



The ghost currency:
Everyday life economic exchanges in a country
without official banknotes
The case of Venezuela

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To all Venezuelans

ABSTRACT

As a consequence of the difficult political and economic situation that Venezuela has been going through in the last decade, *bolívars* banknotes have almost disappeared from the economy. Some informal and others official, government and citizens alike have come on with a wide array of payment solutions to substitute the use of said banknotes. Making use, mainly of Marcel Mauss' (1925) gift exchange theory and Henrik Vigh' (2008) social navigation theory, this master thesis answers the following question: *how do the citizens of Maracaibo, Venezuela, participate in everyday economic exchanges in a context of political polarization?, and, what relations are formed out of this participation?.* To conclude that different types of relations, that go from the creation of communities to total rejection, are formed between citizens and between citizens and the government.

Keywords: Venezuela, Maracaibo, payment methods, everyday life, gift exchanges, social navigation

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD	Acción Democrática
CAP	Carlos Andrés Pérez
COPEI	Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (Partido Socialcristiano)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ID	Identification
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PDVSA	Petróleos de Venezuela, Sociedad Anónima
PSUV	Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela
SSI	Semi-structured Interviews
TAG	Tarjeta de Administración de Gasolina
URD	Unión Republicana Democrática
US	United States of America
VAT	Value Added Tax

1. INTRODUCTION

Once called “Saudi Venezuela” due to a perceived widespread prosperity among its citizens, Venezuela’s poverty index nowadays has been compared to the ones in Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo, with 96% of its population living in poverty (Otero, 2020). Furthermore, it has been labelled as the fourth most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International this year (2021).

Being an oil dependent country, Venezuela has been relying heavily on petroleum revenues at least for the last fifty years (Cheatham & Cara, 2021), leading to an eventual neglect of other sectors of the economy (ibid). Likewise, this dependency has made the country’s economy prone to be affected by international changes in the oil prices; thus, having periods of both bonanzas and crisis (Bermúdez, 2016).

Following president Hugo Chávez’ death in 2013, Nicolás Maduro assumed the presidency of Venezuela and received a heavily indebted country. Unlike his predecessor, he faced a downfall in the prices of petroleum and a fall in the national production of petroleum barrels (Cheatham & Cara, 2021). On top of this, growing external debt led to an enormous fiscal deficit and to a State that was impossible to finance due to an “irresponsible management of the economy”, according to economist Ricardo Haussman (Bermúdez, 2016). To cope with the crippling debt, his government decided to print inorganic *bolívares*, the national currency, without a metal backup for the value of the money (Moleiro, 2021).

Even though inflation in Venezuela has been present ever since the 1970’s, its figures have been increasing yearly; going from an average of 25% between 2009 and 2012, to 180% in 2015 (Palma, 2016) and 19,906% in 2020 (Rances, 2021). It is, as of May 2021, the country with the highest inflation in the world, with its currency, the *bolívar*, devaluing 1.3% against the US dollar every 24 hours (Infobae, 2021). The creation of inorganic *bolívares* mixed with hyperinflation, led, ultimately, for the printing process of banknotes to become more expensive than the actual worth of the produced banknotes (Moleiro, 2021).

A combination of hyperinflation, oil dependency and a series of unsuccessful economic policies has led the country to face the harshest economic crisis in its history (Cheatham & Cara, 2021). In addition to the economic crisis, there is also a political one which sharpened with the rise of a parallel government formed by opposition leader Juan Guaidó in 2019. With this episode, political polarization severed, making even more evident the division among Chávez and Maduro supporters (known as *chavistas*) and non-supporters (*opositores*). As a consequence of both of these crises, to live in Venezuela nowadays represents an immense challenge. In daily life, it is common for citizens¹ to face situations that involve, among many others: electrical service shortages, water scarcity, risks of getting robbed or kidnapped, dysfunctional bureaucracy² and securing their access to food and medicines with a minimum wage now set at \$3,600,000 *bolívares*, or \$2.4 US dollars as of May 2021 (Bayoud, 2021).

With the virtual disappearance of *bolívares* banknotes, the economy has slowly turned to an informal “dollarization” that has had most actors in the economy having to improvise and organize around it one way or the other (Perdomo 1, 2020). However, the fact that this “dollarization” was impulsed by the citizens and not by the government, left open the spaces for other alternative payment methods to flourish (ibid). Even though some digital solutions have emerged (cryptocurrencies, mobile payments, among others), constant electrical shortages, a very slow internet connection and the non existence of online shopping platforms (Perdomo 2, 2020) are part of the landscape of a country that has been “forced” to digitize without having the infrastructure to do so. In this context, a wide array of different payment methods have arised, besides the *bolívar* currency.

This master thesis seeks to answer the following question: *how do the citizens of Maracaibo, Venezuela, participate in everyday economic exchanges in a context of political polarization?, and, what relations are formed out of this participation?*. It aims, on one hand, at describing and analyzing the different payment methods created by both the citizens and the government due to

¹ To different degrees, clearly.

² Due to scarcity, it has become common having to wait for several years from the date of payment until the date a passport is processed, for example. In my personal case, I waited for two years and a half.

the lack of banknotes in the economy, and on the other, to understand the different kinds of relations that are formed through the use of the different methods.

In this investigation, the words “citizen/s” are used to refer to the inhabitants of Venezuela or Maracaibo, and in no way they are used to make a reference to a migratory status. Likewise, the word “bond/s” in the second part of the analysis, refers to some sort of “vouchers” that are paid when subscribed to the *Carnet de la Patria* (“Homeland card”). I chose to refer to them as “bond/s” since that word is the closest to the actual word in Spanish, which is “bonos”

2. METHODOLOGY

The present chapter introduces the methodological considerations and approaches that are used throughout the thesis in order to answer my research question presented in the introduction chapter.

2.1 Research structure

In the following section, I describe the structure of my thesis. Likewise, I provide a brief presentation of my most important theories and authors as well as my considerations in order to have chosen said theories and concepts.

I start with a context chapter, in which I explained the political and economical context of Venezuela from the *Pacto de Punto Fijo* (“Punto Fijo’s Pact”) in 1958 to nowadays with president Nicolás Maduro's mandate. I decided to cover this time span since it shows a dramatic³ evolution from a neoliberal state to a solicialist state, and the subsequent deterioration of Venezuela’s institutions. Once the context is set, I started my analysis. My analysis is mostly based on the testimonies of two of my main informants, Laura* and Agnes*. This is divided into three parts.

The first part deals with the way political polarization, I argue, has led to a politicization of everyday life. What I try to demonstrate in the chapter is, first, the extent of the political polarization, which has led for spaces to be, at least symbolically, divided among the two factions, *chavistas* and *opositores*. Second, how this polarization now covers almost every aspect of citizen’s everyday life, influencing decisions as simple as where to grocery shop. Finally, and taking into account this context, to show how some citizens take advantage of this polarized context through the assumption of “political personas” as a way to access the different benefits each faction has or is associated with. This almost-context chapter allows me to both stress on how important this division among factions is, and helps me to make a smarter subsequent division of my two following chapters.

³ I argue it is dramatic since it parts from one economic model to another one completely different.

This section uses the concepts of “political persona” and “navigation” as the main analytical categories. According to Marshall & Henderson (2016), research involving the concept of political personas is new (p. 1). Among the first ones to study the concept is John Corner in 2000. His studies were focused on developing the idea of how a political persona was a mediated entity and how politicians, strategically, worked and performed within the exigencies of that particular arena (Marshall & Henderson, 2016, p. 2). Even though my research is not focused on politicians, I make use of the notion of performance to explain how certain roles are assumed according to perceived benefits. This is complemented by Marshall & Herndersons’s own definition of persona, which stresses how the persona can be a fabricated role in order to navigate the social (2016, p. 1). This concept then complements the concept of “social navigation” developed by Henrik Vigh (2008). Vigh is an anthropologist who has developed an important part of his research on social navigation in Guinea-Bissau. By “navigation”, he means “the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled” (p. 420). The term “social navigation”, according to him, is used when referring to “how people act in difficult or uncertain situations and (...) how they disentangle themselves from confining structures and (...) move towards better positions” (p. 419). Through the use of this concept, I make sense of how the citizens move around the different payment options that have arised and which strategies they use to engage with each of them. Even though other concepts such as “political polarization” and “opportunism” are defined in this chapter, they are used to help explain the studied phenomena rather than as analytical concepts.

The second part of my analysis deals with payment methods created by the government. Even though “mainstream” payment methods like debit cards do exist in Venezuela, the accelerated devaluation of the *bolívar* has made these methods render futile, to some extent; being more profitable to instead make use of international debit or credit cards that have dollar backing, for example. Being so, the government has created three different payment methods for the citizens as of May 2021: the *Carnet de la Patria* (“Homeland Card”), the *biopago* (“biopayment”) and the *petro*. The *Carnet de la Patria* is a subscription-based ID system that allows the government to pay for the social programs offered to the citizens (La Iguana TV, 2016). The *biopago* is a biometric payment system created by the government-owned bank *Banco de Venezuela* (“Venezuela’s Bank”) which allows users to make a payment just using a fingerprint (Ochoa, 2020). The *petro* is a cryptocurrency backed up by the price of one petroleum barrel in the

international market (Rojas, 2019). For my analysis, I chose to only analyze the *Carnet de la Patria* and the *biopago*, since none of my informants had any clue about how the *petro* worked.

Having this in mind, I analyze both of the aforementioned methods in relation to Marcel Mauss' gift exchange theory. Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) was a French sociologist and anthropologist. His work on gift exchange and social relations in primitive societies made him very influential in the anthropology field. Through his work and including his masterpiece *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* ("The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies"), he studied gift giving as binding people together in a social relationship that would go beyond the material value of the object involved (New World Encyclopedia, 2021). The act of giving, he argued, could sustain entire communities and become the basis of all types of relationships in human society. The gift exchange ritual, thus, is composed of three stages that involve giving, receiving and reciprocating in order to maintain social relations among communities (Komter, 2007). To not engage in the described ritual, or to refuse, would be interpreted, according to Mauss, as a declaration of war (ibid). My analysis on this chapter, thus, has the intention of, on one hand, describing the government-issued methods and on the other to analyze how my informants make use or not use of them. What I argue, roughly, is that citizens engage in a refusal to receive, meaning that they have decided to not make use of these methods even if they could represent a benefit for them. This is made in order to make a political stance that would, hopefully for them, pressure the government to aim for creating better overall conditions for the citizens. Although the concept of hope is mentioned in my analysis, it is not meant to be used as an analytical category.

The last part of my analysis explores alternative methods created by the citizens besides the official or mainstream ones. Here, I set three criteria for dividing the payments in order to make a better analysis of them. The first one is the group of payments that are based on whether they create lasting relationships among the parties or not. These are the use of "fake money" and payments in kind. Payments made with "fake money" refers to payments made with "vouchers" or any piece of paper that is to be found at hand and that could be used as means of exchange. Payments in kind refers to payments made with objects such as vegetables or candy. The second group gathers payments that are made through the use of trust and networks. These are the participation in the

black market of currency exchange and the method known as *fiao*'. The former refers to an informal exchange of currencies (*bolívares*, US dollars, euros) out of official channels. The latter refers to an informal practice in which a good is acquired at the market and its payment is settled later. The last group gathers practices that show care of kin. These are the sending of remittances from abroad and the sending of goods boxes from Miami. Remittances constitute transfers of money from migrants abroad to their own home country. The other case, the goods boxes, constitute, literally, boxes filled up with different kinds of goods that are sent from Miami to Maracaibo. Miami, located in the US, has been regarded as a city which combines the perks of living in the US and the warm weather most countries in South America have. Therefore, it has historically been the recipient of a big part of the middle class continent's diaspora (Fajardo, 2016). As of 2017, 421,000 Venezuelans were living in Florida, the state where Miami is located (Osorio, 2019). Growing networks and purchasing power of its residents facilitated the emergence of multiple companies devoted to door-to-door package sending from the US city to different cities in Venezuela, being Maracaibo one of the main ones.

My overall goal in the last part of the analysis, is on one hand, to explore those alternative payment methods that have sprung in recent months and on the other, to analyze the relationships that are created among offerers and recipients when engaging in the exchange. To do so, I picked theories and concepts I found relevant according to each case. For the first group, I use Mauss' (1925) gift exchange theory to analyze how relations are meant to be maintained when using "fake money". For payments in kind, I used David Graeber's (2011) studies on debt to argue how no relationship is created when payments are made in kind since no debt is formed. Loosely inspired by Mauss (1925), Graeber (2011) argues, roughly, that the existence of debt allows for the generation of profit as well as for the exertion of control over an indebted one. Through the use of Graeber's reasoning, I am able to argue for how the non-existence of debt, thus, invalidates the forming of a relationship when the exchange is made in equal terms.

For the second group, I use Aafke Komter's (1997, 2007) studies on reciprocity. Again inspired by Mauss (1925), she studies different cases of gift exchange in the Netherlands, and analyzes the instances in which reciprocity might arise when engaging in gift exchange. To complement this view, I make use of Alan Fiske's (1991) classification of forms of human relationships. Using both

authors helps me analyze the role of reciprocity and trust in my studied cases. For the last group, I use Marshall Sahlins (1972) studies on the formation of kinship and I complement it with Robert Trivers (1971) concept of “reciprocal altruism”. Through this concept, he was looking to explain how cooperation can evolve when mutual altruism exists. Making use of both author’s arguments, I am able to develop on how the degree of kinship plays a role when there is an intention of showing care.

Once the analysis is done, I conclude that in an unstable, changing context, both government and citizens managed to come up with different methods and possibilities in order to engage in daily life economic transactions without the use of banknotes, and how each of the methods affects the way they create relationships with each other. Finally, I close this master thesis with a discussion on how the State is affected when it loses control of the economy and how this same situation helps to create a sense of solidarity among the citizens, who are aware that they are sharing the same struggles.

2.2 Case selection

This thesis is structured as a single case study research. Case studies are defined as a research approach used to generate an in-depth and multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue that is framed in a real-life context (Crowe *et al*, 2011, p. 1). Furthermore, and according to Robert K. Yin, case studies can be used to “explain, describe or explore” events or phenomena in the everyday contexts they occur (Yin, 2009 in Crowe *et al*, 2011, p. 1). Thus, by framing this research as a case study, it is possible to deeply understand how a determinate group of citizens interact with an array of payment alternatives and what types of relations they form by the use of them, in the city of Maracaibo.

Maracaibo is Venezuela’s second biggest city (after Caracas), and the most important city on the Western side of the country. It is home to the biggest lake in South America, the “*Lago de Maracaibo*” (“Maracaibo Lake”), which has one of the biggest reserves of petroleum in the world (Decamme, 2019). Due to its closeness to Colombia, it has been prone to smuggling of resources

like gasoline, food or medicine since price differences between both countries are significant (Semana, 2020). It has been affected, among other reasons, by shortages of gasoline, food and medicine and has been subjected to more strict control measures than other parts of the country that are far from the border. An example is the gasoline TAG, a sticker installed on cars to help control the supply of gasoline for each car and prevent re-sellings (Nava, 2021). In addition to this, Maracaibo has the reputation of being a very unique city in Venezuela. It has one of the warmest year-round weather, a very distinctive accent and it has been historically opposed to the government in turn. This, possibly, since Maracaibo lies in the Zulia region, a region with a strong movement that campaigns to gain independence from Venezuela. Finally, most of the research made about Venezuela has been mostly focused either on the country as a whole or in Caracas⁴, leaving other parts of the country in a neglected position regarding academic research. In my opinion, all of these characteristics make Maracaibo a very interesting place to set my investigation at.

For the development of this thesis, I started by collecting relevant data and setting patterns or broader themes (political polarization, government-issued payment methods, alternative payment methods, others). Once this was set, I started looking for theories and concepts that would allow me to make sense of my data. According to Gabriel (2013) inductive research is focused on exploring new phenomena and developing a theory, whilst deductive research is oriented to taking a theory or concept, analyzing the data in relation to it and confirming a theory (Gabriel, 2013). Since I started by collecting data and later I moved on to analyzing it with existing theory, I would consider my investigation to have an inductive approach that moves on to being a deductive one, without fully being framed in any of them.

2.3 Qualitative methods

Qualitative research is focused on the observations and interpretations of people's perception of different phenomena (Gentles *et al*, 2015 in Mohajan, 2018, p. 2). This type of research stresses

⁴ A quick search on Latin American academic research databases "Redalyc" and "Scielo" shows that the keyword "Caracas" has 43,247 and 251 associated articles (respectively) whilst "Maracaibo" has 5,304 and 154, respectively.

the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is researched and the situational constraints that shape the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.10).

2.3.1 Primary sources

2.3.1.1 Interviews

Since qualitative research attempts to describe and interpret human behavior based on the words of selected individuals (Chenail, 1997, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10), I decided to carry out semi-structured interviews as my main source of data, being complemented with the diary studies method. SSI are interviews which employ a blend of closed and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow up questions around why and how, and which are carried out with one respondent at a time (Adams, 2015, p. 493). By its use, I was able to access a certain level of in-depth access to information, as well as obtaining different points of view on the same topic (idem, p. 494). As a limitation, however, both the transcription and the translations proved to be time consuming and labor intensive (idem, p. 493).

