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**“Nimble Sociality and Belonging”:
An Ethnography of Migrants’
Responses to Bans on Associational
Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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“Nimble Sociality and Belonging”: An Ethnography of Migrants’ Responses to Bans on Associational Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Within the past few years, pandemics like HIV/AIDS, influenza, and SARS-CoV-2 have become common worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out recently, profoundly impacted the world. As part of containing this pandemic, lockdowns which put a moratorium on human mobility and associational life became a dominant measure. Yet these mobilities and associational life are the lifeblood of migrants and diaspora belonging. This paper examines the impacts of bans on associational life on migrants and, further, what migrants did to continue living in the absence of these associations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is based on a case study of Lydiate informal settlement in Zimbabwe, where Malawian migrants have established an ethnic enclave to shield themselves from the precarity and injustices of foreign lands. Through convivial and digital ethnographic fieldwork, the paper revealed that, bans on associational life disrupted community engagements and binding religious associational life, increased targeted violence and ‘othering’, and perpetuated stigma and discrimination and loss of ties with family and fictive kin. However, migrants restructured their associational life by adopting agile and new forms of belonging to get by, including relocating religious shrines to more secretive places or conducting religious ceremonies in the dark, drinking beer within the perimeter of the settlement, use of WhatsApp and instant messaging and WhatsApp groups for important community updates, and collective resistance. I termed these strategies ‘nimble forms of sociality and belonging’, meaning there are lithe mechanisms that migrants, employ to further their sociality even when they are restricted. A distinctive feature of ‘nimble sociality and belonging’ from traditional migrant coping strategies (problem focused, emotion focused, avoidance focused) is its convivial and collective nature in fostering resilience and solidarity to navigate challenges within the community.

Keywords

Migrants, COVID-19 pandemic, associational life, belonging, informal settlements.

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Contents

1	Introduction	5
2	Migrant coping strategies at destination	6
3	Convivial and digital ethnography among Lydiatians	8
4	Background and context of migrants at Lydiate	10
5	Associational life and its significance among Lydiatians	12
6	Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on associational life in Lydiate	14
7	Nimble/ agile adjustments to associational life and belonging among migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic	21
8	Theoretical underpinnings: Unpacking ‘nimble sociality and belonging’ among migrants on the margins	25
9	Conclusion	27
	References	30

1 Introduction

Epidemics are no longer a thing of the past. Within the past few years, pandemics like HIV/AIDS, influenza, and SARS-CoV-2 have become common worldwide. Beginning in early 2020, the world was hit by a major health and social crisis following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. As part of containing the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns which put a moratorium on human mobility and associational life became a dominant measure for combating this disease. Yet these mobilities and associational life were the lifeblood of migrant and diaspora belonging, particularly those who live in informal settlements in foreign lands. Associations or social networks ‘comprise of actors who are tied to each other through socially meaningful relations’ (Giurca & Metz, 2018: 4). In informal settlements and among migrants in the diaspora, associations facilitate cooperation in shared activities, collective action, sharing resources, exchange of favours, exertion of social influence, knowledge exchange and social learning (Bhanye, 2023a; Massey, 2017).

Besides the impact on the associational life of migrants in informal settlements, the COVID-19 pandemic also exposed the already existing complex problems experienced in informal settlements. Preliminary studies during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal that people living in informal settlements (often called “slums” or “squatter settlements”) were in a structurally disadvantaged position to cope with a health crisis like COVID-19 and its associated lockdowns (Chirisa et al., 2022; Matamanda, Dunn & Nel, 2022). Informal settlements are marked by the perilous conditions of living on the margins - marginalized not only within society but also within the fringes of healthcare systems. The residents of these settlements grapple with multifaceted dangers that are exacerbated during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Chirisa et al., 2022). Their existence is characterized by a precarious statelessness, the relentless stigmatization of its residents, rampant economic insecurity, tenuous land tenure, the burden of multi-generational households, and the oppressive confinement of cramped living conditions (Bhanye, 2023b). The pandemic cruelly revealed the vulnerability of people living in informal settlements as they faced heightened risks due to overcrowding, limited access to clean water and sanitation, and insufficient healthcare infrastructure (Matamanda et al., 2022). In essence, these settlements became breeding grounds for the rapid transmission of the COVID-19 virus, transforming them into epicenters of the pandemic’s devastation (Chirisa et al., 2022). Moreover, the marginalized status of these communities extends beyond their physical conditions. They face the harsh consequences of statelessness, rendering them invisible and voiceless in the eyes of governments and city authorities (Bhanye et al., 2023). In low-income countries, where many of these settlements are situated, the relationship between the state, city authorities, and these marginalized populations is often contentious. Frequently, the state neglects or actively suppresses efforts to address the profound issues plaguing these vital yet overlooked neighborhoods (Van Belle, 2020). This paper delves into the depths of these challenges, shedding light on the perilous margins of society and healthcare systems, where migrants in informal settlements found themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While there is growing evidence that informal settlements in Africa’s emerging urban spaces were the epicentres of the COVID-19 pandemic and that, they were more prone to the impacts of mandatory lockdowns (Chirisa et al., 2022; Matamanda et al., 2022), the sociality and associational life of migrants in the informal settlements remains blurry. Sociality here means the way people live or associate as a group and can cope with and adapt to different societal pressures that confront them. Associational life is related to connections, interdependence, bonds and/ or cooperative links

that facilitate the progression of life among people. The reason why the sociality and associational life of migrants in the informal settlements remains blurry is, in part, because informal settlements or ‘slums’ are hard to understand because of their architecture and social seclusion (Nyashanu, Simbanegavi & Gibson, 2020). The informal or illegal status of many deprived settlements often undermines both the collection of data and the implementation of policies to improve them. Further, there is also a contentious relationship between the state, city authorities and people living in informal settlements in low-income countries; often, the state tries to mute voices that attempt to highlight the problems of these significant and extremely important neighborhoods (Van Belle, 2020).

This paper investigates the new forms of associational life and belonging that emerged among migrants in informal settlements during the pandemic, as the basis for drawing valuable lessons to improve the well-being of migrants living on the margins during times of pandemics. Associational life of migrants is important because it enables migrants to negotiate their survival within a precarious environment of unresolved citizenship, and yet during the COVID-19 pandemic, this associational life was momentarily suspended and severely curtailed. The paper is based on convivial and digital ethnographic fieldwork carried out among Malawian migrants (herein referred to as Lydiatians) at Lydiate informal settlement, located in Zimbabwe’s Norton peri-urban area.

2 Migrant coping strategies at destination

Migration, a significant phenomenon in today’s globalized world, has brought forth various challenges for migrants as they navigate the complexities of adapting to new environments. The process of adjusting to life in foreign countries or at destination often necessitates the development and utilization of coping strategies. Coping strategies are the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional mechanisms individuals employ to manage stressors and challenges (Lazarus, 1993). Coping strategies can be categorized as problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping (Figure 1). However, it is important to note that many coping strategies serve multiple functions simultaneously and are not sufficiently reflected when categorized by such binaries. In the context of migration, coping strategies also vary depending on several factors like migration and acculturative experiences, status in the host country, and attachment to native culture (Desie, 2021).

