La Violencia* and the starting point of the current conflict between the guerillas and the Colombian State. During this first stage of the Colombian emigration, a large number of professionals and college graduates arrived in the New York City, New Jersey, and South Florida areas. The subsequent periods of large migration are the 1980s with the oil crisis and at the end of 1990s due to the political instability and deepest recession in Colombian history. Venezuelans began to arrive in the United States later in the 1980s, and in large numbers after 1998.

The Colombian and Venezuelan populations in the United States differ in one significant way: the Colombian community is more established and numerous, but is no longer growing at increasing rates, whereas the Venezuelan community is more recent and continues to grow and increase rapidly. The Colombian immigrant population has remained more permanently in the United States, as indicated by the number of immigrants admitted. The Venezuelan population, although it has historically regularly visited the United States, generally did not intend to reside in the US for long periods of time until recently, when the number of admitted immigrants rose. The difference in age of the immigrant community in the US is critical to understanding the differences in their profiles. Our assumption is corroborated with the data shown in Table 1. According to the data from the 2007 American Community Survey (US Census Bureau, 2007) of the roughly 38 million foreign-born persons living in the United States at that time, 604,527 were from Colombia and 155,492

from Venezuela. Forty six percent of the Colombian immigrants were naturalised US citizens in contrast to 30 percent of the Venezuelan immigrants. Moreover, where as 42.2 percent of Colombians arrived to the US prior to 1990, only 22.7 percent of the Venezuelans did so. In addition, 44.4 percent of the Venezuelan population arrived on or after 2000, compared with just 29.4 percent of the Colombian population.

In general, the South American immigrant population in the United States is younger and more educated than the native population. Table 2 shows that both immigrant populations are concentrated in the productive age groups. Furthermore, the more egalitarian gender distribution of Venezuelan immigrant population might indicate the migration not of individuals but of families. This last argument is supported by the differences in the proportion of children less than 18 years of age. Colombia had only 7.2 percent of their population in this young age group while Venezuela almost doubles this figure with 13.8 percent. Another indication of the recent arrival of Venezuelans, versus the more established Colombian community, is the proportion of persons older than 54 years of age. While in the Colombian community we observe a similar proportion as in the American population at 24.3 percent and 23.4 percent respectively, the proportion of Venezuelans in this age group is only 11.4 percent.

The analysis of educational attainment indicates significant differences between the levels of education in the Colombian, Venezuelan, and American population 25 years and older living in the United States. The level of education of the Colombian population is similar to that of the American population. About 30 percent of both populations are high school graduates, about 45 percent had some college or were college graduates, and about 10 percent hold a graduate or professional degree. The level of education of the Colombian population in the US has decreased over time, suggesting a moderation of the positive self-selection process (Aysa, 2007). In contrast, the Venezuelan population is highly educated. Only 6 percent has less than high school diploma versus 15.5 percent of the native and 16.9 percent of the Colombian populations. Only 18.2 percent were high school graduates in comparison to the 30 percent of the Colombian and native populations, and almost double the percentage had bachelor's degrees (29.3 percent vs. 19.8 percent and 17.4 percent) and graduate or professional degrees (21.4 percent vs. 10.10 percent and 10.4 percent).

The profile of the Venezuelan population might indicate two phenomena. First, since the Venezuelan immigrant population arrived relatively recently to the United States, its immigrants are positively selected compared with the population that resides in the country of origin. In other words, only those who possess the abilities, resources, and credentials migrate because they are the ones with the highest probability of success in the United States (Chiswick, 2005). Second, the most educated and talented professionals are leaving the country to escape the authoritarian political conditions, the economic crises derived from these conditions, and the insecurity and violence that is reducing their quality of life. The profile of the immigrant populations and their contexts of origin are important factors to understand the way immigrant organisations delineate their identities and create their portrayals.

METHODOLOGY

In this analysis we investigate immigrant organisations and their public portrayals and incorporate the study of Venezuelan organisations into the literature. We compare this group with its most similar and well documented case: Colombian immigrant organisations.

