Online energies: an exploration of virtual sociability modes in "Llave Mariana"

Energías en línea: una exploración de los modos de sociabilidad virtual en el caso de la "Llave Mariana"

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we propose to address the way in which the use of virtual platforms shapes a spiritual movement known as "Llave Mariana" and its social life. We take into account its forms of dissemination, interaction and practices in the online world and the way in which these features dialogue with its cosmological and ritual elements. This spiritual movement can be considered as a part of Argentina's New Age and has the peculiarity of mixing typically New Age elements –taken from Orientalist traditions, such as the language linked to chakras and energy– with Catholic figures, especially Virgin Mary. However, the group develops explicitly outside any institutional or territorial Catholic structure. As for the methodology, a combined approach complementing virtual ethnography techniques with traditional fieldwork resources were aplied, mainly participant observation in the field and semi-structured interviews. The conclusions in this article aim to understand the virtual dimension within the spiritual realms as more than a mere "reflection" of reality but as a habitable space that modifies subject's experiences and emotions as well as promotes new ways of community representation.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la forma en la que el uso de plataformas virtuales moldea la vida de un movimiento espiritual conocido como "Llave Mariana". Se revisan sus formas de difusión, interacción y prácticas en el mundo en línea y la manera en las que estos aspectos dialogan con sus elementos cosmológicos y rituales. Este movimiento espiritual pertenece a la corriente de la Nueva Era en Argentina y posee la particularidad de combinar elementos de New Age (provenientes de las tradiciones orientalistas, como el lenguaje vinculado a los chakras y la energía), con figuras del panteón católico, especialmente la Virgen María. No obstante, el grupo se desarrolla explícitamente por fuera de la estructura institucional y territorial de la Iglesia Católica. En cuanto a la metodología, se utilizaron las técnicas de la etnografía virtual que se complementaron con recursos tradicionales del trabajo de campo etnográfico, especialmente la observación participante en el terreno y las entrevistas semiestructuradas. Las conclusiones de este artículo apuntan a comprender la dimensión virtual dentro de los ámbitos espirituales, no como un reflejo de lo real sino como un espacio habitable que introduce modificaciones en las experiencias y emociones de los sujetos, así como también vehiculiza nuevas formas de representación a partir de los miembros de una comunidad.

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Paakat, Revista de Tecnología y Sociedad, Year 9, no. 17 (2019) ● September 2019-February 2020
eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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Introduction

This paper falls within an ongoing research in which we analyze the cosmovision aspects and rituals of the LLave Mariana [The Mariana Key Meditation] as part of a repertoire of alternative spiritualities we could situate within the New Age current (Carozzi, 1993; Frigerio, 2013; Semán y Viotti, 2015). This current may be understood as a matrix meaning based on holistic principles that establish connections and analogies between the self and the cosmos under the utopic inspiration of modifying the world and its relationships (De la Torre y Gutiérrez, 2013).

The New Age Era current in Argentina develops spiritual knowledge practices and systems aiming at generating experiences promoting the participants' wellbeing. These may include group workshops, short-term seminars or individual consultations which, in some cases, address emotional, psychic and physical equilibrium or are intended to deepen self-knowledge.

These practices are more widespread in the middle layers of the major urban centers; nonetheless, it is becoming more relevant in the popular sectors of these cities. Its followers circulate more broadly among spaces that propose alternative ways of taking care of their body and maintaining it healthy, as well as seeking non-hegemonic alternatives to deal with illness, pain and emotional discomfort (through alternative therapies and different forms of meditation). This set of elements, together with the key topics of the energetic interpretation of the universe and the search to return to the ancestral times of supposed harmony between man and nature, shape the landscape of the New Age practices and beliefs in Argentina.

Next, we will explain the particularities that ethnographies possess in cyberspace and the way in which these become a possible – and significant – path to deal with spiritual and religious phenomena. Subsequently, we will present a brief explanation of the genesis, cosmovision characteristics and morphological structure of the Llave Mariana, i.e., the existing subdivisions and the criteria or events they respond to. We will also give details of the first virtual contacts with which we approached the group to explain the way they inhabit cyberspace, their mechanisms of interaction, diffusion and characteristics, that rituals acquire in this environment.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach to Cyberspace Ethnography

According to anthropologist Martinez Ojeda (2006), the implementation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has set up new cultural maps where the interpretations of the symbolic processes that make up human subjectivity and intersubjectivity have been modified. This process of change which has been modified by the author with the concept of *Homo digitalis*, refers to the existence of new ways of interaction and relation among people which consequence is the emergence of virtual communities.