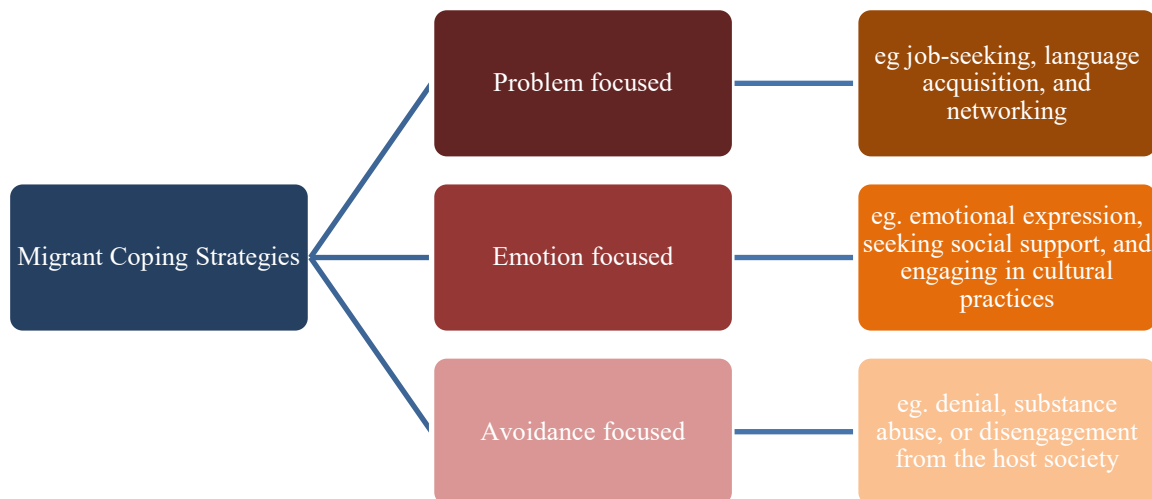


Figure 1: Migrant coping strategies at destination. Source: Author

Problem-focused coping strategies involve efforts to actively address stressors by seeking practical solutions (Carroll, 2020). Migrants often engage in these strategies to tackle challenges related to employment, housing, and legal documentation. Studies have shown that migrants use strategies such as job-seeking, language acquisition, and networking to address these challenges (Chinyakata & Raselekoane, 2021; Opfermann, 2020). However, the effectiveness of problem-focused coping can be limited by structural barriers in host countries, such as discrimination in the job market or limited access to education and healthcare. Emotion-focused coping strategies revolve around managing the emotional distress associated with migration and accompanying stressors (Wolfin, Sassenberg & Albayrak, 2018). Migrants frequently resort to emotional expression, seeking social support, and engaging in cultural practices to ease their emotional burdens (Bhanye, 2023a). While these strategies can provide psychological relief, they might also lead to social isolation if migrants primarily rely on their own communities for support. Additionally, host societies' reception of migrants may impact the availability and effectiveness of emotional support. Avoidance coping entails distancing oneself from stressors or emotionally numbing oneself to manage the overwhelming challenges of migration (Noor & Shaker, 2017). This strategy can manifest as denial, substance abuse, or disengagement from the host society. While avoidance coping might offer temporary relief, it tends to undermine migrants' long-term adaptation and integration efforts. Moreover, relying excessively on avoidance strategies could perpetuate mental health issues.

Numerous studies have highlighted migrants' resilience and adaptability in foreign contexts, demonstrating their ability to navigate challenges even before the onset of pandemics like the novel COVID-19. Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) coined the term "rescaling" to describe migrants' strategies of engaging in transnational activities to overcome structural barriers. These activities often involve the establishment of social networks, remittance flows, and communal support systems that transcend borders. Recent studies on mobility and sociality in Africa's emerging urban also demonstrate the roughness, risk, and vulnerability faced by migrants at destination (for example, Bhanye 2023c; Landau & Freemantle, 2012; Nyamwanza & Dzingirai, 2020; Mushonga & Dzingirai, 2022) forcing migrants to adopt strategic associational forms of belonging and conviviality. These studies reveal that when faced with various forms of threats to their survival,

migrants devise innovative ways of surviving in marginal African urban spaces. Bhanye and Dzingirai (2022), for example, highlight the use of paralegal structures and networks in accessing land among Malawian migrants in Zimbabwe's peri-urban; Mushonga and Dzingirai (2022) demonstrate how Nigerian entrepreneurial migrants in Zimbabwe reconfigured transactional sexual relationships to acquire important documents; while Loren Landau and Freemantle (2010) observed insertion and self-exclusion tactics by foreign nationals in South Africa, which they termed 'tactical cosmopolitanism.' The current study also demonstrates an adjustment by migrants in response to bans on associational life because of the COVID-19 pandemic through 'nimble forms of sociality and belonging.'

Belonging plays a pivotal role in migrants' coping strategies during crises. Often, migrants construct a sense of belonging in unfamiliar environments through social interactions, place-making activities, and the negotiation of identities (Bhanye, 2022; Mushonga, 2022). The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including bans on associational life, demonstrate the centrality of belonging for migrants' well-being. The current study contributes to this discourse by exploring how migrants employed "nimble forms of sociality and belonging" to counteract the challenges posed by the pandemic-induced restrictions.

Social networks and transnational ties are very important among migrants in coping with the complexities of living in foreign countries. These networks serve as crucial sources of emotional support, information dissemination, and resource sharing (Faist, 2000). In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, social networks become even more vital. During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant communities utilized digital platforms and social media to maintain connections with their home countries and fellow migrants (Goldsmith et al., 2022; Muswede & Sithole, 2022). These virtual networks enabled the exchange of information about safety measures, available resources, and emotional well-being, mitigating the isolating effects of lockdowns.

Despite the extensive literature on the importance of social networks as a coping strategy among migrants, there is still a paucity of information on how migrants cope with the loss of their social networks due to bans or restrictions. This literature gap highlights the need for further research to understand the coping strategies used by migrants in the face of such challenges. Introducing the new concept of 'nimble sociality and belonging,' this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the coping strategies used by migrants when their social networks are banned or restricted.

3 Convivial and digital ethnography among Lydiatians

The study was anchored in ethnography, a long-standing traditional methodology rooted in colonial Anthropology. At its height, colonial ethnography was very detached and involved foreign and often white male researchers studying African societies (Atkinson, 2016). Today decolonization of ethnography has made it possible for young natives like myself to study their own people using their own language and often in between what we call convivial ethnographic moments. The moments range from shared labor with subjects, attending religious ceremonies, and formal and informal gatherings, to enjoying victuals and leisure centers to migrant life.

The researcher spent a year and a half in the field, studying sociality and fast-moving migrant processes. The researcher established a makeshift base in Lydiate informal settlement in Zimbabwe, home to Malawian migrants and their enchanting occult. It can be said that the paper's methodology is banal. There is nothing methodologically peculiar because many researchers have done this before and continue to use participant observation, perhaps in even more romantic sites. What makes the methodology of this paper peculiar is the stress on conviviality, marrying social interactions with research participants. Conviviality among migrants refers to the social component of interaction, emphasizing a sense of mutual support, and shared experiences within host communities. It represents the ability of migrants to establish connections, build relationships, and participate in the social fabric of their new environment. When adopted by the researcher, conviviality entails being friendly and lively in social situations with the participants.

Data for this study were collected between January 2020 and November 2021 as part of a bigger Doctoral research project exploring mobility and sociality among migrants. The researcher's privileged position as an insider provided him with insights to better understand the associational situation of migrants in Lydiate during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the study, the researcher participated in various social spaces, including Nyau cult ceremonies, church gatherings, youth gatherings and community meetings, to understand how associational lives of migrants have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the various responses of migrants to the bans on their associational life. The researcher also undertook transect walks within and around the community to observe the dynamics of associational life during the pandemic. Observing all COVID-19 protocols, including wearing masks and social distancing, the researcher also conversed with selected community members through in-depth interviews. Interviews were also conducted with selected community leaders, the councilor and Civil Society leaders in Lydiate.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and strict mandatory lockdowns, starting June 2020, the researcher left the field and continued the research through digital ethnographic methodologies. What is digital ethnography? Digital ethnography (also known as "virtual ethnography," "cyber ethnography," "netnography," or "mobile ethnography") is a digital transformation of in-person ethnography and a form of online or remote ethnographic research that leverages the power of smartphones to help researchers to remotely generate rich, contextual insights into the lives and experiences of the people under study (Hine, 2008; Varis, 2016). To begin with, the researcher was made part of the community WhatsApp group by Dhabuka, one of the active WhatsApp group administrators whom he knew prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The WhatsApp group became critical in coping with bans on associational life, as the authors shall demonstrate in the results section. In-depth interviews continued through phone calls, while some conversations were carried out on WhatsApp digital platform.

The shift to digital ethnography introduced unique challenges, notably related to internet access, network reliability, informed consent, and maintaining ethnographic engagement. In Lydiate informal settlement, where internet connectivity was sporadic, interviews were scheduled based on network stability. Obtaining informed consent for audio recording in the digital context was a priority, and participants were informed in advance and provided with options for consent. To address the potential distance in digital engagement, the researcher actively participated in online forums, such as the community WhatsApp group, fostering discussions and sharing experiences. Ethical considerations, including anonymity and privacy, were rigorously maintained in both

physical and digital interactions, ensuring the integrity of the research throughout. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of migrants’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic’s bans on associational life in Lydiate informal settlement.