In order to gather data on Colombian and Venezuelan immigrant organisations, and to advance some comparative analyses on how immigrants from these two groups construct the images of their organisations, we proceeded to conduct an extensive search of the organisations' websites by using different Internet search engines. We pose that each immigrant organisation's goals and mission statements show the search for social spaces, and also the creation of an image that reflects its needs and desires to the larger immigrant community and host society. We are aware of the limitation for an in depth analysis of immigrant organisations practices. However, this analysis focuses on the creation of their public images, and the way that immigrant organisations portray themselves in terms of the goals and major justifications for their existence. Therefore, this method of data collection allowed us to collect comparable data on immigrant organisations from both countries established in the US

Our sample contains information on the immigrant organisations that have, at minimum, sufficient resources to maintain an updated website. However, some organisations that might have limited resources but are formally registered appear in the Internet listings. We gathered data on 46 immigrant organisations headed by immigrants from Colombia (24) and Venezuela (22) in the United States. We included organisations with websites identified using the keywords 'immigrant organisation', 'Colombia', and 'Venezuela'. The sample was designed to yield a comparable number of observations from each country. To learn more about these immigrant organisations we built a comparable database with the information provided in the website of each organisation. The data contained information on their goals and mission statements, the year of formation, location, main activities, web links to other organisations, engagement in transnational activities, language in which the information was presented, and type of URL (whether the page was independent or linked to a larger organisation). To create an analytical coding scheme that allowed us to compare the profile of the organisations, we conducted content analysis of main activities, goals, and mission statements that the organisations projected and presented in the online portals. The codes derived from the analysis emerged from the text. Each of the authors coded the text and then the codes and their definitions and contents were compared for consistency and discussed in case of disagreement. We did not have preconceived analytical frameworks to extract the codes from the data. Our results originate from the constant comparison within and between groups of organisations. The subsequent codes were later grouped in four themes: transnational links, socio-cultural activities, and networking and business activities. After coding the description of the main activities and mission and goals statements, we proceeded to construct a matrix that indicated the presence or absence of each code for each organisation, allowing us to build an exhaustive and inclusive analysis of all our units of observation.

THE IMMIGRANT ORGANISATIONS

The emergence of immigrant organisations is usually the task of the well-established, successful, and first generation migrants who have the cultural, human, social, and financial assets to lead and participate in community efforts. Many studies on the topic underscore the role of the organisations as facilitators in the integration of the immigrant community into the host society, as providers of social spaces to maintain the culture of the communities of origin, and as nodes that facilitate the creation of dense networks that foster communication between the immigrant community, service providers, and local authorities (Caselli, 2009). Other studies have stressed that elites use immigrant organisations as vehicles to incorporate immigrants in the politics of the sending nations (Popkin, 2005). Furthermore, other studies have stressed the fact that immigrant organisations are the results of grassroots movements that distance themselves from any political project and government programs in the country of origin (Escobar, 2010a; Guarnizo, 2006). Finally, immigrant organisations have also been studied as social spaces that arise as a response to the needs of discriminated immigrant populations (Portes, 1999; Massey and Sanchez-R, 2010). While understanding the role of organisations is important, here we focus on how the immigrant community leaders shape the image of their organisations.

We cannot understand the formation of immigrant organisations just by identifying the possible causes of immigration and the profile of the immigrant community. Civil and community organisations are more common in the United States than in Colombia or Venezuela. For example, in 2000 the non-profit sector in the US employed about 9 percent of the labour force. It is a sector that has steadily grown, partially supported by the exercise of individual rights and the promotion of diversity (Hammack, 2002).

