

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Watching them grow: Intergenerational video-calling among transnational families in the age of smartphones

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the novel forms of intergenerational communication in transnational families introduced by the widespread use of video-calls on smartphones. Centring on the kin-keeping role of the mother, the study analyses 30 semi-structured interviews with migrant Turkish mothers living in 10 different countries around the world, as the facilitators of video-calls and intergenerational mediators. It is argued that smartphone mediated video-calls add new dimensions to the communication that expand the possibilities of self-expression and bonding for the migrant child with their grandparents in the form of visual performance, spatial sharing and spatio-temporal longing, while offering new ways of carrying out traditional grandparenting roles in a digitalized setting. Such intergenerational communication is mediated by migrant mothers as manifested through the practice of simultaneous multigenerational communication engaging all three generations on different forms of exchange enabled by the device itself. Although the new generation born into the digital age struggle with the paradox of separation vis-à-vis virtual togetherness, everyday video-calls on smartphones not only help keep the image of 'family' alive for the migrant child, they also generate a circumambient virtual setting that permits the transfer of family

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culture, knowledge and values wherein the younger generation can learn from the parent–grandparent relationship model.

#### KEYWORDS

children, ICT, transnational families, transnational migrants, transnational social relations, transnationalism

## INTRODUCTION

The experience of migration historically came to signify de-location, uprootedness, detachment from the country of origin and from loved ones; a process in which families fall apart and intergenerational contact slowly withers. In the digital age, this conception does not seem to hold any longer, as we have become ever more interconnected across distant spaces, challenging conceptions of proximity and separation. Today, transnational families have various tools at their disposal and modes of connecting with loved ones that have radically transformed the experience of migration. These technological innovations defined as ‘polymedia’ (Madianou & Miller, 2012) constitute a new era, which some scholars have chosen to define as ‘digitalized migration’ (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018), while others have elaborated the concept of the ‘connected migrant’ (Diminescu, 2008) who is no longer estranged or detached, but connected to multiple spaces. With the widespread use of smartphones, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have become available anytime anywhere at our fingertips, thereby introducing an added spatial liberty to the possibility of employing a low-cost real-time audio-visual exchange with loved ones that surpass the inertness of the desktop computer.

There is a rich and thriving new field that explores the impact of new digital technologies on the lives of migrants, including social media and migrant networks (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Komito, 2011), online practices of transnational families (Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla, & Wilding, 2016; King-O’Riain, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu, 2017; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Wilding, 2006), changing forms of motherhood in migration (Parreñas, 2005; Chib, Malik, Arikat, & Kadir, 2014; Gonzalez, Jomhari, & Kurniawan, 2012; Madianou, 2012), the experience of migrant children and those of grandparents (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014; Moskal, 2017; Tarrant, 2010; Tiilikainen, 2017; McClure, Chentsova-Dutton, Barr, Holochwost & Parrot, 2015; Souralova, 2019). While the primary focus on the technology in question has either been international calls, SMS, emails, social media or more recently desktop Skype use, there is an evident gap in this field with regard to how the smartphone has replaced computer usage in maintaining everyday ties among transnational families. As noted succinctly by Madianou, ‘[t]he challenge of studying ICTs in the context of transnational family relationships is that the technologies themselves are constantly changing and technological developments often seem to surpass research’ (2012: 3). This explorative research is firstly an attempt to shed light on this new reality that has become an indispensable part of our lives, and how it impacts the everyday lives of transnational families.

While the first focus is, therefore, on the device and the way it can change the shape and content of the communication, the second focus is on the tripartite dynamic of grandparent–mother–child intergenerational ties and the centrality of the migrant mother as the mediator between the younger and the older generations that are geographically separated. Within the novel field of digital practices among transnational families, there is still much to be discovered on the form and content of multigenerational technology use, the ways in which digital connectedness is practiced and experienced by each generation party to this exchange, especially when it comes to smartphone use. The experiences of the migrant mothers as intergenerational bridges can provide a glimpse into the transnational socialization of the migrant child born and raised in a digital age and how new ICTs are shaping the experience of migration for the new generation. Moreover, mothers can also help us understand in what ways geographically distant grandparents seek to keep in touch with their offspring through cross-cutting ICT-mediated ‘grandparenting’ practices.

It is at this juncture that the study offers a systematic analysis of everyday ICT-use and its impact on transnational families striving to maintain family ties at a distance based on the accounts of the mother as the facilitator of such daily digital practices and an intermediary of intergenerational relations in the family. Focus is given to the practice of *video-calling* that simulates a real-time face-to-face interaction, which has become ever more convenient at our fingertips owing to extensive smartphone use, thereby surpassing the computer-based Skype era with limited mobility and accessibility. Hence, the study seeks to explore how the possibility of low-cost audio-visual calls from a mobile device shapes the form and content of communication in transnational families and how this manifests itself in the tripartite grandparent–mother–child relationship with the middle generation taking on the role of mediator.

In order to do so, the study investigates experiences and perceptions of migrant Turkish mothers living in 10 different countries around the world. It is argued that smartphone-mediated video-calls add a new spatial dimension to the existing temporal dimension of everyday co-presence allowed by low-cost audio-visual real-time calls, which allows for greater room of self-expression and bonding by the migrant child with the older generation in the form of *visual performance*, *spatial sharing* and *spatio-temporal longing*. As such, the intergenerational communication of sentiment, care and curiosity is enhanced, and so are the available options of sharing between the younger and the older generation with the intermediary help of the mothers, manifested through the practice of *simultaneous multigenerational communication*. Everyday video-calls on smartphones not only keep the image of ‘family’ alive for the migrant child, despite challenges posed by the corporeal experience of space and time, they also generate a *circumambient virtual setting* that permits grandparents to follow the development of their grandchildren and undertake conventional grandparenting roles from a distance. In what follows, the article firstly offers an overview of the state of art in the nexus of digitalized migration and transnational families, elaborating the intergenerational dimension of familial relationships at a distance. It goes on to delineate the methodological approach of the study and finally presents the main research findings elicited through a systematic analysis of cross-cutting themes and patterns in the narratives of the migrant mothers.