4 Background and context of migrants at Lydiate

Malawian migrants at Lydiate squatter settlement have a long migration history linked to colonial policies and practices. Beginning in 1895 and up until the 1970s, Malawians migrated to Southern Rhodesia as part of migrant labor pools under the infamous colonial labor migration (Chibaro/Mthandizi) system. It was during this period that Nyasaland (now Malawi) acted as a labor reservoir for Zimbabwe and South Africa’s colonial capitalist economies, and Malawian Migrants were engaged as laborers on colonial white-owned farms and mines (Daimon, 2015) some of these migrants were settled on Lydiate, a former farm compound. Lydiate squatter settlement is now home to first, second, third and fourth-generation Malawians, who together have become an ethnic enclave and diaspora community in Zimbabwe. Lydiatians now have internal differences based on the history of settlement. To begin with, there are vauyi vakare, long-term migrants who are settled in the core of the settlement. Then there are vauyi vazvino, or recent migrants. These newer migrants are settled on the periphery of the settlement in areas known as kuma nyusitendi (new stands). Figure 2 shows the location of the study area – Lydiate.

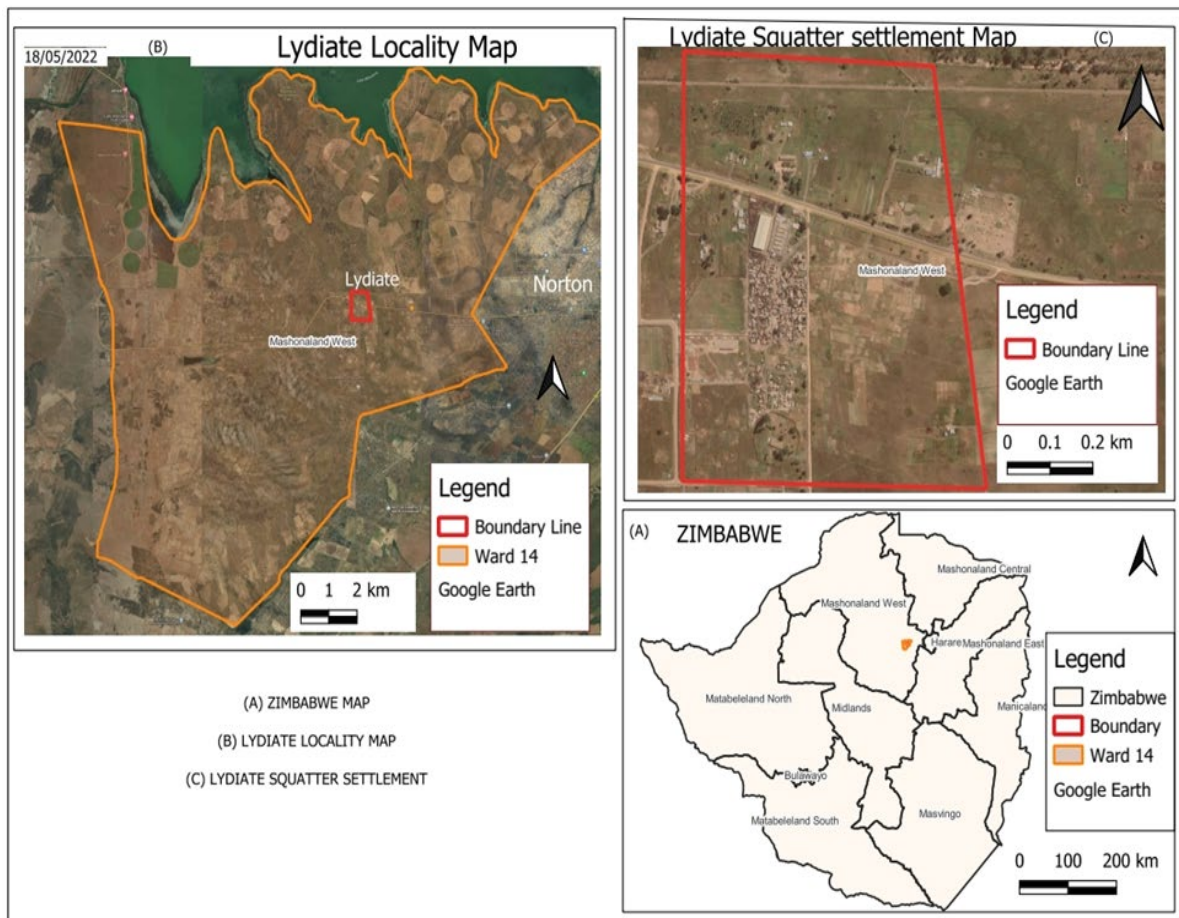


Figure 2: Location of the study area (Lydiate). Source: Author

Lydiate squatter settlement falls under Mashonaland West Province of Zimbabwe, in Ward 14 of Chegutu Rural District Council. The community relies on services from shopping areas like Lucky Store owned by the former Councillor Mr. Musevenzi, Lydiate Store and Mboma shopping and beer drinking area, as well as Mutipitipi Primary School. The area also lies close to other popular areas like Murombedzi, Darwendale, Mapinga, and Trelawney, among others, where some Lydiatians travel for various livelihood activities.

Life in Lydiate squatter settlement is generally difficult. Like other squatter settlements in Southern Africa, Lydiate is what Nyamwanza and Dzingirai (2020) term a ‘rough neighborhood.’ To begin with, there is an acute scarcity of land for settlement, and this is against a backdrop of the population in the informal settlement having grown to about 1200, with more than 60% of the migrants being youths between the ages of 18 and 35 who now require their own individual pieces of land for settlement.¹ The livelihoods in Lydiate are diverse, with petty peri-urban farming, buying and selling and casual labor being key. However, as in several other African squatter settlements, the general livelihood situation in Lydiate is poor. Most people in Lydiate are also illiterate, making it difficult to look for better opportunities, including formal employment elsewhere that pays better wages. The documentation challenges faced these migrant groups make them more vulnerable and forever marginalized (UNHCR, 2001). Groves (2020) reveals how Zimbabwe’s citizenship laws became increasingly exclusive following independence, leaving many politically disenfranchised and labelled ‘aliens’ by the state. Thus, Chidoba Banda (2022) called for a “holistic approach” to understanding Malawi migrants.

Peri-urban petty farming is not helpful since Lydiatians did not get land during Zimbabwe’s Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP). There is also a tobacco grading plant in the midst of the settlement that relies on Lydiatians for labor, leaving behind a trail of sicknesses like Tuberculosis (TB). The plant operates from May to September and, at the height of activity, employs close to 500 migrants.

Foreign lands are often rough and uncomfortable for migrants owing to the othering between the so-called autochthons (sons of the soil) versus the allogenes or allochthons; and /or the indigenous versus the aliens or strangers (Daimon, 2015). This is the case of Lydiatians, who have often been labelled as aliens, foreigners, and lost ones, among several other derogatory titles. The migrants are also under constant threats of eviction from local authorities and locals who consider them criminals, outcasts and bandits who flout the law of the land. Most Lydiatians live in inter-generational households crammed into small spaces and buildings, making social distancing and self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic largely impossible because of the overcrowding. Regular handwashing is problematic due to a lack of water or adequate sanitation access. Testing for COVID-19 at the small local clinic was challenging due to a lack of resources and capacity. In short, virus containment measures such as hand washing and self-isolation were less effective and often impossible to practice at Lydiate. Another sad reality is that the number of COVID-19 cases in informal settlements like Lydiate were inevitably underestimated. There are also old-first-generation Malawians who mostly live in poverty and have high rates of chronic medical conditions, like non-communicable respiratory diseases (asthma, tuberculosis etc.), which placed them at risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19.

¹ Lydiate community records.

5 Associational life and its significance among Lydiatians

Life among Lydiatians is highly dependent on associations with kin, fictive kin, friends, and neighbors. Fictive kinship relates to kinship based on social agreements such as friendship instead of adoption, blood (consanguinity), or marriage (affinity) that creates a relationship “like family” (Nelson, 2013). Beginning with the organization of the community, Lydiatians belong to kin groups. These kin groups are not locked to specific spaces; it is common for members to be diffused throughout the settlement according to land availability. Elders in kinship groups remain important and occasionally meet to deliberate over community matters affecting their members. There is a culture of reciprocity between members; people assist each other with basic needs and will attend each other’s funerals and celebrations alike; as one community leader said: “We are like a big family in this community. We support each other, both in times of need and in times of celebration.”² In literature, kinship has widely been identified as a critical factor in facilitating the integration of migrants and in facilitating access to scarce resources (see, for example, Kazlou & Wennberg, 2021). The decades of coexisting among Lydiatians have also strengthened their social ties, which are so important in times of need. This came out clearly in an interview with 67-year-old Dorothy Ngadza, who said:

*People in this community are now more comfortable with this place than anywhere else because of the strong connection with friends and relatives here. Yes, life can be difficult here and there, but there is no other place where you are better welcome than here. Some of us now have decades staying here, and we have managed to build strong friendships with other people here. Some of my friends here have even become like blood relatives. I am also privileged to have four families that I am closely related to here. I have three brothers and a sister whom both stay here. We understand each other better, and we support each other in difficult times.*³

I observed that associational life at Lydiate is mediated by the various institutions and networks that have emerged over time in the community. The community, for example, has an established hierarchy of leadership that govern the affairs of the community. There are selected leaders, ‘maSabhuku’ (village heads), who maintain a register (bhuku) of the settlement. At the micro level, the compound is divided into five units, each represented by a ‘Sabhuku’, chosen by the community and officially appointed by the powerful chief Chivero. The maSabhuku command respect from the migrants, who regard them as instrumental in negotiating belonging and facilitating access to land. Also active in the compound are Vakuru-vakuru (big men). These include vakuru venzvimbo (the Councillor) representing the state; vakuru vemusangano (the local ZANU PF political party chairperson) and finally, mukuru wevechidiki (the local ZANU PF political party youth chairman). It is common for these leaders to oscillate between Lydiate and the towns of Harare and Norton. These big men have the power to change the politics on the ground, including facilitating access to resources.