Colombian Immigrant Organisations

As mentioned earlier, Colombian society historically has been highly stratified. Differences in class, ethnicity, and region can explain the lack of social cohesion of the civil society and in Colombian communities abroad (Guarnizo, Sanchez and Roach, 1999). Due to the expansion of the international drug market and criminal networks, Colombian immigrants were stigmatised during the 1980s (Portes et al., 2003; Guarnizo et al., 1999). As a consequence, the political participation of Colombians via immigrant associations and other public organisations was minimised because of fear and mistrust. The stigma attached to the Colombian community and the obvious differences in class and regions can be considered as elements that help explain the lack of cohesion in the Colombian community abroad. The lack of cohesion among the Colombian community is also evidenced by their lack of political participation. Although Colombians have the right to vote in Colombian presidential elections, and Colombians living abroad have a representative in the Colombian National Congress, their political participation is very limited (Portes, Escobar and Radford, 2005b).

Through the program Colombia Nos Une (Colombia Unites Us) and by branding the country through campaigns such as Colombia es Pasión (Colombia is Passion), the government has aided the Colombian community abroad in two ways: it has facilitated community formation through a series of leadership workshops and events; and it has provided a unifying positive

national image and sense of belonging. These two effects are collateral because neither of these policies is directed to the broad and diverse Colombian diaspora. The neoliberal project, reflected in the business activities facilitated by Colombia Nos Une and the touristic promotional scope of Colombia es Pasión, have limited the impact of both initiatives.

The analysis of the mission statements and main objectives of the 24 organisations included in the study (see Table 3) suggests that some Colombian immigrants maintain communication with Colombian organisations and disadvantaged communities through their organisations in the United States and dynamically participate in activities in Colombia. The mission statement of 25 percent of the organisations mention being engaged in activities in Colombia, and 29 percent contributed to and develop projects of humanitarian assistance. For example, one of the organisations describes that its main aim is: 'to generate revenues to develop high impact programs in regions where violence caused hunger and misery'. Over the years Colombians have created immigrant transnational organisations that are connected to other well established community organisations in urban centers in Colombia, serving as distribution channels of collective or philanthropic remittances for specific projects that are aimed at improving the lives of poor children or disadvantaged persons in Colombia (Aysa, 2007).

Colombian student organisations in the United States emerged among the most significant in our sample. The high participation of Colombian students might be explained by the demographic profile of the Colombian community abroad, being a young population with a deficit in education when compared to Venezuelans or the US population in general. Another potential explanation is the long duration of the immigration flows, as these organisations can count on the participation of students born in Colombia as well as on second generation Colombians in the United States.

The promotion of cultural activities was often mentioned as an objective of the Colombian organisations; fifty-four percent of the organisations stated their aim is to promote and preserve Colombian traditions and provide ways to maintain their culture among migrants and their US born children. For example, the mission statements often included the following phrases: 'promote Colombian culture', 'keep alive Colombian cultural expressions', 'celebrate Colombian art and culture', and 'maintain and disseminate our patriotic symbols, our traditions and cultural and family values'.

The stigma attached to illicit activities and the long series of violent political events in Colombia had adverse effects for the image of the country and Colombian communities abroad. As an effort to vindicate the country's image and the good things that Colombia has to offer to the world, 29 percent of the Colombian organisations said their goal is to improve the image of Colombia in the US. We highlight this particular item because we did not identify it in the case of Venezuela and it appears to be a motivation for participation in Colombian immigrant organisations. For example, the mission statement of one organisation states, 'Beyond the headlines of violence and drugs, there is a wonderful country. Our goal is to share a positive image of this country and its people'. Some other examples of the importance of improving the image of Colombia and of Colombians in the US are: 'portray

a positive image of Colombia and its people', 'changing the image of Colombia and extolling the name of our country'.

About 30 percent of the organisations show an interest in enhancing the communications among Colombians in the US. They recognise the need for social organisation in immigrant communities and their importance in the US, which might signal a potential change in attitudes and might indicate that in the future we will witness the emergence of a large and organised Colombian community in the US. Examples of the recognition of the need for spaces of social integration are reflected in the following phrases: 'organise and carry out projects that improve our local community', 'striving to develop the wellbeing of Colombians in the US', 'provide assistance, information, counseling and support to the Colombian community and most of all to those who have recently arrived in their efforts to adapt to their new life', and 'enhance unity among Colombian residents in [this] country'.