I interviewed nine people in total, mainly focusing on the informants Laura* and Agnes* who had a considerable disposition to be interviewed as many times as I needed them to. I wanted to interview people who had experienced different governments and who had experienced how Venezuela was before the *chavismo* and how it has evolved. I therefore chose a sample of people between 50-70 years old, who have lived in the city of Maracaibo for their whole or most of their lives and who were part of a middle-high socioeconomic class. I chose people with a middle-high socioeconomic class background, as I believed they might have been able to have more options and some sort of maneuver or “negotiation” power when faced with adversity. I did not consider gender to be a relevant aspect since I believe my studied case affects everyone without a gender distinction. The group of people was obtained after asking my family and friends to help find individuals with my desired characteristics and willing to participate. The questions and most of the relevant answers I got from my interviews are to be found in the Annex 1.

2.3.1.2 Diary studies method

Since I was interested in following the daily lives of my informants, I complemented my interviews with the diary studies method. This method refers to a series of observations of and with individuals as a way to have “systematic discussions and conversations regarding concrete, everyday life” (Jakobsen *et al*, 2008, p. 2). This method, thus, allows the gathering of detailed knowledge through conducting close observations (*ibid*). Since I stayed in Denmark during the whole process of investigation, it was impossible to carry out observations with the individuals but instead, I followed their daily lives mostly through Whatsapp conversations.

To do so, I asked almost all of my informants if they were interested in participating. Two of my informants, Laura* and Agnes*, expressed both interest and commitment. I asked them to keep track of their interactions when going to the supermarket or when performing other types of economic transactions. The main thing I asked them was to register their what, where, who and why of their interactions. I would, then, ask them every three or four days to tell me about their latest interactions when shopping. One thing I noticed is that they both often omitted information they had “normalized” but that proved to be important for the development of this research when I pushed further for it. Despite this issue, I got a better sense of their everyday struggles further than what I got to learn through the interviews. The diaries are not included in this master thesis. However, it helped my own reflections as a researcher in the sense that I got to know both the details and the overall picture regarding the context.

2.3.2 Secondary sources

For my secondary sources of data, I mostly made use of news articles from both local media as well as international ones like “El Nacional”, “The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)”, “Diario AS”, among others. Being a very recent phenomenon, it seemed like not much literature had been produced on the exact same topic. I was able to use, however, some academic texts produced mostly by students of different Venezuelan universities.

2.4 Limitations

The fact that my investigation was focused on a phenomenon that was, and keeps occurring in Venezuela in a very fast and changing environment, gave me a limitation when trying to access journals and academic papers. Little to none has been written yet—in an academic way— about what is happening today in Maracaibo regarding daily economic exchanges.

When conducting interviews, I found out that some of the existing tools and technologies available to be used as payment methods, were completely unknown to my population. Examples of this include transferences of bonds given by the government to an app that would convert the amount into bitcoins or the use of the tool named *biopago*, issued by the government. To cover this gap and in order for me to understand what they were about, I interviewed three young adults on specifically these kinds of questions, successfully covering the gap.

Another limitation was the fact that all of my informants are currently living in Venezuela and organizing the agenda for the interviews proved to be a difficult task at times due to the time difference (-6 hours). Likewise, connection to the internet was more often than not, very unstable; leading to having, oftentimes, interviews divided among Zoom calls, Whatsapp calls and ultimately, Whatsapp voice notes to be sent when the informant would be able to access the internet.

A different limitation was the impossibility to access official data issued by the government of Venezuela. Access to the *Patria* platform was obtained after several attempts on different days. The official website for elections and related kinds of statistics (<https://www.cne.gob.ve>) proved to be down during the entire time this master thesis was written (February-May 2021). Lastly, access to the official website for statistics (<https://www.ine.gov.ve>) was not only almost impossible, but the information was so outdated that it proved to be completely irrelevant for this investigation. Other than these three websites, I did not try to access any other official source.

Lastly, a drawback from case studies and the fact that I am basing most of my findings on the input provided by, mostly, two of my informants, is the impossibility (or limitation) to make

generalizations. The fact that I selected a group of individuals with some similar conditions might be enough (for now) to make a generalization to a certain extent, when referring to people of that particular same group. Likewise, there is a possibility for data loss due to translations since most of my data is in Spanish.

2.4 Positionality

Being myself born and raised in Maracaibo and having experienced, first-hand, some of the situations I refer to in this investigation, I had the advantage of counting with some prior knowledge as well as an understanding (to a certain degree) of the political and social context of both the country and the city. However, and precisely for that reason, I struggled to filter the information and to limit the scope of this investigation. Likewise, I struggled with my own bias, which I tried to keep as neutral as possible through this project.

3. CONTEXT

3.1 The democratic period

Following the overthrow of dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in a coup organized in 1958, an arrangement to preserve the new democratic system was signed by three of the major political parties at the moment: AD, COPEI and URD (Duarte, 2005, p. 153). The “Punto Fijo Pact” had its roots in the Constitution of 1961, and its goal was to guarantee the respect for election results and the equal participation of all the parties in the new government of the winning party (Viana, 2019), as well as to prevent that a coup d’état would occur again (Cárdenas, 2012, p. 15).

Supported on the clientelistic distribution of the petroleum income, the system had a solid institutional engineering that lasted thirty years (Duarte, 2005, p. 154). A bipartisan⁵ system which had a minimal ideological and programmatic difference (one was socio-democratic and the other one democratic-christian), minorities were excluded and left without a political voice, as for example the Communist Party was perceived to be a destabilizing force for the nascent democracy (ibid). Access to the government, thus, was mediated by the party pact and polarized disputes were always avoided. There was room, however, for party coalitions within the system (ibid). The “puntofijismo”, thus, was successful and stable, and propagated in Latin America as an exemplary model (Lewis & Weiner, 2013).

An important asset within this system was petroleum. The existence of it allowed the intervention of the government in the economy and shaped its relations with other political actors such as parties, unions and the private sector (Duarte, 2005, p. 154). Furthermore, the petroleum revenues subsidized all kinds of different mechanisms, leading to the linkage of officials from the parties to economic groups, both national and foreign (Lewit & Weiner, 2013). The capitalist economic system that was in place focused on accumulation and specially, accumulation as a result of the petroleum revenues. As a consequence of this, the industrial profile for Venezuela was less focused

⁵ The URD left the pact by 1960 (Lewit & Weiner, 2013)

on domestic markets and more focused on complex, capital-intensive industries which required great State prominence and that were supported both by private and foreign capital (ibid).

During this period, and due to the extraordinary petroleum revenue the country started to perceive, a type of corruption started to be common. This practice involved State agents who had influence on how state resources would be distributed (Morris & Blake, 2010, p. 172). However, and despite the pervasive corruption, it was perceived as a nuisance and it was not viewed as a major problem for society. It was a topic who did not attract media interest nor was used by politics around their campaigns; but it is believed that it helped to distribute⁶ State resources and thus, created a large middle class who in turn supported the growing industrial complex and helped democracy remain stable (idem, p. 176).

3.2 “¡Ta’ barato dame dos!”⁷

By 1974, the model reached its peak with the first presidential period of CAP. One of the most important events during this period was the creation of a state-owned petroleum company: Petróleos de Venezuela (Petroven), which was later known as PDVSA (ibid). Pérez’ government enjoyed the highest petroleum revenues ever and had the highest external debt known until the time. The richness created an illusion of prosperity which hid a single-product economy that relied heavily on the revenue derived by petroleum and which was not diversified (ibid).

This flourishing period is commonly known as the “Great Venezuela”, “Saudi Venezuela” or the “¡Ta’ barato dame dos!” (“It is very cheap, give me two!”) era. The middle-class made a habit out of traveling to Miami, Caracas had the best French restaurants in Latin America and the Venezuelans came to be the biggest whisky consumers in the world (Markous, 2018). Despite this fairy-tale-like environment, the end of CAP’s period was full of controversy. He was heavily questioned by excessive bureaucracy, corruption and splurge (Semana, 2010) and according to the

⁶ Although irregularly (Morris & Blake, 2010, p. 176)

⁷ A local saying

Library of Congress⁸, his government spent more money in five years than all of the governments together since independence (ibid).

These scandals led to the emergence of president Luis Herrera Campins (1979-1984) whose campaign slogan was “¿Dónde están los reales?” (“Where is the money?”), alluding to the previous government (Lewit & Weiner, 2013). His government received a densely indebted country with an economical model that was exhausted and hit by the oil prices crisis of 1973 (ibid). To face the crisis, Campins applied neoliberal measures that included the non-intervention of the State in the economy and the reduction of public expenditure (ibid).

3.3 The downfall of the model

On the 18th of February of 1983, the famous *Viernes Negro* (“Black Friday”) took place. This day came to be the materialization of three substantial elements that had been present during the last couple of years and which now reached its peak: 1) an uncontrollable and growing external debt that had to be canceled in a 50%; 2) a strong capital flight; and 3) the fall of the petroleum prices (ibid). On top of this and to try to cope with the crisis, an exchange rate regime and a devaluation of the Venezuelan bolívar was put into place (ibid). This led to financial speculation and the definite end of the “Saudi Venezuela” era. By the end of 1988, nostalgic feelings towards the petroleum bonanza led to the election of, once again, CAP as the president of the country (Semana, 2010).

He soon introduced a set of measures that came to be known popularly as *Paquetazo Económico/Paquetazo Neoliberal* (“Big Economical Package/Big Neoliberal Package”), which included: assuming more external debt under the supervision of the IMF, market liberalization, an increase in public services prices, privatization of some public companies and the increase of oil prices (Lewit & Weiner, 2013). This set of very unpopular measures led to a massive protest known

⁸ From the United States

as *Caracazo*⁹, the 27 and 28th of February of 1989 in which at least three hundred people¹⁰ died, according to official sources (Duarte, 2005, p. 157). Though short in duration, its effects remained as unemployment and life's cost rose while some subsidies were cut (Semana, 2010). Political instability continued to grow and by 1992, then Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez led a coup attempt which despite unsuccessful, reflected the society's general discontent (Duarte, 2005, p. 157). To close this crisis, the presidential institution was left demoralized as CAP lost credibility and consequently, left office in 1993 due to corruption scandals (ibid). In his specific case, he was accused of peculation, embezzlement and illegal appropriation of resources (Semana, 2010), and was subjected to an impeachment and a prison sentence that was not complied with (ibid).

During this period and as a consequence of CAP's second period, corruption came to be seen as a scourge. It was widespread, acknowledged by society and viewed as a serious political problem (Morris & Blake, 2010, p. 176). This led to the emergence of non-traditional political leaders that were not affiliated with either of the two historically dominant parties. One of the most popular was the already mentioned Hugo Chávez, who justified his coup attempt as a drastic action that had to be taken if Venezuela had any hope of turning back its growing corruption (idem, p. 177). Likewise, the next elected president, Rafael Caldera, also got to power on the basis of an anti-establishment and anti-corruption discourse (ibid). During Caldera's period and in the wake of deregulation policies, banks expanded and gained control over companies in different kinds of sectors (tourism, agriculture, etc), but soon many banks went bankrupt (ibid).

3.4 A new era

In 1999, Hugo Chávez, a military officer, got elected as the president of Venezuela (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 195). He modified the national Constitution and proclaimed the "*Socialismo del Siglo XXI*" (Socialism of the 21st century), a system which proposed a participative democracy, an increased sovereignty and a solidary economy, mainly (idem, p. 196). During his fourteen year old presidential period, he enjoyed favorable petroleum production and prices (Bermúdez, 2016),

⁹ The word *per se* does not have a meaning, but makes allusion to Caracas, Venezuela's capital city

¹⁰ The numbers are still undisputed, as other sources claim three thousand deaths. This revolt was, to its date, the largest and most violence repressed response to an austerity plan in Latin American history (Coronil, 1997 in Åsedotter, 2017, p. 38).

avored the nationalization of private companies and introduced currency exchange controls. The latter leading to a “complete distortion of the economy”, according to economist Carlos Miguel Álvarez (ibid), among other reasons.

Chavez’s governing period was controversial in the sense that he enjoyed a widespread popularity due to his charisma and overall informal style. Likewise, he was also heavily criticized by his detractors for his populist governing style, corrupt practices and close ties with the Castro brothers’ government in Cuba, who served as advisors for Chávez on how to govern Venezuela. His populist style, according to experts, was based on the use of strategies for the mobilization of socially excluded sectors of the population (Magallanes, 2009, p. 127). He faced, additionally, a coup d’etat attempt in 2002 and a recall referendum in 2004, which deepened the already marked divisions (Paullier, 2012). As a consequence, his government started to try, by all means, to hold on to power (Fisher & Taub, 2017).

From 2006, it is said that a more radical style followed. He pulled Venezuela out of some multilateral conventions such as the Andean Community (2006), and relied on the recently founded PetroCaribe (2005) and the *Alianza Bolivariana Para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA - “Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America”). This, as a strategy for delivering a petroleum diplomacy (Serbin, 2006). Political institutions kept getting weaker and corruption accusations continued to rise. He, likewise, deepened his discourse on how the “rich elite” and the “humble, fair people” were enemies (Fisher & Taub, 2017) further contributing to the already very polarized climate. He also financed armed groups both in Venezuela [these known as *colectivos* (“collectives”)] and abroad, such as guerrillas in Colombia (ibid).

Upon his death in 2013, his appointee, Nicolás Maduro, became the president of Venezuela. He inherited a disastrous economy and very little support both from elites as well as popular sectors (ibid). In order to solve this situation, he distributed power among different factions. The army, for example, became the controllers of lucrative businesses like drug trafficking, food distribution and illegal mining, which form an important base of the Venezuelan economy nowadays (ibid). During his government, production of petroleum and its international prices fell, leading to an impossibility to maintain the previous social spending levels and growing debt levels. To solve

this issue, he ordered a massive printing of banknotes, which led to the hyperinflation (Fisher & Taub, 2017) that was referred to at the introduction chapter. Violence rised even more, since hyperinflation and price controls led to a food crisis. Not producing almost anything else than petroleum and with tight controls for imports, stores and supermarkets in general became empty (ibid). Black market transactions, thus, rised, leading for all classes of informal activities to develop. Some of these are the famous *bachaqueros* (“leafcutter ants”) in Maracaibo. These are individuals who were dedicated to smuggling gasoline and food from Venezuela to Colombia, which they would sell for a higher price (Pardo 1, 2015). With the shortages of food and gasoline, they switched to the re-selling of products from Colombia to Venezuela (ibid). This overall situation, according to Harvard economist Steven Levitsky, is possible due to the paradox of Venezuela, in which the government is too authoritarian to coexist with democratic institutions, but too weak to be able to demolish them without risking its total collapse (Fisher & Taub, 2017).

Since 2017, the US has introduced sanctions to Venezuela, targeting individuals, businesses and oil entities associated with Maduro’s administration (Kirschner, 2021). These, according to the US, are designed to prevent Maduro’s government from profiting from illegal gold mining, state-operated oil businesses or other transactions that would allow criminal activity and human rights abuses (ibid). Although blamed by Maduro as being the responsible ones for promoting an “economic war” against the regime, several economists agree that the Venezuelan economic decline has been a consequence of deteriorating living standards long before the sanctions came in 2017 (ibid).

3.5 Juan Guaidó

In a historical event in 2015, the *oposición* gained control of the National Assembly (Miranda, 2021) and lost it again in a controversially held elections in 2020 that were famous for its higher levels of abstention (ibid). Considering this election a fraud, the *oposición* designated Juan Guaidó, president of the National Assembly, as the interim president of Venezuela (ibid). With this event, a parallel government was formed and over sixty countries recognized Guaidó as the president of Venezuela until free elections could be held again (Cifuentes & Meza, 2020). Despite appointing diplomats around the world and heavily campaigning for allowing humanitarian aid to enter

Venezuela (ibid), his government has had very limited control. As of May 2021, he has been unable to unseat Maduro from the presidential power. He has also had his assets in Venezuela frozen and has received multiple death threats by detractors (ibid).

The previously described political, social and economic crisis has led for 5,5 millions of Venezuelans to flee the country as of April 2021; a number almost as high as that of Syrian refugees (El Nacional, 2021). This number equals 17,1% of all Venezuelans, including myself. The panorama for Venezuela nowadays does not look better. With the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges have increased for the average citizen. Even though it exists, official data has not been able to keep up with the number of infected nor dead people. The country, likewise, does not have a vaccination plan yet (Ospina-Valencia, 2021) and rising levels of poverty challenge access to healthcare or to give sepulture to the dead. Despite the situation, Venezuelan peoples' spirit is strong and community ties are powerful, as is going to be seen through this master thesis.

4. ANALYSIS

In this first chapter, I aim at discussing how the political polarization in Venezuela has led, ultimately, to a politicization of everyday life that is mostly evident in economic terms. I argue that in this context, citizens can assume “political personas” in order to manage the polarization. The choice of these personas, I argue, is made according to the perceived benefits that belonging to a particular faction can bring.

4.1 PART I - Political polarization in Venezuela

Two and a half years ago, politician Juan Guaidó self-proclaimed as the interim president¹¹ of Venezuela, following the inauguration of the sixth presidential period of Nicolás Maduro. Guaidó described Maduro as “illegitimate” and an “usurper” of the presidential power in the country (Phillips & Zúñiga, 2019). In what followed, a parallel government was formed, sixty countries recognized Guaidó’s mandate and hope for better general conditions was renewed among Venezuelans (Kurmanaev & Jakes, 2021).

As of today, Maduro continues to officially hold the power and the country continues to be as divided as in the last twenty years (ibid). This phenomenon, known as polarization, is evidenced when “the position of a group supposes the negative reference to another group, which is perceived as an enemy” (Lozada, 2008). This complex dynamic implies that closeness to one group means active rejection of the other (ibid). As explained in the context chapter, polarization in Venezuela is not new, but has certainly deepened in the context of a government that on one hand, has held power for the last twenty two years, and on the other, has been proposing a “radical”¹² governing system known as “socialism of the 21st century” (ibid).