Associational life in Lydiate is also strengthened as Lydiatians drink beer together at the nearby beer halls, and some sell each other illicit brews, ‘chikokiyana’ in the compound. Well-known

² Interview with Community Leader Matambo at Lydiate Farm, 20 June 2020. All the names used in this study are pseudonyms.

³ Interview with Dorothy Ngadza at Lydiate Farm, 11 May 2020.

homes in the community have now become like small beerhalls, which the locals refer to as ‘mashabeen’. Lydiatians buy the illicit brews and sit down to drink and chat about various matters in the community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these shebeens became centers of activity as people could not visit proper bars which were closed. During funerals, Lydiatians also strongly support each other, and they bury their lost ones in song, dance and Nyau cult rituals. It is a norm for every household to give support, materially or in kind, to the deceased’s family. This is also the case during celebrations, where community members pool resources together and have music and meat as they celebrate. Associational life is also meaningful among the youth who occasionally gather, especially during weekends, to play soccer on the Mutipitipi primary school ground adjacent to the community. During other times, the youths gather to play cards, commonly referred to as ‘makasi’. During these times, they bond more and tip each other of potential opportunities for making money in the community and building syndicates for exploring the opportunities like menial jobs, fish mongering, and gold panning outside the community. Thus, Lydiate community is punctuated by a frenzy of mobility and transition characterized by migrants, often young, continually moving in and out of the settlement in response to better opportunities elsewhere (Bhanye, Dzingirai & Chirisa, 2021).

There are also several established religions that bind the people of Lydiate together. These range from Christianity, Islam and the enchanting Nyau cult. The Islamic Mosque is located by the roadside, and there are multiple shrines of other churches dotted in and outside the compound. Among the multiple churches that I observed and interacted with in Lydiate are Gospel Power Ministries, Marange church in Mutufa and Norton, Zvakazarurwa, Apostolic church led by Rairo Tembo, who stays in the compound, AFM at Mutipitipi Primary school, Calvary Fellowship Ministries, Pentecostal Holiness Church in Norton, Ever Journey Apostolic Church, Calvary ministries, Roman Catholic, Mwazha, Anglican, Zvakazarurwa Zvavapostori and Seventh Day Adventist Church. Religious associations in Lydiate have brought the community together through shared rituals and beliefs. Beyond faith and spiritual guidance, members also give each other moral and tangible support like food and clothing handouts.⁴ Thus, it is common for members to belong to multiple faiths to maximize the benefits offered by the various religions.

Below are some direct quotes from participants highlighting how associations through religious organizations in Lydiate play a significant role in their lives.

The church is like our second family here. When times are tough, we know we can rely on our fellow church members for support. Whether it’s sharing a meal together or lending a helping hand, our faith community provides us with both moral and tangible assistance.⁵

I lost my job due to the pandemic, and things were really tough for me and my family. But through the church, we received food parcels and clothing donations that helped us get by during those difficult times. I am grateful for the support we received from our church family.⁶

4 Interview with Mrs. Zvinyenye at Lydiate Farm, 30 June 2020.

5 Interview with Mrs. Zvokuomba at Lydiate Farm, 29 June 2020.

6 Interview with Mr Kademaunga at Lydiate Farm, 22 June 2020.

Being part of multiple faith communities has been a blessing for me. Each church offers different forms of support, whether it's financial assistance, emotional encouragement, or practical help. By belonging to several churches, I am able to maximize the support available to me and my family.

The mosque serves as a focal point for our community, not just for prayer but also for social gatherings and support networks. During Ramadan, we come together to break our fast and share meals, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity among us.⁷

Among the various religions in Lydiate, the Nyau cult seems more outstanding and mysterious. Thus, it is customary in Lydiate for the Nyau cult to organize initiation rites for the youth. The enchanting and dramatic Nyau cult has a voice and influence on sociality and associational affairs in the community (Bhanye, 2023). Like all other religious leaders, Nyau leadership is respected among Lydiatians. Its leadership is presumed to have ritual powers capable of inflicting harm or bringing down illness on those who are insubordinate and go against its decisions. The much-subscribed Nyau ceremonies and dances take place at weekends, usually after church services and at funerals.

6 Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on associational life in Lydiate

The COVID-19 pandemic altered everyday life dramatically for migrants in Lydiate, imposing new costs, restrictions, and risks on everyday life because of the ban on associational life. Figure 3 shows a summary of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated mandatory lockdowns on associational life among migrants in Lydiate.

⁷ Interview Mr Paulos at Lydiate Farm, 20 June 2020.

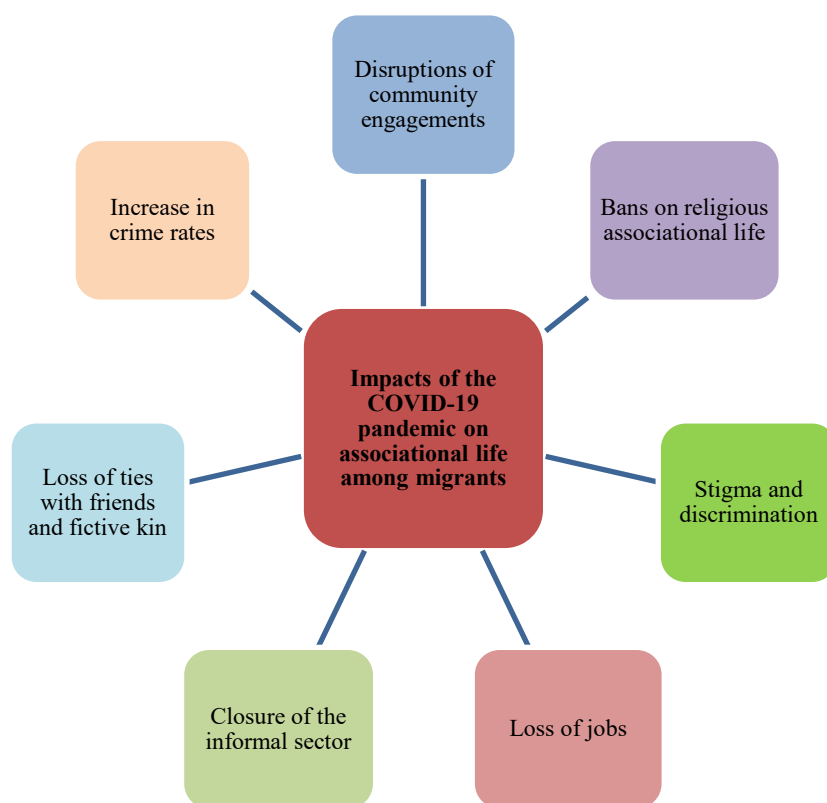


Figure 3: Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on associational life among migrants. Source: Author

Mandatory lockdowns led to the closure of the informal sector were some of the migrants in Lydiate made their living from. During normal times, some migrants used to buy stuff from the nearby Norton town to sell in the community, and others would travel as far as the Eastern highlands⁸ to buy fruits for sale in the community and other nearby places. Others would sell fresh and dried fish, secondhand clothing, and groceries. COVID-19 restrictions posed significant threats to families who depended on the informal sector, exposing them to food and health insecurity. Mr. Manijibhangu, who used to buy bananas to sell in the community, narrated how travel and associational bans affected his source of livelihood:

I don't even know where to start after my source of livelihood has been halted by travel bans. I used to survive by buying bananas in the Eastern highlands and selling them in this community. However, when the government imposed intercity travel bans, I could no longer operate my business.⁹

Another informal sector operator Mrs. Bhasikiti highlighted a risk of malnutrition and starvation among her family and other informal sector operators in the community as they no longer had the means to feed their families after the informal sector was banned. Mrs. Bhasikiti narrated:

⁸ Phone interview with Mr Manijibhangu, 18 November 2021.

