

NETWORKS, RELATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL SOCIAL CAPITAL: IN THE ASSOCIATION OF ARTISANS IN THE ECUADORIAN ANDES

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Abstract: This study explores the role of social capital within the Association of Artisans of La Victoria, located in Ecuador, with the aim of analyzing its relational and structural dimensions. Social capital is defined as the network of relationships and connections that facilitate cooperation among community members and is essential for economic and social development. In the case of the Association of Artisans of La Victoria, the study seeks to assess how both internal (bonding) and external (bridging) networks influence the competitiveness and sustainability of artisans in a globalized context. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative research. The first phase involved participatory action research, where interviews were conducted with members of the association, particularly with the president, to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In the second phase, a quantitative assessment of social capital was carried out using a self-assessment tool designed to measure the structural and relational dimensions of social capital, specifically bonding and bridging relationships. Aspects such as trust, cooperation, participation, and commitment among the association's members, as well as access to external networks and connectivity with public and private institutions, were analyzed. The results obtained indicate that bonding social capital, based on internal trust and cooperation among members, is well-developed. However, bridging social capital, which is crucial for accessing external markets and securing institutional support, remains underdeveloped. External relationships with other associations and organizations are limited, preventing the association from expanding its reach in broader, global markets. Additionally, demographic factors such as gender, age, and education play a significant role in shaping social capital. In particular, women are noted for their contributions to strengthening internal networks, while age and education affect participation in external relations. The study concludes that, to improve the competitiveness and sustainability of the Association of Artisans of La Victoria, it is crucial to strengthen external networks by promoting cooperation with public and private institutions and encouraging the use of technologies such as digital marketing. The lack of marketing strategies and limited engagement with external actors hinder the growth and commercialization of artisan products.

Keywords: social capital, structural dimension, relational dimension, craft activity, craft tourism

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INTRODUCTION

In Latin American countries, there has been a trend in recent years of forming associations as a strategy to strengthen territories' economic dimension of sustainable development, as part of the so-called social and solidarity economy, social economy, or third-sector economy (Lee, 2020; Piani & Curiazi, 2024). In this sustainable development of territories, sustainability does not only imply the strengthening of economic elements, but it is a multidimensional process, based on four pillars: competitiveness or the economic dimension, sustainability itself or the environmental dimension, equity conceived as access to opportunities and expansion of human freedoms (Sen, 2000) or socio-cultural dimension, and the governance pillar or political-institutional dimension. In this way, the sustainable development of the territory depends on the interrelation between four dimensions that in many cases are opposed and generate tensions (Hernández-Medina, 2025). In the search to minimize these tensions, some countries have opted for social production enterprises through the Solidarity Economy or third sector, given that they make it possible to reduce inequalities, generate spaces for innovation and economic resilience (Kutsenko et al., 2021; Ibourek & Raoui, 2022; Sadykov & Akhmetov, 2022).

Unlike for-profit companies, social or solidarity economy organizations seek the common good of their members and, as stated by Manríquez et al. (2017:16), they constitute 'a set of practices that are based on factors such as: cooperation, reciprocity, ethics, where the well-being of populations and the planet is given primacy over accumulation and unequal development'. Experiences in Latin America on organizations with this solidarity approach, developed from an objective of local development and use of endogenous resources, include Bolivia, Costa Rica with agricultural cooperatives, Mexico

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with savings and credit cooperatives, Venezuela with the link between gender and cooperativism as a mechanism to achieve economic empowerment through the creation of financial institutions dedicated to providing financial products to women. In addition, rural extension services are identified in Brazil, service cooperatives in Canada and, in Ecuador, the promotion of the popular and solidarity economy, both in the financial and non-financial sectors (Annoni et al., 2021; Menezes, 2021; Vieta & Heras, 2022; Hernández & Gurría, 2024). The most notable advances, at least in terms of the regulatory framework, have been seen in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela, where the maximum objective of good living and collective well-being, framed in the preservation of the environment as heritage, is enshrined in their constitutions. In spite of this, these social and solidarity economy organizations must achieve sustainability, not economic but socio-economic sustainability, which allows them to cover costs with the stable sale of their products, obtain public support through subsidies, maintain working capacities and networks, consolidate the association and achieve the well-being of their members, all in an environment in which they must compete in the market under unequal conditions with the rest of the capital-based companies. In the context of sustainable development and globalization, the solidarity and social economy has established itself as a key strategy for the preservation of ancestral knowledge, local culture and sustainable tourism. Unlike conventional economic models, this alternative promotes community participation, respect for natural resources and the self-management of indigenous peoples. The transmission of traditional knowledge is an intergenerational process that faces threats due to the expansion of extractives economies and cultural homogenization, which is why the solidarity economy, through cooperatives, associations and community networks, makes it possible to strengthen this knowledge by ensuring that its practice and teaching are economically sustainable. An example of this is the cooperatives of artisans in Latin America, where weaving, ceramics and metalworking techniques have been protected thanks to fair trade and ethical production systems (Egorov et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2023).

The strengthening of cultural identity is another central axis, in which communities that adopt solidarity economy models manage to resist the loss of their intangible heritage, promoting festivals, fairs and spaces for cultural dissemination. This self-management not only protects cultural heritage but also fosters social cohesion and the self-determination of peoples (Ariffin et al., 2023; Arinta et al., 2023; Duxbury et al., 2023).