Over the years we observe an interesting variation in that even though socio-cultural activities dominate the priorities of organisations, network priorities grow more important relative to transnational goals, implying that Colombian immigrant organisations have become more interested in activities related to immigrant integration, and give increasing priority to communication and information inside the United States. Over time, Colombian immigrant organisations have become more active inside US society, contradicting the apathetic and indifferent stereotype. This is consistent with their higher rates of permanent residence in US.

Venezuelan Immigrant Organisations

Venezuelan immigrant organisations are mainly recent formations, due to the expanding Venezuelan diaspora in the last decade. In general, they progressively emerged in the year 2000 and later years. Like Colombian organisations, Venezuelan organisations portray goals and priorities related to transnational links, socio-cultural aspects, networks, and institutional links.

In this analysis of organisations, we should remember that the codes were not mutually exclusive and exhaustive, but rather defined by plurality of intentions and goals, often with an emphasis of one, two, or three of these characteristics. Reviewing the 22 Venezuelan immigrant organisations, we find that a significant number agree in defining socio-cultural activities as a priority. In their website portrayals, 36 percent of the organisations name cultural goals as a priority, followed by 27 percent declaring community services as a priority.

As one of the organisations in the Northeast states, 'This is a not for profit organisation, its mission is to promote the culture, traditions, folklore and roots of Venezuela in the Delaware Valley region, also known as The Greater Philadelphia region, through cultural, artistic, educational, community and social events and programs'. Another association in Florida describes itself 'to be a gathering center for the preservation and diffusion of our culture and traditions [...] and its goal is to contribute to better quality of life of Venezuelans in the [area] in a progressive and solidarity way'.

Only 9 percent of organisations appear to be defined as student associations, and similarly, 5 percent of those organisations declared other goals related to politics, social mobility, or quality of life. Of the Venezuelan organisations with transnational links, 14 percent appear to be promoting issues in the country of origin. This endorsement reflects the recent political history of the country, which has created a demand for information and mobilisation, such as gathering signatures for referendums, for example, during the initial years between 2000 and 2003.

Some organisations are described as networks, and those related to higher education represent a high percentage of the Venezuelan organisations. Of these, 60 percent are significantly related to network communication, but 9 percent in particular are established as network organisations for social integration.

Venezuelan immigrant organisations, however, emerged only recently and although transnational links and socio-cultural activities appear as priority goals, network activities are the most salient, explaining not only the priority placed on information and communication within the Venezuelan immigrant community, but also that high levels of education facilitate and promote *fast* communication between immigrants.

Recently and due to the political polarisation outcome of the Chavez model, Venezuelan immigrant organisations redefined their goals with the aim of embracing any Venezuelan immigrant independent of his/her political position. We observed how the organisations became highly inclined to promote only cultural aspects. Some emphasised in their goals statement that they were non-political organisations, and finally others expressly positioned themselves as non-governmental organisations. For example some of the organisations were defined as ‘a socio cultural group (non-political, non-religious) that respects all the political tendencies of their members ...’ or ‘[it] is a civic, autonomic, independent and NON governmental organisation’. Their goal is to contribute to the unity and solidarity of Venezuelan immigrants for a better quality of life and integration into US society.

Finally, 91 percent of Venezuelan organisations and 88 percent of Colombian organisations provided network links, either to other immigrant organisations, to organisations related to the Latino community, or to organisations providing general services for the community.

The Venezuelan organisations became more visible in US society after 2000, and the majority of them appear to be concentrated in the Northeast and Southern regions of the country. Florida and the Northeast corridor have the highest concentration of Venezuelan immigrants. In the Midwest region, the creation of a number of organisations after 2000 has been significant. In the West, we only found Venezuelan organisations after 2000, indicating the recent arrival of the immigrant permanent flow to this region. Some Colombian organisations were formed before 2000. Although Colombian organisations are also concentrated in Florida and the Northeast corridor, corresponding to the residential patterns of immigrants, we observe a number of organisations in other regions as well. The expansion and emergence of immigrant organisations in different regions of the country not only reveals the growing number of immigrants from South America, particularly Venezuelans and Colombians, but also the expansion of destinations within the United

States, consistent with the patterns of Latin American immigrants from other countries in the region (Massey, 2008).