⁹ WhatsApp conversation with Mrs Bhasikiti in Lydiate community, 03 June 2020.

They have banned our livelihoods, and we are no longer earning an income. They forget that we have recurrent expenses for food every day; how do they expect us to survive during the pandemic?¹⁰

A local Civil Society Leader in Lydiate also lamented in a telephone interview about the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 mandatory lockdowns on Lydiatians' livelihoods. He argued that while the government was using the excuse of 'sanitization' of urban areas to curb the spread of coronavirus by evicting market traders, the impacts of such decisions were detrimental, especially to their livelihoods as most residents of Lydiate are informally employed:

The government's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic by issuing lockdowns, mandating people to stay at home, and closing businesses will seriously impact people at Lydiate. All the businesses of these migrants are informal, and their economy functions on a day-to-day basis; such measures are both unfeasible and incredibly harmful to their livelihoods. The deaths by COVID-19 will be far less than what hunger will do to these people.¹¹

Other Lydiatians had their already low and precarious incomes significantly whittled during COVID-19 mandatory lockdowns after losing their jobs. This was especially evident among young and middle-aged Lydiatians working in the nearby agricultural plots. One of the youths who used to work in the nearby plots before the COVID-19 pandemic and was subsequently laid off at the onset of the pandemic narrated:

Our lives have been completely shattered. The lockdowns have halted all the economic activities in this community and the nearby areas where we used to get employment. This has resulted in substantial employment loss among young people like me.¹²

Some of those who lost their jobs reported that their employers feared being infected with COVID-19 through migrant employees from the crowded squatter settlement - Lydiate.¹³ Others like Jacob, who worked far away from the community, lost their jobs because of the curfew, which forced them to be in the community by 6 pm, or else suffer the full wrath of the state security apparatus enforcing COVID-19 lockdowns. Jacob narrated:

'COVID-19 and its curfews have seriously affected my livelihood. I used to work in the surrounding plots doing menial jobs 'maricho', and I would come back home even after 8 pm. Now I should be home by 6 pm, meaning I will have worked for fewer hours than I used to work before COVID-19.¹⁴

During the study, there was also a young Lyditian who was brutally attacked after getting caught on his way home from work after 6 pm – the curfew time. There is well-documented brutality of state security services during the Covid-19 pandemic both in Zimbabwe and across Africa in general,

¹⁰ Phone interview with a local Civic Leader in Lydiate, 30 May 2020.

¹¹ WhatsApp call with Justice Kabanga, 20 November 2020.

¹² WhatsApp Conversation with Dickson, 30 November 2021.

¹³ WhatsApp Conversation with Leadwell, 30 November 2021.

¹⁴ WhatsApp Conversation with Jacob 26 November 2021.

pointing to the excessive use of police force, use of brutal methods and dangerous weapons, abuse of authority and corruption, and causing ‘terror’ in communities (Corpuz, 2022; Obioha & Mugari, 2022). Observations by various human rights organizations also show that the majority of the victims of police brutality during the COVID-19 pandemic were marginalized groups like racial and ethnic minorities, migrants, and the poorest members of society (OMCT, 2021).

During the study, there were also fears that even the local crime rates could rise as all the youths were now idle in the community, as one community leader narrated:

The majority of our people here have already suffered complete or partial loss of their jobs and incomes due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The crime rate has increased in this community and this is because of the desperate and idle youths.¹⁵

In Lydiate, there has also been stigma and discrimination against households affected by COVID-19. The coronavirus is seen as a contagious and fatal disease; hence those infected were quarantined, isolated, or locked up from the rest of the family. Red flags were also placed by fellow Lydiatians in the homes of infected people. Fears of getting the virus also resulted in surveillance of others, harassment of people with flu-like symptoms and suspicions about outsiders. Thus, traditional networks of support were disrupted within the community as some community members were no longer entertaining visitors. During normal non-COVID-19 times, community members would visit each other without any fear or restrictions. However, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically made people throw away their receptive African culture of ubuntu – humanity towards others. The major reason for the unwelcoming attitude towards other community members during the COVID-19 pandemic was that migrants feared the transmission of the deadly virus to their family members, as one female respondent narrated:

Even though I love everyone in this community, I will not allow them to randomly visit our home as they used to do in the past. I fear they will spread the virus to my children.¹⁶

However, this attitude seriously impacted the community as some forms of reciprocity in cash, goods and kind became disrupted.

The study findings also show that Lydiatians’ associational life with local indigenes waned because of the pandemic. Beyond fellow migrants’ associations, Lydiatians used to survive through fictive or convivial associations with local Zimbabweans in the greater Lydiate area. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Mrs. Kachire, for example, would not spend two days without visiting her fictive kin Zimbabwean friend Mrs. Mapfumo who owns an agro-residential plot adjacent to Lydiate settlement. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictive measures, Mrs. Kachire highlighted that the thought of visiting her friend made her seem like an unreasonable person:

‘Unoita seune miyedzo’ (you seem like an unreasonable person) when you visit people during COVID-19, no matter how close you are.¹⁷

15 Phone interview with Community Leader Matambo, 30 January 2021.

16 Phone interview with Mrs. Tagutanazvo, 13 February 2021.

This decrease in associational life with both kin and fictive kin is a source of vulnerability among migrants as they depend on local networks to access resources, food, job connections, and moral support. During the study, I also found that older first-generation migrants were more vulnerable to poverty, hunger, and destitution after banning associations during the COVID-19 pandemic. A good case in point was 88-year-old Mr. Dhisi Jairos, who stayed with his 88-year-old wife Mrs. Jairos, in Lydiate community. Before COVID-19, the two used to survive through associational support of community well-wishers who regularly checked up on them. However, with the devastating impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns, the community well-wishers were also struggling to stockpile food for themselves in preparation for long periods of isolation.¹⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated bans also disrupted important community engagements in Lydiate community. During the study, it was difficult to conduct community meetings like in the past when people would gather at will to discuss various matters ranging from community updates, projects, and political part party meetings. During a phone call interview with community leader Matambo, he confirmed that:

‘Because of mandatory social and physical distancing measures, the frequency of our meeting in Lydiate has been affected. We used to meet regularly to discuss important matters in the community, and it is no longer the case.’¹⁹

Other important community gatherings like funerals also became difficult to do during COVID-19 mandatory lockdowns. Lydiatians are very united when it comes to mourning and burying their dead, as the whole community collectively gather to console the bereaved family. However, the gatherings were put stale by COVID-19 restrictions. A concerned Lydiate resident had this to say:

‘Funerals have always been a cornerstone of our unity here in Lydiate. We used to come together, share our grief, and console one another as a close-knit community. But when COVID-19 hit and the restrictions came into play, it felt like our hearts were mourning in isolation. We could not gather, we could not hold each other, and it was painful to say our goodbyes from a distance.’²⁰

Beyond the loss of livelihoods, jobs, stigma and discrimination and disruption of community meetings discussed above, religious associational life was also negatively interrupted by COVID-19 mandatory lockdowns in Lydiate. The enchanting Nyau cult ceremonies that used to be a marvel attracting large groups of people (Figure 4), especially during the weekends, were halted at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a norm in Lydiate that during public holidays, anniversaries, and funerals, initiated members of the Nyau brotherhood perform a masked dance called Nyau or Gule Wamkulu, which means ‘Great Dance’ in Chichewa. However, the ceremonies were banned, with some Nyau cult members receiving some thorough beating from the law enforcement agents who had warned them to stop their activities. One defiant cult member confirmed this by saying:

17 Interview with Mrs. Kachire at Lydiate Farm, 03 September 2021.

18 Interview with Mr. Dhisi Jairos at Lydiate Farm, 04 September 2021.

19 Phone interview with Community Leader Matambo, 30 January 2021.

20 Interview with Mrs. Dhairesi at Lydiate Farm, 03 September 2021.

*'They came and beat some of our members who were dancing over the weekend. It was a dramatic scene. However, our members managed to escape. From that time onwards, we would only do our ceremonies during the night.'*²¹



Figure 4: Nyau ceremonies by Lydiatians before the COVID-19 lockdowns. Source: Fieldwork

Meetings for other religious sects (Islam and Christianity) churches were also affected in Lydiate. Because of the associational restrictions, there were no longer big Sundays. In one instance, and at the height of COVID-19 strict lockdowns, church members of the Apostolic sect were thoroughly beaten by the police and soldiers. They had defied COVID-19 lockdown regulations banning church gatherings and engaged in a public church program close to the railway adjacent to Lydiate community. Besides the beating, the soldiers and police gave the church members beer to drink, against their religious beliefs.²² This incident was news across all social media platforms in Zimbabwe, further insinuating a bad reputation for migrants as ‘deviants’, ‘law breakers’, and ‘perpetual outcasts’.