Tourism based on the solidarity economy is presented as an alternative to mass tourism, which, in many cases, generates displacement of local communities and exploitation of their resources without direct benefits for the inhabitants (Pebrianto et al., 2024; Ruiz-Palacios et al., 2024). In contrast, community-based tourism allows local populations to manage their own tourism resources, offering authentic and sustainable experiences; some successful experiences of this model include tourist routes managed by indigenous communities in the Andes and the Amazon, where visitors participate in traditional activities such as pottery making, agro-ecological cultivation and the narration of ancestral myths. This approach not only boosts the local economy but also educates tourists about the importance of cultural and ecological conservation (Lan et al., 2021; Forero & Saavedra, 2022; Arinta et al., 2023; Duxbury et al., 2023).

In spite of the protagonist role that social production organizations play in the development and preservation of resources, the high rate of free-riding is surprising (Hernández & Gurría, 2024), particularly in countries such as Ecuador, where more than 50% of the population has been free-riding since its implementation in 2010. The factors are multiple, ranging from lack of funding, marketing channels, lack of institutional support and even social disarticulation, lack of trust and commitment of its members and the little interrelation with the environment, the community and strategic actors.

Strategies to improve their performance are different, one of them being the strengthening of networks, relationships, trust of their members, integration and cooperation. Specifically, Albuquerque (2004: 159) establishes that the socio-cultural dimension "together with the economic relations and production techniques are essential for the local economic development". Trigilia (2001: 439) proposes in this sense that social capital in the framework of local development should be considered as "an instrument to increase specialized knowledge, infrastructures, services and forms of integration between firms, thereby strengthening competitiveness". The literature on social capital is extremely broad, which makes it difficult to establish a consensus on its definition. If we start from the different visions of the social sciences, sociology proposes that social capital should be considered as resources associated with participation in a network, either by considering individual appropriation (Coleman, 1990) or collective appropriation as a public good (Bourdieu, 1985). From the political perspective, Putnam (1993) established that it is the set of norms, social organization, and trust, which enable and enhance collective action. Meanwhile, the economic position approaches the analysis from a neoclassical perspective with a microeconomic approach, in which social capital is an additional capital to physical, natural, or human capital that generates economic growth; and there is the perspective based on terms of economic development (Knack & Keefer, 1997; Sabatini, 2005) at macro level and framed in the territory.

Social capital could be classified into at least three groups linked to the social structure perspective (dimensions of social capital), the network perspective or functional vision, and the level perspective, which largely determines the dimensions, approaches and functions proposed in literature. From the perspective of social structure, Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) propose three dimensions for their study: the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions. The first is linked to connections between actors, the second is to the resources that are generated from that relation, for instance friendship, confidence, reciprocity, motivation, solidarity, cooperation, and influence on others' behavior, and the third is the codes and languages for communication that are linked to intellectual capital.

In the perspective of levels, individual, meso or macro-collective, formal, and informal groupings, the community and even the country would be considered, which recalls the contradictory position of some authors as to whether social capital is a public good with positive and negative externalities, or a private good. From a network-based perspective, as proposed by Atria (2003), social capital is based on a group's resources and networks, which can be horizontal, including those

generated within the network (bonding) or with other networks (bridging), and vertical, including other hierarchical levels (linking). Thus, the network is a set of members that are connected through relationships. These networks can be business networks in which they are linked to improving performance based on specific objectives related to the value chain; social networks based on communication or intangible benefits (social capital); and physical networks associated with physical capital, infrastructure, or geographic characteristics. Specifically, the social network can be unstructured or structured, which is indicated in structural social capital within the social structure perspective, as the configuration is based on the cohesion or density of relationships, diversity, or weak links. In the case of unstructured networks, they are those that do not have organization and could be considered as micro or individual social capital (level perspective), they meet sporadically or without any leadership and usually remain for an abbreviated time.

These structured networks can be horizontal or vertical and bring about collective or meso social capital (Lin, 2008). In the first case, if they are related to business activity, they would be connecting organizations that carry out the same activity within the production chain or perform similar work, while in the second case they link actors at different levels of the chain, so it is suggested that vertical networks generate a greater economic impact than horizontal ones (Casson & Giusta, 2007). There are therefore determinants or causal factors of social capital that condition the structural elements and the positive or negative consequences. The structural elements are associated with ties, the hierarchy of relationships (vertical or horizontal), access to membership or participation in the network, the type of structural and cognitive social capital, and binding or bridging the structure of the network, temporal and spatial characteristics, and group alignment.

In addition, some authors who have addressed the problem of the factors that influence social capital at each level, individual, meso or macro, mention that in the case of the individual, variables associated with educational level, income level, employment status, age, gender, and marital status should be taken into account (Kaasa & Parts, 2008; Asadullah, 2017; Kaasa, 2019). Empirical evidence seems to show that the effects of these variables are not always equal; rather, they will depend on the conceptualization of social capital or the measurement perspective, and on the social fabric in which the analysis is made. An example is that for Kaasa (2019), informal relationships are influenced by age, as well as participation in organizations (Katungi et al., 2007), with the youngest showing better results, while citizens' participation improves as educational level increases. Regarding trust, Alesina & La Ferrara (2002) identify that lower incomes and educational levels reduce trust, as does belonging to vulnerable groups, such as women.