Paakat, Revista de Tecnología y Sociedad, Year 9, no. 17 (2019) ● September 2019-February 2020
eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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Therefore, the ethnographic interest in these contexts is pursued through approaching the behaviors of individuals when they are connected and the social relationships they build as of these actions. In turn, it addresses the way in which the representations and constructions of meanings are updated based on the means provided by the new technologies that operate through the Internet.

The virtual world is a new horizon in which people live, exchange and create relationships which, notwithstanding their particular nature, cannot be interpreted as superficial or of little real impact *per se.* What prevails in this field research is a logic of continuity and complementarity among the relations, actions and emotions at play in these differential instances. Hence, the premise of Citro and Puglisi (2015) is useful in understanding individuals with multiple intersubjective networks that develop in person or virtually.

Since new technologies are also communication tools and new arenas in which the social world revolves; it therefore applies a combined, mobile and connective methodology (Dyke, 2013), in order to transit and analyze these scenarios without weighing – *a priori* – one over the other. Part of the proposals for the study of what is happening in the virtual environment is netnography (Kozinets, 2010), an ethnographic method focused on the study of cyberspace and the networks being developed on the Internet. Netnography is presented as a research technique in which the object of study is the social life of the network and the field of study are the virtual communities.

The virtual ethnographic method is suitable for our study since it addresses what happens in the relations between the physical and virtual contexts, as well as the construction and development of technology-mediated relations (Ruiz and Aguirre, 2015). The interaction between the individual and the virtual environment deserve careful analysis since there are particularities and differences in the practices developed in the two types of platforms being revised in this paper (Facebook and WhatsApp).

This type of study must be accompanied by the use of data comparison tools and methods (Hutchings, 2011; Murthy, 2008), besides taking as knowledge input what also occurs in the physical dimension. It is important for this analysis to retake Campos García's perspective (2002) that points out that virtual communities (together with the symbolic products that emerge from them) do not develop autonomously or in isolation, but they rather subscribe to political and cultural mapping of social reality.

To talk about our area of research, i.e., the use of technologies in religious or spiritual environments, Campbell (2005) pointed out that the Internet has undergone a "spiritualization process" since it has been approached as a technology or suitable space for religious engagement, which offers the users the possibility to include virtual activities in line with their spiritual life.

Likewise, María Papenfuss (2019) has used the concept of cyber-religiousness from the communication and information culture standpoint. She points out that the virtualization

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eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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of religion has caused individuals to access a greater range of religions; hence, broadening their global religious panorama and allowing the coexistence of a variety of religious views (and their heterodoxies) marked by dogmatic fluidity. As we will see in our case study, the dynamics mentioned by Papenfuss entails the permanent reconfiguration of the horizon of beliefs and the narrowing of the syncretic possibilities between cosmologies, religious and spiritual knowledge.

Within religious and spiritual netnographies there are relevant studies that have contributed to this debate with original ideas. First, in their work, Renée de la Torre and Lizette Campechano (2013) have addressed the case of the *conchera* danse as a cult that reinforces the sense of the neo-Mexicanity by drawing up the Aztec-Indigenous ancestrality and a considerable use of web pages connected on the net.

Next, within the Brazilian context, the work of Alberto Calil Junior (2008), who analyzes the existence of the "virtual spiritualist world" and the possible methodologies that adapt to his study. His work also highlights the symbolic confluence of the spiritist movement and its cosmology (accustomed to the dialogue with entities materially absent conceived in a deterritorialized world) with a virtual space. Lastly, different Buddhist communities in Argentina have been analyzed in regard to the use of technologies that mediate their rituals and learning processes (Carini, 2009; Carini y Gracia, 2016).

Genesis and morphology of the Llave Mariana

The following chronology and description of the movement was developed based on the mapping of the information available on different web sites as well as on interviews and observations carried out with their instructors and followers.