In the face of these punishments, many churches were closed, which greatly affected many people who depended on these church gatherings for emotional, spiritual and social survival. The modern Pentecostal churchgoers, for example, believe in a spirit-filled and empowered life through prosperity gospel and demonstration of power through divine healing and prophecy. For the Pentecostal churchgoers in Lydiate, the ban on associational life meant the loss of hope for tomorrow and exposure to demons and diseases. During the study, I came across some Christians who had become sickly and hopeless because they could not physically attend church on Sundays after the pandemic hit. One female migrant narrated:

*We depend on the church for our emotional and social life. The pandemic did not only disrupt our livelihoods; it also cost our spiritual life. When we meet at church gatherings physically, we are given hope with the word of God, some are healed, while others are protected from potential future calamities by the word of prophecy.*²³

²¹ Interview with Nyau Cult member Damian at Lydiate, 16 October 2021.

²² Interview with Mr. Kambeva at Lydiate Farm 20 June 2020.

²³ WhatsApp Interview with Mrs Gidhiza, 10 October 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively affected tobacco grading work at Lydiate. For several decades, Lydiatians have been bound by this common practice of providing labor in the local tobacco grading shade that belongs to a white man, who generously allocated some of the Lydiatians' spaces for settlement. The tobacco grading shade normally has more than 500 people working at the same time; however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tobacco grading shade could only accommodate a small group at a time, working on a shift basis. At the height of the pandemic, the tobacco grading shade was closed, negatively affecting the lives of Lydiatians who earned an income through tobacco grading (Figure 5). While the white owner allocated COVID-19 PEP (face masks and sanitizers) to the workers, tobacco grading exposed the migrants to diseases like tuberculosis, which makes the migrants more vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. However, Lydiatians who rely on the daily earnings of providing labor in the tobacco grading plant have no option but to take risks to feed their families during the pandemic.



Figure 5: Tobacco grading shade at Lydiate closed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic
Source: Fieldwork

The findings on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on associational life among migrants reveal that, the pandemic triggered a significant 'separation' - from livelihoods, communities, cultural and religious practices, and traditional networks of support. Mandatory lockdowns led to economic uncertainty, job losses, and food insecurity, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups within the community. Additionally, stigma and fear of virus transmission disrupted the communal bonds that were the hallmark of Lydiatians' sense of belonging. Besides separation, the pandemic also threaten to tear the African ubuntu - the fabric of society apart. The values of ubuntu - 'humanity to others', emphasize shared humanity, interconnectedness, and a shared commitment to the welfare of all, as opposed to separation (Murove, 2012).

7 Nimble/ agile adjustments to associational life and belonging among migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the section above, I demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictive measures negatively affected associations and belonging among migrants at Lydiate. In this section, I demonstrate how migrants adjust and find ways of maintaining associational life during COVID-19. Figure 6 illustrates the different strategies of adjustment to associational life and belonging among migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

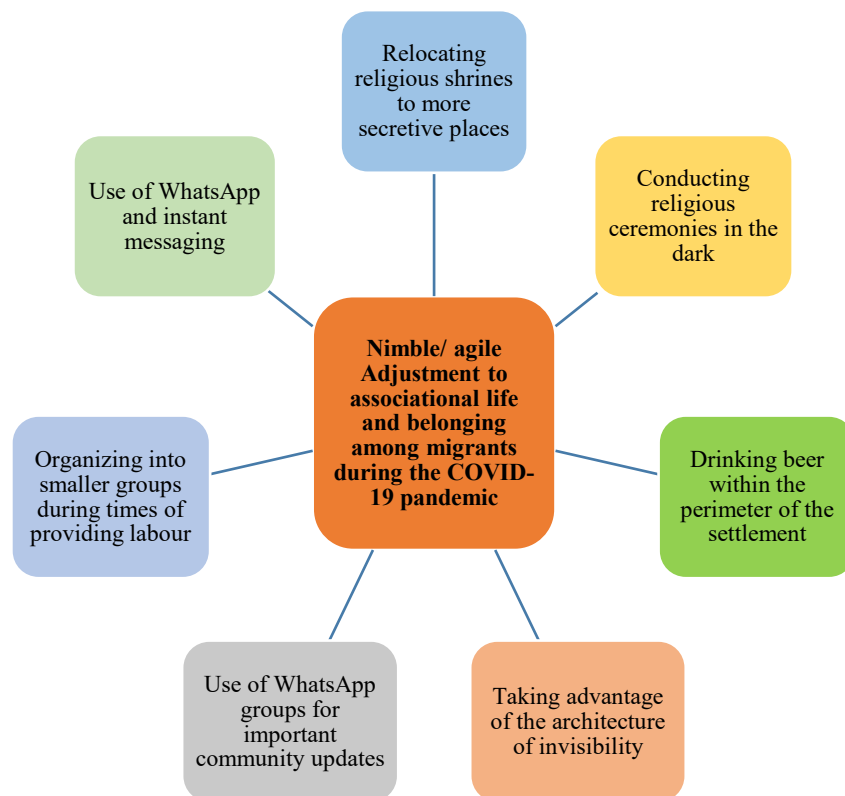


Figure 6: Nimble/ agile adjustments to associational life and belonging among migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: Author

When it comes to household associations that were disrupted by mandatory social distancing, Lydiatians use innovative ways to maintain associations with their fellow community members. They make use of social media, in particular, WhatsApp instant messaging, to communicate and check up on their neighbors. This was highlighted by Mrs. Ketula in a phone interview:

Although we no longer visit each other as was the case during pre-COVID-19 pandemic times, we still find ways to continue associating with each other. We are taking advantage of our phones to regularly check on our neighbors and friends in this community.²⁴

²⁴ Phone interview with Mrs. Ketula, 15 October 2021.

Other migrants take advantage of the closeness of shacks in the informal settlement and communicate with their neighbors over the thatched barricade that divides their settlements. Mrs. Jabula narrated over a WhatsApp text message:

*I used to greet my neighbor physically every day. However, because of COVID-19, things have changed. We now communicate with each other over the Durawall.*²⁵

It was also interesting to note that Lydiatians even improved the already existing thatched barricade facility to keep the connections, particularly within the built infrastructure.

Malawian migrants at Lydiate, though obliged to government bans and restrictions on religious gatherings, they invented new ways of continuing their religious associational life. Some of them evaded the state authorities by relocating their religious shrines from public or open spaces to more mysterious and secretive places. During the study, the researcher came across baba Kuda a devoted member of the apostolic sect going to church in the forest. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, his church was located adjacent to the community. When the researcher confronted baba Kuda, he revealed:

*We have now changed the location of our church. We no longer gather in public spaces, but we now meet in the forest to hide from the police and soldiers. Some church members were meeting next to the railway, and they were seen by the soldiers who beat them and forced them to drink beer. We do not want to end up like them.*²⁶

Other migrants temporarily changed their place of worship as an adjustment to restrictions for gathering. In cases where migrants used to attend churches far away from the community, some migrants resorted to changing their churches to local/ community-based churches that were not affected by travel restrictions. During fieldwork, Mr. Kabwera, who worshipped at a church at Mabvuku-Tafara, which was more than 40km from Lydiate, now worshipped at a church in the neighborhood.²⁷ For other migrants, the timing of religious associations was very important. Some church members highlighted that they conducted their church services during the night. One of the other religious groups that took advantage of darkness was the Nyau cult dancers. During most of the COVID-19 period, they conducted their ceremonies during the night and when they felt confident that the state apparatus was not in the vicinity of Lydiate.²⁸

It was at drinking places that migrants interacted with kin groups and friends to build the social capital required for survival in a precarious environment like Lydiate. To continue their interaction during drinking on the blind side of authorities, Lydiatians turned to drink within the perimeter of their community, as the government restricted public drinking to contain the coronavirus. The police and soldiers also patrolled the beer-drinking centers near Lydiate but failed to locate the new drinking centers.²⁹ Another interesting finding of the study was that some Lydiatians also shifted from conventional beer to their local brew, commonly referred to as 'chikokiyana'. The former

²⁵ WhatsApp Interview with Mrs Jabula, 10 October, 2021.