These networks and relationships that constitute social capital are a determining factor in the performance of solidarity economy organizations, as higher levels of trust, cooperation and participation in networks contribute to the sustainability of these associations (Marconatto et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2020; Salinas & Sastre-Merino, 2021; Egorov et al., 2022; Prayitno et al., 2023; Awad et al., 2024). Considering the role of these organizations in the preservation of ancestral knowledge, culture and community tourism, this research analyses the Association of Artisans of La Victoria, Cotopaxi, an organization responsible for maintaining the craft tradition of the territory and promoting tourism in the area; this pottery craft technique was recognized as an intangible heritage of Ecuador in 2019. The study, through participatory action research, initially addresses the analysis of the situation of the association in productive terms through interviews and brainstorming in plenary with its members and, secondly, the evaluation of the levels of social capital and the identification of its determinants. The assessment of social capital is based on the network perspective, which seeks to characterize bridging relationships, in which the network is the structural element of social capital, and the multidimensional or social structure perspective, considering the structural dimension and the relational dimension. While the identification of factors that could influence social capital (bonding and bridging) considers variables associated with the demographic components of age, marital status, gender, educational level, seniority in the network and position held. In the case of Ecuador, studies on social capital at any level are scarce. This is why this research attempts to analyze the level of social capital of the Association of Artisans of the parish of La Victoria, in the canton of Pujilí in the province of Cotopaxi, Ecuador, as a third sector that preserves the intangible heritage of the area associated with the activity of pottery craftsmanship.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Association of Artisans of La Victoria's situation analysis, as well as of its members, was conducted in two phases, the first through interviews with the president of the Association, the second with the discussion of the past, current and future perspectives of the organization in the members' assembly. The last phase consisted of a survey to assess the level of social capital (Figure 1). In order to carry out the first and second phases, a qualitative study was designed with regard to the social theme; it was an intervention based on the methodology of Participatory Action Research (PAR), and therefore two approaches are intended; firstly, a socio-political one that implies the empowerment and consequently the greater participation of the artisans in the governance processes and a socio-cultural approach affirming the identity and the image, which can be translated into a process of structuring a collective brand.

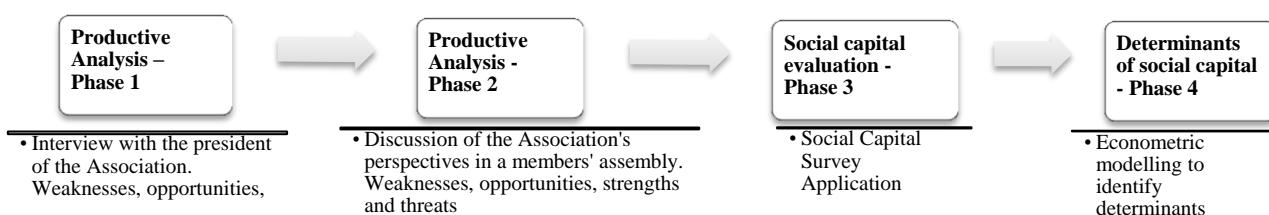


Figure 1. Methodology steps

Initially, qualitative techniques were used to obtain the first results of the work and to guide the subsequent phases. The techniques specifically used in these phases were: i) an interview with the president of the Association, which made it possible to identify, at least in broad terms, a series of opportunities, threats, weaknesses and strengths, both of the association and of the artisan activity as a whole; ii) at the social level, it was decided to use a brainstorming technique, whose systematic approach was as follows: 'Past, present and future of the Association of Artisans of La Victoria, positive and negative aspects'. For this joint work session, the participants were divided into two heterogeneous groups separated spatially; a group reflection was proposed. One group thought positively, and the other group thought negatively. 100 members of the Association of Artisans of La Victoria took part in the session, which lasted 1 hour. After a 45-minute reflection, the ideas were put together on a flipchart. These ideas were then submitted to the two groups, which became one. The ideas generated represented the opinion of the group. The first analysis conducted in this work reflects the so-called EMIC level (description in meaningful terms) of the participants' considerations.

The work developed with the Association in this phase was based on a participatory diagnosis, due to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the area, associated with the need to promote craft activities, specifically pottery. This proposal consolidates the operation focused on marketing, product mix, evaluation of production and raw materials.

The work session for this participatory diagnosis was conducted with the aim of identifying the existing weaknesses and strengths of the members of the Association with a view to generating proposals in three basic areas, to subsequently conduct a socio-economic and productive diagnosis through an instrument, identifying opportunities for improvement.

In the last phase, to respond to the research objective, the short instrument proposed by Mujika et al. (2010) in the self-assessment model of social capital in organizations was used, given that the purpose is to analyze the social capital of the Association of Artisans of La Victoria from the perspective of social structure, considering the structural dimension (quantity of relationships) and the relational dimension (quality of relationships), and from the network perspective by evaluating the structural and relational component both at the level of bonding and bridging relationships.

The instrument was made up of five sections, the first of which consisted of five general questions associated with gender, training, age, seniority in the organization, and whether a person is simply a member or holds a position within it, allowing us to identify the possible factors that contribute to explaining social capital.

The second section was linked to the relational dimension, both at the level of bonding and bridging relationships. It consisted of 39 approaches grouped into 6 components: information and communication, level of trust, cooperation, participation, commitment and relationship with the environment, which was complemented by a third section that directly assessed the quality of relationships through 7 approaches. The fourth and fifth sections were related to the structure of relationships, in the sense that they inquired about the number of informal linking and bridging relationships (7 approaches) and participation in other formal organizations (2 approaches). Each of the statements in the second section considered a Likert-type response scale, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 represents strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. With respect to the third section on quality, a score of 1 indicated extremely low quality, 2 means fairly low, 3 is neither high nor low, 4 is fairly high, and 5 is extremely high. The fourth and fifth sections, which asked about the number of relationships and organizations, use a different scale: 1 for none, 2 for less than two, 3 for between three and five, 4 for between six and ten and 5 for more than ten.

Independent random sampling without replacement was used to apply the instrument. Only association members located in the same territory were considered, since the association is composed of members from different geographical areas, in some cases distant -in different cantons or provinces- and who have joined only to obtain benefits linked to fairs for marketing purposes. In addition, the analysis included the examination of the close relationships, whether bonding or bridging relationships that are generated in the same territory, i.e., La Victoria parish.