¹¹ This action is legal, as it is in line with article 233 of the Venezuelan Constitution: “*Serán faltas absolutas del Presidente o Presidenta de la República: su muerte, su renuncia, o su destitución decretada por sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia, su incapacidad física o mental permanente certificada por una junta médica designada por el Tribunal Supremo de Justicia y con aprobación de la Asamblea Nacional, el abandono del cargo, declarado como tal por la Asamblea Nacional, así como la revocación popular de su mandato.*” (Constitución Nacional de Venezuela, 1999).

¹² I argue that it is radical since it is completely different from the neoliberal state that was ruling Venezuela before (Rodríguez, 2010).

It is not unexpected, thus, that this political polarization permeates almost every aspect of citizen's life in Venezuela nowadays, leading to, I argue, a politicization of everyday life that is mostly evident in economic terms. It is worth noting, however, that it is almost impossible for the economy to be non-politicized since economic policies respond to political interests to an important extent (Frieden, 2020, p. 6). Taking as a main case of study to grocery shop, I argue that political affiliation, to a certain degree, affects everyday life decisions such as where to go or how to pay, when grocery shopping. This will be further explored in parts two and three of the analysis.

According to Palonen *et al* (2019, p. 249), politicization can be defined as the action of “turning something – an issue, an institution, a policy – that previously was not a subject to political action into something that now is subject to political action”. In Venezuela, “winning” citizens' hearts depends much on partisan identification (Polga-Hecimovich, 2019, p. 477), parties that are loosely represented by two factions: *chavistas* and *oposición*.

According to sociologist Reinaldo Iturriza, the *chavismo* constitutes a left-wing political movement driven by late president Hugo Chávez, in which centrality is given to Hugo Chávez, his socialist political party the PSUV, and to the *barrios populares* (“Slums”), which are marginalized areas of the country that were not taken into account by previous governments before (Iturriza, 2019 in Teruggi, 2019). In a definition created by current president Nicolás Maduro after Chávez death in 2013, to be *chavista* means to be “bolivarian, anti-imperialistic, anti-capitalistic, christian, patriotic and anti-oligarchic”¹³ (Maduro, 2013 in González, 2014, p. 98). Likewise, and as defined by Elías Jaua, a *chavista* politician, to be *chavista* means “to know that power belongs to the people and not to the rich”, and it implies “to have a loving connection with Chávez, a leader who has never betrayed us”¹⁴ (Jaua, 2012). This centrality of the Chávez figure has a populist content, since “it relies on charismatic linkages between voters and politicians (...) and it also bases itself on a powerful discourse of ‘the people versus the elite’” (Hawkins, 2003, p. 1137).

¹³ “Bolivariano, anti-imperialista, anti-capitalista, cristiano, patriota y anti-oligárquico”.

¹⁴ “Saber que el poder le pertenece al pueblo y no a los ricos”, “tener una conexión amorosa con Chávez, el líder que nunca nos ha traicionado”.

The *oposición*, on the other side, constitutes the different parties, citizens, religious groups, and any other opposed to the *chavista* movement. Despite struggles to define its leadership, it has had a couple of leaders through the years, in which Henrique Capriles, Leopoldo López and Juan Guaidó stand out (Cañizález, 2021). Although it does not have a defined position in the political spectrum, their proposals could be characterized as rather central (ibid); however, the *chavista* movement has referred to them in multiple occasions as *la derecha* (“the right wing”), contributing to the political polarization climate in the country (González, 2014, p. 96).

In the following section, I will analyze how everyday life has been politicized, using grocery shopping as the main case of study.

4.1.1 Politicization of everyday life

Laura* is a sixty year old woman who has lived in Maracaibo for almost her entire life. She lives in an upper-middle class neighbourhood in the city and works informally baking desserts on demand. When she was younger, her parents were militants of COPEI, the Christian party (which today is almost extinct), she was raised in a Catholic home and has had the opportunity to travel abroad and afford an university education. Her everyday routine includes waking up early, praying, taking a shower, having breakfast, going to the supermarket and/or running errands, coming home for lunch, baking desserts (if there is any request) and exercising and/or watching TV or reading before going to bed. To make ends meet, she mostly relies on her baking business, her pension¹⁵ and remittances from abroad.

When deciding where to go to buy groceries, she mostly takes into account “location and variety of products”. Likewise, she only goes to places “that, she knows, are not owned by *chavistas*”. When I asked about further details on how to tell if a place is *chavista* or *oposición*, she explained:

“you just know. There is a chavista-owned mini-market that is very well located and offers a great variety of products, of very good quality and they even have slightly cheaper prices.

¹⁵ As of April 2021, a pension in Venezuela equals \$1,850,708 *bolívars*, or \$0.72 US dollars

I went there only once because I really needed to buy some turkey and they were the only ones selling it, but I avoid the place at all costs”.

She continued with an example of a restaurant:

“there is a meat restaurant that is owned by chavistas. Some people in the oposición have carried out a campaign to warn people that this place is chavista. As a result, that restaurant is constantly empty, and you just know that the kind of people that go there are only chavistas”.

Agnes* is a fifty five year old married woman who has lived in Maracaibo her whole life. She lives in an upper-middle class neighbourhood in the city and is an architect but is currently a housewife. Her husband, also an architect, is the main bread-winner. In her daily routine, she wakes up and gives thanks to God. Afterwards, she has breakfast, takes a shower and takes care of what is needed to prepare lunch. In the afternoon, she takes a nap, exercises and watches TV. In her free time, she paints altarpieces and works with an NGO teaching individuals in poorer areas of the city about their rights and duties as citizens. She assured that her routine has been severely affected both by the COVID-19 pandemic and insecurity in the city. To make ends meet, they rely on her husband’s salary (paid in US dollars) and their life-time savings. Occasionally, they receive a box with goods/groceries, sent by their children who are living abroad.

When asked about her criteria to choose a supermarket or place for daily grocery shopping, she replied that she goes to the place that is “the closest, cheapest and most varied” and does not check prior if the place is owned by a *chavista* or not. She, however, had a different conception than Laura* about the distinction of spaces in Maracaibo:

“I actually do not know. The people that go to, for example, new cafés, are the people who can afford it. Chavistas will not show themselves as such so easily, so they can be mixed with the oposición people and sometimes you can not know. However, during the lockdown, many places were closed except for the ones owned by chavistas”.

According to Laura* and Agnes'* testimony, it can be said that both women are aware of the distinction of spaces, both physical and imaginary, among political factions. In Laura's* example, she places political affiliation as a more important criteria to choose a place to shop, than price or variety, and expresses what could be labeled as "feeling shame" when shopping at a *chavista* place. In the case of Agnes*, she chooses a place for other reasons rather than a political one, but is aware of how political affiliation can both go unnoticed as well as to serve as a purpose for a distinct treatment.

They are, however, not alone when noticing a distinction of spaces among both factions. Just recently, on April 16th of 2021, "Gustavo Dudamel" became a trending topic in Twitter Venezuela when he was elected as the Musical Director for the *Opéra National de Paris*, (becoming the first Latin American person to gain such an achievement) (Folha de S. Paulo, 2021) as users kept *tweeting* about how upset they were that a *chavista* would get such a recognition, and how impossible it was for most of them to be happy about it since he was supported by the government (Rincones, 2021). The same happened the day allegedly *chavista* Venezuelan artists "Servando y Florentino" offered an online concert in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Twitter, 2021).

Although nowadays true believers and supporters of the *chavista* project still exist, the extreme polarization has led to the existence, also, of "political" personas' through which it is possible to thrive (or be miserable), depending on what role is being played. According to Marshall and Henderson (2016), a persona is a "fabricated reconstruction of the individual that is used to play a role that both helps the individual navigate their presence and interactions with others and helps the collective to position the role of the individual in the social" (p. 1). Although this has happened in Venezuela among higher political ranks (the practice is known as *salto de talanquera*, which means "to jump the fence"), it has become more common throughout the years for the common citizen to engage in these kinds of political personas. One of them is locally known as *boliburgueses*, *bolichicos* or *bolibourgeois* in English.

Boliburgueses or *bolichicos* is a word created by journalist Juan Carlos Zapata in 2005 to designate the group of entrepreneurs that managed to accumulate substantial amounts of wealth in a short period, due to connections with the *chavista* government (Mansilla, 2020). Although

boliburgueses could be considered the “official” word, this group of people are locally known as *nuevos ricos*, which means “new rich”, or *enchufados*, which means “plugged”, as being “plugged” to the *chavista* government. They can be quite easily identifiable as they do not live with austerity but rather exhibiting their assets and luxurious lifestyle. This includes driving the latest model cars which are usually armored, as well as wearing designer clothes (Forbes, 2021) in the context of a country with more than 80% of its population living in extreme poverty. In the words of one informant: “nowadays, the people that have money in Venezuela are either *enchufados* or people that traditionally have had wealth for generations”

Taking into account the previous context, I argue that political personas can be performed by the common citizen, as a way of navigating in a context of polarization where “opportunism” arises. As defined by the Collins dictionary, “opportunism” refers to “taking advantage of any opportunity that occurs in order to gain money or power, without thinking whether their actions are right or wrong” (Collins Dictionary, 2021). This means that some people will pretend to belong or agree with one or another faction depending on which advantages or benefits are perceived to be obtained when doing so. In the words of Corner (2000), a political persona is made through a performance that works towards a particular end (Coner, 2000 in Marshall & Henderson, 2016, p. 2); which in the case of roles of *chavistas* or *opositores*, is to take part of perceived benefits. This could be thought of as a way of “navigating” the political context in Venezuela.

According to Henrik Vigh (2009), “social navigation” can be defined as “the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled” (2009, p. 420). Empirically, within social navigation, people invest a significant portion of their time “in making sense of and predicting the movement of their social environment” so they can clarify how they are able to adapt through upcoming change (ibid). Navigation through the performance of political personas is possible, I argue, in a context of weakened institutions that struggle to enforce law or fail to distribute rent in an equal way resulting in inequality. In this sense, unequal access to resources could serve as a catalyst to assume a determinate role in what circumstances allow.

However, and putting personal convictions aside, assuming a role will lead the person to be associated, inevitably, with the values or practices that are perceived, by the other faction, to be

characteristic of this group. This means, that if corruption is a well-known and widespread problem inside a government and its institutions (as it is in Venezuela), then performing a political persona of a *chavista*, in this case, could mean, on one side, to be associated¹⁶ with corruption and on the other, to “luckily” be able to take advantage of those opportunities that arise from that same corruption. Likewise, to assume a political persona of *oposición* (or *opositor*), could mean to be perceived as “traitors” or “capitalists” by *chavistas*, or “democratic” by other members of the *oposición*. These, once again, are just perceptions and not necessarily facts.

Playing a political persona can make sense, for some people, in a context of crisis. As Ingold (2000) explains, in situations of crisis agents are forced to “take into account not only how they move within a social environment, but also how the social environment moves them and other agents within it” (cited in Vigh, 2008); therefore, agents are led to “provisional praxis and navigation”. As explained earlier, positions can be “performed” according to the perceived potential benefits each of them could bring, besides personal convictions, as a way of navigating through the crisis. The polarization has led, ultimately, to on one side, the almost-unavoidance of political affiliation as a criteria when making decisions as simple as choosing who you buy your goods from and on the other, to resentment from each group towards the other. In the example of Laura*, she associates *chavismo* with “corruption”, “destruction” and “drug trafficking” whilst she associates *oposición* with “a democratic exit to *chavismo*”; thus, she avoids spaces and situations that can make her seem like part of *chavismo*, even if unintentionally.

Through this chapter, I analyzed the way political polarization has led to a politicization of everyday life. This politicization involves that political affiliation influences everyday life decisions such as where to grocery shop. Taking advantage of the polarization and in the context of the political and economic crisis, “political personas” can be performed as a way to navigate in daily life, besides personal convictions. The decision on which persona to assume is influenced by the perceived benefits each political faction might represent. Besides benefits, ideas associated with each faction would be additionally associated with the person assuming the role. For example, *chavistas* could be labelled as “corrupt” whilst *opositores* could be labelled as “traitors”. To

¹⁶ Associated with corruption by the *oposición* people and most likely, also by the majority of the international community.

navigate through the crisis while exchanging political roles becomes an option for some citizens in a society with weakened institutions, corruption and unequal access to resources. In the next section, I demonstrate, concretely, how political affiliations affect the views in government-issued payment solutions.

4.2 PART II - Government-issued payment solutions

In this chapter, I aim to describe two government-issued payment solutions. The first one is the *Patria* system, a system created by president Maduro to organize the way in which subsidies are allocated to the citizens that choose to register their data within the database. The second one, is the *biopago*, as it is locally known, which is also a system that allows citizens to tank their cars whilst paying “preferential” rates for gasoline, in the context of the petroleum crisis in the country. I highlight the ways in which citizens in Maracaibo practice a refusal to receive as a political stand that has an underlying hope for change. To do so, I use Mauss’ (1925) theory on gift exchange. His approach is useful to explore the way in which, in this case, a gift from the government can be refused by its citizens. This, with an ultimate goal of demanding a change in the country’s current conditions.

As a starting point for this chapter, I will introduce part of the central argument by sociologist Marcel Mauss’ in his book, *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïque* (“The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies”) (1925). He studied, primarily, the social constraints underlying the circulation of gifts in Polynesian, Melanesian and Amerindian societies (Alain, 2012, p. 4). Gifts can include goods, marriage offerings, invitations, and the like, and they can serve economic, social, moral, religious reasons. He entitled this phenomena as a “total social phenomenon” (or *potlatch*) (Komter, 2007, p. 94). Gift giving is embedded in a system of exchange that includes the obligation to give, to receive and to return (Hedenskog, 2019, p. 6).

Gifts can establish a positive reciprocity, in which gifts are given, received and returned¹⁷ in order to create and renew social bonds, as a sign of alliance, solidarity and communion (Adloff, 2016; Hyde, 1983; in Cedrini *et al*, 2019, p. 691). Gifts contain *hau*, which according to Mauss, is “the spirit of things” (Mauss, 2002, p. 14). As such giving includes the giving of oneself (Cedrini *et al*, 2019, p. 693). The *hau* follows the gift and it wishes to return to its birthplace (Mauss, 2002, p. 15). needing, consequently, for reciprocity to take place (Cedrini *et al*, 2019, p. 693).

Gift exchange could be, however, negative. Refusing to give, receive or return is a tantamount declaration of war on the community, and a risk is taken on losing authority, status, autonomy and independence (idem, p. 695), and even death (Siegel, 2013, p. 72). Gift exchange systems, as institutions, constrain behavior by the requirement of following the three mentioned rules; however, the fact that normative compulsion and social sanctions exist, implies that the gift also enables behavior (ibid). Since refusal (or betrayal) is always a possibility, alliances (positive reciprocity) need to be continually renewed (idem, p. 692). Finally, the gift that is granted when reciprocating, needs to be returned with interest (Mauss, 2002, p. 28); that means, that the returned gift needs to be, at least, valued the same as the received gift or more (Hedenskog, 2019, p. 7).

In the following two sections, I will use Mauss’ idea on gift giving and “refusal to receive” to explore the *Patria* system and the *biopago* system in the Venezuelan context.

4.2.1 The *Patria* system

- “Do you have the *Carnet de la Patria*?”

- “No”

- “Ok. In that case, I cannot assure you that your application will proceed as fast as possible”.

Until last year, Laura* used to work at a restaurant as a legal representative. Therefore, it was part of her job to pursue loans that would offer the lowest interest rates. She knew, by popular knowledge, that the *Banco de Venezuela* (“Venezuela Bank”), a government-owned bank, offered

¹⁷ These are also known as the three rules

the lowest interests for loans to restaurants and overall businesses. She then went and tried to apply for a loan but quickly gave up when presented with the requirements to open an account as a first step before being able to apply for a loan. “*Not only some of the requirements were very difficult to fulfill, but I was also told that the application would, for sure, not proceed as fast as it could if I did not have the Carnet*”, said Laura* with clear annoyance.

In December of 2016, president Nicolás Maduro announced the creation of the “*Carnet de la Patria*” (“Homeland Card”), a Chinese-developed ID system which would allow the government to pay for the social programs offered to the citizens (La Iguana TV, 2016). He announced that with the ID card, the government would be able to gather in one place and access the information on health, education, feeding, odontology, among others, of each citizen subscribed to it, as well as to deposit money directly into the bank accounts of said people to access social benefits and/or participation in the *misiones*¹⁸ (“missions”) (ibid).

When checking out the official *Patria* website¹⁹, it is possible to find a list of one hundred and five different economic bonds to which subscribed citizens have or have had access²⁰ (some are not active anymore). These bonds range from direct social services (scholarships, food boxes, access to free health) to direct money deposits due to festivities (carnival bond, christmas bond, mother’s day bond). Following Mauss’ idea of gift-giving and the spirit of the gift, this could be interpreted as a gift, from part of the government, towards the citizens that decide to engage in this system. When citizens accept the gift, a greater and enduring contract among both parties is formed, in which they are supposed to keep engaging if good relations are to be maintained (Mauss, 1966, p. 4).

