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MENESES GUTIERREZ, Mitxy

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Vivencias: Reports from the Field

Mitxy Mabel Meneses Gutiérrez

Goldsmiths, University of London

M.menesesg@gold.ac.uk

Mexico-U.S. Local Transborder Micro-Business Methods Resisting Border Travel
Restrictions in 2020

About the Author

Mitxy Mabel Meneses is a PhD candidate in Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London, funded by CONACYT. Her research focuses on Transborder Practices and Policy Implications at the Cali-Baja Region. She holds a BA in Politics by ITESO, Mexico and a Master's Degree in International Politics by Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain. Her work focuses on Migration, Education, International Cooperation and Transborderism. Her professional experience includes working with the International Organization for Migration and the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education.

It has always been hard to explain my hometown, upbringing and the reason for my Spanglish fully. I was raised in the border city of Mexicali adjacent to Calexico, California. As a child, I thought cities can be divided into two by a fence or can even comprise two countries. As I grew, I began to acknowledge the unique dynamic I been experienced my entire life. Some activities were on the Mexican side of the border and some others on the U.S. For instance, I went to school on the Mexican side. However, grocery shopping was always conducted on the U.S. Sunday trips, and family meals also happened on the U.S. If we needed toilet paper, snacks, or any other item for school or the household, we would cross to Calexico. In this same

sense, my friends lived on both sides and enjoyed what these cities offered. Options were never limited to just the country of my residency. Such a dynamic is typical and an essential element in my life and shared by other residents with a visa or passport. Unfortunately, everything changed on 21 March 2020, when border closures and limited travelling was announced due to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the entire world in different ways, depending on specific regional contexts. In the case of the U.S.-Mexico border region, the disruptions stemmed from respective national policies and agreed on international travel restrictions causing the most prolonged border closure since its fully establishment in 1854. For approximately fourteen million people residing in adjacent cities located on both sides of the border, domestic and international policies' interplay affecting their lives differently. In the case of some Mexican residents, such as myself, to cross the border to shop essential goods in the U.S. or visit friends was no longer possible. At least, that what most people in such a condition thought at first. The historical interconnectedness of the border region and its dynamics adapted to the new glo-cal normality.

The U.S.-Mexico border region today comprises six states, the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila; and the U.S. states of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas (Ganster and Lorey, 2016). This border region's total population is approximately fourteen million people, with 7.3 million living in the U.S. and 6.8 million in Mexico. The region also holds fifteen pairs of border "sister cities" inhabited by 90% of the border population (Border 2020, 2020) including Tijuana-San Diego. These border cities have two land Ports of Entry, San Ysidro and Otay Mesa. San Ysidro has consistently been the most crossed border port with legal documentation experiencing

approximately 25,000 pedestrian crossings and 50,000 vehicle crossings per day (U.S. CBP 2019) up to the year 2019. The second set of sister cities in the California-Baja California border is Mexicali-Calexico, holding two Ports of Entry (POE), Calexico and Calexico East. The Calexico Port has been the fourth most crossed throughout the U.S.-Mexico border, with a total of 12,713,669 documented crossings of pedestrians and personal vehicle passengers in 2019 (U.S. CBP 2019). These numbers reflect the regular crossing dynamic since Mexicali has a population of only 1,049,792 (INEGI 2020). This number of documented border crossings reflect a dynamic region with unique characteristics reflecting a level of interconnectedness of the border, particularly in Mexicali-Calexico.

The name of Mexicali is a composition of the words Mexico and California. In this same sense, the name of Calexico, the adjacent city, is the combination of California and Mexico's words. A dotted line in Mexicali's City Seal represents the border which is of relevance to the city. The Mexican flag is included in Calexico's City Seal of Calexico, the Mexican flag, and the legend "Where California and Mexico Meet". Such official symbols show how deeply connected both cities are sometimes referred to as twin cities (Gildersleeve, 1979; Kearney and Knopp 1995; Alegría, 2012). The historical link between Mexicali and Calexico is essential when analysing contemporary local border crossing practices incorporated into the border population's life with a U.S. visa or passport. However, the year of travel restrictions applied to land Ports of Entry due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected the local transborder dynamic.

On 21 March 2020, the Mexican and U.S. government announced that the border they share would be limited to only essential travellers. That is U.S. nationals, people with lawful working and resident permits, students, truck and train drivers. Such measures also affected

trade. In comparison with data of 2019, entries of passengers from all modes of transportation decreased 42%, and trade entry decreased by just 8% during 2020 (CBP Trade and Travel Report F.Y. 2020). In the specific case of Mexicali, crossings from pedestrians and private car passengers decreased by 45% during 2020 in comparison to the numbers registered for 2019 (CBP 2020). Albeit the economic losses in Calexico due to travel restrictions have not been published yet, it is safe to say that it is of millions of U.S. dollars, mainly from retail and supermarkets. For instance, in 2019, the Tijuana-San Diego Port of Entry was closed for several hours, causing a loss of 5.9 million U.S. dollars to the local San Diego economy (Ojeda 2018). The reason for closing the border was the clash between U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers and members from the Migrant Caravan from Central America. On such occasion, the California Governor called for a nuanced understanding of the economic border dynamic. However, the current border closures do not reflect such a petition. Nonetheless, the border population has adapted to the new extended temporary measures and developed mechanisms to continue having access to U.S. goods that I was able to experience in Mexicali during the summer of 2020.