The Association of Artisans of La Victoria has 129 members (the largest and oldest in the area), of which only 51 live in the parish. The rest, as explained, belong to other more distant areas, so the sample, estimated to be 95% confidence and 5% error, was 45 members, to whom the instrument was applied.

With the information available in the database provided by the president of the association, which included each of the members, their addresses and contact telephone numbers, an appointment was made with the 45 members (of the 51 who live in the area) so that the interviewer could visit each of the members in their homes. To analyze the results, they were statistically validated using Cronbach's Alpha test, in which the values obtained to ensure internal consistency should be as close as possible to unity. First, the results were analyzed by describing the typical characteristics of the sample. Secondly, the levels of social capital were evaluated considering the relational dimension with each of its components and the structural dimension, as well as the assessment of bonding and bridging in each of these dimensions.

To identify the variables affecting the measurement of social capital, the analysis was complemented with an estimation of a multiple linear regression model in accordance with Kaasa & Parts, 2008; Asadullah, 2017; Kaasa, 2019, as follows:

$$SC = \beta_0 + \beta_1 age + \beta_2 gender + \beta_3 education + \beta_4 charge + \beta_5 antiquity \quad (1)$$

Where *SC* represents the level of social capital, *age* is the age of each member of the association, *gender* represents whether the partner is male or female, *education* is the level of education, *charge* represents whether or not they hold an office and *antiquity* is the length of time they have been involved in the association. Moreover, an estimate was made for internal and external relations, using the same explanatory variables. To corroborate the validity of the estimation based on cross-sectional data, so that the estimators are efficient, unbiased, and of minimum variance, tests of homoscedasticity of variance of the error term were applied through the Breusch and Pagan test, the Ramsey test for omitted variables, and the possible relationship of linear dependence between the explanatory variables through the variance inflation factor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Productive analysis: phases 1 and 2

In the first phase, a diagnosis was conducted through interviews with the president of the Association, which made it possible to identify, at least in broad terms, a series of opportunities, threats, weaknesses and strengths, both of the association and of the artisanal activity. Issues such as the community, products, suppliers, the Association and the sales or income generated by this activity were addressed, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Diagnosis based on interviews (Source: own elaboration based on data collected in phase 1 and 2)

Community/associative aspects	Productive and management processes	Market/Competition
<p>Seventy percent of the population is engaged in handicrafts and 30 per cent in agriculture. Migration to other cities is high in search of employment.</p> <p>Each artisan works from his or her home. The strategy of working together has not borne fruit, as each artisan sees the others as competitors and there is little collaboration.</p> <p>The handicraft sector could be boosted through the development of tourism projects, but there are no resources or willingness on the part of local governments.</p>	<p>The products produced are linked to utilitarian ceramics, "piñatas," decorative ceramics (such as flower arrangement bases and vases), as well as tiles.</p> <p>There is only one supplier of clay (raw material). Local clay is not used because of its low quality.</p> <p>Purchases of raw materials are made individually and are not grouped or associated for this purpose, they do not have the capacity to negotiate with the suppliers, they impose the prices because they are the only ones who are able to offer them.</p>	<p>The area is not only home to products made by local artisans, but also to products from Colombia and Peru, whose prices are lower than local products. Tourists and buyers buy them in the belief that they are local products. For roof tiles, the main competitor is the Cuenca tile, which is of better quality, and its price is four times higher, due to its better quality and resistance.</p> <p>There are no collection centres, so sales are made individually.</p>

Additionally, through the interview with the president of the Association, a matrix of weaknesses and strengths, threats and opportunities was structured. The strengths are based on the techniques for handling clay that have been passed down from generation to generation and have allowed the preservation of ancestral knowledge, and in recent years the use of lead in the production of handicrafts has been eliminated, which guarantees the use of the products without side effects for the local population and consumers.

Weaknesses are mainly linked to the fact that, although lead has been eliminated from the products, there has been no improvement in the handicraft process to improve the quality as a whole, which is different among the artisans; furthermore, they depend on a single supplier located in Pujilí, because the quality of the local clay is very poor.

In addition, another important weakness is the absence of promotional strategies to position the product and make it known at the national level, which could even lead to sales opportunities at the international level. In terms of threats, the main one is related to competition from imported products, with lower prices, which are offered as local products, confusing consumers; in addition to this competition, there is also competition from local artisans themselves, who, out of necessity, lower their prices, often despite incurring losses. But there are also opportunities linked to the certification as intangible cultural heritage of Ecuador, which places the area as part of the country's tourist attraction, with a recognized *Finados* Fair, as well as the possibility of designing a tourist route that enhances the sites of interest in the area.

The second phase was based on a participatory diagnosis, due to the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the area, associated with the need to promote handicraft activities, specifically pottery. This proposal consolidates the operation worked on the fundamental axes of marketing, product mix, evaluation of production and raw materials.

The work session for this participatory diagnosis was carried out with the aim of identifying the existing weaknesses and strengths of the members of the Association, with a view to generating proposals in three basic areas, to subsequently carry out a socio-economic and productive diagnosis through an instrument, identifying opportunities for improvement.

Although negative aspects have been identified in the past, some have been solved, the use of lead in the production of handicrafts, and the lack of organization, since at least the Association has strengthened participation in the *Finados* Fair, which is the main source of income. The positive aspects reflect better economic conditions, linked to greater marketing possibilities, tourism and less competition, as well as an increase in the sale of products in other areas.

The main positive aspects of the present situation are linked to the willingness to take on innovative technologies, procedures, products and even the strengthening of existing capacities, to generate more attractive products that can access new markets. In terms of this, knowledge of consumers and competition is identified as a need, as well as access to long-term credits with preferential rates that allow for the introduction of the required improvements.