Among the data the *Patria* platform stores, it is possible to find information on birthdays, family details, job information, income, membership to a political party and whether the person has voted or not during elections (Rodríguez, 2021). Likewise, and to encourage people to subscribe, prizes

¹⁸ A program created by late president Hugo Chávez in 2003, which aimed at offering basic services to a part of the population who lives with limited access to resources in areas where that access is limited by economic capacity (Hurtado & Zerpa, 2016)

¹⁹ <https://www.patria.org.ve/login>

²⁰ At least, until the 5th of April of 2021

in cash have been given to citizens that engage in “civic activities” such as gathering voters in election times (ibid).

Despite being of voluntary subscription, the *Carnet de la Patria* grants different kinds of rights based on whether a person is registered or not (Berwick, 2018). As mentioned, benefits are solely received upon registration; and, in case a person wants to obtain even more gains, it is possible to additionally sign up for supporting the government, actively, on social media (Frontera Viva, 2021).

On February 2021, the *Cazadores de Fake News* (“Fake News Hunters”) website published an investigation in which it is proven that Maduro’s regime had granted bonds to citizens that would collaborate in social media propaganda, such as the positioning of certain hashtags on Twitter and posting a certain amount of daily tweets (ibid). The name that was given to the citizens involved in such a task was *Tuiteros de la Patria* (“Homeland Twitter-nauts”), who would organize and coordinate each other through other apps such as “Whatsapp”, and who would recommend to those citizens that would complain when not receiving bonds, to join “Twitter” and participate in the activity (ibid). In order to pay, the “Twitter” account had to be linked with the *Patria* system registration. Upon verification of weekly tweets, awards such as “social media active person” with a money payment of \$1.8 US dollars would be made (ibid).

There is, however, a special bond that was created by Maduro as a relief to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was equivalent to 300,000 BsF (around \$0.16 US dollars as of 29th of March 2021) in the first hand-outs but currently sits at \$1.60 US dollars (AS 1, 2021). The *guerra económica*²¹ (“Economic war”) bond is supposed to be given out monthly to all pensioners that possess the *Carnet* (AS, 2020); however, one informant who is a pensioner and is subscribed to the public Social Security Institute but not to the *Patria* system, received the bond one time last year: “I got a text message some months ago last year saying that I had received a *guerra económica* bond and it was included along with my pension payment”. The fact that he got the bond without being

²¹ According to President Maduro, the ultra right wing in the US has been carrying out an economical war against Venezuela. This war has been carried out by financial and commercial blockades, and their ultimate goal, according to the president, is to isolate Venezuela and to take possession of the country’s natural resources (Meleán, 2020).

subscribed to the system could mean either that it is a strategy from the government to show pensioners the kind of benefits they could obtain if subscribed, or that databases are combined, or a simple mistake. In his words: “this *Patria* thing is an *arroz con mango*²² (“rice with mango”); no one fully understands how that system works and I have no clue why I got that bond in my bank account”.

Despite him receiving a bond by mistake, many other affiliated citizens do not get them at all. Complaints have been made by subscribed citizens who claim that they do not receive bonds on a regular basis as it was promised (A Simple Vista, 2020). Some protests have been held across the country: police in Lara (González, 2021), pensioners in Caracas (Torres, 2020) and entire families in Maracaibo (Urdaneta *et al*, 2020). Comments sections of news websites that announce any news related to the bonds are also flooded with complaints, hopelessness and confusion.

Although at first sight bestowing subsidies might seem like an obvious task from a government to perform towards its citizens (as in income redistribution, for example) (OECD, 2021), bonds in Venezuela are seen by the government as a gift²³.

Gifts, in this case, are not entirely disinterested (Offer, 1997, p. 456). They imply a voluntary transfer, an expectation of reciprocity, a motivation for regard and they establish repetitive, self-enforcing bonds (idem, p. 457). “The *Carnet* protects you, and you protect the country by voting” stated Maduro in a 2018’s mother’s day event (García, 2018). With a discourse that can even be labelled as romantic, inclusive and even personalized, an expectation of reciprocity is expressed in which voting support is expected in exchange of money.

In the same manner, for some citizens it can be common knowledge to be aware that it is their right to have States to guarantee people’s access to health, education, nutrition, among others.

²² A popular expression for making reference to a very confusing or problematic situation.

²³ The Christmas bond that was handed in 2020 was announced as a Christmas gift by the president for the “protection of the families” (La Iguana TV, 2020), as well as the bond for the festivity of the Three Wise Men (AS 2, 2021). Likewise, the title for the official Twitter account for the bonds (@BonosSocial) is “Bonos Protectores Social Al Pueblo” (Folk’s Social Protection Bonds). The fact that there is an insistence on the word “protection” indicates, in my opinion, a sense of condescendence and a perception of the folk as victims, maybe due to the “economic war” from the US.

While for many others, and especially those with very limited economic possibilities, when this access occurs (if even) it can be perceived as a gift. The gift, which in this case the citizens return to the government, is trust and votes. Trust constitutes a unilateral transfer with an expectation, but no certainty of reciprocity (Offer, 1997, pp. 453, 454). Some citizens, whether they like the government or not, trust that to become part of the *Patria* system can be more beneficial than to not be, at least for the hope of receiving subsidies even if there is no guarantee they will actually get them. Likewise, with rumors that affiliation to the *Carnet* will become a requisite in order to get vaccinated against COVID-19, fear of exclusion can become a powerful tool to make more citizens engaged (Vinogradoff, 2021). As one informant said:

“At my workplace, one person with contacts with the government arranged it for all of the employees to subscribe and get the Carnet easily and quickly, there at our office. I do not like the government at all, but I agreed to participate in the event as I might get a bond eventually, who knows²⁴”

Though trust in this case is not unilateral as the government also trusts that citizens will keep offering support in exchange of money, the ones that have more to lose are the citizens. On one hand, in the case of Venezuela, the government has arranged other ways to remain in power further than through voting, as explained in the context chapter, and on the other, some citizens, due to a diversity of factors, rely on the bonds for their everyday living.

Beyond needing the bonds or not to make ends meet, I observed that all but one of my informants were adamant on their decision to not make part of the *Patria* system, even if that would imply for them to give up social benefits and having to resort to other ways to navigate their everyday lives. *“Hmm yes, I know people that have the carnet. They have not cared about their principles and they have signed”*. Claimed one informant when asked if she had signed up for the *Patria* system or if she knew anyone who was part of it. Here, I would interpret that she believes that there is betrayal of the values of the signing person. According to Scott (2000), values are “beliefs about what is important” (p. 500); therefore, what is more important for one person might not be the

²⁴ To date, this informant has not received a single bond.

same for the other. For the informant in this case, it is more important to make a statement through a refusal rather than receiving benefits from a group she does not agree with.

The former example shows an interesting point, connected to the polarized climate in the country. Choosing to engage with the government (regardless of personal preference or true need for social help) can be seen as betrayal since it implies forming a relationship with the government. By signing up for the *Patria* system (gift), ties are created among the government and the citizens. Furthermore, an expectation of those ties to evolve into “trusting, loyal and mutual commitments” is put into place (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 875). This means that the exchange is not desired to be a one time thing but something sustained in time.

A specific problem within the *Carnet* is the lack of transparency in the exchange. In a system in which social rights are constantly being negotiated (Guery, 2013, p. 18), the handing of social benefits that started through *misiones* came to be replaced by the *Patria* system, a system based on subscriptions. However and despite subscription, there is no guarantee that the subscribed citizen will receive the bonds and benefits, as well as there is no guarantee for the State that the “benefited” citizen will actively support the government. Thus, the scope and reach of the expected reciprocity is unclear for both sides.

Another example closely connected to the *Carnet*, is the famous *Chip de la gasolina* (“Gasoline chip”) -now called *biopago*-, explored in the next section.

4.2.2 The *biopago* system

For decades, it was cheaper to fully tank a car than to buy a bottle of water in Venezuela. Since 1945, a portion of gasoline’s price has been subsidized by the government and since 1996, the price of a liter was frozen at 0.07 *bolívares* (0.00000004 US dollars as of the 29th of April 2021) until 2016, producing to PDVSA more loss than profit (Daza, 2017, p. 199). This fixed price obeys the “social agreement in which such a rich country should not charge their citizens for gasoline”, according to economist José Toro Hardy (Olmo, 2020). Furthermore, as mentioned in the context

chapter; the *Caracazo* started as a reaction to CAP's attempt to raise gasoline's prices to try and fix the fiscal deficit the country had and therefore, no further big attempts were made after that deadly episode, until 2016 (ibid).

In 2012, debt-induced fiscal deficit and a growing monetization of that deficit created a crisis that sparked inflation even more (Bull & Rosales, 2020, p. 113). Economic inefficiencies and the decline of oil production led to a limited capacity in redistribution, leading to scarcity (ibid).

In addition to the previous situation and due to enormous price differences and poor control, the smuggling of gasoline (and also of food and medicines) created a lucrative business, especially in the border with Colombia (Semana, 2020). Individuals, authorities and illegal groups (guerrillas, for example) alike got involved in smuggling low and fixed priced gasoline from Venezuela, to a market in Colombia in which it got sold by ten or fifteen times the original price (Unidad Investigativa El País, 2017). According to Colombian authorities, daily, at least three million US dollars in gasoline would cross the border; leading *guerrilleros*²⁵ to find in this business, more profit than other illegal markets such as drug trafficking (ibid). In recent years, however, the dynamic has turned around due to heavy scarcity and lack of production in Venezuela. Now, a gallon of gasoline that costs \$1.78 in Colombia, is sold for \$9.57 US dollars in Venezuela (Semana, 2020).

In this context, the announcement of the installation of the TAG in border areas such as Zulia (where Maracaibo is located) and Táchira in 2012 was considered by the government as a tactic to try and tackle the rampant smuggling and scarcity (Rojas, 2012). According to one informant, the TAG, or “chip”, as is locally known, consisted of a “sticker” that would be placed in a car and would allow the car to be tanked with a certain amount of liters a month:

“you would have to bring a couple of different documents such as the registration of the car on your name and insurance in order to get the sticker. Then, the sticker would have a certain amount of liters a month that you could tank... I do not remember the amount now

²⁵ Persons that are part of a guerrilla

because it changed a couple times... but if you did not tank the entire amount you were allowed to per month, then they would not accumulate for next month”.

The TAG system, however, proved to be inefficient as it, unsurprisingly, limited the supply for those cars that were not able to get it (Tal Cual, 2020). The elimination of the TAG gave way to the *biopago*, a biometric payment system created by the *Banco de Venezuela* which is connected to the *Patria* platform, and which allows users to make a payment just using a fingerprint (Ochoa, 2020). According to two informants, the *biopago* is now the system that is used in those gas stations that still supply gasoline for a subsidized price, and to which only people who either have the *Carnet de la Patria* or have a bank account at the *Banco de Venezuela*, can access²⁶. Otherwise, they mention, the option is to “go to private gas stations, in which they sell gasoline only in US dollars”. With constant changes and now with a parallel system in place for gasoline supply, some people find it too difficult to understand or follow up. In Laura’s* words:

“I just stopped using my car more than a year ago; it has gotten too complicated to tank a car and if the car breaks, then there are also no spare parts to fix it. I am just walking to places now even if that will expose me to even more insecurity”.

Likewise, I found it interesting that most of my informants had a very limited understanding of both the *biopago* system as well as the *Carnet*. The overall feeling, according to my assessment, was that regulations and conditions change so often that it is difficult to keep track of the changes, leading to a perception that both systems are inefficient and corrupt. Since they both stem from the government, this perception is extended to also include the government in general.

The above explored examples can be read in the context of the gift exchange theory developed by Mauss. Disguised at first as a selfless gift, the *Carnet* requires, clearly, something in return in order to offer the payments: private information and (maybe) political support. The *biopago* system

²⁶ While reading for this section, I came across some negotiations the government is trying to make to include private banks such as “Banescor”, the biggest in Venezuela. I discussed this with one informant and he told me that it is true that negotiations were there, but the COVID-19 pandemic has everything delayed. He also commented that if “Banescor” was to be included, it is still not very relevant as the biggest and most important bank in the Zulia region is the “Banco Occidental de Venezuela” (Western Bank of Venezuela) instead of “Banescor”.

requires its holders to be subscribed either to the *Patria* system or to hold a bank account at the government's bank. Gifts, as Mauss declared, have a "soul"; they possess something from the giver and they come with an obligation to be returned, as the *hau* wishes to return to its birthplace (Mauss, 1966, p. 9). The gift, thus, creates some sort of tie between souls, after which, reciprocity is expected (Offer, 1997, p. 423). Being voluntary and forming such a strong linkage between the parties, the gift can be thought as spontaneous and selfless. However, and according to Mauss, gifts are "forced and largely selfish" (Mauss, 1997, p. 17), since they compel the recipient to return it in order to avoid illness, loss of status, among others (Regan, 2014). Applied to this case, the "selfless gift" created as an "instrument for social protection and unification" (Rodríguez, 2021) is actually a tool for social control, in which not only the social and economical information of the person is closely monitored, but some of their actions are limited to whether they are part of the *Patria* system or not or if they can participate in the *biopago* method if they hold a bank account at the *Banco de Venezuela*.

4.2.3 Refusal to receive

As mentioned earlier, Venezuela's economic and institutional collapse, among other conjunctures, has led to an increasing political polarization between *chavistas* and *opositores* (García, 2003, p. 31). Even though this phenomenon is visible in the whole country, inhabitants of the Zulia region, where Maracaibo is situated, have nation-wide fame of being regionalistic and distinguished from the rest of the country because of its social and cultural singularities (Aguilera, 2017). Likewise, it is known for being a region that historically has been opposed to the government in Venezuela²⁷. According to one informant: "*We know about all the capacity Zulia has... it is enough for us to be modern already; but since it is a centralized country, everything (resources, money) just goes to Caracas. This is where our hate or rejection for whichever government is in charge comes from*".

²⁷ This information could not be officially confirmed. Access to the official website of the *Consejo Nacional Electoral* (National Electoral Council) was not possible since the website has been down during the entire time this thesis was being written (annex 2).

According to the *Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida del Venezolano* (Encovi - “Survey on life conditions of Venezuelans”) made by three of the biggest universities in Venezuela, extreme poverty in the country affected 80% of the population in 2020 (Singer, 2020), while in the Zulia region this number was 62% in 2018 (Delgado, 2018)²⁸²⁹. In this political and economical context and with projections of a 2.8% contraction of the GDP for 2021 (Círculo de Estudios Latinoamericanos, 2021), it is understandable that public or state-led initiatives are received with suspicion and distrust by a part of the population, since the revenue obtained by all the resources the region has not being perceived by the inhabitants of the region. When presented with options such as the *Carnet de la Patria* or the *biopago* system, some citizens practice a refusal to receive.

Through reciprocity of exchange: giving, receiving and giving in return, personal or collective bonds between givers and receivers are created, maintained or deepened (Mcgranahan, 2014, p. 335). To refuse, then, is to cut social relations or as Mauss (1966, p. 11) says “the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship and intercourse” (ibid). When citizens refuse government-crafted economic options and benefits, they are, specifically, cutting ties and opposing what the gift represents, which in this instance, is associated with support to the government. It is not the gift that they reject, but the potential relation that would be formed.

Refusal in this case, is a political stance. It is in an effort to redefine or redirect certain outcomes, expectations or relationships (Mcgranahan, 2014, p. 334). It challenges authority and/or the structure of rules of engagement in the first place (ibid). In the words of Agnes*:

“With that Carnet thing a lot of people were forced. Of course, neither me nor my family have it because we believe it is a lack of patriotism, you know?, we have fought so much, without violence, against this government”.

²⁸ Numbers are likely to be higher in 2021, since factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic have severely impacted the country.

²⁹ Official numbers in the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística*’ (“National Statistics Institute”) website announce poverty has diminished 12% when comparing 2018 to 1999 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2018). This is the most updated information since other statistics are even twenty four years old, for example.

This quote is useful to look into two points. The first one, is that refusal not only implies rejection of an existing structure, but also that a community is produced and reproduced (Mcgranahan, 2015, p. 322). The *oposición* in Venezuela gathers all the groups and individuals that oppose the current government of Venezuela (*chavismo*) regardless if they have little or much in common apart from the dislike for the current power holders. One crucial milestone was the installation of Juan Guaidó as the interim president in 2017, uniting the *oposición* in the second important point to look at: hope.

Hope is defined by Isabelle Stengers as “the difference between probability and possibility” (Zournazi, 2002 in McGranahan, 2014, p. 338). When a gift is given, there is an expectation, a hope for a return (reciprocity) (Siegel, 2013, p. 74); in this case, and since the gift exchange allows for some maneuver (the recipient can always choose to accept or not, at its own risk), citizens that refuse the *Carnet* or the *biopago* at the risk of being excluded completely of all government-issued social benefits, have an overall hope for a change in the system and/or the government³⁰. Refusal is the hope and insistence for things to be different (McGranahan, 2014, p. 338). For these citizens, refusal asserts both their political stands and their values, and is a profound desire for a change.

In this chapter, I analyzed Mauss’ theory of gift exchange in relation to two government-issued payment systems: the *Carnet de la Patria* and the *biopago*. Both systems are offered as a gift from the government to the citizens, in expectation of private information, trust and (maybe) political support in return. In the *Carnet* example, exchange is not transparent since there are no guarantees for any of the sides regarding payments or support. In the *biopago* example, gasoline-tanking parallel systems and overall changing conditions have made people confused. Some citizens believe that it can be more beneficial to take part of it than to refuse it, whilst others believe that participating in government-issued methods implies that they support the government even if unintentionally. Following Mauss’ gift exchange cycle of giving, receiving and reciprocating, I argued that some citizens engage in a refusal to receive due to fears of being associated with a government they do not trust. The refusal in this case, breaks the cycle of gift exchange; sets a

³⁰ It is true, however, that this refusal could be thought of as a luxury, since some people do not depend on government subsidies in order to cover their needs.

political stance and presents an effort to redirect certain outcomes. Ultimately, refusal produces a community around hope for a change and for better conditions.