The Llave Mariana emerged in Buenos Aires, in 2002, based on a revelation that occurred within a group of Reiki[i] disciples who requested from Heaven to make progress on their energy and spiritual learning path.

Veronica, one of the disciples, received a symbol and a series of divine messages in the form of revelation. This symbol and the messages are considered the work of Mother Mary (name also given to the Virgin Mary in the group messages) and possess a prophetic nature. These are also believed to grant humanity a series of essential knowledge to overcome the difficulties of the contemporary world and to begin certain energetic transformations aiming at generating a planetary change through love and the elevation of consciousness.

The learning of the Llave Mariana implies an initiation instance consisting of the transmission of the central points of the technique and the performance of two essential rituals: the chakras potentiation of the apprentices and a harmonizing meditation. As we will see further on, depending on the group under observation, this initiation will have a different format, extension and modality which can last between two to fourteen hours. The differences mentioned above are not reduced to organizing decisions but rather to

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eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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implying deep dogmatic discussions on the adequate manner of carrying out these procedures that have had fragmentations and hostilities as consequences; this has given rise to three distinct groups: the original group (also designated as group number one), the transitional (group two), and the virtual (the most recent formation which will be designated as group three).

As for the original group, it presents a stricter appropriation of the messages and guidelines suggested by the messages channeled through Veronica, as well as greater resistance to innovations. It rejects the use of the Internet as a means of spiritual interaction for this discipline. Groups two and three can be considered as a kind of continuum that gradually dissociates from the initial doctrine and presents a greater openness to the dialogue with other similar disciplines and to the introduction of virtual technologies as means of the diffusion, teaching and practice of the rituals of the Llave Mariana.

At the beginning, the original group proposed the division of the teaching into nine energy levels. The first level would be given face-to-face, while the subsequent levels were developed at distance, although the booklets containing the messages revealed corresponding to each level and the precise instructions could be sent via e-mail so that the neophyte would be able to carry out certain energy techniques to raise his/her level of consciousness and the vibrational frequency.

As this dynamic of course delivery consolidated, some of the group members had the idea of imposing a test to determine if the new participants had the skills to advance to higher levels of the teaching. This device was coined *"energy diagnosis"* and was based on the alleged ability of some of the group participants to perceive the power of the chakras the apprentices had. It was also established that only the members of the original group of the Llave Mariana would be authorized as their instructors.

Although the energy diagnosis modality was installed in the group, the first major rift appeared. The instructors, who rejected the device as an alteration of the original message and the teaching guidelines, went their own way and strongly criticized the group they had abandoned. They viewed it as a distortion of the Llave Mariana (which essence was the alleged absence of authorities or elected individuals) and they challenged its proponents as "false teachers"; hence, they began promoting their own teaching by self-defining themselves as the true bearers of this divine message since they were the ones to uphold its ethos of altruism and openness.

During the field work we observed that the activities of the original group were sustained thanks to the work of the instructors who continued in contact with Veronica and who made the teaching and the practice of the Llave Mariana their main activity. Every weekend, they lend their private homes to carry out initiations and during the weekdays, they also offer accompaniment to different disciples who require attention or clarification of doubts; this attention is given through e-mail or by telephone.

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This group attends initiations solely personally or collectively. Two instructors present the different teaching topics: the location of the chakras, the development of the rituals and the explanation of the symbol, among others.

Other instructors or advanced apprentices provide logistic and energetic support during these gatherings, whether by welcoming the new disciples or by setting the table with food and infusions for recess. They are also in charge of harmonizing the atmosphere with meditation and the performance of a specific ritual called *conduction*, of which we will talk about further on.

The second group or transitional group as we will call it in this paper was formed in 2003 during the first rupture. It is the first group that implemented the web pages[ii] as privileged means of diffusion and contact with new participants.

Their initiation usually takes place in the private home of one of the individuals interested or in centers where rooms are rented temporarily for this type of events. In addition to holding gatherings in the city of Buenos Aires, this group also gathers in semi-urban underprivileged neighborhoods, far from the capital and in small towns in rural Buenos Aires. Their presence stands out in the provinces of Mendoza, Cordoba, Salta and Santa Fe. Projections (presence of instructors and disciples) is also felt in other Spanish-speaking countries such as Uruguay, Mexico (in Merida and Guadalajara) and Spain.