When classes at all levels in the United Kingdom migrated to virtual platforms, I decided to travel back from London to Mexicali and spend the next critical couple of months with my family. Currently, I am doing my PhD looking at Transborder Practices at the Mexico-U.S. border and thus, continue to analyse border interactions during border closures. At first, it was thought that limited entries to the U.S. would only be for a few months beginning in March. Nevertheless, some people prepared and bought in the U.S. months' worth of goods. By July, different local mechanisms for shopping in the U.S. rose that I got the opportunity to use since I needed some goods "from the other side", but I was also very interested to see how these newly established methods to shop goods from Calexico work.

As stated previously, essential travellers hold a U.S. passport, resident permit or a student visa. Also, train drivers can cross to the U.S. This meant that those binational residents could continue to cross the border as usual. Such “freedom of mobility” represented a business opportunity for the group. It is important to underscore that such “freedom of mobility” does not come without any inconveniences. For instance, waiting times to cross the border increased as the number of U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers processing travel entries decreased. This fact is observable in the number of lanes open in comparison to pre-pandemic normality. Locals express such issue through Facebook groups stating that it can take up to three hours in northbound crossing through the Mexicali-Calexico Port of Entry. Such waiting times are included in the overall fee charged using the newly transborder shopping methods that I identified as the Warehouse method and the Shopping and Errands method.

Both of the shopping schemes I used had things in common. For instance, they required some pre-research or pre-purchase from the interested customer. In the Warehouse method, the scheme included receiving parcels in the entrepreneur home in the U.S., then the packages were crossed once a week and delivered to another Mexicali home address familiar to the business owner. Once the packages were in Mexicali, the customer would pick them up from such location. The guy conducting the business would not go to any shop nor handle cash directly. His standard fee was 20% of the total of the purchase delivered to his home. On one occasion, I bought a pair of shoes directly on a website that cost me approximately eighty U.S. dollars, including delivery fees. His commission had to be transferred to his account, which was 20% of my purchase costs. The commission also included the return or exchange of goods if needed, meaning he would post the package back to the retailer in the U.S. The reason for calling it the

Warehouse method is because this person just receives the parcels in the U.S. and cross them to Mexicali.

The second method used I call the Shopping and Errands method. This scheme was conducted by a woman and offered more services. For instance, I sent her a list of goods I wanted to buy from a shop in Calexico with checked in-store availability. Then she calculated the price plus tax and sent me an excel sheet with the prices breakdown. The total amount of the purchase had to be covered by cash. In case she could not find the requested products, she would look for them in two other similar stores. Another option is to have the products ready to click and collect in the store directly, in which case she would pick them up on specific dates and times. The only items that she would not cross were technology-related as these are subject to importation fees, and not declaring them at the Port of Entry back to Mexico could have monetary repercussions. An important indication was to provide her with reusable bags for the requested shopping. If not, extra money was requested.

Moreover, she would also go to P.O. Boxes in Calexico. It is widespread for people living in Mexicali to rent monthly a P.O. Box address in Calexico, such as myself. Holding a P.O. Box allows for cheaper national and international purchases, serves as an address to open U.S. bank accounts, and other services. In such cases, the customer would need to drop the P.O. Box key with the woman who would cross back to Mexicali the correspondence and packages. In all cases, the customers would need to pick the things up from her house on Tuesdays after six in the afternoon. When I went to pick up the shopping requested, at least five other customers were in line outside her house, and more arrived as I was leaving with my goods. In my case, I paid eight U.S. dollars for the full service plus the total costs of the goods

solicited. I was very impressed by the service's convenience and the price considering the commuting and shopping needed.

After I returned to London in August 2020, many more of these services rose in Mexicali. Today, customers on the Mexican side of the border can choose which service works better based on needs, commission, dates for delivery in Mexicali, online purchase, etc. It has become common to know someone that crosses goods per request for a commission or payment. In one case, the transborder person conducting the business accepts discounts or deals on products as payment. For instance, buy one and get 50% on the second type of deals. The business runner would buy the discounted product either for himself or re-sell it afterwards. Moreover, younger transborder residents are getting involved with these schemes to support their economy and studies. Many of these mechanisms available are openly advertised on local Facebook pages. It was truly interesting to observe new local economic schemes connecting both sides of the border to maintain some of the old normality to a certain extent. In the future, it would be important to analyse these micro binational business schemes in intersection with traditional gender roles, global economic hardship and a possible demographic boom of binational births.

Overall, the adaptive capacities of the border population never ceased to amaze me. Locals managed to keep shopping for goods on their favourite stores in the U.S. with the help of a binational intermediary able to navigate current land border travel restrictions. Retailers, businesses and shops on both sides of the border have suffered severe economic damage. It is yet to be seen if they will recover once the border becomes open for non-essential travellers. Another element to consider for the “new border normality” once all restrictions are lifted is the fact that some population are now accustomed to the goods available on their side of the

border, changing traditional patterns of local shopping. It will be interesting to see if these schemes manage to stay active after the border is open as they have proven to be an alternative for those that cannot cross it or do not want to due to long waiting times and time constraints. The new local border economic panorama is yet to be seen; however, this place has always been a region for commercial opportunities. Even when border crossing restrictions, local transborder business schemes managed to rise.

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