## NEW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES AND INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

### Digitalized migration and transnational families

The phenomenon of migration brings forth today how mobility is the new order rather than stability and fixity (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Harney & Baldassar, 2007; Favell, 2008), where individuals and families find themselves operating not only across borders, but also across different social settings especially with the advent of new ICTs. In the age of mobility, digital technologies are providing migrants the means to continue and foster ties in multiple settings and ways of socializing transnationally. This is especially the case for geographically separated family members, wherein mobility of one part of the family does not necessarily impede the everyday togetherness of the whole. Transnational families that experience ‘familyhood’ across national borders (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002), include not only transnational couples and migrant/non-migrant children, but also elderly parents and siblings who remain in the home country (Fesenmyer, 2014: 1). The family becomes an ‘imagined community’ with family bonds, shared sentiments and reciprocal duties extending over multiple sites, even in the absence of daily face-to-face exchanges and spatial distance (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002: 14). Research on transnational families has challenged the precondition of geographical proximity by demonstrating how ‘doing family’ is possible also across borders (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016).

While mass media and other communication technologies have historically occupied an indispensable position in the lives of migrants, the great presence of new ICTs in our social interactions, in the form of internet, smartphones and social media, (Baldassar et al., 2016; Dekker & Engbersen, 2014; Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012), it has been suggested that a new field of inquiry calls for attention on ‘how informational proximity within a permanent regime of digital ubiquity transforms the very significance of geographical distance...’ (Nedelcu, 2012: 1344).

These new technologies provide the means for cultivating 'intergenerational solidarities at a distance' (Baldassar et al., 2016: 134), with even more profound implications for the new generation of migrants growing in an age of space-time compression. A significant manifestation of new ICTs is simulating the experience of 'co-presence' among transnational families that are geographically separated (Baldassar et al., 2016; King-O'Riain, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu, 2017; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Wilding, 2006), thereby 'demystifying physical presence as an inescapable condition for social relationships to exist' (Baldassar et al., 2016: 135). Transnational families are conveying new deterritorialized ways of socializing, sharing sentiments, histories, habits and values as a family across everyday long-distance contact (Nedelcu, 2012). Instead of replacing conventional ways of communication, it has been argued that the use of new ICTs by transnational families has been incorporated to the traditional practices of everyday social life, thus creating 'virtual connectedness' among loved ones (Wilding, 2006).

## The migrant child and the intermediary role of the mother

Within the family structure, practices and perceptions of children are pivotal in comprehending 'changes and continuities' that migration entails for the family (Coe, Reynolds, Boehm, Hess, & Rae-Espinoza, 2011). While migrant children are expected to represent the values of their community, they are concomitantly viewed as 'symbolic carriers of a changing world, embodying futurity and possibility' (Coe et al., 2011: 2). The field of children's participation and experiences in the migration process is a growing field of inquiry, which requires greater attention, especially in the nexus of new ICTs and intergenerational bonds. Existing works have tended to focus on long distance exchanges among the parents and children who have been separated as an outcome of migration, premised mostly on the use of international calls, emails, SMS and more recently, the social media (Chib et al., 2014; Madianou, 2012; Orellana, Thorne, Chee, & Lam, 2001; Parreñas, 2005). Tiilikainen (2017) offers a more up-to-date analysis on sentiments of transnational 'ways of being' and 'belonging' of children through telephone calls, social network sites, remittances and visits to home country, and how the mother plays a central role in mediating kinship relationship with the distant family. Another recent study that sheds light on ICTs in the imagination of the migrant child has been offered by Moskal (2017) based on the drawings of Polish children in Scotland visualizing a sense of 'attachment', demonstrating how common it is for children to draw smartphones or computers to represent connection with distant family members that allow them to construct 'home' that extends beyond spaces (Moskal, 2017: 7–8).

When it comes to intergenerational family ties, the parents as the middle generation play an indispensable role of the mediator (Holladay et al., 1997; Thompson & Walker, 1987), which becomes even more complex when the family migrates abroad. As put succinctly by Holladay and others, '[p]arents act as "mediators", "socializers", "bridges" or "intermediaries" in the relationship because they help to socialize both grandchildren and grandparents into relationship behaviors they perceive to be desirable' (1997: 24). The middle generation can affect the relationship between their offspring and their parents by intentionally increasing or decreasing the amount of contact, or in forming a relationship model with the grandparents that the child can follow (Brown, 2003; Holladay et al., 1997; Thompson & Walker, 1987). Traditionally speaking, women have been considered as the primary facilitators of kin-keeping and maintaining contact between different generations by undertaking functions, such as caretaking, settling family disputes and passing on the family values and tradition (Dubas, 2001). The mother assumes a particularly pivotal role in mediating multidirectional bonds between generations owing to their tendency to develop closer ties with her own family (Holladay et al., 1997; Thompson & Walker, 1987). Previous studies focusing on the maternal line have further demonstrated that the granddaughter's closeness to the grandmother is largely conditioned by the mother's relationship to the older generation, especially when face to face contact is less than once a month (Thompson & Walker, 1987).