²⁶ Interview with Baba Kuda at Lydiate Farm, 22 October 2021.

²⁷ Interview with Mr Kabwera at Lydiate Farm, 24 October 2021.

²⁸ Interview with Nyau cult member Romeo at Lydiate Farm, 23 June 2020.

²⁹ Interview with Mr. Kasiye at Lydiate Farm, 19 June 2020.

councilor Mr. Musevenzi, highlighted that, although COVID-19 lockdowns affected the lives of people in Lydiate community to associate and drink at the local beerhalls freely, one of which he is the owner – The Lucky Store, Lydiatians innovated to meet for their local brew in the community secretly.³⁰ This strategy of drinking illicit brews in the community worked for the migrants as they only gathered in small groups, usually at a selected household, without attracting any suspicions.

The need to get Covid 19 information across to people during the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to WhatsApp groups which eventually served as a new form of associational life among the migrants. Through the community leaders, Lydiatians created a vibrant virtual WhatsApp group, ‘Lydiate Community Updates’ for easier communication and support for each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. The senior community leader Mr. Matambo said that, together with other community leaders, they use the WhatsApp group to constantly update the community on important information and awareness on observing COVID-19 protocols, including social distancing, regularly washing hands, and procedures to take when a family member contracts the virus.³¹ However, this adaptive strategy of using digital forms of communication was not accessible to everyone in the community, giving rise to new disparities within the community. Notably, certain members like children, the elderly, and those with limited means were disproportionately excluded due to a lack of access to mobile phones.

Locally, Lydiatians also organized themselves to continue to work in the tobacco grading shade by taking shifts of small groups of people at a time to observe COVID-19 regulations. Lydiatians also made use of the ‘architecture of invisibility’ (Zack & Govender, 2019), a community barricade, to hide group activities in the community from the public and continue their everyday associational lives even during COVID-19 (Figure 7).



Figure 7: The ‘architecture of invisibility’ at Lydiate - a community barricade made of thatch and hiding community activities from the public. Source: Fieldwork

³⁰ Phone interview with Mr. Musevenzi, 12 October, 2021.

³¹ Interview with Sabhuku Matambo at Lydiate Farm, 03 September 2021.

The thatched barricade, commonly referred to as ‘*mupanda*’, surrounds the whole community not only to protect the migrants from bad weather elements but, more importantly, to make the community invisible from external threats and dispossession of their collective space. Transect walks in the community revealed that some Lydiatians continued to gather in their numbers at events like funerals, taking advantage of the community’s ‘architecture of invisibility.’ One of the community leaders Mrs. Zvinyenye, explained why this was so.

When it comes to funerals, it is hard for community members not to attend the funeral. We all attend the funeral, regardless of the current COVID-19 gathering restrictions. Because of the community barrier, it is hard for law enforcement agents to notice our activities in the community. Thus, a funeral gathering can happen within this community without anyone outside noticing anything.³²

The responses of migrants in Lydiate to the disruptive forces of the COVID-19 pandemic, uncovered a profound testament to the resilience and adaptability of human sociality and belonging. The challenges imposed by lockdowns and restrictions were met with nimble adjustments that emphasized the enduring importance of associational life. Whether through the creative use of digital platforms, the transformation of religious practices, or the discreet continuation of communal gatherings, Lydiatians found innovative ways to maintain their social bonds and collective identity. These nimble forms of sociality and belonging reflect the human capacity to adapt and thrive even in the face of adversity. The concept of associational life and belonging takes on new dimensions in this context, highlighting its pivotal role as a source of support, identity, and resilience during times of crisis. This study demonstrates the enduring strength of human connections and the remarkable adaptability of communities in the face of unprecedented challenges, offering valuable insights for understanding the dynamics of sociality and belonging in an ever-changing world.

Beyond understanding the new forms of belonging among migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, a key question I asked myself during the study was how effective are these new forms of belonging. I found these new forms of belonging effective because migrants innovatively managed to continue with life in the community through them. For example, the use of mobile phones and social media meant that migrants managed to remain socially connected to each other even though they were not meeting physically. Community WhatsApp groups meant that community leaders communicated important community matters instantly, even without physically meeting the people. One of the community leaders Mr. Bhinya, supported this, saying:

Now, people no longer have to be physically gathered in one place to be told important information. As leaders, we now send important information via WhatsApp group, and people will instantly see the communication from wherever they are.³³

Perhaps this could be a new form of engagement that the community will adopt even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic times. However, not everyone is privileged to own a mobile phone, and even more, affording internet data for a connection could be difficult for some migrants. But the fact remains the same: social media has removed communication barriers, created decentralized communication channels, and opened the door for all to have a voice and participate in matters that

³² Interview with Mrs. Zvinyenye at Lydiate Farm.

³³ Interview with community leader Bhinya at Lydiate Farm, 21 October 2021.

affect them in the community, even in times of pandemics. Nonetheless, as one elderly leader Mrs. Zvinyenye grieved, the increased use of social media during COVID-19 turned people into one of the most antisocial generations.³⁴ The use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic has robbed humanity of the personal-physical communication, replacing the human fellowship and physical and emotional support they once had with the artificial virtual connection.

Other Lydiatians also reported that WhatsApp groups had become a haven for spreading fake news, creating panic and despondency in the community now referred to as the COVID-19 infodemic (WHO, 2020).

While some new forms of associations among migrants, like the use of social media, proved to be effective and innovative, other measures like conducting churches in the bush, drinking in the community and holding funerals behind the closed community, proved to be risky and in contradiction with the law. While the risky and illegal measures had the potential to perpetuate the ‘othering’ of the migrants, it is important to highlight that, these are measures of last resort because they would have run out of normal options to rescue themselves.

8 Theoretical underpinnings: Unpacking ‘nimble sociality and belonging’ among migrants on the margins

The empirical findings presented in this study provide rich insights into the practical manifestations of nimble sociality and belonging among migrants in the Lydiate informal settlement. Reflecting on the ways in which migrants adapt and innovate in response to challenges, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of migrant coping strategies within the broader theoretical framework of coping and agency. The introduction of the novel concept of ‘nimble sociality and belonging’ expands the discourse on migrant resilience and adaptation, highlighting the dynamic and context-specific nature of coping mechanisms in the face of crisis.

The concept of “nimble/agile adjustments to associational life and belonging” introduced in this study represents a new understanding of migrant coping strategies within the context of crises/catastrophes like the COVID-19 pandemic. This concept reveals migrants’ ability to adapt swiftly and creatively to disruptions in their social connections, thereby highlighting the agency and resilience inherent in their coping mechanisms. Drawing from Lazarus’s (1993) framework of coping strategies, which categorizes coping mechanisms into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping, the concept of nimble sociality and belonging transcends these traditional classifications. While problem-focused coping involves addressing stressors directly, emotion-focused coping aims to manage the emotional distress associated with stressors, and avoidance coping entails avoiding or distancing oneself from stressors altogether. The nimble adjustments observed among migrants in response to pandemic-induced restrictions creatively encompass elements of all three coping strategies, but they also go beyond them.

For instance, the migrants in the Lydiate informal settlement demonstrated problem-focused coping by innovatively restructuring their associational life to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the

³⁴ Interview with Mrs Gambiza at Lydiate Farm 5 October, 2021.

COVID-19 lockdowns. This included organizing covert religious ceremonies and leveraging social media for virtual gatherings, thereby directly addressing the challenges posed by the loss of physical social connections. Additionally, these adjustments also served as emotion-focused coping mechanisms, providing emotional solace and support in the face of isolation and uncertainty. By maintaining their social ties through creative means, migrants were able to mitigate feelings of loneliness and alienation, thus managing the emotional distress associated with the pandemic's impact on their social networks.

Moreover, the concept of nimble sociality and belonging extends beyond traditional coping strategies by emphasizing migrants' agency and resilience in actively shaping their social environments. Unlike avoidance coping, which may involve passive disengagement from stressors, the nimble adjustments observed among migrants reflect a proactive approach to maintaining social connections and forging a sense of belonging. By redefining social norms and adopting innovative means of interaction, migrants demonstrated agency in navigating the constraints imposed by the pandemic, thereby empowering themselves to retain a sense of community and identity amidst adversity.

In examining the concept of "nimble sociality and belonging" within the framework of migrant coping strategies, it becomes apparent that this approach involves belonging or association as collective strategies or binding strategies of individuals to collectives. Unlike the traditional characterization of migrant coping mechanisms, 'nimble sociality and belonging' encompass not only individual-level adaptations but also collective endeavors that foster resilience and solidarity within the community. Moreover, despite its innovative nature, 'nimble sociality and belonging' still encompass traditional coping strategies, albeit in a collective and agile form.