When these two groups began their separate operations, the information available on the Internet on the Llave Mariana was scarce. The most common form of communication between disciples and instructors was through telephone calls; dissemination was oral and the contact of the first initiation was done through text messages and e-mails, especially when sending the written material compiled for each level. From that moment on, the virtual dimension started having greater relevance within the dissemination and development of the movement. This is due to the fact that the main proponents of the transitional group who implemented the use of web pages to promote themselves, were explicit regarding the history of the teaching and its divisions. This transitional group, characterized by its lax structure where most of its members are also disciples, instructors and users of other energy disciplines, succeeded in expanding significantly.

Among the differences to be acknowledged between the original and the transitional groups are that the followers of the original group who wish to advance on the path of the Llave Mariana must dedicate their practice exclusively to this technique and abandon entirely any other practice linked to energy management such as Reiki, Ho'oponopono[iii] or Magnified healing[iv]. On the contrary, group two promotes the passage through different techniques; this openness is considered a central feature as well as a virtue of the Llave Mariana.

All the initiations to which we participated together with instructors of this group were carried out by one person; in some instances, advanced disciples helped during the

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eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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sessions. Other absent followers are asked to collaborate with their "Energy Assistance" to "harmonize the energy" during the encounter with the new initiated.

After this first moment and as we will see further on, the follow-up and the accompaniment of the participants is based on the interaction in WhatsApp groups. The last group to carry out substantial modifications to the modality, structure and doctrine content, emerged in 2010. Since this represents the last important change in the history and morphology of the movement, we propose this new group (the virtual group as we call it), as the last section of our study.

This last group was created in the province of Mendoza under the initiatives of a disciple initiated in the transitional group. The change this disciple (Ariel) introduced was the opening of a page[v] and a group on Facebook, aiming at the dissemination and practice of the Llave Mariana and inaugurating the possibility to carry out initiations online.

Therefore, this disciple defines himself as the "online facilitator[vi] of the Llave Mariana" and carries out fortnight initiations in which those interested enter a videoconference room where they receive an explanation of the technique, the potentiation of the chakras, the meditation and the clarification of doubts.

This last group also introduces in its teaching new elements from other knowledge systems or disciplines such as the "sacred geometry[vii]" or the "Atlantis and Lemuria[viii]" esoteric knowledge. The surprising laxity that characterizes this group is the existence of a particular group on Facebook dedicated to the "Channelers of the Llave Mariana", where different members of the group share daily messages they believe to have been sent by the Virgin Mary and that they themselves have channeled. It is striking that this dynamic does not question the basis or legitimacy of the messages received by Veronica; on the contrary, they are interpreted as bonus elements, that, up to some extent, enrich the original doctrine.

According to Ariel, the openness of this virtual group and its corresponding separation from the transitional group can be explained by the old energy at which the female instructors who initiated the movement were vibrating; hence the need to resort to a series of innovations to update both the doctrine level and the practices of the Llave Mariana. These modifications gave birth to this virtual group. From the first contact to the initiations, accompaniment of the new followers and the messages channeled are transmitted through these platforms.

According to this instructor, the reason that justifies the foregoing modifications is linked to the evolving nature of the Mariana energy. Since everything that exists is ever changing and evolving, the energy is also subject to changes that must, to some extent, be embodied in the dogmatic teaching. In this regard, the resistance to changes experienced by other members of the movement is considered as "attachment to the structures of the past". The idea of establishing the online modality aimed at

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eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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transcending the old paradigm by stressing the need to resort to someone (a teacher) or to a physical place to live an inner transformation, an awakening.

It is possible to state that all the groups are currently expanding; initiations are taking place in different parts of the country where ten to fifty people participate on a monthly or fortnight basis. The virtual group has recently added face-to-face encounters to its teaching dynamics and promotion; hence, giving it even more visibility and presence within the spiritual universe.

Our first reflection on the historical development and disputes within the movement and their link with the use of virtual technologies, leads us to anticipate that the promotion or rejection of these modalities is part of a greater dogmatic debate permeated by the innovations and openness taking place in the Llave Mariana.