4.3 PART III - Alternative payment methods

This last section deals with alternative payments. These are payments that are not offered by the government but instead, have flourished in an informal way and have now extended to most sectors of society mostly due to the lack of cash money. In this chapter, I analyze the ways the citizens from Maracaibo navigate in order to pay for their daily groceries. To do so, I will use Henrik Vigh's concept of navigation (2009) to unfold the ways in which, through improvisation and networks, citizens employ different kinds of payments. In order to make it easier to understand, I have divided the sections as follows: the first section deals with payment methods that establish lasting relationships (or not) among the parties. These include the use of "fake money" and payments in kind. The second section is focused on payments that involve trust and networks as the main characteristic: these consist of participation in the black market and the method known as *fiao* ' ("to trust"). The last part deals not with direct payments but rather gifts from kin relations, and it includes remittances and goods boxes from abroad.

"The other day I went to the supermarket. They wanted to give me some cookies as change. I do not eat that, and I asked the cashier about what would happen if someone with diabetes, for example, receives it and does not eat that product, what can they do? And she said "you have to take them anyways". I said "no, I don't want that" and she said "then go look for something of the same price or cheaper or there is no change". At the end, I accepted some candy, but since I do not eat that, I wanted to give them to herself (the cashier) and she said that it was forbidden for the personnel to receive gifts. Finally, I gave the candy to a car-keeper. It is absurd that I cannot do what I want to with the goods I was forced to receive".

The above testimony by Laura*, comes after the inability of a supermarket to give her change after she paid her groceries using US dollar banknotes.

As of April 2021, the banknotes crisis in Venezuela has been the most acute the country has ever gone through. The crisis has occurred mostly due to hyperinflation. As a consequence, the price of producing banknotes becomes higher than the actual worth of the banknotes (even the ones with the highest denomination). Likewise, overall rising prices in products and services demand payments using a bigger amount of banknotes each time (Cunto, 2018). The lack of banknotes in the economy has led both civil society (including shops-owners) and the State to resort to whatever means they can encounter to face the banknotes and hyperinflation crisis. On the State's side, it has led the government to issue their own payment solutions such as the already explored *Carnet de la Patria*, the *biopago* system and ultimately, the *Petro*, a cryptocurrency. On the civil society's side, it has led citizens to navigate through all kinds of options and short-lived solutions that will be explored in the following sections.

4.3.1 Payments that establish relationships (or not)

4.3.1.1 The use of “fake money”

The varied solutions that have arisen to face the banknotes crisis in Venezuela can be described by what Vigh (2009) calls an “awareness of socio-political movements in order to anticipate oncoming problems and assess possibilities of actions” (p. 422). In this sense, both the government but mostly the citizens are following the political and economic developments and taking decisions and improvising as they go. When buying groceries, the decision about which payment methods to use might differ widely depending on the specific people and places. According to Laura*:

“When I make a big purchase at the supermarket, I use my debit card in bolívares. However, I normally buy a small quantity of products since they are only for me and my sister. Here, there come several options: I either pay using US dollars I receive through remittances or that I buy from someone; I call my sister and ask her to pay through Zelle, which is a mobile phone app for online payments; or I pay fiao’, through which I take a product from the store and arrange a later payment with the owner instead of paying at

the moment. When paying with cash, the banknotes need to be new and the amount of the banknote needs to be low denomination, because if they are old, wrinkly or too high, they do not take them. For giving me change, the supermarket will either give me change they have in bolívares or US dollars (rarely happens); or will give me their own bonds (fake money) or would let me pay fiao', it all depends on who I am dealing with".

She continues:

"It is difficult to know how I am going to pay beforehand. Also, because of hyperinflation, there are products that do not have a price, so you will know the price once you are about to pay. It is common to go into a supermarket and hear the owner coming out and screaming to all the cashiers: "¡ACTUALICEN!" (update!), referring to prices. They change the prices of the products a couple times a day. It is impossible to keep up or set up a budget".

In this context, agency is constrained by both economic possibilities and by how creative and skilled citizens are in order to be able to adapt to changing conditions. Instead of unfolding in a rather grounded or stable environment, citizens engage in what Vigh calls "motion within motion". This refers to the way "people move in their social environments as well as of the constant configuration of the social environments themselves" (Vigh, 2009, p. 433). According to my previous quote, in order to be able to shop in a supermarket, an individual needs to have a wide range of payment options for it to be able to engage in the transaction. Likewise, the shop should also have a wide range of payment options in order to keep a constant clientele. One of these options is the one I would call "fake money".

On March 10th of 2021, the big Venezuelan department store "Beco" launched their own currency, called "*dólar Beco*" ("Beco dollar") through their Instagram account @tiendas_beco (Instagram, 2021). In the post, they announced the creation of four "banknotes" of \$1, \$2, \$5 and \$10, equivalent to the same amount in US dollars, and described them as their solution for being able to offer change to their clients (view: annex 3). This solution, however, only lasted five days. The Ministry for Commerce prohibited the measure, claiming that the mechanism was "unauthorized"

and that “clients deserve a fair change” (Producto, 2021). The store manager, however, expressed surprise at how controversial the reactions were regarding their idea, since they were “just looking to offer more options for the clients” (ibid). Using Vigh’s (2009) definition, they were just “navigating”, meaning that they were just trying to adapt to the changing conditions and uncertainty.

Although the example of “Beco”³¹ shows some level of organization and structure, it has become common that local shops also implement these kinds of solutions. They are not, however, as sophisticated; as Laura* recalls:

“When they know you at a supermarket and they do not have change, what they do is that they give you a bond (voucher, “fake money”). They give you back the same receipt for what you bought and on the backside, they write the amount they owe you, they sign it, stamp it and then you can use it in that same supermarket the next time you buy”.

The previous practice is an example of the way some shops resort to whatever thing they have at hand (in this case, a piece of paper) to try and offer a solution for giving change instead of using banknotes. An interesting point, in my opinion, unfolds from this practice: the way relationships are created or maintained is “forced”. This will be explained in the next paragraph.

Recalling Mauss’s gift exchange theory, giving, receiving and reciprocating are the cornerstone of gift giving. Through gift exchange, a bond is created between giver and receiver (Mauss, 1966, p. 77). This means that an alliance and a relationship has begun once one party gives and the other receives. When engaging in a “fake money” exchange, both the shop owner or cashier and the shopper engage in a “forced” relationship in which the payment method becomes only valid within that exact same context. This means that both parties need to engage with each other for as long as the amount written on the paper lasts. I will offer an empirical example: one person buys groceries that are worth \$16 US dollars and pays using a \$20 dollar banknote; as change, the person

³¹ Other big stores such as “Excelsior Gama” have also implemented similar mechanisms. Theirs was called “Guarda tu vuelto” (Save your change) and consisted of offering the clients to register in the store system the amount of change they should receive instead of giving it back to the client (Fernández, 2021).

receives a \$4 dollars voucher. The person then needs to return to the same supermarket, as the voucher is only valid in that place, and needs to buy groceries that are worth at least \$4 dollars. If they buy only a \$2 dollars product, then the person will have to keep returning to the shop until the amount is completely used; that is, if they want to make their money worth. If the means of exchange were banknotes from a national or foreign currency, relationships would not have to be maintained in time if those involved do not desire it.

“Fake money” in these examples, constitutes a personalized gift, which shows care (Offer, 1997, p. 454). Darwall (2002) developed a concept of care related to welfare. To assess what care could represent, it would be “something that is for someone’s good, if it is what a person would want for itself” (Darwall, 2002, in Feldman, 2006, p. 587). What I understand from this concept, is that caring means to offer to someone the same you would want for yourself. As Laura* mentioned, this is a solution performed when the owners or cashiers of the supermarket “personally know you”, meaning that they are willing to continue engaging in a relationship with that specific client. However, another interpretation could be that, if they “personally know you”, you might not denounce their “fake money” practices to the authorities. As seen in the “Beco” example, to hand in “fake money” constitutes an illegal activity.

4.3.1.2 Payments in kind

Another way in which the continued bond or relationship between owner/cashier and client can be affected is through payments in kind. In Agnes words: *“If the cashier does not have change, they can give you a product: an onion, parsley, a carrot. It always gets round out in favor of the place”*. Through this kind of exchange, the relationship between both parties becomes completely impersonal and it does not have to be sustained over time. Drawing on Mauss (1925), anthropologist David Graeber (2011) introduces three modalities of morality which he thinks all economic behavior and relationship rests on (Maurer, 2013, p. 85). These are communism, hierarchy and exchange. “Exchange”, he argues, “is all about equivalence” (Graeber, p. 103 in Maurer, 2013, p. 85), meaning the equivalence of people, things and basically anything. Commercial exchange would fall under this category, as it implies that there is always a way to

pay back by finding something equal to it (ibid). Exchange, as Graeber defines it, is specific to instances where there can be equivalence and where there can be a separation: “once I pay my debt to you, the debt and our relationship is cancelled and I can walk away” (ibid). Taking this into account, a payment in kind at a supermarket would not create debt nor social relations. Therefore, it could be thought of a pure economic exchange in which both shop owners and clients would just prefer to close the transaction instead of engaging in longer relationships.

Now, other types of payments are based more on trust and networks. These include the participation in the black market for currencies and the payment through *fiao*. They will be explored in the next section.

4.3.2 Payments based on trust and networks

4.3.2.1 Participation in the “black market” currency exchange

As mentioned earlier in the context chapter, the US dollar in Venezuela has a long history of fluctuating prices due to the different economic crises the country has gone through, hyperinflation, and different currency regulation systems. With the continued devaluation of the *bolívar*, -and among other reasons- currency exchange houses lost their purpose as it was more convenient to make exchanges through the “black market”. Participating in the “black market” economy, thus, became easier and so widespread that it is not perceived as something rare but rather as an everyday “*survival tactic*” according to one informant. In Laura*’s words:

“Many people are dedicated now to selling US dollars, and especially Colombians and Arabs. But you have to be very careful because there are a lot of fake banknotes or sometimes they charge you more so they can have a commission”.

As growing as “black market” buyers-sellers were the opportunities to swindle. The most common tactic was, first, the use of fake banknotes and later, inconclusive transferences³² (Flores, 2021). Common denunciations of individuals being swindled led most people to have as an “universal rule” to only exchange currencies with people they know beforehand or have references of³³. The procedure, then, goes as follows according to Agnes*:

“My husband sometimes sells (US) dollars to have bolívares. This is made through a transfer: you look for a known buyer and you agree on a price according to the official figures. Then, my husband transfers the amount in (US) dollars to a bank account in the US, and the other person transfers the agreed amount to an account in bolívares. Everything is virtual because banknotes are almost non-existent”.

In Agnes* example, the common procedure includes finding a known buyer or a seller (depending on the individual’s needs) and making the transaction. If successful, the buyer or seller can be recommended to another buyer or seller, as Laura* mentions: *“Nowadays everyone knows about someone that either buys or sells (US) dollars, but if you do not know, you ask trusted individuals for recommendations”.*

Aside from being another example on how citizens navigate this time through the use of their own networks, participating in the “black market” economy can be interpreted in the dynamics described earlier by Mauss (1925). Gift exchange can sustain communities of any kind, as one of their primary functions is to create and maintain social ties (Mauss, 1925, in Schrift, 1997, p. 77). In Douglas (1990) interpretation, the perpetual cycle of exchanges is maintained within the rule that every gift has to be returned (Douglas, 1990, in Mauss, 2002, p. 11). When a gift is returned with an equal value, a stable system of statuses is generated. However, and as the gift exchange

³² For example: a buyer wants to buy \$100 and agrees with a seller that \$100 is equal to 2,887,384,000 *bolívares*, according to the very widespread used website <https://dolartoday.com/>. The buyer sends the *bolívares* from their Venezuelan bank account to a bank account the seller has in Venezuela. Later, the seller should transfer the \$100 from their US bank account to the US bank account the buyer has, concluding the transaction. The buyer, later, can use the acquired US dollars through Zelle (which will be explained later) or through their debit or credit cards from that US bank.

³³ This is literally something that comes from my observations on friends, social media and my family in general. It is well known that you only exchange with people you know and not strangers, but I do not have (yet) any source to back this up besides what I have seen very often.

system aspires to keep increasing the value of the returned gift, a contest for escalating statuses gets put into place (ibid). This system of perpetual obligations in gift exchange is known as the society (ibid).

In the “black market” system, a buyer or seller offers their service (giving). Later, a buyer or seller gets that service (receiving), to later recommend the service to another buyer or seller (reciprocating). According to Komter (2007), gifts can have a market-pricing intention. In this case, people’s relationships are instrumental and characterized by competition and struggle. Here a direct or future benefit is expected (p. 98). The expectation from this exchange, then, is: we buy/sell from each other, and I can recommend you to someone that might need it.

However, the “black market” community here can be interpreted as rather close-knitted as one of the “requisites” to enter is to be “known” by the other members who already participate. Likewise, and as one transaction happens before the other³⁴, trust, I argue, becomes the most important criteria when wanting to engage in this gift exchange system. Since these exchanges occur in a “private” and non-regulated manner, the three obligations are “internalized” and cannot be enforced by an external agent (Komter, 1997, p. 102), making trust even more important in the transaction.

4.3.2.2 Payments through *fiao*’

The ultimate way in which trust can be used as a currency when buying groceries is to, literally, not pay anything at the moment but fix it later, without leaving any guarantee. This system is called *fiao*’ and the action of doing it is known as *fiar*. It is therefore common to hear phrases like “*hoy voy a fiar*” (“today I am going to trust”) or “*me lo llevé fiao*” (“I took it trusted”). Like the participation in the black market currency exchange, the *fiar* system is normally put into place between parties that know each other. As Laura* explains:

“Another way in which I pay is through trusting. If the owner of the shop is present and I

³⁴ For example, I transfer you first and I trust that you will transfer me back as agreed.

need to buy things worth a very small amount of money, for example, an onion, I can leave without paying and then I pay by making a transfer or whenever I have bolivares”.

Through this payment method, trust reaches its peak as the transaction involves pure “trust”, as no guarantees of payment are involved. Like in the “black market participation” example, relations here are meant to be built and maintained through time.

According to Fiske (1991), there exist four basic types of human relationships. The first one, “community sharing”, exalts the situations in which things are mainly exchanged “on the basis of feelings of connectedness to other people” (Fiske, cited in Komter, 2017, p. 96). Likewise, what is given “is not dependent on what one has received, but springs from one’s perception of other people’s needs” (ibid). Even though the *fiao*’ exchange cannot be perceived as charity or as for free (as it is a commercial exchange, anyways), it does have some goodwill involved in it. Exactly the characterization Fiske (1991) does of gifts given based on “one’s perception of other people’s needs” is what takes place in the *fiao*’ exchange.

As reported by one informant, for the *fiao*’ to work: *“the owners have to be there because otherwise cashiers will not take that responsibility in case the client does not pay (...) they also need to know who you are”*. She continues: *“there are no banknotes in the economy... Everyone knows that this is a struggle. It is understood that we all have limitations, so that is why this is an option”*. Awareness that everyone is going through the same struggle is part of the reason why methods like the *fiao*’ exist.

4.3.3 Care of kinship

4.3.3.1 Remittances from abroad and goods boxes from Miami

The last case explored here is the reception of remittances from abroad and of goods boxes from Miami, as the latest examples of care of the kinship.

Since 2020, the reception of remittances has become the second biggest source of currencies in Venezuela³⁵ constituting 5% of the country's GDP (Infobae, 2020). According to the *Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2020* (ENCOVI - “National Survey on Life Conditions 2020”), 10% of Venezuelan households obtained their money through remittances from abroad (Fernández, 2020)³⁶. These numbers, however, have fallen by 55% compared to the last previous years due to the COVID-19 crisis in the world (ibid). Even so, it is still an important (and sometimes, the only) source of income for some Venezuelan families.

For Mauss (1925), the obligation to give or to receive can be influenced, among other things, by kinship (Mauss, 1925, in Schrift, 1997, p. 17). Some groups of people, he argues, have no option but “to ask for hospitality, to receive presents, to enter trading” (ibid); in this sense, they have to engage in reciprocity. Building on the concept of kinship and reciprocity, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1972) proposed that the degree of social distance (kinship) determines the kind of reciprocity (Sahlins, 1972 in Mooney, 1976, p. 323). Being so, he argues that “the closer the degree of kinship-residential distance and the greater the rank and wealth of the donor, the more generalized or altruistic his exchanges are likely to be” (ibid). Furthermore, anthropologist David A. Nolin (2010) builds on the concept of “reciprocal altruism” developed by Robert Trivers (1971). According to him, when frequent fortune reversals exist, it might pay over time for “haves” to share with “have-nots” if there is an expectation that the “have-nots” will reciprocate in the future when their fortunes are reversed (Trivers, 1971 in Nolin, 2010, p. 245). This could be seen as an instance of the concept of “delayed” or “indirect” reciprocity; in which, the balance of relations of giving and receiving among kin may change its character or direction over time (Finch & Mason, 1993 in Komter, 1997, p. 304).