The vision of the future does not change significantly in relation to the current situation; there is a desire to preserve the cultural identity, and the pottery tradition supported by the generations of parents and grandparents, which has been reinforced with the certification as intangible heritage of Ecuador. In addition, the presence of the Association and the *Finados* Fair as a crucial point in the commercialization process are reiterated as positive aspects. The negative aspects that can be identified in the future are related to the risks of losing ancestral knowledge, techniques and the cultural heritage of the area over time, as many young people, not seeing that the activity is profitable, choose to migrate to other areas in search of employment. There is also evidence of the need to improve, increase production and broaden access to markets, but to do so they must improve the quality of the product and innovate in other areas. Once the instrument was applied, its internal consistency was first validated through Cronbach's Alpha, obtaining a value of 0.8795.

Since this is close to 1, it indicates the statistical consistency of the responses. After determining the validity of the instrument, the overall results show that most of the members (87.80%) do not hold managerial positions in the

association, 53.65% are women, more than half have only basic education (65.85%), while 17.07% have studied at university or another higher education institution. With respect to the age of the members, 73.17% are over 45 years old while only 12.19% are under 30 years old. This shows that pottery is an activity conducted by middle-aged and older people. Regarding length of time in the association, the majority has been a member for at least 5 years (82.29%), and specifically, 29.26% have been part of it for more than 20 years (although informally, as the association was registered in 2008). Only a few have worked in the association for less than one year (2.43%).

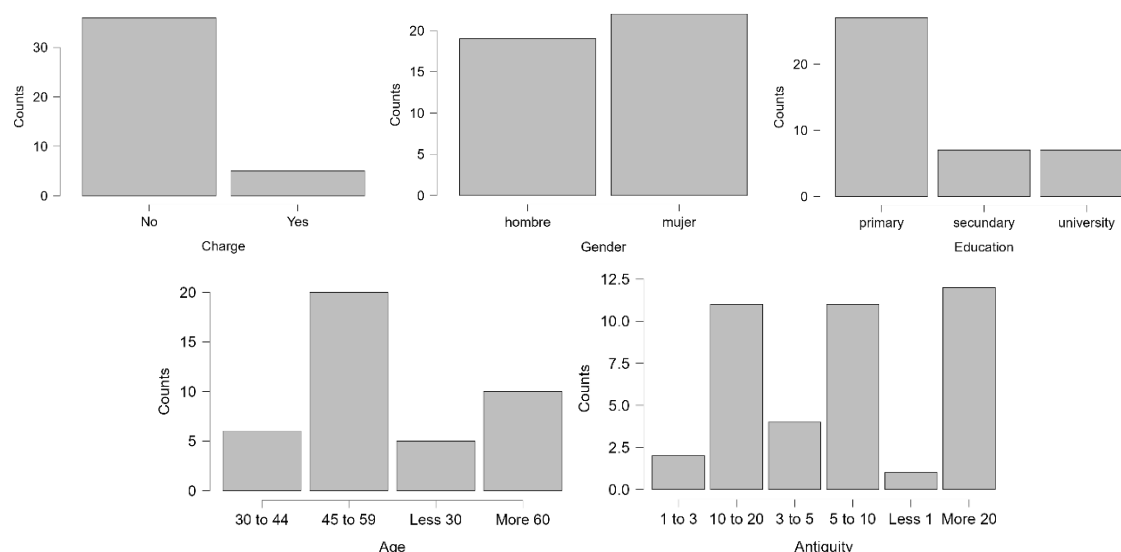


Figure 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of members (Source: own elaboration based on social capital survey)

Social capital evaluation - Phase 3

When analyzing the results linked to the perspectives of social capital addressed in this study, the relational dimension of the social structure perspective was taken as the starting point. The evaluation of the quality of horizontal relationships (both bonding and bridging), as well as the components considered, associated with information and communication, trust, cooperation, participation, commitment, and linkage with the environment, show results that are between 3 and 4 points (with the maximum being 5 points and the minimum 1), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Ratings of the components of the relational dimension (social structure perspective) for horizontal, bonding, and bridging relationships (Source: own elaboration based on social capital survey)

Dimensions	Average Horizontal Relationships	Average Bonding	Average Bridging
Relational dimension	3.6720 (0.4424)	3.8902 (0.4713)	3.7588 (0.5603)
Information and communication	3.7121 (0.9879)	4.3780 (0.9860)	3.2682 (1.2023)
Confidence	3.6036 (1.2221)	3.6097 (1.2929)	3.5853 (1.2840)
Cooperation	3.1646 (0.6010)	3.2621 (0.7069)	3.6991 (0.7333)
Participation	3.8634 (0.8215)	3.8719 (0.8064)	3.8292 (1.1811)
Commitment	4.3804 (0.6046)	4.3821 (0.6979)	4.3780 (0.9668)
Surrounding	3.8150 (0.5366)	3.8373 (0.5342)	3.7926 (0.5649)

Note: Values in parentheses represent standard errors

In general terms, they are all above 3 points. The highest average was commitment with 4.38, followed by participation with 3.86, surrounding with 3.82, information and communication with 3.71, confidence with 3.60, and the lowest was cooperation with 3.16. Thus, considering the ratings of these components, the relational dimension in this way stands at 3.672 for all relationships. For bonding relationships, on average, the relational dimension is better rated with 3.8902, while bridging relationships scored 3.7588. It is possible to identify the greatest difference in the results in favor of the first type of relationship in the information components, and in favor of bridging relationships in the cooperation component. Thus, bonding relationships, with family and close friends, are characterized by a higher level of information and communication, while bridging relationships, with the non-close environment, had higher scores for cooperation. In both cases, commitment is the highest scoring component.