The openness toward the use of new technologies as Facebook pages or groups as means of disseminating the Llave Mariana and reaching as many individuals as possible, adds pressure on the legitimacy of the groups that historically carried out the task of disseminating and teaching this discipline (in a non-virtual manner) and questions the appropriate ways of managing the power (on both spiritual and organizational plans) within the movement.

Some of the members of the group question whether, according to this doctrine, it is possible to carry out an initiation at distance with equally efficient results as those carried out during face-to-face sessions. This is where the virtual group distances itself from the original and transitional groups since it considers that the energy of this technique possesses such power that it is possible to transmit it virtually and in a short period of time (four hours) instead of carrying it out in two face-to-face sessions that usually last four and five hours each. On the other hand, the members of the former groups sustain that the potentiation of chakras (through which the initial boost of the Mariana energy occurs) must be carried out necessarily in a first face-to-face session since the energy unlocked during the initiations is so powerful that the initiation must be carried out over two days because the sudden reception of this energy may lead to decompensations or discomfort in the individuals being initiated.

Another problem related to the implementation of virtual platforms has to do with those individuals who consider themselves the instructors or facilitators dedicated to the dissemination and teaching of the Llave Mariana. This is also permeated by the way in which the exponential proliferation of new instructors and groups is promoted or avoided. In this context, we could think of ways in which the leaders' own charisma is managed or regulated and the way in which the virtual dimension (with the massification it implies) thwarts the control over the emergence of not only new leaders but also of new channelers.

It should be mentioned that the negotiation around the religious authority is usually a recurrent topic within the studies addressing digital religion (Campbell, 2013; Dawson

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and Cowan, 2013). Seeing the way this negotiation operates in our case study, it is possible to state that there are several figures that have managed to become leaders given the recognition they have gained through their role as administrators or creators of virtual interaction spaces for spiritual followers. At this point, the incorporation of the Llave Mariana on the Internet has had a transforming role in promoting new ways for leaders to emerge and consolidate their capacity to question and put pressure on the old forms of authorities existing within the movement.

Netnography of the use of Facebook and the online rituals of the Llave Mariana

Our first approach to the Llave Mariana occurred through the exploration of some web sites that held the teaching general information. This information was magnified through a Facebook page created by the main facilitator, which would then be established in this analysis as the virtual group. Based on this contact, we started reconstructing the history of the movement and the splits within it. We progressively succeeded in establishing different contacts with its members.

Our initial work consisted in reviewing the content of the Facebook page promoted by Ariel, its creator, and one of its administrators. The material circulating in this space included advice, schedules, didactic images to learn how to manage the Llave Mariana energy, and the information on other related disciplines. In this initially inscrutable universe, there was an announcement of an initiation that read as follows:

> YOU ARE WELCOME TO THE ONLINE INITIATIONS OF THIS TEACHING. UNIVERSAL teaching for ALL, regardless of race, social status or religion; based on LOVE as universal language that unifies us. No need to register, only be present at the time scheduled and connect to our videoconference room.[ix]

Later, they invited the visitors to be part of the Llave Mariana, to know its main features, its usefulness and to be potentiated with the "energy of the Key". The initiation was then scheduled for the following week; i.e., on Saturday for free.

The first image to be displayed on the Facebook page was that of Ariel who greeted and welcomed the visitors from his computer. Next to the video image transmitted a live chat column would open where approximately ten people started to exchange greetings.

First, Ariel asked every new individual interested in being initiated to give their personal data: given name, surname and date of birth. He clarified that these were important since we would be added to the help list.

The online initiation process took approximately four hours. Then, Ariel talked at length on the location and functioning of the chakras, following with the description of the form and meaning of the symbol of the Llave Mariana. He also expanded on the correct method to carry out energetic treatments.

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The religious symbol that identifies the Llave Mariana is a key topped by two identical circles that represent, according to the instructor's explanation, the right and left hemispheres of the brain in which the higher chakras (seventh, sixth and fifth) are located. These elements seek to mean the unified female and male energies; in more general terms, the union of opposites (See image 1).

Figure 1. Symbol of the Llave Mariana.