Thus, a distinctive feature of 'nimble sociality and belonging' is its collective nature, wherein individuals come together to navigate challenges and forge connections that transcend individual boundaries. For instance, within the Lydiate informal settlement, migrants demonstrated problem-solving in a collective manner. They engaged in activities such as sharing information, pooling resources, and offering mutual assistance, thereby addressing common challenges collectively. This collaborative problem-solving reflects a communal approach to coping, wherein individuals collectively mobilize their resources and expertise to find solutions that benefit the entire community.

Furthermore, nimble sociality and belonging involve emotional coping strategies enacted collectively within the community. Beyond individual-level emotional support, these communities provide a space for communal emotional support, caretaking, and engagement in cultural practices that foster a sense of belonging and comfort. Through rituals, prayers, and shared experiences, religious organizations offer a collective outlet for processing emotions and finding solace amidst adversity, thereby strengthening social bonds and resilience within the community.

Additionally, nimble sociality and belonging encompass collective forms of avoidance coping, where community members resist hegemonic norms, laws, or policing practices that threaten their well-being. In Lydiate, this resistance took the form of illegal or informal strategies aimed at circumventing oppressive structures or asserting communal autonomy. For example, migrants collectively engaged in activities such as organizing covert religious ceremonies or community

events in defiance of restrictive regulations, thereby reclaiming agency and preserving cultural practices within the collective space of their religious communities.

In summary, nimble sociality and belonging represent a dynamic and adaptive approach to coping that involves collective problem-solving, emotional support, and resistance within migrant communities. By transcending traditional categorizations of coping mechanisms and emphasizing the collective and agile nature of coping, this concept provides valuable insights into how migrants navigate challenges and maintain resilience in the face of adversity. Moreover, it highlights the importance of community and collective agency in shaping individuals' responses to adversity and highlights the need for holistic approaches to supporting migrant well-being and integration in host societies.

9 Conclusion

This study explored the complex dynamics of migrants' associational life on the margins during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed the profound impact of pandemic-induced restrictions on migrants, demonstrating the critical role that associational life plays in belonging and resilience among migrants. As the pandemic unfolded, mandatory lockdowns imposed a halt on human mobility, disrupting the very fabric of migrants' social connections that were pivotal to their sense of community and identity. The repercussions of the pandemic were far-reaching for migrants residing in Lydiate informal settlement. The restrictions not only severed crucial lifelines to economic survival, such as the informal sector bans and loss of employment, but also stripped away vital religious gatherings that provided spiritual solace and a support network. The loss of immediate and fictive associations further exacerbated the challenges faced by migrants, robbing them of forms of social capital that traditionally cushioned them in times of need.

The migrant variable among the Lydiate community intensified their exposure to the impacts of the pandemic compared to other informal settlement dwellers. Nevertheless, this study revealed a remarkable facet of human resilience—the ability to adapt in the face of adversity. Despite the constraints, migrants exhibited remarkable agility in restructuring their associational life, ingeniously forging new forms of connections and belonging. The lithe adoption of 'nimble forms of sociality and belonging' emerged, signifying the resourcefulness with which migrants navigated the restrictions, creating covert religious ceremonies, leveraging social media for virtual gatherings, and redefining social norms for communal consumption. However, these nimble adaptations were not without their challenges. While initiatives like online community platforms proved effective and innovative, acts of civil disobedience inadvertently strained relations with authorities and host communities, intensifying migrants' marginalization. This reveals the complex interplay between survival strategies and sociopolitical dynamics in such contexts.

The conclusions drawn from this study on 'nimble forms of sociality and belonging' among migrants on the margins, resonate with existing research on the resilience of migrants in Africa's emerging urban spaces (for example Bhanye, 2023a; Landau and Freemantle, 2012; Nyamwanza and Dzingirai, 2020; Mushonga and Dzingirai, 2022). This study agrees with these scholars that, migrant communities consistently demonstrate their capacity to creatively respond to threats and adversities, forging innovative pathways to survival and social interaction.

The study makes a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on migrant coping strategies, particularly within the context of global pandemics. While existing research has shed light on migrants' resilience and adaptability in the face of various challenges, this paper extends the discourse by examining a distinct facet of migrant coping strategies—namely, the adaptive measures employed in response to bans on associational life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The categorization of coping strategies into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping has been widely acknowledged in the literature. However, this study demonstrates that migrants' coping strategies are not always simplistically confined to these categories alone. The innovative concept of “nimble forms of sociality and belonging” emerges from the analysis of this paper, illustrating the dynamic and resourceful ways migrants navigate the constraints imposed by pandemic-induced restrictions. This concept highlights an agile response encompassing the restructuring of associational life through both digital and physical means, underlining migrants' agency in adapting to adverse conditions. A distinctive feature of ‘nimble sociality and belonging’ from traditional migrant coping strategies (problem focused, emotion focused, avoidance focused) is its convivial and collective nature in fostering resilience and solidarity to navigate challenges within the community.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the discourse on informal settlements and diaspora communities, shedding light on the complex dynamics of their associational life and social networks. It is through these networks that migrants forge belonging, resilience, and survival strategies. The study demonstrates the centrality of associational life in migrants' well-being and identity, further emphasizing the necessity for policymakers to consider the implications of restricting these networks during crises. Importantly, this study also offers a critical exploration of the often-overlooked consequences of bans on associational life. While digital platforms and social media have been recognized as tools for maintaining connections, this study demonstrates the complex interplay between these virtual networks and physical community ties. This dual perspective enhances our understanding of how migrants negotiate social isolation while remaining engaged with their communities, thereby enriching the literature on both digital migration and coping strategies.

As the world grapples with the challenges posed by global health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper provides timely insights for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners. The ‘nimble forms of sociality and belonging’ framework offers an innovative lens through which to examine the strategies migrants employ in times of crisis. This paper thus contributes to an expanded understanding of migrants' agency, adaptability, and the importance of fostering inclusive and supportive environments for those residing in marginal spaces like informal settlements.

Beyond the novel findings I summarized as ‘nimble sociality and belonging’ in Africa's emerging urban, what was also innovative about this study is the stress on conviviality, marrying social interactions with research participants, and leveraging on digital ethnography during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, ethnographic inquiry has been characterized by the observer's immersion within the community of interest, often adopting a stance of detached observation (Brink, 2013). However, in embracing conviviality, this research blurred the boundaries between researcher and participant, privileging collaborative engagement and mutual exchange. By actively participating in the social life of Lydiat settlement, I cultivated a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of its inhabitants, transcending the role of a mere observer. This methodological stance enabled me to

forge genuine connections with research participants, fostering a sense of trust and openness that enriched the data collection process.

Furthermore, the integration of digital ethnography emerged as a pivotal methodological innovation in navigating the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. With restrictions on physical mobility and face-to-face interactions, the reliance on digital platforms became indispensable for maintaining connection and conducting research remotely. Drawing upon digital tools such as WhatsApp and instant messaging, I was able to sustain ongoing dialogue with participants, facilitating the exchange of insights and observations despite geographical distance. However, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent challenges and limitations associated with virtual methods, including issues of digital access, privacy concerns, and the potential for digital divide exacerbation within marginalized communities. Thus, while digital ethnography offered unprecedented opportunities for remote engagement, it also necessitated a reconfiguration of methodological approaches and heightened awareness of the mediated nature of interactions. The shift to virtual platforms introduced new dynamics into the research process, influencing the nature of participant engagement and the interpretation of data. As such, it is essential to critically reflect on the implications of these methodological choices and their implications for the broader field of ethnographic inquiry.

Given the complexity of fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic, I recommend that future researchers also utilize digital ethnographic methodologies in studying sociality in Africa's emerging urban; particularly for the agile methodology's ability to deal with the complexities of the 'global', the 'local' and the 'trans-local' nature of migrants. Moving forward, it is imperative to continue interrogating the intersections of technology, methodology, and social life, ensuring that ethnographic inquiry remains responsive to the evolving realities of our interconnected world.

In terms of policy implications, this study highlights the need for governments to reconsider the consequences of imposing bans on associational life as a crisis/ pandemic containment measure, particularly for vulnerable migrants residing in informal settlements. While such measures may be necessary for public health reasons, policymakers should ensure that they are accompanied by robust social safety nets and cushioning allowances to sustain the livelihoods and well-being of marginalized communities. By acknowledging the vital role of associational life in migrants' resilience and survival strategies, policymakers can work towards fostering inclusive and supportive environments that protect the rights and dignity of all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status or migratory status.

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