Although the ratings are between 3 and 4 points in a similar way, when analyzing the components of relationships' quality, the high rating was trust with immediate family members (4.7073) and the lowest was trust with friends (2.9756), whereas the

average rating of the quality of bonding relationships was 3.8414, while for bridging relationships, the average quality score was 3.6292, lower than the quality of close relationships. These results allow us to estimate an average value for the quality of relationships of 3.6898, like the assessment of the relational dimension through the components identified above.

If we contemplate the second dimension of the social structure perspective, related to the number of ties or participation in formal networks or organizations, the average number of horizontal relationships with people in the family and association environment is on average 3.6167 (between 3 and 10 people), while the number of relationships with other associations is just 1.6341 on average, which represents less than 2 associations. The greatest number of relationships are identified with friends (4.0243) and with people in the association who have no position or responsibility (4.1463), and to a lesser extent with people in other organizations without a position (3.1707) or with a position (3.2439) and with family (3.2195).

If relationships are grouped according to closeness, the average for personal relationships of the bonding type is 3.6219, and in the case of less close relationships of the bridging type, with other people or organizations, the average was 3.01487.

According to Woolcock & Narayan (2000), and then Esparcia et al. (2016), these results of internal and external relations could be analyzed graphically by considering their position in any of the four quadrants that are generated from segmenting according to the values from which the results are considered good or very good- in this case 4 and upwards, since 3 is considered 'regular'. As shown in Figure 3, the first quadrant with low values of both bonding and bridging denotes that the community or organization is not very related and not very cohesive; the second quadrant signifies that although external relations are strong (values above the acceptable value), internal relations are weak.

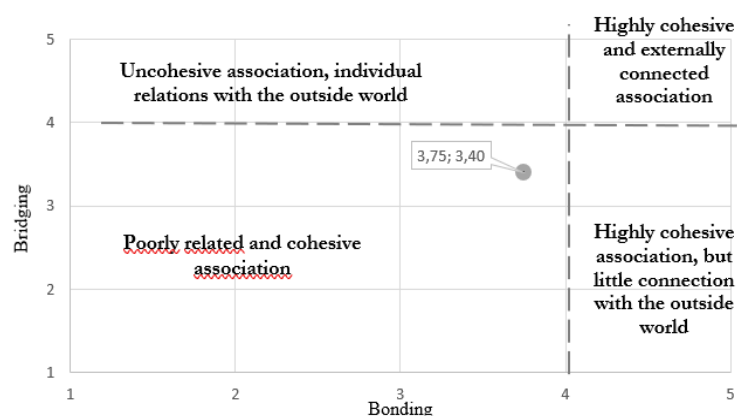


Figure 3. Association between internal relations (bonding) and external relations (bridging)
(Source: own elaboration based on social capital survey)

The third quadrant, with above-average values for internal relationships, shows that cohesion is high but lacks exchange with other organizations; finally, the fourth quadrant implies a cohesive association strongly related to the environment.

In the case of the Association of La Victoria Artisans, the assessment of both types of relationships places it in the first quadrant, in which the associations do not have the necessary conditions to promote processes of territorial development, which Woolcock defines as isolation or "amoral individualism", not taking advantage of the benefits of association or public institutions or policies. The average of the bonding relationships in both the structural and relational dimensions was 3.75, while for the bridging relationships it was 3.40.

Determinants of social capital - Phase 4

To complement the analysis and identify the variables that could influence the results obtained for the relational dimension (social capital, information and communication, confidence, cooperation, participation, and commitment), an estimation by ordinary least squares was realized, the results of which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Estimation of ordinary least squares for the values of relational dimension of the social capital (Source: own elaboration based on social capital survey)

Variables	Relational Dimension	t	Relational Bonding	t	Relational Bridging	t
Charge	-0.1402	-0.61	-0.3260	-1.39	-0.0474	-0.16
	(0.2284)		(0.2344)		(0.2918)	
Antiquity	-0.0407	-0.69	-0.0717	-1.20	-0.2083	-0.28
	(0.0587)		(0.0599)		(0.0746)	
Age	0.0390	-0.37	0.0383	0.36	0.1057	0.80
	(0.1042)		(0.1065)		(0.1326)	
Gender	0.2633*	1.70	0.2306	1.45	0.3798*	1.92
	(0.1552)		(0.1586)		(0.1975)	
Education	-0.0624	-0.54	-0.1128	-0.95	-0.0317	-0.22
	(0.1156)		(0.1182)		(0.1471)	
Constant	3.7176***	7.79	4.1966***	8.60	3.4024***	5.60
	(0.4775)		(0.4880)		(0.6075)	

Note: Significant at: 1% (***), 5% (**), 10% (*). Values in parentheses represent standard errors

The results show that, in the case of the relational dimension in general terms, without considering the type of relationship, only gender was significant at 10%, meaning that women increase social capital from the relational dimension. When considering the type of relationship, none of the variables was significant in union relationships, while in bridge relationships gender has a positive impact. For each of the estimations, the potential problems of heteroscedasticity, omitted variables, and presence of multicollinearity were discarded through the Breusch and Pagan test, the Ramsey test, and the variance inflation factor (VIF), respectively.

By performing a similar analysis, but to explain the behavior of the structural dimension in general terms, of union-type relationships and bridge-type relationships, considering the variables of position, seniority in the association, age, gender, and educational level, the results shown in Table 4 were obtained.