Our analysis of the data shows that immigrant organisations from Colombia and Venezuela have different profiles. These variations by country of origin are linked to the differences in the profile of their immigrant populations, particularly their human capital, the timing of their arrival, the length of their presence in the host society, and the changing scenarios in both the exit and the reception contexts.

Our analysis provides a comparison of the portrayals created by immigrant organisations in an effort to voice their concerns to the public, provide an image of the immigrant organisation, shape their immigrant identity, and try to preserve their cultures and by engaging in transnational activities and constructing their countries' images. These spaces in which the organisations project their goals and portray their images through websites show a permanent intentionality to maintain transnational links with the country of origin. In the case of Colombian organisations, we clearly see the presence of a transnational dimension, particularly in cases with an active participation and support by the Colombian State and government. Contrasting this is the case of Venezuelan immigrant organisations, where we can only see the presence or absence of the transnational dimension in their intention of taking distance from the current government, or positioning themselves as apolitical organisations, attending to all Venezuelan immigrants by promoting cultural and artistic activities.

CONCLUSIONS

We analyse immigrants' contexts of exit, the characteristics of the immigrant population, and the contents of the websites produced by a sample of Colombian and Venezuelan organisations in the United States. We understand an immigrant organisation as the creation of a social space in which international migrants, usually with a shared national origin, band together to identify activities that they could not otherwise accomplish by themselves.

The framework provided by Appadurai (1996) helped us to consider massive access to electronic media and migration as the two major components in the creation of imagined spaces that transcend national borders and shape everyday discourse. By creating websites, immigrant groups that have common concerns and goals create portrayals of themselves and participate in shaping the discourse about their communities. The members of immigrant organisations are likely to be well-established immigrants with the human, cultural, and financial capital to engage in community efforts (Portes, Escobar and Radford, 2005a). Although Venezuelans have arrived more recently than Colombians and are on average more educated, both groups have a wealth of accumulated human capital that facilitates their engagement with groups and organisations. Immigrants who participate in immigrant organisations engage in social relationships and develop goals and missions for these organisations that are communicated through the Internet. These exchanges of ideas link those who migrated, those who stay behind, and those in the country of destination who may have never been in the country of origin or have limited information about it. They create a

transnational social field (Levitt and Schiller, 2004) that transcends the boundaries of their social spaces composed only by their social relations.

In order to understand the context in which these organisations emerge and create their images and portrayals, we incorporate an analysis of immigrants' contexts of exit. In the Colombian case, their urban context of exit, during a period of very high levels of political violence and distrust in the political institutions (i.e., their government), explains the low levels of participation among Colombian immigrants in their organisations in the United States compared to other Latino immigrants groups such as Mexicans and Dominicans (Escobar, 2010a; Guarnizo, 2006). In the Venezuelan case, recent years of authoritarian regime and destruction of alliances with middle and professional classes set up the arena for immigrants to initially organise as a political response and later to promote community identity.

We also found differences in the role of national governments in promoting policies toward their diasporas. In the case of Colombia, the program Colombia Nos Une has supplemented the efforts of the community leaders and even provided an institutional platform that facilitates the immigrants' participation in Colombian organisations abroad. For analytical purposes it is important to focus on the rationale for these actions, keeping in mind that immigrant communities abroad are increasingly becoming important providers of economic resources, particularly during times of crisis, and have been influential in the political arena in the countries of origin.