Under conditions of migration, the mediation undertaken by the mother is carried out in a context of spatio-temporal separation from the family members with whom continued rapport is sought. Here, mothers fulfil a dual role, that of simultaneously undertaking the duties of motherhood and care for the elderly parents, while mediating between two different 'worlds' (De Jong, 2015). This might mean that the mother might need to help with

overcoming language differences between the migrant child and the grandparents or mediate cultural differences (Tiilikainen, 2017). With the ICTs transforming communication practices in transnational families, mothers also take on the role of facilitators in the use of new technologies enabling intergenerational exchange at a distance. It is suggested that while relationship of the migrant grandchild is strongly linked to the parents' transnational ties, the mothers are more active in maintaining 'familyhood' at a distance as the ones to hand the phone to their children to say 'hi' to relatives (Tiilikainen, 2017). The migrant mother's role as an intergenerational bridge in transnational families is illustrated by Gonzalez et al. (2012) in their investigation of online photo-narratives of young Malaysian mothers that allow the grandparents to follow up on the development of their grandchildren living abroad. The use of smartphones for video-calls remains to be an unexplored field with respect to intergenerational ties and the mother's mediating role, offering immediate availability and mobility that unlock new dimensions of connectedness.

## Grandparents and intergenerational ties at a distance

Grandparents have historically taken on a variety of roles in the lives of their grandchildren, from surrogate parents, role models, best friends and playmates, to mentors and trusted confidants (Szinovácz, 1998: 161). Denham and Smith note that '[a] popular view of grandparents has been as historians: teaching values, ethnic heritage, and family traditions through the telling of stories' (1989: 347). Likewise, grandparents have also occupied a central position in transmitting and translating their culture to grandchildren in families that belonging to an ethnic minority (Szinovácz, 1998: 162), which is particularly important for migrant children growing in a different societal setting than the country of origin of their parents.

Earlier studies have distinguished three different forms of influence grandparents exercise over the lives of their grandchildren. *Direct influence* involves one-on-one exchanges in the form of spending time together, playing, offering support with personal problems, helping with homework or mediating conflicts between the parents and grandchildren (Denham & Smith, 1989; Keck & Saraceno, 2008; Szinovácz, 1998). On the other hand, *indirect influence* entails grandparenting through the relationship with the parents, where the latter provides a 'model' picked up by the younger generation (Denham & Smith, 1989; Holladay et al., 1997; Keck & Saraceno, 2008). Emotional and financial support that the grandparents provide to their immediate offspring can yield a substantive effect on the lives of the grandchildren (Keck & Saraceno, 2008: 140). Lastly, grandparents exercise *symbolic influence* over their grandchildren through their emotional and attitudinal presence for the family, rather than their physical presence. The feeling that grandparents 'are there' influences the experience of being a family by carrying out symbolic roles, such as 'stress buffers', 'arbitrators', 'watchdogs' or the 'roots' of the family (Denham & Smith, 1989: 346). The study holds that such roles are also valid in transnational families with grandparents living at a distance, albeit carried out in novel arrangements of 'co-presence' offered by the digital age.

Hence, in the age of mobility and increased migration flows, 'transnational grandparenting' (Da, 2003) has given way to new forms of keeping family relations intact. It is argued that grandparents take on the challenge of mobility by providing support as caregivers across borders, who come to be defined as 'flying nannies' (Plaza, 2000) or the 'zero generation' migrants (Nedelcu, 2009). Furthermore, grandparents in second-generation migrant families play a significant role in shaping the sense of 'belonging' in two different societies, both the destination country and the country of origin (Souralova, 2019). Thus, most studies on grandparenting in transnational families so far have focused either on conventional means of communication among the grandparents living at a distance and their migrant family or the physical presence of grandparents who mobilize across borders to support their families in times of need.

There are few studies that address how intergenerational relations from a distance are negotiated and reinvented with the latest technological advents in the new digital age. To begin with, Bangarter and Waldron (2014) argue that grandparents who reported using technologies, such as texting, cell phones, emails and Skype with grandchildren living far away, enjoyed stronger ties with grandchildren (2014: 93). Likewise, Tarrant (2010) argues that a shared interest between grandchildren and grandparents in technology can help continue intergenerational bonds in the absence

of physical closeness. Another research that focuses on the practice of video-calling by infants and toddlers in the United States (McClure, 2015) illustrates how video-calls with grandparents are reported by parents as an exception to screen time restriction as it is found to be beneficial for maintaining the child's relationship with grandparents.

When it comes to the impact of video-calling through Skype in transnational families, Nedelcu and Wyss's (2016) study on Romanian migrants in Switzerland explores the everyday routinized character of what they call 'ordinary co-presence' that foster an ongoing sense of 'doing family' across distance. Likewise, Nedelcu (2017) expands this earlier research, illustrating the continuum between offline physical presence of mobile grandparents and online novel grandparenting duties across borders. The burgeoning field of intergenerational ties among transnational families in the digital era thus provides preliminary insights to everyday ICT use among transnational families and the role of grandparents as active participants of transnational socialization (Nedelcu, 2017; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Sourlova, 2019). Yet, these initial studies remain limited in their scope for several reasons: (i) their analyses largely overlook the predominance of smartphones outweighing the use of computers with respect to real-time audio or audio-visual communications, (ii) they neglect the importance of intergenerational ties among three generations, including migrant children, migrant mothers as intermediaries and the 'left-behind' grandparents, (iii) they do not consider how the younger generation adapts to such new technologies at an early age and (iv) most importantly, while signalling an important new phenomenon engendered by everyday ICT use in transnational families, they fail to analyse and elaborate systematically what actually *are* those recurrent daily routines that constitute new digitalized family practices and in what ways such 'co-presence' impacts separated family members. This study attempts to expand this avenue of research by demonstrating in a concrete and systematic manner the ways in which use of smartphones among three generations shapes the form and content of 'doing family' in the absence of physical togetherness by tracing salient patterns and practices.