Table 4. Estimation of ordinary least squares for the values of structural dimension of the social capital
(Source: own elaboration based on social capital survey)

Variables	Structural Dimension	t	Structural Bonding	t	Structural Bridging	t
Charge	-0.2478	-1.15	0.3807	0.91	-0.4274	-1.71
	(0.2154)		(0.4171)		(0.2493)	
Antiquity	-0.0453	-0.82	-0.1686	-1.58	-0.0100	-0.16
	(0.0551)		(0.1067)		(0.0637)	
Age	-0.0404	-0.41	-0.4144**	-2.19	0.0663	0.59
	(0.0979)		(0.1896)		(0.1133)	
Gender	0.1196	0.82	-0.1823	-0.65	0.2059	1.22
	(0.1458)		(0.2823)		(0.1687)	
Education	-0.0086	-0.08	-0.3606*	-1.71	0.0919	0.73
	(0.1086)		(0.2103)		(0.1257)	
Constant	3.4786***	7.75	6.1750***	7.11	2.7081***	5.22
	(0.4485)		(0.8684)		(0.5190)	

Note: Significant at: 1% (***), 5% (**), 10% (*). Values in parentheses represent standard errors

Only in the structural dimension for union-type relationships did age (at 5%) and educational level (at 10%) prove to be significant. In the first case, an increase in age and educational level reduced the evaluation of the structural dimension of the union relationships. In the structural dimension in general terms and for bridge-type relationships, no significant variables could be identified. Similarly, tests were applied to identify potential problems of heteroscedasticity, multicollinearity, or omission of variables (Figure 4).

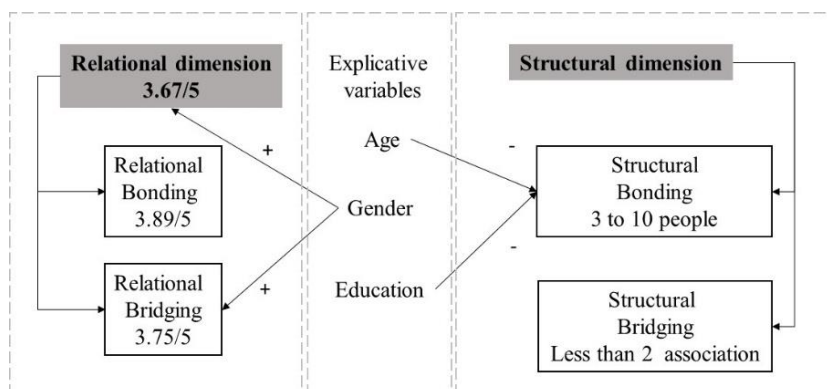


Figure 4. Principal results (Source: own elaboration based on social capital survey)

As shown in Figure 4, the ratings received for the relational dimension exceed the mean value of the scale, but it is the close bonding type relationships that are shown to be the most cohesive and strengthened. Specifically, these relationships cannot be explained by the variables used in the analysis, while bridging relationships and the general average of the dimension increase with gender, so that being a woman improves (between 0.26 and 0.37 points) the levels of relational capital associated with less close ties.

Similar results are identified in the structural dimension, in which the number of close relationships is higher than those of bridging links. In the first case, an average of 3 to 10 people are present, while in the second case, less than 2 associations or organizations to which one belongs are identified. It is the bonding-type structural dimension that is explained by variables such as age and educational level. An increase in age reduces the number of close relationships by 0.41 points, while an increase in educational level also contributes to a decrease of 0.36 points.

In the case of La Victoria, considered a territory that has specialized in the production of clay handicrafts, the current economic conditions demand those possibilities be identified to strengthen associations and hence improve living conditions and income levels, thereby reducing migration and the loss of culture, artistic heritage, and ancestral knowledge.

The Association of La Victoria Artisans is an organization that was formally created in 2008, although informally it dates back more than 30 years. This jump to formality took place as a mechanism to generate a strategy of association

through the creation of marketing channels for their products, derived from working with clay, such as vases, *piñatas*, utilitarian ceramics, roof tiles, pots, and so on. So far, other advantages of the formal associative process have not been evidenced, such as the reduction of input costs, the search for markets or the technification of the processes; indeed, the expectations of the associates are not very optimistic regarding the improvement of their economic situation, the new generations are disinterested in pottery, and there is a high volume of migration to other areas in search of employment.

Given this reality, this study made it possible to analyze social capital from the social structural perspective through the relational dimension (quality of relationships) and the structural dimension (quantity of relationships); in addition, the network perspective was approached by considering only the horizontal relationships of bonding and bridging, and in them the quality and quantity of these relationships were evaluated. With no evidence of previous studies on the measurement of social capital in any of its dimensions in Ecuador, and no studies regarding this specific association, the methodological proposal by Mujika et al. (2010) was used to evaluate horizontal social capital under the social structural perspective. Considering the relational dimension, the levels of commitment to both close and bridge-type relationships are higher, there are values such as trust, cooperation, and information that can limit the actions of the association and the formal structure, conditioning the appropriation of resources derived from instrumental social capital (Atria, 2003; Lin, 2008; Hernández et al., 2021).

These results are corroborated when the members were asked specifically about the perception they have of the quality of these relationships; this highlights the need to strengthen the relationships within the association as a strategy for the appropriation of instrumental resources (Lin, 2008), based on trust as a requirement for the consolidation of social capital (Atria, 2003). As for the structural dimension, linked to the number of relationships, at the micro or personal level, on average they have at least 5 relationships, while the number of relationships with other associations is quite limited and is reduced to less than 2, thus limiting the appropriation of new resources or the strengthening of instrumental social capital. Based on what Woolcock & Narayan (2000) propose, the association's cohesion is stronger than its links with others, but in any case, it is considered independent and poorly organized (Figure 4).