The vertical line that crossed the symbol is based on the human spine which function is to unify the higher and lower dimensions, heaven and earth. In the center of the triangle (referring to the divine trinity), there is a circle with eight sun-like rays which is the symbol of Archangel Uriel, representing the divine light. Lastly, the lower section symbolizes the earth and the presence of the lower or telluric chakras (ninth, second and first).

The instructor used our name and date of birth as "energetic coordinates" to potentiate our chakras at distance. During this process, the apprentices only had to be receptive and breathe normally during one minute in order to receive the energy. Before parting, Ariel instructed us to meditate once a day for forty days, and that we visualize the first pyramid to install its energy in our inner self.

After this virtual encounter, we are considered as "initiated disciples" and we are included in a private Facebook group that has more than 17 000 members. This is the space where revealed messages and help lists are shared, and where different members request that energy be sent to close individuals who find themselves in difficult emotional, physical or work situations.

The help lists in which different members of the group write the given names, surnames and dates of birth of the persons in need of energy are organized in different categories, with very peculiar linguistic headings: "sending light for files", "list of treatments for the animal reign", list to find and ask for those disappeared", among others.

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eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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Nevertheless, this terminology did not seem confusing to the rest of the web surfers more accustomed to the New Era universe of senses. Here, the shared language is one of the characteristics that reinforces the sense of belonging of the followers of this community since they tend to highlight the fact of feeling better understood contrary to what occurs in their own home with their immediate environment (family and friends).

The Facebook group has expressed, in interviews and interactions, the stigmatization they often experience when treated as crazy or strange, which leads them to develop strategies to conceal their spiritual beliefs and practices.

From that virtual moment, the use of terms such as "*brothers in light, Marian brothers or Llave Mariana family*" gain popularity; meanings are used to solidify the idea of community within followers. This section is an attempt to provide evidence of the form the two key points of netnography take according to Kozinets (2010): the social life of the net and the constitution of virtual communities, in this specific case on the Facebook virtual platform for the "Mariana brothers" community.

Virtual Etnography of the Llave Mariana WhatsApp groups

As this exploration of the virtual group grew, our interest to know the history of the movement increased. We got in touch through e-mail with Damian, one of the individuals that had been part of the first rift, from the original group and founder of the transitional group of the Llave Mariana. When learning of our interest in knowing the history and characteristics of the group, he invited us to a face-to-face initiation that would take place in Buenos Aires shortly after this exchange. He included us to the rest of the participants in a WhatsApp group called "Llave Mariana Barracas".

We are currently part of three WhatsApp groups that were created under similar circumstances from initiations in which we participated in sub-urban localities of Buenos Aires, González Catán and Morón. The possibility of interacting in the groups through this mean was of great value to maintain an ongoing follow-up of the requests for help, doubts and informal dialogues, as well as to schedule interviews with some of the followers after receiving the prior authorization of their instructors and administrators to use the content of the groups as input for this research.

In general, the beginning of the activity of a WhatsApp group is through a welcome message from the instructor and the sending of information on the teaching. An example of this type of information are the audio messages that explain the different techniques and elements of this cosmovision. The audios were sent by one of the earliest instructors of the movement of the transitional group.

The instructors that broadcast these audios as well as the followers who receive them, see an advantage in using them to deepen this knowledge and practice in several ways. On the one hand, they say that by listening to these messages helps them understand the booklets since they are too extensive and difficult to comprehend; on the other hand,

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eISSN 2007-3607 ● Universidad de Guadalajara

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they also say that they can listen to these audios while carrying out their daily tasks. During our interview, Alina, a disciple in one of the initiations in the González Catán locality, said that she usually listens to these audios while cooking or cleaning her house. These data show the links that are woven between virtual and physical contexts, an aspect of great importance for virtual ethnographers (Ruiz and Aguirre, 2015).

The virtual means of dissemination of information contribute to insert the learning and practice of the Llave Mariana in daily routines (proper to the physical context) by presenting a continuum with the secular world and the tasks that we might think are so distant from spirituality.