## MIGRANT MOTHERS' NARRATIVES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RECURRENT THEMES

The study explores the multidirectional intergenerational relations of migrant children and their distant grandparents from the point of view of the migrant mother functioning as the intermediary in this relationship. As the mediator of kinship-ties in conventional family relations, the middle generation's experience and observations are taken as a starting point to understand how this mediation is pursued in a digitalized environment, and how it affects all three generations in transnational families. Migrant mothers are usually the primary agents facilitating video-calls, as they are usually the ones to determine the use of smartphone for their offspring and to stimulate the intergenerational conversation. Most of these calls are done through the mothers' personal phone. Hence, the research dwells on the testimonies of migrant mothers on the use of video-calls between their children and their own parents or siblings. As a result, while the focus is not on motherhood *per se*, the account of the mother as the primary motor of distant intergenerational ties is taken as primary point of reference as they are able to testify for their own experience, the experience of their infant (in some cases who have not acquired verbal skills to express themselves) and the experience of their own parents. These testimonies for the large part involved children's relationship with maternal grandparents, although in some cases the mothers also elaborated digitalized practices with paternal grandparents. It must also be noted that, while the interviews with mothers have provided a rich source of data for exploring the use of intergenerational video-calling, it does not provide access to the personal accounts of migrant children themselves or of the grandparents. The interviews have been conducted in an ICT-mediated environment, which allowed me to contact 30 respondents living in 10 different countries and 5 continents. The option of video-call or audio-call was offered to the mothers in order to respect their privacy. Some preferred a face-to-face interaction, while others found audio-call to be more convenient for them. The group of respondents are constituted by Turkish mothers<sup>1</sup> who have children between 1 and 12 years of age, namely the pre-adolescent period that is crucial in family socialization and constructing one's identity. The practice of video-calling is particularly important for younger children as audio-only technology,

such as conventional phone calls, requires a set of verbal and cognitive skills that children under the age of 7 usually lack (McClure, Chentsova-Dutton, Barr, Holochwost, & Parrot, 2015: 1). It is also for this reason given the lack of communicative skills of children at this age that the mothers' accounts have been a valuable source for discovering the reactions of children growing up by seeing their grandparents mostly on a smartphone screen.

The respondents have been contacted via snowball sampling, starting off with personal connections continuing with mothers who were members of an online group on social media called *Göçmen Anneler* (Migrant Moms), an exclusive Facebook group consisting of Turkish mothers around the globe which at the time of writing had more than 21,000 members. As an initial group of mothers were approached, others were contacted through the reference of these initial contacts. In total, 30 mothers<sup>2</sup> have been interviewed, of which 2 were living in Sweden, 4 in Germany, 2 in Greece, 7 in Italy, 3 in the UK, 1 in Chile, 1 in Algeria, 1 in Denmark, 6 in the United States and 3 in France. The study utilized semi-structured questions, pertaining to the mothers' motives of migrating and their current situation, their work and social life in the new country, their experiences of motherhood as a migrant, the frequency, type and content of communication in the use of video-calls with their families living in Turkey or a different country from their own, and last but not the least, their observations on the practice of video-calling among elder family members and their children. Thirteen of them had migrated due to partner's work or education, and eight had migrated to get married and settle in the new country. The rest of the respondents had moved to the new country for their own careers or education. Fourteen of the women had children from Turkish partners, of which 13 were currently married. In addition, one was married to a second-generation migrant from Turkish origins living in France. The other 15 respondents were married to foreign partners, among which two were divorced and one had re-married. The profile of the interviewees represents a middle-class cluster with most of them having an educational background with a university degree.

The data analysis was conducted through the qualitative research software ATLAS.ti premised on the approach of *grounded theory*, whereby the analytical categories are inductively 'derived from data and then illustrated by characteristic examples of the data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967: 5). This approach is particularly fruitful in relatively recent and unexplored fields of inquiry (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Given the novelty of the widespread use of smartphones just in the last couple of years, grounded theory has proved to be the most suitable approach to investigate the largely unexplored nature of this everyday transnational practice, whereby key themes and hypotheses are both premised on and developed in relation to the data. This approach allows trends and patterns to be unearthed without resorting to borrowed categories in new venues of research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

The results are usually presented in the form of well-established analytical categories and their respective characteristics or a set of worked-out propositions within a larger theoretical discussion (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012: 348). In our case, recurrent themes, observations, convictions and sentiments were sought in order to trace visible patterns in the testimonies of the mothers. The task of the researcher is not only to track change in social events, but also to observe how actors perceive such change. Thus, in-depth interviews are a particularly fruitful type of data gathering, due to the 'open-ended, detailed exploration of an aspect of life in which the interviewee has substantial experience and, often, considerable insight' (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012: 348). This analysis has revealed interrelated coding categories pertaining to the use of video-calling practice, its impact on transnational family ties, the perception of distance and the perception of time.