According to my interpretation of Mauss, some care of kinship might derive out of obligation. However, and taking into account the previously cited example in which an informant says that “*everyone knows this is a struggle*”, and Sahlins (1972) studies, can constitute an incentive for

³⁵ After the ones obtained through the petroleum industry (ibid)

³⁶ By 2019, according to Consultores 21 (“Consultants 21”) polling private firm, these numbers were 40%, a number that I think is closer to reality (Blasco, 2019).

sending remittances from abroad, when it is possible to do so. What I am trying to say is that, on one side, Venezuelans around the world are aware of the situation in the country and therefore, solidarity is a common feeling among expats (García, 2018); and on the other side, the degree of kinship make it more common for parents-descendents, among siblings or spouses to engage in remittances exchange. The previous statement is hard to confirm as 80% of remittances that arrive to Venezuela do so from outside of the official channels (ibid), however, I am basing this assumption both on my own personal experiences and in one of my informants testimony:

“The bolívares I get every month come from remittances. My daughter sends them from Spain. To do so, she sends euros to one of my siblings in Australia. He, in Australia, has a contact that has a bolívares account in Venezuela. He transfers the equivalent amount in Australian dollars and then the other person transfers the agreed amount in bolívares to my account”.

Finally, Trivers’ (1971) concept of “reciprocal altruism” does not apply directly to this case as it is unlikely that fortunes will switch among the persons living in Venezuela and the ones living abroad (due to poor conditions for economic improvement in the country that have been explored throughout the whole thesis). However, wishes to provide kinship care can be motivated as a way of returning what parents offered their children while growing up (Torres, 2021).

Exactly like the case of remittances, it has become popular in recent years to have boxes of goods³⁷ sent from Miami to Maracaibo. Laura* explains the process:

“Rather than sending me money, my brother living in Miami sends me a big box full of different goods bought at a supermarket in the US, every three or four months. He directly goes to Walmart³⁸ For example, buys shampoo, canned tuna, toothpaste and whatever other thing I need; puts them in a carton box, and sends them using a direct delivery company

³⁷ By goods I roughly mean groceries (oil, flour, canned products, personal hygiene, etc).

³⁸ A chain retailer in the US which sells groceries and various other goods

*based in Miami. The box arrives directly to my house in Maracaibo a couple of days after”.*³⁹

In both cases, as part of care by kin, there is not only money investment but also a significant time investment from the sender abroad to the receiver in Maracaibo in order to set the gift up and arrange its dispatchment. According to Cancian (1966), relationships can be modulated through the use of gifts in order to “maintain the desired degree of intimacy” (Cancian, 1966, in Sherry, 1983, p. 159). Time and money investment on a gift, thus, can be an example relative to the receiver and donor’s relationship (ibid). This means that the closer the social relationship or kinship degree, the bigger time, money and/or effort investment there will be. This, of course, is also dependent on the economic possibilities the sender has.

In this last chapter, I focused on alternative payment methods; referring to those methods that are not officially created by the government but the citizens and that mostly sprung out of the banknotes crisis. The first group of methods grouped those who create relationships among the parties or not: payments with “fake money” and payments in kind. I argue that agency, in this case, is constrained to the skills and creativity of both clients and shop owners, since they must improvise with whatever product they have at hand. One example of this is the use of “fake money”. With this method, I argue, relationships among clients and shop owners are forced and intended to be maintained in time: both because it is a method used among people that know each other and because the “fake money” is personalized and only valid to be used at the same shop. With payments in kind, on the contrary, relationships are not meant to be maintained. Drawing on Graeber (2011), I argue that since this constitutes an exchange on equal terms, then it is impossible to have a debt and therefore, there is no need for further social relations.

The second group of methods are based on networks and trust. Here I identify the participation in the black market of currency exchanges and payments through *fiao*. For the first one and citing Komter (1997), I argue that due to possible scams, the market is organized around individuals that

³⁹ When I asked her the reasons to have this arrangement, if, according to her, “the same products were also found in Venezuela”, she replied: “*Yes they sell almost the same here. However, it is a million times cheaper to bring them from the US. Also, we do not have to pay for nationalization of the goods. The boxes just come straight to private homes*”.

know each other and who would like to keep lasting relations. Trust, therefore, becomes essential as the three obligations (giving - receiving - reciprocating) take place in a private stance. Trust, however, reaches its peak in the *fiao*’ exchange, since no guarantees are offered for the payment to be completed. In this case, parties also know each other and strive for maintaining their relations. Building on Fiske (1991), I argue that the commercial exchange that takes place through the *fiao*’ is based on a perception of what others need, taking into account that most individuals are aware of the common struggle situation in the country. The last type of exchanges were grouped regarding their possibility to show care of kin. These are the sending of remittances and the sending of goods boxes from Miami. Through the use of Sahlins (1972) and Trivers (2010), I argue that the degree of kinship plays a role when showing care, being most likely for direct kin to engage in the sending of remittances or goods boxes. Likewise, I argue that Trivers’ (2010) concept of “reciprocal altruism” does not apply to my studied case but, however, it renders useful for explaining kinship care’s motivation. Finally, I show how significant investment of time and money can be directly related to a desire for kinship’s degree of intimacy.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this master thesis was to explore and analyze how the citizens of Maracaibo, Venezuela participate in everyday economic exchanges and what relations are formed out of this participation. The overall objective of my research was to explore the different payment options used in everyday life, that both citizens and government have created in order to face the complex political and economical crisis that has become even more acute during the last decade in Venezuela. Likewise, I was interested in understanding how citizens, in a context of political polarization, approached each method and how each of them impacted or shaped their relations to other human beings or their personal values. Having this in mind, the research was divided into three chapters.

The first chapter was focused on the ways the political polarization in the country has led to what I argued is the politicization of everyday life. The aim of this context-like chapter was to, on one hand, set the reader in what I consider is a situation almost impossible to not take into account when taking daily life decisions and on the other, to make sense of the subsequent division of chapters between government-created methods and alternative methods. In the chapter, thus, I discussed how belonging to one of the opposing factions (*chavistas* and *opositores*) influences and determines, to a certain degree, everyday life decisions, being my main case grocery shopping. Leaving personal preferences aside and taking into account perceived advantages and disadvantages that belonging to each faction has, I argued that citizens can assume a “political persona” as a strategy to gain access to the opportunities each side represents. On the *chavista* side, this can mean to gain access to business opportunities most likely associated with corruption, as in the case of the *boliburgueses*, and on the *oposición* side, it can mean to not be subjected to public shame like in the case of artists “Servando y Florentino”.

The second chapter explored two widespread government-issued payment solutions such as the *Carnet de la Patria* and the *biopago* system. Both systems are presented as a gift but they both demand a subscription, private information and/or political support. In the case of the *Carnet*, it was concluded that the exchange was not transparent since there were no guarantees for both citizens and government on payments or political support. In the case of the *biopago* system, it was concluded that most citizens feel confused about how this method works. Since both payment

proposals stem from the government, it was concluded that some citizens would rather avoid them since their use might imply tacit support for the current government. Through the refusal to take part of them, citizens make a political stance and create a community around hope for improvement and overall better conditions in the country.

The third and last chapter was focused on alternative payment methods than the ones created by the government. The first group gathered two methods that either created relationships among the parties or did not do so at all; these were the payments using “fake money” and payments in kind. For the first one, it was concluded that relations among clients and shop owners are forced to be maintained since the “fake money” is personalized and only valid within the same store. For the payments in kind, on the contrary, it was concluded that social relations have no need to be maintained since an exchange on equal terms removes a potential debt. The second group gathered two methods based on trust and networks: the participation in the “black market” of currency exchanges and the *fiao*’ system. It was argued that both methods included the participation of individuals that knew each other and had a high degree of trust between them. Therefore, it was concluded that both of the methods promoted the maintenance and reinforcement of relations among the parties. The last group reunited methods that showed care of kin, being these the sending of remittances from abroad and the sending of goods boxes from Miami. Both of them, it was concluded, took place according to how much more altruistic the exchanges would be taking into account the degree of kinship distance and economic possibilities.

To sum up, this master thesis showed how, in an unstable, changing context, both government and citizens managed to come up with different methods and possibilities in order to engage in daily life economic transactions without the use of banknotes, and the manners in which these transactions affected the way they formed relationships with each other. It should be stated, likewise, that this is the current situation in Venezuela as of May 2021, and possibilities are that non-banknotes methods will keep evolving as citizens keep trying to adapt to uncertainty. This means that more soon than later, it is possible that the methods described here will no longer be used, making ongoing research on this topic crucial at least while banknotes continue to be almost non-existent in an economy not prepared for the digitalization it has been forced to.

6. DISCUSSION

As shown throughout this research project, Venezuela's economic exchanges take place through the use of a wide variety of payment solutions created both by the government and the citizens. According to a 2019⁴⁰ research made by the independent poll firm "Ecoanalítica" in Caracas, Venezuela's capital city, during one month and out of measurable payments, 56.6% of all transactions was in US dollars, 39.5% in *bolívares*, 2.2% in euros and 1.3% in other currencies (Perdomo 2, 2020). During 2021, and due to the deepening of the economic crisis, it is very probable that the use of *bolívares* will be even lower, but no official numbers nor updated data exist.

The previous numbers, however, reflect the dramatic depreciation of the *bolívar*, the official currency of the country, which has rendered almost useless and deemed relegated to the payment of bus tickets, cell phone credit or gasoline (ibid). As shown in annex 4, prices in supermarkets are shown in US dollars⁴¹ or are just left blank, since hyperinflation makes it impossible to keep track of prices in *bolívares*. This precise incapacity of the official currency to fulfill citizen's demands and needs has led to, on one hand, the emergence of the US dollar as the most important unofficial currency and on the other, to the flourishing of all kinds of alternative payment methods. Likewise, trust in the *bolívar* has been lost.

A very detailed explanation on how Venezuela's economy crashed are out of the scope of this investigation; however, it can be said that a combination of inefficient economic policies like fixed exchange rates, monoproduction and corruption led the State, it could be argued, to lose (nearly) total control of the economy's course. The greatest reflex of the former is a hyperinflation that was politically motivated by redistributive objectives (Pittaluga *et al*, 2021, p. 349) and that as of today, has been impossible to tame probably due to continued inefficient policies. Price controls, a practice that had been put into place for the last two decades, saw a flexing point last year when president Maduro loosened the regulations. He allowed producers to set prices according to their

⁴⁰ These results might not reflect the exact reality of Maracaibo, since the use of Colombian pesos can be more frequent due to its proximity to the border with Colombia.

⁴¹ Using the black market exchange rate.

own cost structures and flexibilized controls on the use of US dollars in the economy (González, 2020).

Likewise, controls over the exchange rates were also flexibilized last year when Maduro recognized that the inevitable dollarization of the economy represented a “scape valve” that was helping the self regulation of the economy (ibid). With that said, it can be argued that the government is completely aware of the economic situation the country is going through and all the parallel mechanisms that have arisen to try and cope with the crisis. Even if the normalized use of alternative payment methods among citizens represents a challenge for tax recollection (for example, the VAT), it could be argued that the State “turns a blind eye” to the already formed parallel economy. It could be presumed, then, that they are aware that the situation is completely out of their hands and in any case, they have other sources for financing themselves like their own drug trafficking cartel.

Some citizens, as I argued in the analysis, practice a refusal to participate in government issued methods as a way to make a statement that will hopefully show their rejection and dislike for the current government and force a change. Demonstrations, protests and strikes have been held constantly for decades. However, the exhaustion that remains of a crisis-stricken context has led citizens to be now more focused on trying to cope and solving their daily lives than on anything else. As economist Luis Vicente León said, Venezuelans “either survive or flee” (Tal Cual, 2019).

This same strive for survival has also led, on the other hand, to the formation of deeper ties around the community. Laura* talked to me about how the Catholic church in Maracaibo has created food banks:

“All these kinds of support have had a rise since the minimum wage does not buy anything. In my church, four hundred daily lunches are given, made with food that people donate. They have been very supportive, there is a lot of poverty”.

Another example can be seen in the campaigns created on the popular website “GoFundMe”. On this website⁴², any person can start a fundraising campaign and gather donations for their own personal purposes (GoFundMe website, 2021). According to the website “El Reportero”, by April 2021, there were 17,600 campaigns that included the word “Venezuela” as a keyword (2021), representing this the 10% out of all the running campaigns on the website (ibid). Furthermore, this website currently operates only in nineteen countries (Venezuela is not included), meaning that every campaign made for Venezuelans needs to be run by someone located in one of those nineteen countries that would later find a way to send the money to Venezuela (ibid). Here, I consider, both the roles of networks, care of kin (possibly) and solidarity take protagonism.

Solidarity is often based on “we-thinking”, and its target is “us, together”. It is, therefore, related to the concepts of “friendship” and “sisterhood” or “brotherhood” (Laitinen & Persi, 2015, pp. 11-12). It is possible that to a certain extent, solidarity is a common attitude found in Venezuelan culture. However, I would consider that in uncertain and unstable times where “*everyone knows this is a struggle*”, these solidarity ties grow stronger. Citizens are aware that on one hand, most people are going through the same struggle and therefore, they can understand and identify with each other. On the other hand, the State has shown that it is unable (or not willing) to deal with the economic crisis and therefore, unable to fulfill its citizens’ needs; paving the way to all the nearly improvised payment alternatives the citizens have come up with that were explored in this master thesis. Citizens, then, only have each other.

As a final reflection, I would consider that, putting political polarization aside, both factions are victims of the economic mismanagement and subsequent crisis. Even though it is true that a group of people has benefited due to corruption and opportunism, the wide majority of the population has been left adrift without opportunities or working institutions of any class. It will probably take multiple generations before being able to see and experience better overall conditions for Venezuela, since the damage made is very severe. In the meantime, then, what is left is to stand together and support each other.

⁴² <https://www.gofundme.com/>

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8. ANNEXES

8.1 Annex 1

Introduction

Hello and thank you so much for your time and your willingness to be interviewed by me!. My name is Carla Florio and I'm a master student of Global Refugee Studies at Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Denmark. The purpose of the following interview is first to raise awareness of Venezuela's situation, at least on a local scale in Copenhagen, and to help me understand better what is going on in Maracaibo in terms of economic exchanges and provide me with enough data for writing my master thesis. The interview does not follow a fixed line and we can talk more thoroughly on the most interesting topics either for you or for me. Before continuing I want to ask you if it's ok that I record this interview? If affirmative, all your answers and identity will remain anonymous, and I promise to delete all records after I have handed in my thesis in may. Likewise, I can send you the final result if you wish to read my master thesis.

Research question: “how do the citizens of Maracaibo, Venezuela, participate in everyday economic exchanges in a context of political polarization? and, what relations are formed out of this participation?”

Questions:

- How do you pay for your everyday items?
- Which currency do you use and where do you get it from?
- What means of payment do you use?
- What could you buy last week, yesterday and today with the highest banknote?
- When you go to a shop, what happens if the cashier does not have the exact change?
- (In case it applies) why do you pay with banknotes? Why do you pay with a debit card? Why do you pay with a credit card?
- What are the causes for the lack of banknotes in the economy?
- What job/activity are you doing right now?

- What do you do if someone asks you for money on the street? (homeless person)
- What do you do if an authority (police) asks you for money?
- If you plan to make a big purchase (car, house, etc), how do you pay for it?
- If a person does not have family or friends living abroad, what does that person do to make ends meet?
- What is the minimum wage as of today?
- When you go abroad, what currency do you take? How do you get it?
- Have you accessed any of the public programs for obtaining a foreign currency? Which one and how was the experience?
- What do you know about the “*Carnet de la patria*”, “*biopago*”, “*petros*” and other payment solutions created by the government? Do you have access to any of these? Why?

Second round of interviews:

- Does anything change in election times? What is different about Maracaibo?
- What is your criteria to decide who you buy US dollars from? Or bolívares? Why?
- Who have you voted for? Why? Who was the other option and why not for the other option?
- Describe your everyday life from when you wake up until you go to bed
- Are there places in the city that are associated with *chavistas* and others associated with the *oposición*? Which ones?
- Do you feel that anything has changed now during times of COVID-19?

Interview answers

*All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the informants.