Likewise, WhatsApp, as a means of privileged interaction, generates an effect of instantaneousness between requests and responses, which gives the group a particularly vertiginous dynamic, and introduces and also discusses current issues generally taken from the media. The topics could deal with the floods on the Argentinean coast during 2018 or the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, in April 2019. This type of news is generally broadcasted by any of the followers through images that circulate on social networks or are televised photographs shared within the groups.

All these catastrophic events are read by followers based on the cosmological matrix of the group; their members identify these events as signs of evil that confirms the presence of "dense energies" in the world. They also consider that this evil presence must be countered by the group by sending the "energy of Marie", request that this is done through written messages such as: "We send energy to the place of the event", "We activate the Llave Mariana for mother earth"; to which the rest of the participants respond with confirmation words: "active", "activated" or simply with emoticons that symbolize that they are sending Marian energy for this purpose; these emojis are usually a drawing of a key, a heart and praying hands.

These highly complex interactions show how images, audio and text interweave. The way in which the dynamic of spiritual practices is edited and disseminated, reasserts the collective emotions and representations such as the devotion to the Virgin Mary or the conception of the planet as a living and energetic being. They also model the idea of community as the sum of individuals oriented toward the same purpose within the movement.

In all cases, the followers are initiated in a face-to-face session and the WhatsApp groups are made up based on these encounters with a limited number of participants (approximately 20 individuals). Given these characteristics, close personal bonds are created and which, in certain cases, are maintained only virtually, but they show a great level of exposure of intimacy and emotional contention. Once more, an element already mentioned as part of the virtual ethnography analysis is manifested: the existence of multiple avenues of determination between the virtual and physical contexts that are formed and impact one another.

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The secular and the spiritual in the uses of time in virtual platforms

The role of technology for this movement is to allow the space-time continuum which enables certain types of interaction and the development of new ways to connect; hence, shaping specific modes of being with others online and new ways of thinking individually and collectively. By using these technologies, the users themselves are those who report a certain identity and sense of belonging to a community, according to the technological tools they have access to.

In the same way as the physical environment produces specific settings used as scenarios for interaction, the platforms operating through the Internet generate specific virtual spaces that are decisive for the type of interaction that may occur in said settings. One of the most outstanding features in this regard is the permanent accessibility offered by Facebook as well as WhatsApp groups. This possibility promotes a constant alternation between life *online* and life *offline* which generates a continuum between both orders, but, at the same time, provides momentum to the tendency toward a growing and almost permanent connectivity.

By exploring how the use of these technologies was presented in the followers' routines, the interactions occurred at any time; the users would register in a multiplicity of contacts and activities carried out on the Internet. Notwithstanding the fact that many of these contacts and activities were linked to the spiritual world and occupied most of the users' cyberspace time, a variety of tasks of a different nature such as going over work e-mails or going over family-event photo albums on Facebook would also capture their attention.

At this point, it is interesting to note how the instances of connection with the Virgin Mary and the emission and reception of energies considered of divine origin were not spatially or temporarily limited to specific sacred settings or separated from everyday life but rather depended solely on the ritual procedures that imply visualizations and intentionalities that may be activated or deactivated instantly based on subjective and intersubjective processes.

Conclusion

Against this background, it is necessary to think about the fluidity of the dialogue between the new technologies that facilitate interactions and virtual spaces with the old "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1995) of spiritual nature (as could be the case of meditation) that imply a non-electronic dimension of virtuality and bring into play complex imagination exercises.

Regarding this topic, Gustavo Ludueña (2012) understands the processes of invention and religious imagination as predominantly intersubjective and insists on the fact that these are associated to the practices of believers and respond to a processual dynamics.

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Likewise, he considers the notion of imagination as an essential element to comprehend the processes of religious change.

If we think of the ritual experiences and their dialogue with virtual platforms, under this perspective, one of the characteristics we can notice is the disembodiment of the individuals by disrupting the physical limits imposed by the body (Citro and Puglisi, 2015; Vázquez, 2011); this is due to the existence of devices of consciousness that "virtualize" the body, the self and the community based on complex imagination processes.

The individuals that participate in a group meditation connected in a videoconference room or including emit and receive "divine and healing energy" transmissions through requests exchanged through chats on WhatsApp, do not only have these electronic means at their disposal (which could be thought as the novelty or the greatest change within the phenomenon), but find this experience empowered by the previous "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1995) that operate at the level of consciousness and the representations of the body and the individual.