## THE PRACTICE OF INTERGENERATIONAL VIDEO-CALLING IN TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

### The use of video-calls on smartphones

General inquiry about the use of video-calls has illustrated its regularity among transnational families, mostly conducted with grandparents in the home country. Firstly, majority of the respondents indicated using video-calls several times a week, each call lasting at least 10 min and typically more. As the frequency is reduced, the duration of

the call tends to go up to an hour, which was mostly the case for families living in distant time zones, such as the United States, where a common available time period could be achieved only during the weekends. This suggests that the 'distance' imposed by a greater time difference, which hinders practicing spatiotemporal 'co-presence', is overcome with an increase in the total time spent in a given family 'meeting'.

Secondly, the most commonly used apps for making these calls have been reported as WhatsApp, followed by FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, and in the last place Skype. These preferences point out how personal computers have been replaced with smartphones among transnational families for making audio-visual calls. One of the main reasons behind this discernible trend is the ease and mobility provided by smartphones, coupled with the fact that they are more affordable than a conventional computer. The evolution of video-calls since Skype and the shift to smartphones today has been pointed out in several accounts:

It's much easier to call anytime anywhere. Because with Skype... honestly, I never used its app before [on the smartphone], only on the computer. Then there were smartphones and thousands of apps and for me Skype remained as a program on the computer. Now it's more practical [using the phone] for me because you can access it anywhere. You can call any time of the day, you don't necessarily need a computer to do so. Makes things easier. (Hande, France, 14 Feb. 2019)

While the respondents indicated a variety of people who they commonly video-chat with, the most regular calls are by and large made with grandparents, followed by the siblings of the parents. The separated family comes before friends when we are talking about routinized forms of transnational communication. A majority of the respondents have stated that they would not make video-calls as frequently if it were not for the children involved, which supports the centrality of intergenerational dimension of this practice, especially given the high demand by grandparents to 'see' their grandchildren on an everyday basis. Here, the kin-keeping role of the mother comes to the fore, as the migrant mother expresses an increased need to facilitate connection between the younger and the older generation in her family, who otherwise would lose their bond in the absence of physical togetherness. Some mothers even stated that they would have preferred conventional phone-calls instead of audio-visual calls with their parents if they did not have any children, which further points out to the preferred use of multidimensional communication when all three generations are involved. In fact, for the young generation of migrant children who have been born in the age of smartphones and have been since socializing primarily with this form of audio-visual communication, the concept of a conventional phone call can be a perplexing one: 'It's very strange for my daughter to hear someone's voice without seeing them. She thinks everyone is there in voice and in sight. When she heard someone's voice for the first time on the landline phone... she got scared because she couldn't see. She couldn't understand where the voice was coming from' (Serap, France, 29 Jan. 2019). It is thus interesting to see how a generation of migrant children born into the digital age respond to new technologies and associate the phone with audio-visual exchange.

The mothers as the primary facilitators of video-calls with family members are rather cognizant about the liberty of movement offered by smartphones that transcend the inertness of the computer, and make use of this new dimension in their everyday exchanges. This translates into intergenerational sharing outside the home space, providing the possibility of exchanging emotions and knowledge in new settings, which enlarges the scope of what can be shared: 'Now when I go out I make a video-call to my mom. I even call her in the market. The other day I called her in the market to ask if I should buy celery and how I can cook it' (Görkem, 1 February 2019). This feature also shapes exchanges between the migrant child and the grandparents where the *device* itself occupies a central performative function: 'Characteristic talks take place like the grandmother is in the house. For instance, he says "Grandma now I'm taking you around on my truck", the grandmother is on the phone [laughter]. He says he will show her around the house. He shows our house and plays with her as if the grandmother is that phone' (Hayat, Algeria, 15 Feb. 2019). Thus, the smartphone becomes a protagonist on its own right in the relationship between the grandchild and the grandmother. As a result, the transnational practice of video-calling with the smartphone allows the reinvention



of 'direct grandparenting' (Denham & Smith, 1989; Keck & Saraceno, 2008) to be carried out in an ICT-mediated environment, where grandparents and migrant children discover new ways of spending time one-on-one.

## The utilization of visuality and spatial liberty

The visual dimension of video-calling offers a wide variety of options when it comes to the form and content of communication beyond the traditional conversation which can be too demanding or even boring for children. With respect to the form of visual communication, one recurrent ritual noted by most mothers is turning the screen toward the children to 'show' them in their natural state to the grandparents while simultaneously continuing a conversation themselves: 'After a certain point the kids stop chatting, but I continue. They go back to play, I turn the camera towards them and continue talking, with them playing in the background' (Öykü, Italy, 18 Jan. 2019). This multifaceted interaction allows all three generations to be involved in the communication, whereby the grandparents get a visual glance into the everyday lives of their grandchildren contemporaneously chatting with the middle generation. Therefore, 'showing' the children as a *simultaneous multigenerational communication* allows all three generations to engage with one another at the same time through various means, visually, verbally or both, in which the mother once again is in charge of mediating this multiparticipant exchange. This practice is made possible with the technology offered by smartphones with cameras on both sides of the device, allowing the mother to move from one room to the other to show the children in their natural state while verbally engaging with her parents. This ritual concretizes the notion of 'doing family' at a distance (Baldassar et al., 2016; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) and in what distinct ways the technology shapes family communication engaging all generations. The content of communication in visual sharing is central for the participation of the migrant child in the intergenerational exchange, as most mothers have noticed that their children prefer to express themselves visually rather than verbally when connecting in an ICT-mediated environment. The analysis has demonstrated that *visual performance* of children includes sharing visual cues, such as making funny faces, showing their favourite toys, jumping up and down, showing their paintings or their rooms to their grandparents on the other side of the screen. For an age group that has not yet developed necessary verbal skills for self-expression, visual sharing becomes a powerful means of communicating with grandparents in the absence of bodily closeness: 'The other day he [the migrant child] was eating bread when he was having breakfast. The part that he bit, he thought it looked like a fish, so he said, "Look Grandpa it's a fish!" and he showed his bread to his grandfather' (Pelin, USA, 30 Jan. 2019). This dimension also allows migrant children to demonstrate their performative talents to their grandparents, in search of their approval: 'She likes to dance to them sometimes, when she is in the mood, she dances... We put on some music. She puts on quite a show [laughter]' (Ceylan, Greece, 18 Jan. 2019).