Theme #1		
Political polarization		
Name	Quotation	Translation
Laura*	“Tu simplemente sabes. Hay un mini-market cuyos dueños son chavistas. Está muy bien ubicado y ofrece una gran variedad de productos de muy buena calidad e incluso tienen unos precios un poco mejores. Fui para allá una sola	“You just know. There is a chavista-owned mini-market that is very well located and offers a great variety of products, of very good quality and they even have slightly cheaper prices. I went there only once because I really needed to buy some turkey and they

	vez porque de verdad necesitaba comprar un pavo y ese era el único lugar que lo vendía, pero evito el lugar a toda costa”.	were the only ones selling it, but I avoid the place at all costs”.
Laura*	“Hay un restaurante de carne que es de chavistas. Algunas personas en la oposición han llevado a cabo una campaña para advertir a la gente que este lugar es chavista. Como resultado, el restaurante está constantemente vacío, y se sabe que las personas que van para allá son solo chavistas”.	“There is a meat restaurant that is owned by <i>chavistas</i> . Some people in the <i>oposición</i> have carried out a campaign to warn people that this place is <i>chavista</i> . As a result, that restaurant is constantly empty, and you just know that the kind of people that go there are only <i>chavistas</i> ”.
Agnes*	“En realidad no sé. La gente que va, por ejemplo, a nuevos cafés, son las personas que lo pueden pagar. Los chavistas no se van a mostrar a sí mismos como eso tan fácilmente, entonces podrían estar mezclados con gente de oposición y a veces no se puede saber. Sin embargo, durante la cuarentena, muchos lugares estaban cerrados excepto por los sitios chavistas”.	“I actually do not know. The people that go to, for example, new cafés, are the people who can afford it. <i>Chavistas</i> will not show themselves as such so easily, so they can be mixed with the <i>oposición</i> people and sometimes you can not know. However, during the lockdown, many places were closed except for the ones owned by <i>chavistas</i> ”.
Laura*	Yo asocio el chavismo con “corrupción”, “destrucción” y “tráfico de drogas”, y a la oposición como “una salida democrática al chavismo”	I associate <i>chavismo</i> with “corruption”, “destruction” and “drug trafficking” and <i>oposición</i> with “a democratic exit to chavismo”.
Laura*	“Hoy en día, la gente que tiene dinero en Venezuela son o enchufados o gente que tradicionalmente ha tenido dinero por generaciones”.	“nowadays, the people that have money in Venezuela are either enchufados or people that traditionally have had wealth for generations”
Agnes*	“Es sabido que mucha gente de la oposición ha sido cómplice para que este gobierno siga. Apenas tienen un espacio pequeño, lo toman y no les importa su país”.	“It is known that a lot of people from the <i>oposición</i> have been accomplices for this government to keep on. As soon as they have a small space, they take it and they do not care about their country”.

Theme #2

Government-issued payment methods / Other official methods

Name	Quotation	Translation
Laura*	“Eso del petro es un invento del gobierno. Eso no lo aceptan en ninguna parte del mundo como forma de pago. Mi cuenta del banco tiene las cifras también en petros. De hecho, hay varias transacciones que son petros y todo el mundo dice: “ajá, ¿cómo funciona eso, qué hacemos, cómo se accede?”. Al final tú solo dices ¿cuánto es en dólares? Y ya. Nadie tramita en petros, pero ellos (el gobierno) tratan de hacer todo en esos términos, ponerlo por delante, por ejemplo,	“That petro thing is an invention by the government. That is not accepted anywhere else in the world as a payment method. My bank account has the amounts also in petros. In fact, there are a couple transactions that are to be done in petros, and everyone says “ok, and how does that work, what do we do, how do we get them?”. At the end you just ask “how much is that in US dollars?” and that’s it. No one uses petros, but they (the government) try to write everything on those terms, to put it at the front, for example, when paying

	en los impuestos”.	taxes”.
Petra*	“Los bonos se pueden transferir desde el sistema Patria a otros bancos, si quieres, pero se tarda en llegar la transferencia. En cambio, al banco estatal llega al día siguiente”.	“Bonds can be transferred from the <i>Patria</i> system to other banks, if you want, but it takes some time for the transference to be made. Instead, to the state’s bank it arrives the next day”.
Petra*	“Si quieres pagar con petros, ahora hay establecimientos que tienen lectores de huellas que están asociados con el Carnet de la Patria. Esto se llama biopago”.	“If you want to pay using petros, now there are places that have fingerprint readers that are linked with the <i>Carnet de la Patria</i> . This is called biopago”.
Petra*	“Yo en verdad no sé mucho sobre cómo funciona el carnet; quizás le deberías preguntar a un chavista. Yo lo tengo porque en donde yo trabajo hubo un evento. Una persona con contactos con el gobierno organizó todo para que los empleados nos inscribiéramos y tuviésemos el carnet rápida y fácilmente. No me gusta el gobierno para nada pero acepté hacerlo porque quizás me llegue un bono eventualmente. Quién sabe”.	“I actually don’t know that much about how the <i>carnet</i> works, maybe you can ask a <i>chavista</i> . I have it because there was an event at my workplace. One person with contacts with the government arranged it for all of the employees to subscribe and get the <i>carnet</i> easily and quickly, there at our office. I do not like the government at all, but I agreed to participate in the event as I might get a bond eventually, who knows”.
Agnes*	“Bueno, con eso del Carnet forzaron a mucha gente. Por supuesto, ni yo ni mi familia lo tenemos porque nos parece una falta de patriotismo, ¿sabes?, tanto que hemos luchado, sin violencia, contra este gobierno”.	“Well, with that <i>Carnet</i> thing a lot of people were forced. Of course, neither me nor my family have it because we believe it is a lack of patriotism, you know?, we have fought so much, without violence, against this government”.
Agnes*	“Piden el carnet de la patria para poder tener acceso a cajas de comida”	“They ask for the <i>carnet de la patria</i> to allow access to government-distributed food boxes”.
Agnes*	“Tengo una amiga de oposición, que supongo que por necesidad, tuvo acceso a los petros. Yo me enteré hace poco. Se supone que se acumulan en un página (...) yo pensé que cualquier ciudadano común podía tener acceso a ellos pero luego me enteré que es solo a los que tienen el carnet”.	“I have an <i>oposición</i> friend that I guess, because of need, she had access to the <i>petros</i> . I learned about it recently. It is supposed to be accumulated in a website (...) I thought that any common citizen could have access to them but later I found out that it is only for the ones that have the <i>carnet</i> ”.
Agnes*	“Yo le pregunté a ella que cómo se hacía eso de los petros. Pero no me explicó nunca”.	“I asked her how to do those <i>petros</i> things. She never explained to me”.
Kat*	“Si conozco las opciones que ha hecho el gobierno pero no los utilizo. Mi esposo y yo solo cobramos la pensión pero no estamos en nada de eso”.	“Yes I know the options that the government has created but I do not use them. My husband and I only received the pension, but we are not part of any of it”.
Kat*	“El carnet de la patria, mucha gente lo ha sacado porque dijeron que iban a poder recibir gasolina por precios subsidiados pero creo que eso no está funcionando”.	“The <i>carnet de la patria</i> , a lot of people has subscribed for it because they were told that they would be able to receive gasoline for subsidized prices but I think that it is not working”.
Laura*	“Tengo más de un año que no utilizo una tarjeta de crédito, porque tienen tan poco crédito por la	“I haven’t used my credit card for more than a year, because they have so little credit due to devaluation, so

	devaluación, que no sirven de nada. Mi tarjeta hoy en día es de menos de 1 dólar”.	it is worthless. My card nowadays has a limit of less than 1 US dollar”.
Agnes*	“Tarjetas de crédito nacionales no sirven. Ya no hay, los bancos las eliminaron”.	“National credit cards are no longer useful. They do not exist anymore, banks eliminated them”.
Kat*	“Tarjeta de crédito no utilizo”.	“Credit card I do not use”.
Laura*	“Para tener acceso al Carnet de la Patria tienes que estar inscrito en el partido (PSUV), a lo cual, yo me niego. Generalmente, eso se tramita a través del banco del Estado”.	“To access the Carnet de la Patria you have to be signed up to the party, to which I refuse. Generally, that is processed through the State’s bank”.
Laura*	“Con el Carnet, tienes beneficios que no tenemos los comunes venezolanos que no estamos con el gobierno. Por ejemplo, a ellos les dan bonos en Navidad, cada cierto tiempo, tienen acceso fácil a las bolsas CLAP”.	“With the <i>Carnet</i> , you have benefits that we, the common venezuelans that don’t support the government, don’t have. For example, they get bonds on Christmas and every now and then, and they have access to the CLAP boxes”.
Laura*	“Los que somos oposición no tenemos esos beneficios”.	“We, the ones opposing the government, do not have those benefits”.
Laura*	“Hmm sí, conozco gente que tiene el carnet. No les han importado sus principios y han firmado”.	“Hmm yes, I know people that have the <i>Carnet</i> . They have not cared about their principles and they have signed”.
Carolina*	“Tenías que traer varios documentos como el registro del carro a tu nombre y el seguro, para tener la sticker. Luego, la sticker tenía un cierto monto en litros por mes que podías tanquear... no me acuerdo exactamente del monto ahora porque cambió varias veces... pero si no tanqueabas el monto completo or mes, no se te acumulaba para el siguiente”.	“you would have to bring a couple of different documents such as the registration of the car on your name and insurance in order to get the sticker. Then, the sticker would have a certain amount of liters a month that you could tank... I do not remember the amount now because it changed a couple times... but if you did not tank the entire amount you were allowed to per month, then they would not accumulate for next month”.
Laura*	“Simplemente dejé de utilizar mi carro hace más de un año; se ha vuelto tan complicado tanquear un carro. Y si el carro se daña, no hay tampoco repuestos para repararlo. Ahora estoy simplemente caminando a los lugares aunque me exponga más a la inseguridad.	“I just stopped using my car more than a year ago; it has gotten too complicated to tank a car and if the car breaks, then there are also no spare parts to fix it. I am just walking to places now even if that will expose me to even more insecurity”.
Laura*	“Yo trabajé en un restaurante hasta el año pasado, y en una ocasión tuve que buscar un préstamo. Me comentaron que el Banco de Venezuela tenía intereses bajos. Intenté allá y me preguntaron que si tenía el Carnet... Cuando dije que no, me dijeron que la aplicación no iba a proceder tan rápido porque no tengo el Carnet. Además pedían demasiados requisitos difíciles de cumplir”.	“I worked at a restaurant until last year, and on one occasion I had to find a loan. Someone told me that in the Bank of Venezuela the interest rates were low. I tried there and they asked me if I had the <i>Carnet</i> ... when I said no, I was also told that the application would, for sure, not proceed as fast as it could if I did not have the <i>Carnet</i> . Also, they asked for so many requirements that were very difficult to fulfill”
Jose*	“Recibí un mensaje algunos meses atrás diciendo que había recibido un bono de guerra	“I got a text message some months ago last year saying that I had received a guerra económica bond and it was

	económica que estaba incluido en mi pago de pensión, pero no sé por qué recibí eso”.	included along with my pension payment, but I have no clue why I got that bond”
Jose*	“Eso del sistema Patria es un arroz con mango, nadie lo entiende”	“this Patria thing is an <i>arroz con mango</i> , no one fully understands it”.

Theme #3		
Alternative payment methods		
Name	Quotation	Translation
Laura*	“Para obtener bolívares, se hace vendiendo dólares a personas que por alguna razón les pagan en bolívares”.	“To obtain bolívares, you can sell US dollars to persons that for some reason, are paid in bolívares”.
Laura*	“También existe el método de pago que se llama Zelle para el que tienes que tener una cuenta de Estados Unidos. Pero esto es solo para una persona natural. Esto claramente implica un desorden administrativo y no hay ningún control del gobierno”.	“There is also a payment method called Zelle, for which you have to have a bank account in the US. But this is only valid for a private person. This clearly implies an administrative mess and there is no control from the government on this”.
Laura*	“A veces no dan factura, y cuando la dan, el monto está en bolívares aunque yo haya pagado en dólares o con un vale. En los supermercados todo está en dólares, pero como oficialmente nuestra moneda es el bolívar, el gobierno se hace la vista gorda”.	“Sometimes they do not give receipts, and when they give it, the amount is written in bolívares even if I paid in US dollars or with a voucher. In supermarkets, everything is in US dollars, but because officially our currency is the bolívar, the government just ignores this difference”
Laura*	“Con un dólar se puede comprar un kilo de Harina PAN, como de producto básico”.	“With a US dollar you can buy a kilogram of Harina PAN, which is a staple product”.
Agnes*	“Si el cajero no tiene vuelto, te pueden dar un producto: una cebolla, perejil, una zanahoria. Siempre se redondea a favor del establecimiento”.	“If the cashier does not have change, they can give you a product: an onion, parsley, a carrot. It always gets round out in favor of the place”.
Laura*	“Cuando te conocen en un establecimiento y no tienen vuelto, lo que hacen es que te dan un vale. Te dan el mismo papel de la factura del producto y escriben atrás cuánto te quedan debiendo, lo firman y lo sellan y luego lo puedes utilizar en ese establecimiento en una próxima compra”	“When they know you at a supermarket and they do not have change, what they do is that they give you a voucher. They give you back the same receipt for what you bought and on the backside, they write the amount they owe you, they sign it, stamp it and then you can use it in that same supermarket the next time you buy”.
Laura*	“El gran problema es que son muy pocas las veces que tienen billetes de baja denominación. De hecho, conozco un supermercado que paga incluso un 4% extra de comisión a las personas que les vendan dólares en billetes de baja	“The big problem is that it is on very few occasions that they have banknotes of low denomination. In fact, I know about a supermarket that pays even a 4% extra commission for persons that would sell them US dollars in low denomination banknotes”.

	denominación”	
Laura*	“Lo que se le da a la gente que pide en la calle, se le da comida. Galletas casi siempre. Ya ni piden plata, porque se sabe que nadie tiene. Yo ni siquiera sé cómo son los billetes de Venezuela, tengo más de un año y no los he visto. En los supermercados, las cajas registradoras están vacías o llenas de vales”.	“What you give to beggars that ask on the streets, is food. Cookies most of the time. They do not even ask for money anymore, because it is known that no one has. I don't even know how venezuelan banknotes look, I have not seen them for more than a year and a half. At the supermarkets, tills are empty or full or voucher”.
Laura*	“El otro día, me quisieron dar de vuelto unas galletas. Yo no como eso, y le pregunté a la cajera que qué pasa si a alguien con diabetes, por ejemplo, no le sirve el producto, ahí, ¿que se hace? Y me dijo “te las tienes que llevar igualmente”. Yo dije “no, no quiero eso” y me dijo “entonces busca algo de igual o menor valor o no hay cambio”. Al fin, acepté unos caramelos pero como yo no como eso, se los quise regalar a ella misma (la cajera) y me dijo que no, que el personal del supermercado no podía recibir regalos. Al final, se los di a un cuidador de carros. Es absurdo que no pueda hacer lo que quiera con la mercancía que me forzaron a recibir”.	“The other day I went to the supermarket. They wanted to give me some cookies as change. I do not eat that, and I asked the cashier about what would happen if someone with diabetes, for example, receives it and does not eat that product, what can they do? And she said “you have to take them anyways”. I said “no, I don't want that” and she said “then go look for something of the same price or cheaper or there is no change”. At the end, I accepted some candy, but since I do not eat that, I wanted to give them to herself (the cashier) and she said that it was forbidden for the personnel to receive gifts. Finally, I gave the candy to a car-keeper. It is absurd that I cannot do what I want to with the goods I was forced to receive”.
Laura*	“Antes de ayer, me dieron de vuelto dos papas”.	“The day before yesterday, I got two potatoes as change”.
Laura*	“Otra forma en la que yo pago es fiao. Si los dueños del lugar se encuentran presente y debo hacer una compra muy pequeña como por ejemplo, una cebolla, me dejan irme sin pagar y luego yo pago haciendo una transferencia o cuando tenga bolívares. Esto sucede porque Zelle no deja hacer transferencias tan bajas y tampoco es fácil encontrar billetes de 1 o 5 dólares, por lo que sale mejor no pagar nada y luego resolver”.	“Another way in which I pay is through trusting. If the owner of the shop is present and I need to buy things worth a very small amount of money, for example, an onion, I can leave without paying and then I pay by making a transfer or whenever I have bolívares. This happens because Zelle does not allow to make very low transfers and it is also not easy to find 1 or 5 US dollar banknotes, so it is better to just not pay anything and then figure it out”.
Agnes*	“Mi esposo paga por Zelle o por tarjeta de débito en bolívares. Muy rara vez en efectivo porque es muy difícil conseguirlo”.	“My husband pays with Zelle or debit card in bolívares. Rarely in cash because it is very hard to find it”.
Agnes*	“Los dólares que tenemos vienen de nuestros ahorros, de eso estamos viviendo ahora y los bolívares que tenemos vienen de la jubilación de mi esposo y un poco de mi pensión”.	“The US dollars we have come from our savings, that is what we are using to live now, and the <i>bolívares</i> we have come from my husband and my pension”.
Agnes*	“Mi esposo a veces vende dólares para tener bolívares. Esto lo hace por transferencia: se busca a un comprador, se ponen de acuerdo sobre el tipo de cambio mirando la cifra oficial. Entonces, mi esposo transfiere el monto en dólares a una cuenta de Estados Unidos y la	“My husband sometimes sells (US) dollars to have bolívares. This is made through a transference: you look for a buyer and you agree on a price according to the official figures. Then, my husband transfers the amount in (US) dollars to a bank account in the US, and the other person transfers the agreed amount to an