The analysis allows us to compare the formation and dynamics of the immigrant organisations for both countries which are both dominantly self-defined by socio-cultural as well as transnational links. Organisations with cultural statements are common for both countries, accounting for 54 percent of Colombian and 36 percent of Venezuelan organisations. The significant differences in socio-cultural goals among Colombian organisations are attributable to student organisations or national image consciousness. In contrast, providing community services to the origin population appears to be important to Venezuelan organisations. Transnational links is characterised as humanitarian assistance (29 percent) and activities with the origin country by the Colombian organisation, whereas for Venezuelans, promotion of the origin country appears to be predominant. This characteristic is related to political events in which Venezuelan immigrant organisations were originally involved. In terms of dynamics of immigrant organisations and activities related with networks, Venezuelan organisations frequently possess networks for communication and possess a high density of links with other organisations. Colombian organisations give similar importance to highlighting the construction of networks for social integration.

The electronic and public portrayals of Colombian and Venezuelan immigrant organisations and our multilevel approach provide a window through which we describe migrant agency in opening spaces for identity negotiation and construction of alternative images they want to be identified with and not the images that are imposed upon them by the media, particularly in the current anti-immigrant times.

This comparative analysis is a first glance at the intersection of the use of electronic media by groups and international migration. In this emerging area of study there is a need for the development of methods of analysis that contextualise these new social spaces in which immigrants exercise their agency and create non-traditional social spaces that transcend their transnational communities. This paper is a step toward this direction.

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Figure 1.

Homicide Rate in Colombia and Venezuela. Homicides per 100,000 Inhabitants between 1985 and 2010.

Source: authors estimations base on Public data in Colombia: from DNP until 2001, y CIC-DIJIN from 2002, and in Venezuela: from the Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, 2011

Table 1

Citizenship Status of the Foreign Born Population in the US by Country of Birth (inhabitants) and Percentage Distribution by Period of Entry (%)

	US Total	Colombia	Venezuela
Foreign born	38,059,694	604,527	155,492
Naturalised US citizen	16,181,883	279,524	46,320
Not a US citizen	21,877,811	325,003	109,172
Period of Entry			
Entered 2000 or later	27.7	29.4	44.4
Entered 1990 to 1999	29.4	28.4	32.9
Entered before 1990	42.9	42.2	22.7

Source: authors estimations based on Public data from US Census 2000

Table 2

Percentage Distribution of the Characteristics of the US Population and the Foreign-Born Population by Country of Birth (%)

	US	Colombia	Venezuela
Total population	301,621,159	604,527	155,492
Gender			
male	49.3	43.8	47.7
female	49.7	56.2	52.3
Age			
Under 5 years	6.9	0.4	0.7
5 to 17 years	17.7	6.8	13.1
18 to 24 years	9.9	15.7	22.1
25 to 34 years	13.3	15.7	22.1
35 to 44 years	14.4	24.7	26.1
45 to 54 years	14.6	21.5	16.0
55 to 64 years	10.9	11.9	6.7
64 to 74 years	6.4	7.3	3.1
75 years and over	6.1	4.1	1.6
Educational attainment for the population 25 years and over			
Less than high school diploma	15.5	16.9	6.1
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	30.1	29.4	18.2
Some college or associate's degree	26.9	23.5	25.0
Bachelor's degree	17.4	19.8	29.3
Graduate or professional degree	10.1	10.0	21.4

Source: authors estimations base on Public data from the American Community Survey 2007

Table 3

Percentage Distribution of the Analytic Codes from Mission Statements and Goals as Published on by 24 Colombian and 22 Venezuelan Immigrants Organisations in the United States on their Web Sites (%)

Immigrants organisation goals	Colombian	Venezuelan
Transnational links		
Act with the original country	25	9
Original country promotion	4	14
Humanitarian assistance	29	0
Resources coordination (donation to NGO)	4	5
Research on country of origin and/or community problems	8	0
Socio-cultural		
Students Association	42	9
Political promotion	0	5
Cultural	54	36
Quality life social mobility	8	5
Social mobility	4	5
Community services in US Latino pop	13	5
Community service for country of origin population	13	27
Youth organisation	0	0
Apolitical organisation	4	5
National image	29	0
Network		
Network for social integration	29	9
Network for communication	21	59
Higher education	13	0
Links	88	91
Other		
Business activities	13	0

Source: authors own calculations from collected data on Immigrants organisations