Moreover, the mobility offered by smartphones has introduced the practice of *spatial sharing*, where migrant children look forward to sharing their new living spaces, indoors and outdoors, with the grandparents to connect with them on a deeper level and let them into their lives. In return, it is suggested that the migrant children usually expect to see from the grandparents those places that they are familiar with back in Turkey, which represent their past corporeal togetherness as a family. The mutual sharing of old and new living spaces in different setting is, therefore, significant in the emotional imagination and the intergenerational communication of the migrant child, materializing the ways in which the smartphone device can shape the content of what is being shared:

When we first moved, we were constantly calling someone from Turkey so she [the daughter] wouldn't feel detached or isolated. She gave a tour of our house to everyone. Look this is my room, this is the toilet, this is our view, this is what we see across the street. She would take the phone in her hand and show around. (Şermin, USA, 1 Feb. 2019)

Spatial sharing has also been noted to provide a peace of mind for the left-behind grandparents by providing the opportunity to 'see' firsthand the new living environment of their offspring who are starting a new life in a foreign

setting. The uncertainty and the unknown character of the place of destination in the imagination of the grandparents can be an extra source of anxiety. Video-calling was regarded as a tool to overcome such worries by visually and instantaneously introducing the new place of residence and satisfying their curiosity: 'I think its effect on them [grandparents] is really positive, because we know their world... But they don't know ours here. Therefore, they are curious about our lives. The kids are going to an American school, the neighbors are from 52 different nations. If you turn the camera just to show them the garden, the trees, the deer passing by, it's extremely interesting for them. Your daily life is a matter of curiosity and interest for them' (Selin, USA, 1 Feb. 2019).

The shared nostalgia for places of past moments of togetherness has led to the concept of *spatial longing* connoting the sense of yearning migrant children experience for the places they used to live in the physical presence of distant family members: 'She asks in particular the room that she used to sleep in for instance. She says: "That's my room, can you show that room to me grandmother?" I think she is missing it there. She doesn't say I miss so much, but for me all these things show that she does' (Aslı, Germany, 18 Jan. 2019). The movement allowed by smartphones has thus enabled a new dimension in the communication in and through spaces, which spark in the child frustration over the sensation of 'being here and there simultaneously' that underwrites migration experience today. Such unexpected side-effect of intergenerational audio-visual communication is by and large unexplored in previous works on digitalized family practices: 'When my mother is in her summer house she shows me how beautiful is the sunset. If my older daughter happens to be with me, she gets upset for a couple of days. "I want to live in Turkey, I want to live in my grandmother's summer place"... It's a beach next to the sea and the kids think you can go swimming all four seasons. Since we've always used the house in this way, they only have good memories of this place' (Aysu, Sweden, 13 Feb. 2019).

## Perceived effects of video-calls on the migrant child

By simulating a sense of 'here and now', video-calls are considered by migrant moms to have several intertwined bearings on the migrant child filtered through their perception of space and time. As previously mentioned, the visual forms of exchange are considered to employ a fundamental position for the participation of the migrant child in these calls, giving them the necessary tools to bond with the grandparents: 'She becomes very happy... If there weren't video-calls, these conversations would definitely be missing something. When she sees them live in front of her, it helps with her longing, even if it's to a certain degree' (Çiğdem, Italy, 21 Jan. 2019). Nonetheless, a number of mothers have expressed how the presence of their grandparents on a screen could also be startling for their children, creating a confusion of *comprehending proximity and distance* especially for toddlers: 'Initially when she was younger, when she started to notice these video-calls for the first time on many accounts she tried to get inside the screen. When her grandmother and grandfather told her "Come on let's go to the sea!" she would say "Let's go!" and start putting on her shoes. She couldn't understand at that point that they were living so far away' (Hande, France, 14 Feb. 2019).

The perception of separation and the paradoxical everyday presence of family members in their daily lives can create what mothers define as a *reactionary* attitude to video-calls in some cases: '[N]ow, because he is missing, he doesn't want to talk. He says that his "heart breaks"... If the longing is too strong, he prefers not to talk' (Hayat, Algeria, 15 Feb. 2019). Consequently, for the migrant child, communication with grandparents via video-calling is observed to create conflictual feelings: on the one hand, their bond is kept alive and the older generation can undertake traditional grandparenting roles digitally, on the other hand, the bodily absence of family members is constantly reminded to the migrant child. Such reactionary attitudes towards video-calls can increase following family visits when the child gets to spend time in the real presence of family members: 'My mother came here to stay for 2 months and when she went back to Istanbul we didn't video-call her for a long time, because I've noticed that my daughter was very angry with her and she cried a lot when she saw her on the screen for the first time' (Serap, France, 29 Jan. 2019).