	<p>persona transfiere el tipo de cambio acordado a una cuenta en bolívares. Todo es virtual porque no existe el efectivo casi”.</p>	<p>account in <i>bolívares</i>. Everything is virtual because banknotes are almost non-existent”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“La pensión está en \$1.800.000 bolívares (...) depende del cambio pero sería un dólar”.</p>	<p>“The pension is \$1.800.000 <i>bolívares</i> (...) it depends on the exchange type but it is around a dollar”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Los cajeros nunca dan cambio en dólares, no tienen, entonces tienes que tomar otro producto, por la fuerza, para completar lo que estás pagando. Yo trato de utilizar mi tarjeta de débito internacional cuando puedo”.</p>	<p>“The cashiers never give change in US dollars, they do not have, so you have to take another product, by force, to complete what you are paying for. I try to use my international debit card whenever I can”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Si voy a la farmacia y el punto de venta está caído, tengo que regresar a la casa a usar la computadora y hacer la transferencia por internet. Regreso a la tienda y llevo el comprobante de pago”</p>	<p>“If I go to the pharmacy and the point of sale is down, I have to come back to the house, use my computer and make a transfer using the internet. I come back to the store and take the proof of payment”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Dinero, la gente no pide en la calle. Saben que uno no tiene. Dicen “deme algo” y con eso, está abierto a que se les puede dar lo que sea, de comida”.</p>	<p>“Money, beggars do not ask for it on the street. They know one does not have. They say “give me something” and with that, it is left open for us to given them whatever; mostly food”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Yo lo que hago cuando salgo a Misa, es llevar un sandwich o dos. No te imaginas la cara de agradecimiento de la gente cuando les das algo de comida”.</p>	<p>“What I do is that everytime I go to Mass, I take a sandwich or two. You cannot imagine the thankful faces of people when you give them some food”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Hay comedores en muchas Iglesias”.</p>	<p>“There are soup kitchens in many Churches”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“El otro día contratamos a un jardinero por el día. Su pago fue un desayuno, carne cruda y algunos dólares, pero siempre cambia de acuerdo a lo que tengamos y lo que él necesite”.</p>	<p>“The other day we hired a gardener for the day. His payment was a breakfast, raw meat and some US dollars, but it always changes according to what we have and what he needs”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Si quieres comprar algo como una casa, tiene que ser a través de alguna cuenta en el exterior”.</p>	<p>“If you want to buy something like a house, it has to be through some international bank account”.</p>
Agnes*	<p>“Tenemos familia afuera pero no recibimos mucha ayuda de ellos”.</p>	<p>“We have family abroad but we do not</p>
Kat*	<p>“Hoy en día yo estoy utilizando mis tarjetas extranjeras para pagar aquí”.</p>	<p>“Nowadays and I am using my foreign cards to pay here”</p>
Kat*	<p>“Evito utilizar efectivo, mejor dejarlo para una emergencia. Lo cuidamos mucho”.</p>	<p>“I avoid using cash, it is better to leave it for an emergency. We take care of it a lot”.</p>
Kat*	<p>“Cuando pagaba en efectivo en el supermercado eso era horrible. Si no tenían cambio entonces tenía que buscar otro producto para completar”.</p>	<p>“When I used to pay in cash at the supermarket that was horrible. If they did not have change then I had to look for another product to complete”.</p>
Kat*	<p>“Mi hijo en el exterior a veces nos envía una caja con comida, pero no es una ayuda constante”.</p>	<p>“My son abroad sometimes sends us a food box, but it is not a constant help”.</p>

Kat*	“Si alguien pide algo en la calle, les doy un paquete de galletas. Algunos prefieren comer antes que recibir dinero que no vale nada”.	“If someone asks for something on the street, I give them a package of cookies. Some prefer to eat rather than receiving money that is not worth anything”.
Laura*	“Si se quiere comprar algo como una casa, generalmente los papeles se firman con una cantidad irrisoria en bolívares pero el monto real se paga en dólares, debajo de la mesa y generalmente con cuentas en el exterior”	“If you want to buy something like a house, generally paperwork is signed using a laughable amount of bolívares, but the real amount is paid in US dollars under the table and generally using foreign bank accounts”
Agnes*	“Antes yo era la que me encargaba de todo, pero ahora con el asunto de la inseguridad y de la gasolina, es mi esposo el que sale a hacer las compras. La vida nos ha cambiado”.	“Before it was me the one in charge of everything, but now because of insecurity and gasoline, it is my husband the one that goes out shopping. Our lives have changed”.
Laura*	“Todas las Iglesias católicas en Maracaibo han creado bancos de alimentos. Han surgido todas esas formas de apoyo porque la gente con el salario mínimo no puede comprar nada. En mi Iglesia se dan 400 almuerzos diarios, hechos con alimentos que las personas donan. Han sido muy solidarios, hay mucha pobreza”.	“All the catholic churches in Maracaibo have created food banks. All these kinds of support have had a rise since the minimum wage does not buy anything. In my church 400 daily lunches are given, made with food that people donate. They have been very supportive, there is a lot of poverty”.
Laura*	“Muchas personas se dedican ahora a vender dólares, sobre todo Colombianos y Árabes. Pero hay que tener cuidado porque hay mucho billete falso o a veces te cobran de más porque se quedan con una comisión”.	“Many people are dedicated now to selling US dollars, and especially Colombians and Arabs. But you have to be very careful because there are a lot of fake banknotes or sometimes they charge you more so they can have a commission”.
Laura*	“Cuando hago una compra grande en el supermercado, utilizo mi tarjeta de débito en bolívares. Sin embargo, normalmente compro una cantidad pequeña de productos porque son solamente para mí y mi hermana. Aquí, vienen varias opciones: o pago en dólares que recibo por remesas o que compro de alguien; llamo a mi hermana y le pido que pague por Zelle, que es una app de celular para pagos en línea, o pago fiao’, por el cual tomo un producto del supermercado y acuerdo un pago para luego con el dueño del local. Cuando pago en efectivo, los billetes tienen que ser nuevos y tienen que ser de baja denominación, porque si son viejos, arrugados o muy altos, no los toman. Para darme vuelto, el supermercado o me da el cambio que tengan en bolívares o dólares (rara vez); o me dan sus propios bonos o me dejan pagar fiao’, todo depende que con quien esté hablando. Es difícil saber cómo pagar de antemano. También, por la hiperinflación, hay productos que no tienen precio, entonces solo se puede saber el precio al momento de pagar. Es común ir al supermercado y escuchar al dueño salir y gritar a los cajeros “¡ACTUALICEN!”, refiriéndose a los precios. Los cambian varias veces al día, por	“When I make a big purchase at the supermarket, I use my debit card in bolívares. However, I normally buy a small quantity of products since they are only for me and my sister. Here, there come several options: I either pay using US dollars I receive through remittances or that I buy from someone; I call my sister and ask her to pay through Zelle, which is a mobile phone app for online payments; or I pay fiao’, through which I take a product from the store and arrange a later payment with the owner instead of paying at the moment. When paying with cash, the banknotes need to be new and the amount of the banknote needs to be low denomination, because if they are old, wrinkly or too high, they do not take them. For giving me change, the supermarket will either give me change they have in bolívares or US dollars (rarely happens); or will give me their own bonds (fake money) or would let me pay fiao’, it all depends on who I am dealing with. It is difficult to know how I am going to pay beforehand. Also, because of hyperinflation, there are products that do not have a price, so you will know the price once you are about to pay. It is common to go into a supermarket and hear the owner coming out and screaming to all the cashiers: “¡ACTUALICEN!” (update!), referring to prices. They change the prices of the products a couple times a day. It is impossible to

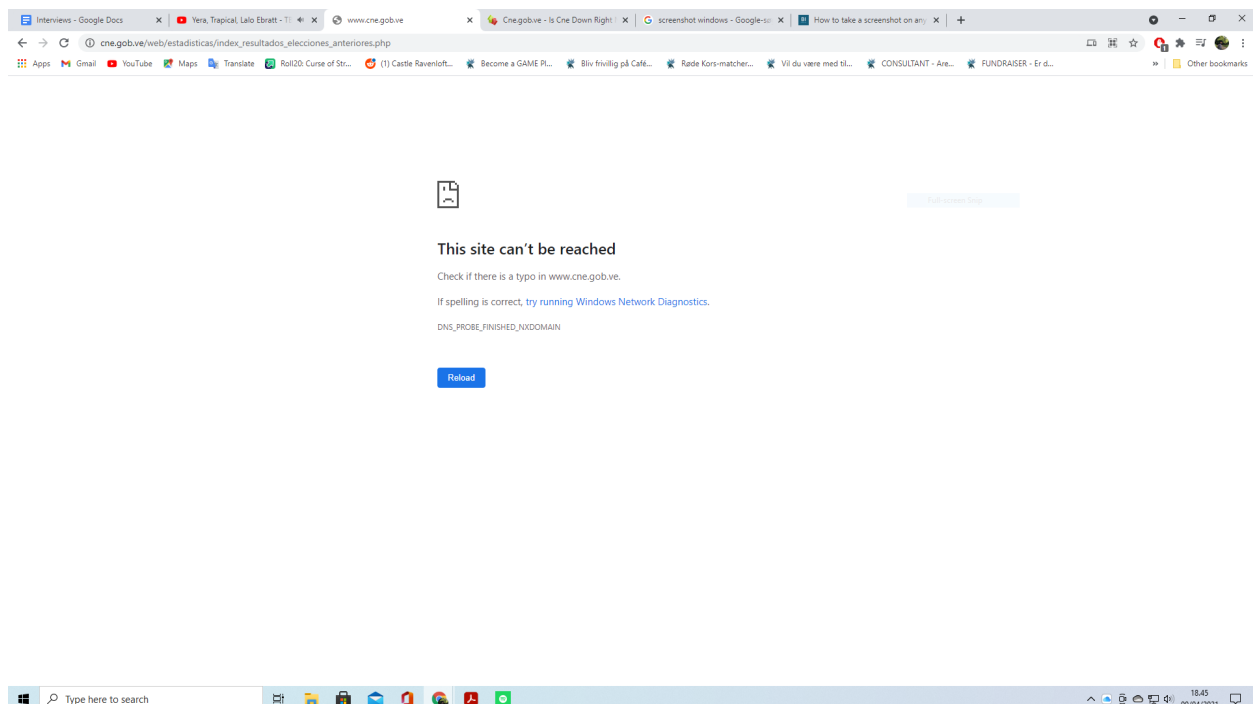
	lo que es imposible mantenerse al tanto y armar un presupuesto”.	keep up or set up a budget”.
Agnes*	“Hoy en día todo el mundo conoce a alguien o compra o vende dólares, pero si no conoces, le pides a una persona conocida que te de recomendaciones”.	“Nowadays everyone knows about someone that either buys or sells (US) dollars, but if you do not know, you ask trusted individuals for recommendations”.
Laura*	“Los dueños tienen que estar ahí porque sino los cajeros no van a tomar esa responsabilidad en caso de que el cliente no pague (...) tienen que saber quién eres (...) no hay billetes en la economía... todos saben que esto es un sufrimiento. Se sabe que todos tenemos limitaciones y por eso el fiao es una opción”	“the owners have to be there because otherwise cashiers will not take that responsibility in case the client does not pay (...) they also need to know who you are (...) there are no banknotes in the economy... Everyone knows that this is a struggle. It is understood that we all have limitations, so that is why the fiao’ is an option”.
Isabel*	“Los bolívares que recibo cada mes vienen de remesas. Mi hija los envía desde España. Envía euros a uno de mis hermanos en Australia. Él, en Australia, tiene un contacto que tiene una cuenta en bolívares en Venezuela. Él transfiere el monto equivalente en dólares australianos y luego la persona transfiere los bolívares acordados a mi cuenta”.	“The bolívares I get every month come from remittances. My daughter sends them from Spain. To do so, she sends euros to one of my siblings in Australia. He, in Australia, has a contact that has a bolívares account in Venezuela. He transfers the equivalent amount in Australian dollars and then the other person transfers the agreed amount in bolívares to my account”.
Laura*	“En vez de enviarme dinero, mi hermano en Miami me envía una caja grande productos comprados en un supermercado allá, cada tres o cuatro meses. Él directamente va a Walmart y por ejemplo, compra shampoo, atún enlatado, pasta de dientes y cualquier otra cosa que yo necesite; las pone en una caja de cartón y las envía a través de una empresa que hace envíos directos desde Miami. La caja llega directamente a mi casa un par de días después”.	“Rather than sending me money, my brother living in Miami sends me a big box full of different goods bought at a supermarket in the US, every three or four months. He directly goes to Walmart and for example, buys shampoo, canned tuna, toothpaste and whatever other thing I need; puts them in a carton box, and sends them using a direct delivery company based in Miami. The box arrives directly to my house in Maracaibo a couple of days after”.

Theme #4		
Others		
Name	Quotation	Translation
Agnes*	“Cuando vinimos de viaje el año pasado desde Estados Unidos, yo llevaba un par de prendas de oro. Tuvimos que pagar 100 dólares al de la aduana para que nos dejara pasar con las prendas. Hay mucha corrupción eso es horrible”.	“When we came last year from a trip from the US, I was wearing some gold bracelets. We had to pay \$100 US dollars to the customs man so it would allow us to bring them. There is a lot of corruption, it is horrible”.
Agnes*	“Aquí han proliferado los mini-markets. Ahora las farmacias son como los <i>drug stores</i> de	“Here, mini-markets have proliferated. Now pharmacies are like drug stores from the US, with food

	Estados Unidos, con comida de todo tipo. Por la pandemia, hay una restricción en la que sólo los negocios que vendan comida pueden estar abiertos. Entonces ahora algunos incluyeron comida sólo para poder seguir abiertos”.	of all kinds. Because of the pandemic, there is a restriction in which only the shops that sell food can be open. So now some of them included food so they can still be open”:
Agnes*	“Caracas es diferente al resto del país. Allá se consigue de todo, no tienen que ir a mini-markets. Hay gasolina, no hay colas mientras que aquí pueden estar dos días en una cola”.	“Caracas is different from the rest of the country. There you can find everything, you do not have to go to mini-markets. There is gasoline, there are no queues while here you can spend even two days in a queue”.
Agnes*	“Maracaibo siempre ha sido muy castigado por opositor. El gobierno tiene especial interés en no darle recursos al Zulia, hay más represión y más escasez. Aquí es terrible. Muchos negocios los han comprado los árabes”.	“Maracaibo has always been very punished because it has always been <i>oposición</i> . The government has a special interest in not giving resources to the Zulia, there is more repression and more shortages. Here it is terrible. A lot of businesses have been bought by Arabs”.
Agnes*	“El gobernador del Zulia es un asesino. Eso todo el mundo lo sabe”.	“The Zulia governor is a killer. Everyone knows that”.
Agnes*	“Yo hago parte de un grupo de la Universidad Católica Andrés Bello en Caracas. Tienen una sede en Maracaibo y nos dedicamos a ir a los barrios y enseñarle a los ciudadanos sobre sus derechos. Muchos de ellos no saben que pueden exigir al gobierno, que tienen derecho a mejores condiciones”.	“I am part of a group from the Andrés Bello Catholic University in Caracas. They have a branch in Maracaibo and we are dedicated to going to slums and teaching citizens about their rights. A lot of them do not know that they can demand from the government, and that they have the right for better conditions”.
Agnes*	“A una amiga cercana le expropiaron su bomba de gasolina. Tenía más de 40 años con su bomba y le habían invertido mucho dinero. El gobierno se la quitó y ahora la controlan los de PDVSA. Hay rumores de que el que se beneficia de esto es Tareck El Aissami y los iraníes”.	“A close friend had her service station expropriated. She had more than 40 years with it and they had invested a lot of money. The government took it from her and now PDVSA controls it. There are rumors that Tareck El Aissami and the Iranians are the ones benefiting from it”.
Kat*	“El salario mínimo creo que es menos de un dólar. Nos enteramos del precio por unas páginas de Instagram sobre el dólar paralelo”.	“The minimum wage I think is less than a US dollar. We learn about the price through some Instagram pages about the parallel dollar”.
Kat*	“Ya yo ni me molesto en ir a buscar al banco el efectivo o nuevo cono monetario que saquen”.	“I do not even bother anymore in going to the bank to pick up cash or any new monetary cone that they release”.
Kat*	“Yo tengo un emprendimiento con mi hermana en Instagram. Los ingresos principales son por mi esposo”.	“I have a little business with my sister on Instagram. My main income are because of my husband”.
Laura*	“No hay billetes por la inflación. Ahora acaban de sacar un nuevo cono monetario, pero ¿qué vas a comprar con 1 millón de bolívars? Nada, no es ni 1 dólar.	“There are no banknotes due to inflation. Now they just released a new monetary cone but, what are you going to buy with 1 million bolívars? Nothing, that is not even 1 US dollar”.
Laura*	“No hay casi patrullaje porque no hay gasolina. En el restaurante en donde yo trabajaba hace un	“There is almost no patrolling because there is no gasoline. At the restaurant I used to work at a couple of

	par de años, necesitaban a la policía hace poco y al llamarlos, el policía dijo que si les podían buscar la forma de surtirles la gasolina entonces si podían ir”.	years ago, recently, they needed the police and when they called them, the policeman said that if they could find a way to supply gasoline to them, then they could come”.
Agnes*	“La cosa es que cuando se paga por Zelle, los negocios no pueden registrar esa transacción en la caja registradora, porque es un servicio banco a banco en Estados Unidos. Por lo tanto, cobran los productos incluyendo el IVA pero este nunca es pagado al gobierno porque no se puede registrar. Es decir, yo pago mi IVA pero el establecimiento no lo da al gobierno”.	“The thing is that when you pay with Zelle, the businesses cannot register that transaction in the cashier, because it is a service from bank to bank in the US. Therefore, they charge for products including the VAT but this is never paid to the government because it cannot be registered. This means, I pay my VAT but the shop does not give it to the government”.
Jose*	“Todos sabemos sobre la capacidad que el Zulia tiene... es suficiente para nosotros haber sido modernos ya; pero como es un país centralizado, todo (recursos, dinero) simplemente se van a Caracas. De aquí es que viene nuestro rechazo y odio a cualquier gobierno de turno”.	“We know about all the capacity Zulia has... it is enough for us to be modern already; but since it is a centralized country, everything (resources, money) just goes to Caracas. This is where our hate or rejection for whichever government is in charge comes from”.

8.1 Annex 2



Screenshot of *Consejo Nacional Electoral* (National Electoral Council)’s webpage.

8.2 Annex 3



Promotional post on Twitter for the “Dólar Beco”

8.3 Annex 4