Thus, it is evident that although internal or close relationships are better valued in relational and structural terms, relationships within the association are not strengthened, and are even worse if relationships with other associations are considered. This, despite being in the presence of a formal network or association, limits the possibilities of generating tangible and intangible benefits from participation in networks (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Atria, 2003; Lin, 2008; Casson & Giusta, 2007; Casanueva et al., 2010; Prayitno et al., 2023). In the manner of Granovetter (1985), the rooting processes (internal relations) have not been strengthened and therefore openness (external relations) with other associations or organizations in the environment has not been achieved. But these relations, resources, and values will depend on demographic variables, such as age, education or gender (Christoforou, 2005; Kaasa & Parts, 2008; Asadullah, 2017; Kaasa, 2019). To identify possible explanatory variables for the described behaviors, ordinary least squares estimations (or robust error correction if necessary) were performed for the average relational dimension and in terms of bonding and bridging, the general structural dimension, and for close and external relationships.

As regards the relational dimension, gender explains behavior both in general terms and in bridging relationships, so that women increase the valuation of social capital in terms of the quality of relationships, in contrast to what is proposed by authors such as Alesina & La Ferrara (2002) or Christoforou (2005). This difference in results is related in the first place to the dependent variable used as a measure of social capital. Alesina & La Ferrara (2002) considered trust, while Christoforou (2005) used group participation, whereas in this case, the relational dimension was analyzed.

Second, the characteristics of the productive activity and the ethnic and cultural component of the territory mean that making handicrafts and pottery is mostly in the hands of women who have maintained the tradition, despite the problems they confront. From a gender perspective, this is related to the typical roles of people, which are accentuated in rural territories and particularly in the province of Cotopaxi due to the importance of the indigenous component. Women must then focus on reproduction and community management, while men focus on productive and political decision-making roles (Mosquera, 2018; Hernández et al., 2021). With respect to the results of the structural dimension (number of relationships), only significant variables were identified in the explanation of bonding relationships.

At higher age and educational level, the valuation of structural social capital of internal relationships is reduced, as proposed by Katungi et al. (2007); Kaasa (2019), who indicate that it is young people who participate more in networks or organizations. Meanwhile, results for educational level in literature differ, although Christoforou (2005) and Katungi et al. (2007) indicate that more education means increased participation; Alesina & La Ferrera (2002) for their part identify an inverse relationship between trust and training.

Thus, any intervention aimed at building or strengthening social capital requires increasing the number of relationships, but also their quality, considering the cognitive component, norms, values and communication codes. In order to identify strategies or actions that strengthen this social capital, the proposal starts from the initial need to build community social capital, where social networks (grassroots or community organizations) and the relationships between them are of vital importance and must be encouraged through public policies and the promotion of community participation.

Rodríguez & Quintero (2018) elaborate on this aspect and propose that at the community level it is vital that leaders can generate strategies that enable these inter-organizational relationships based on the processes of training and exchange between them. This can be strengthened through the social management of knowledge, recognized by Aponte & Vásquez (2020), who propose that the creation of a cognitive space can lead to the construction of community social capital. This internal social capital (bonding) as well as bridging requires concrete actions that are also related to training through socio-educational networks (Díaz & Cívís, 2011), the incorporation of strategic communication, conflict management, collective decision-making (Rodríguez & Quintero, 2018) and even technology and digital aspects (Jafari, 2019).

As for the structuring of socio-educational networks (Díaz & Cívís, 2011), they are based on the formation of a formal organizational network with a formative purpose. These socio-educational networks are 'oriented towards common socio-educational goals, which base their action on cooperation through joint strategic programming and are promoters of social capital' (Díaz & Cívís, 2011). The network therefore pursues work on the dimensions of trust, social organization, voluntarism, commitment to the public sphere and tolerance of diversity. As Jafari (2019) argues, an under-explored issue is digital social capital, where emphasis has been placed on internet social capital, through studies that demonstrate a direct relationship between internet use and improved relationships. It is therefore proposed that micro-enterprises and social production organizations can leverage social networks to enhance links with suppliers and customers, and even among their own collaborators, facilitating strategic communication and decision-making.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that social capital in the Association of Artisans of La Victoria is characterized by a strong presence of bonding social capital, based on trust and reciprocity among its members. However, bridging social capital, crucial for the expansion of markets and access to institutional networks, is limited, which restricts the association's capacity to insert itself into more competitive economic dynamics. Demographic factors such as gender, age and educational level influence the configuration of social capital, highlighting the role of women in the consolidation of internal networks, while age and education affect participation in external relations.

The absence of marketing strategies and the scarce articulation with external actors represent significant challenges for the economic sustainability and preservation of the artisanal heritage. Based on these findings, it is recommended to strengthen linkage strategies with public and private institutions, encourage training in digital marketing and promote cooperation spaces with other craft associations. The consolidation of external networks would make it possible to diversify markets, improve economic resilience and reinforce the intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge. It is also essential that public policies support the solidarity economy through incentives for the formation of productive networks and the recognition of crafts as a key sector for local development.

While this study provides a comprehensive assessment of social capital in the Association of Artisans of La Victoria, it has certain methodological and contextual limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. First, the research is based on a cross-sectional approach, which prevents us from assessing the evolution of social capital and its impact on sustainability over time. A longitudinal analysis would allow identifying changes in the association's internal and external relations, as well as in its economic and organizational performance. Secondly, the sample is limited exclusively to the artisans who are members of the association, without including other relevant actors in the productive ecosystem, such as suppliers, clients or governmental entities.

This restricts the possibility of understanding how external networks and institutional factors influence the dynamics of social capital. Furthermore, the study relies on self-assessments and subjective perceptions, which may introduce social desirability biases and affect the accuracy of the results. Finally, the lack of previous studies on social capital in Ecuadorian craft associations makes it difficult to compare with other contexts and to generalize the findings. It is recommended that future research incorporates comparative analyses with other associations and a longitudinal assessment of the impact of social capital on the economic and cultural sustainability of artisans.

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