A related theme that comes to the fore at this juncture has been *temporal longing*, whereby the child seeks to share with their grandparents' memories of the time spent together in the past or continually making plans about the time that will be spent together in the future. Much like the notion of spatial longing which involved primarily visual cues,

temporal longing primarily involves narrative exchanges reminiscing past moments of togetherness or anticipating future togetherness: 'The plans start 3–4 months before going to Turkey. Yesterday she was telling her grandparents, "We will go here together we will go there. I bought a bathing suit, I bought this and that"...' (Ilke, USA, 3 Feb. 2019). Talking about a point in time that they had been physically together in the past or hope to be together in the future is one of the methods employed for easing the effects of spatio-temporal separation. The so-called continuum of online and offline interaction (Nedelcu, 2017) is, therefore, manifested and materialized in temporal longing where the content of the digital narrative exchange is filled with memories and expectations of physical togetherness.

One of the most recurrent narratives on video-calling has been its role in keeping the notion of 'family' alive and tangible in the imagination of the migrant child. This is made possible through a habitualized audio-visual presence of loved ones who are constantly reminded they are part of a larger family who they 'see' and to whom they are 'seen' regularly. Most of the respondents in the study have agreed that video-calls render the concept family more vivid for migrant children: 'When we video-chat, the family becomes concrete. They know they are actually not alone. We have a big family, maybe not here together, but they understand that they are part of a bigger family' (Zeren, UK, 15 Feb. 2019). In fact, such regular visualized reminders of distant family members have been considered essential for younger children to *recognize* the older generation in their family with whom they lack bodily contact. Mothers of toddlers and younger children believe that in the absence of such technologies, their offspring would have already forgotten not only their own grandparents, but the concept of grandparenting altogether: 'If the child doesn't see visually, the conception of a grandmother might not develop. For this reason, I think they have a need and I think it's good for them. I believe seeing is more effective' (Melis, Germany, 31 Jan. 2019). Such vivification of family members in the imagination of the migrant child also allows for the symbolic grandparenting role (Denham & Smith, 1989: 346) to be carried out even when video-calls end, as the younger generation gets to establish an ongoing feeling that the grandparents are 'there' even in their physical or virtual absence.

## Perceived effects of video-calls on intergenerational ties

While the low cost and easy access of video-calls in transnational families has come to constitute a digitalized household practice, the smartphone device has eased its use especially for the older generation. Unlike conventional phone calls, video-calls by their very nature create a 'setting' in Goffmanian terms that engages everyone in a given space-time beyond the main participants of the call. In so doing, children are drawn into the intergenerational exchange even if they are not directly engaging with the person on the screen. Hence, the study deepens our understanding of the generic notion of 'ordinary co-presence' (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016) and how it is experienced by three generations involved in this digital practice. I suggest that these routinized calls create a *circumambient virtual setting* stimulating a family visit that transcends the screen and encompasses even members who are not actively participating in the exchange. The mothers have reported that this phenomenon has two important ramifications. Firstly, it is suggested that the mere presence of children during a family video-call can allow for the intergenerational transfer of the culture, language and traditions of the migrant mother's family in such stimulated household setting: 'Her grandmother asked her why she didn't celebrate her *Kandil*<sup>3</sup>. As if we are living side-by-side like neighbours, they get the chance to learn things from the older generation that I have not taught them' (Aysu, Sweden 13 Feb. 2019).

Secondly, it is indicated that the child gets a chance to observe the relationship their parent seeks to maintain with the grandparents, notwithstanding the challenge of spatiotemporal distance, serving as a model of family bonding for the young ones. The younger generation can observe and emulate the type of bond that the middle generation sustains with distant grandparents:

Even if she is not interested herself, she keeps listening. The child doesn't need to participate individually to learn something. She also learns from what we do. Even if she doesn't participate herself, the fact

that I keep contact with my mother helps her keep that person alive in her mind, to understand that our connection our relationship continues. (Asli, Germany, 18 Jan. 2019)

As a result, the circumambient virtual setting cultivates the intergenerational mediation of the mother (Brown, 2003; De Jong, 2015; Holladay et al., 1997; Thomspson & Walker, 1987) who is able to transfer her family values and knowledge from the older generation to the younger generation, even when the latter might be a reluctant party in this exchange.

At times, grandparents take on the traditional responsibility of *baby-sitting* through their virtual exchange when the mother has to attend work or household chores at home. This practice strengthens the bonds between all three generations by providing caretaking assistance to the migrant mother, as well as non-mediated one-on-one time between the grandparents and grandchildren: 'Sometimes I leave it [the phone] to my son if I'm busy. He talks with her, tells her things. Sometimes he goes to the balcony and shows her the balcony because it is summer now. Her grandmother asks him "Did you go to the garden? Did you swim in the pool? Did you put on your sunscreen?"' (Cansu, Chile, 14 Feb. 2019). This novel form of virtual grandparenting through video-calls is a game changer for intergenerational ties in transnational families not only for the migrant child, but also for the 'left-behind' grandparents. As observed by the mothers, this audio-visual technology has come to occupy a vital place in the daily lives of grandparents separated from their offspring, who in many cases put great effort to learn how to use smartphones in order to *follow up* on the day-by-day growth of their grandchildren. The opportunity to keep their children and their parents connected is considered as an invaluable opportunity by the migrant mothers: 'Even if she is not with her [physically], it's an opportunity to get to know her... Because the child is in a perpetual process of change and evolution. Being able to catch up on that pace... When you see them 3 months later, they've already grown quite a bit' (Berrak, Italy, 13 Feb. 2019).