The imagination processes linked to virtual platforms have concrete effects on how the spiritual rituals are shaped; e.g., they enable these individuals to establish a spiritual connection that operates in a time synchronicity that, even at distant physical spaces, result in tele-presence.[x]

It is necessary to highlight the notion of "*subtle body*", i.e., the *emic*[xi] representation of the body that indicates that every individual possesses an energetic body that goes beyond the barrier of the physical realm. This is one of the characteristics that mobilizes the fluidity of the dialogue between these forms of spiritual ritual experience and the interactions through programs or social networks that operate by means of the Internet causing a convergence of the energetic flow and the information flow in cyberspace.

Regarding the imagination processes, it is useful to incorporate Anderson's (1993) contributions to perceive the way in which the members of the Llave Mariana think of themselves as a community, and the way this form of representation is permeated by sociability modes occurring in virtual environments.

Anderson establishes that any community is imagined because, despite that its participants do not have any personal knowledge of one another, they have this image of communion in their minds. This representation that, according to the author, operates as a "cultural artefact" (Anderson, 1993, p. 21), can be imagined from different styles, one of them being the religious community characterized by the distinction created from a sacred language.

Along these lines and to build on these notions, it is possible to postulate that the "Mariana brothers" with whom we have worked, is a spiritual community that draws their bonds from a common lexicon and a series of spiritual practices disseminated and

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sustained in instances of virtual sociability. These common elements enable their members to consider themselves as part of a community that vibrates at the same frequency and experiences similar emotions related to devotion and love (Gracia, 2018). It also promotes social bonds that create feelings of emotional contention and accompaniment among its members.

The creative dimension is also revealed in the idea of community that comes into play within the group. The existence of Facebook groups dedicated to the Llave Mariana that represent thousands of members, has an expansion effect on the experience of the existing community which means that, for the followers, the sense of belonging is no longer given exclusively in relation with the original group of the initiated with which this spiritual path began but it extends to a large community of Mariana brothers that resonates in synchrony with the energy of the Virgin. This is how an intersubjective network without space-time limits that pursues a joint objective of elevating the energy of the humanity and the planet is woven.

In the case of the Llave Mariana, the cyberspace operates as a place of encounter among spiritual followers through which they are in constant circulation. They develop forms of electronic sociability that have an impact on their daily routines, bonds and emotions, and on their ways of thinking of themselves as an extensive community that works to achieve more elevated forms of consciousness and a cosmic transformation.

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i Japanese technique that believes on the existence of an universal energy named *Qi* and support the healing though the laying on of hands.

ii The web site that was more relevant for the group functioning is: http://www.lanuevaconciencia.com.ar/llavemariana.htm.

iii Recently popularized within the alternative circle; is a Hawaiian art that is practiced in order to heal or solve conflicts and is based on reconciliation and forgiveness.

iv Is an autohealing and body care technique that involves a connection with the divine essence of oneself and with God; its followers take the master Kuan Yin –Chinese goddess— as main veneration figure.

v "La Meditación de Llave Mariana". https://www.facebook.com/lameditaciondelallavemariana/?ref=br_rs.

vi Corpus of knowledges related to masonry that refers to geometrical designs of widespread use on places that are considered as sacred and referred with esoteric significance and supranatural qualities.

vii Continents allegedly lost that are believed to have been inhabited by civilizations liked to extraterrestrial live with access to arcane knowledge. This is a very developed subject by Theosophy, Anthroposophy and other esoteric schools.

viii This term is usually used to moderate the hierarchy between apprentices and mentors. Due to this, inside the movement the term "teacher" is avoided.

ix Group of Facebook "La Meditación de la Llave Mariana" ["Meditation of the Mariana Key"]. https://www.facebook.com/lameditaciondelallavemariana/photos/a.199558040205082/1214561382038071/?type=3ytheateryifg=1. All caps on the original.

x Concept that Pablo Wright (1995) developed based on the term "telecommunitas" that refers to non-corporal ways of encounter.

xi The term *emic* is used on anthropology to refer to the native perspective about a subject, contrasting the term *etic* that refers to the anthropologist's perspective.

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