Video-calls allow both sides to be updated regularly in each other's lives, where every call offers stimuli to follow up on previously shared topics, such as health, school activities and the physical or developmental changes the child is going through. It has been maintained by majority of the respondents that an increase in the frequency of the calls increased the bond between the family member and the migrant child:

Now his interaction with his uncle is much less. His grandmother on the other hand, knows what happened yesterday, she knows something was going to happen today at school, so she calls him to ask what happened. Because she follows up on an ongoing process, her ties with him are stronger. Her grandson is growing abroad, but at the same time she witnesses everything. (Hayat, Algeria, 15 Feb. 2019)

On the whole, it has been concurred by all respondents that video-calling is an effective tool for *maintaining extant* ties among transnational families if not forging new ones. The multidimensional level of connectedness and possibilities of sharing challenge the understanding of 'mobility' being equated with detachment and eventual estrangement. Some mothers even indicated that they did not used to see each other as much with the grandparents when they were living in the same country. Now, their virtual family visits across geographical distance have become more frequent as one can 'enter' the household environment by simply clicking a dial on their smartphones. These simulated visits help confront the corroding effects of distance and separation in transnational families.

As a result, the multidimensional aspect of this technology is considered by the respondents to have transformed migration experience overall, especially compared to previous means of communication available. The ease of access and the low-cost of making real-time audio-visual calls with loved ones anywhere anytime is regarded revolutionary in this sense: 'We are from Kosovo. Back then, my mother was separated for a long time from her family, they were living far away. When I compare the two, they had a total rupture in their relationship. But ours is almost entirely intact' (Sema, USA, 13 Feb. 2019). Some respondents stated that this new technology had been one of the factors that encouraged them to migrate, since it ensured them the possibility of virtual togetherness unthinkable in previous forms of communication: '... [I]f it were not for these video-calls I don't think I would have changed country. I couldn't. I know it's strange, but I couldn't do it without my family. Talking on the phone, it's expensive, it wouldn't be enough for

me... 5 minutes once a week wouldn't be enough for me. I think the reason I live abroad is because these [technologies] exist' (Görkem, UK, 1 Feb. 2019).

## CONCLUSION

The new technological tools at our disposal are making us reconsider what we in our corporeal existence have taken to denote separation and togetherness, allowing us to connect to distant family even while grocery shopping. Previous works have helped establish the field of digitalized family practices among transnational families (King-O'Riain, 2015; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Moskal, 2017; Nedelcu, 2017), 'doing family' through ICTs (Baldassar et al., 2016; Chib et al., 2014; Madianou, 2012; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016; Tiilikainen, 2017) and ways of fostering 'virtual connectedness' (Wilding, 2006) that transcend our geographical boundaries uniting different generations (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014; Gonzalez et al., 2012; Tarrant, 2010; McClure, 2015; Souralova, 2019).

Building on these previous studies, this article demonstrates in what ways the use of the smartphone that has replaced the inertia of the conventional desktop has also transformed the shape and content of intergenerational communication between the migrant child, the left-behind grandparents and the migrant mother as the facilitator of digitalized interaction and mediator between the older and the younger generation. This phenomenon has been carefully elaborated through concrete categories emerging from the testimonies of the respondents, including the ritual of *simultaneous multigenerational communication*, *visual performance*, *spatial sharing* and *spatio-temporal longing*, the creation of a *circumambient virtual setting*, *intergenerational day-to-day follow up* and *maintaining extant ties*. The mobility introduced by smartphones allows new forms of visual and spatial sharing options that enrich both form and content of the communication across generations, where grandchildren can visually share their everyday, grandparents can get a glimpse of the new lives of their offspring and mothers can facilitate intergenerational communication. It has been shown how these everyday digitalized family practices create a circumambient 'setting', where children who do not engage in the conversation still take part in the family socialization and learn from the parent–grandparent relationship model. Although the new generation born into the digital age struggle with the paradox of separation vis-à-vis virtual togetherness, this form of regular communication, nonetheless, helps significantly in keeping family ties intact and easing the experience of separation. That is, allowing left-behind grandparents to be able to 'watch' their grandchildren grow, and the migrant child to 'experience' grandparenting from a distance thanks to the mediating role undertaken by the migrant mother.

This analysis, based on the testimonies of 30 migrant mothers around the globe, therefore contributes to our understanding of the new reality of ICT-mediated family practices in transnational families by addressing the lacuna in the field on the everyday use of video-calling technology via smartphones and how it is redefining intergenerational ties. Given the novelty of these technologies in our daily lives, there is still a great deal to be discovered on its psychological effects on the migrant child growing up in an age where rules of proximity are changing, as well as the possibilities of socialization for elderly family members; the former bearers of change and mobility, while the latter bearers of family values and history. These new technologies have come to occupy a central position in our lives under the conditions enforced by the pandemic, where social distancing is the new rule and video-calls as the new norm in interpersonal socialization, whether it is for the private or professional life. While the rest of the world is adopting to elongated online contacts, transnational families are already creative consumers of virtual sharing, whereby the younger generation growing up to associate the phone with audio-visual communication. The study hopes to open new research venues to investigate this novel phenomenon that has become so ubiquitous in the lives of people on the move.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The real names of the respondents have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The fathers' status has not been taken into consideration in the sampling, as the exclusive focus is on the mothers' experience as a migrant and the intermediary between her children and her own parents or siblings.
- <sup>2</sup> It must be noted that the interviewees belong to a certain socio-economic background which allows them and their families in Turkey easy access to such technologies.
- <sup>3</sup> Islamic holy nights celebrated in Turkey and Muslim Balkan countries.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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