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**Title:** Virtual proximity and transnational familyhood : a case study of the digital communication practices of Poles living in Finland

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Kędra, J. (2021). Virtual proximity and transnational familyhood : a case study of the digital communication practices of Poles living in Finland. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 42(5), 462-474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1839084>



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To cite this article: Joanna Kędra (2020): Virtual proximity and transnational familyhood: a case study of the digital communication practices of Poles living in Finland, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2020.1839084](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1839084)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1839084>



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Published online: 27 Oct 2020.



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# Virtual proximity and transnational familyhood: a case study of the digital communication practices of Poles living in Finland

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## ABSTRACT

The article presents a study of five Polish multicultural and multilingual families in Finland, and their engagement in digitally mediated family communication. Explored through an ethnographic inquiry into the in-app communication practices of Polish migrant mothers and children, the study contributes to the body of research at the intersection of new media and communication, transnational family and migration studies, and family multilingualism. Building on the concept of virtual proximity, which refers to the emotional closeness between individuals afforded by digital technologies and mobile communication, the study identifies four thematic patterns in participants' practices in digital habitats: (i) children's agency in creating family WhatsApp groups, (ii) the use of family in-app communication for language learning purposes, (iii) digital caregiving strategies and arrangements, and (iv) the use of digital photo-sharing as a form of visual co-presence. Children's and mothers' practices in digitally mediated communication differ from each other, but they lead to the formation of transnational familyhood in digital habitats. In this context, achieving virtual proximity by digital means helps to fulfil aspirations to remain a family across distance.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 July 2020  
Accepted 13 October 2020

## KEYWORDS



Digital communication;  
transnational family; virtual  
proximity; polish migrants;  
WhatsApp; digital habitat

Lidia, 10 years old, and Julia, her 8-year-old sister, are showing me and enthusiastically telling me about the WhatsApp family groups they have created recently. Each group brings together family members who share the same language, but live in different geographical locations. While we talk in Polish, the girls occasionally switch into French and Finnish when answering chat messages posted in the family groups. I notice that Julia is not yet fluent in writing either in Polish or in French, so she does a fast search for relevant emojis, sending them in enormous numbers to either her French-speaking father, or her Polish grandmother. (Fieldwork notes, 5 October 2019)

Kasia, a 10-year-old, loves taking pictures with her camera phone. On one occasion, she took a selfie with Jaś, her 3-year-old brother, and sent it to their mother in a WhatsApp message. This sparked a conversation of which she took a screenshot that included the selfie photo. Kasia sent that screenshot simultaneously to both her grandmother and her aunt in Poland. After that, she realized they needed a WhatsApp family group, and so she created one, including herself, her mother, grandmother and aunt. While Kasia's home is a place of four languages, the family WhatsApp group conversations are entirely in Polish. (Fieldwork notes, 1 June 2019)

## Introduction

Recent research on human mobilities is increasingly focusing on how, in the context of digital communication, proximity and distance are experienced (Bissell 2013). In the mobility and migration

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literature, proximity is understood not only as ‘physical proximity’, but also as ‘virtual proximity’, afforded by internet-based communication technologies (Bissell 2013; Urry 2002). Thus, emotional presence may not mean exclusively physical co-presence, but it can be complemented by virtual co-presence (Baldassar 2008, 2016; Baldassar et al. 2016), or by visual co-presence (Cabalquinto 2019), embodied in digital photographic practices. The communication afforded by digital technologies transforms ways of being together, and in consequence, family relationships may no longer require physical presence to ensure their emotional and social significance (Holmes and Wilding 2019). For this reason, digitally mediated communication across borders, such as video-calling, is often referred to as ‘emotional transnationalism’ (King-O’Riain 2015). Digital connectivity fulfils the need for emotional support and care from relatives living far away (Ryan et al. 2009; Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018), and facilitates intergenerational solidarity at a distance (Baldassar et al. 2016). Digitally mediated kinship may, however, take various forms, in terms of who is contacting whom, using which channels and modes of communication.

As a contribution to the special issue on the language and communication practices of intra-European Polish migrants, this article focuses on the engagement in digitally mediated family communication of Polish multicultural and multilingual families living in Finland. Specifically, the study explores how five Polish-speaking mothers and their children, all living in Finland on a permanent basis, experience virtual co-presence with family members living in Poland. The article discusses the changing practices in family communication afforded by digital technologies, which enable Polish migrants in Finland to display (Finch 2007) and to perform (Kędra 2020) their familyhood transnationally. The findings of the study contribute to the growing body of research on Polish migrant communities in Europe and, more specifically, to the relatively less studied context of how such communities develop communication strategies and build transnational family relationships in digital habitats.

The practices of Polish migrants in remaining connected with relatives across geographical borders have long traditions which have been documented and researched from as long ago as Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1927) seminal study on Polish migrants in North America and Europe. Matyska (2014), in her extensive ethnographic study of Poles who migrated to Finland during and after the Cold War, observes that families that maintained close contact with their relatives in Poland provided ‘the best assurance that second-generation persons will continue to live transnationally and consider Poland at least as their partial home’ (264).

The article presents a case study of five Polish-speaking families living in Finland, but the findings it discusses on specific practices in family digital communication contribute to the broader body of research at the intersection of new media and communication, transnational family and migration studies, and family multilingualism.

First, the article introduces the concept of virtual proximity, which refers to the emotional closeness between individuals enhanced by information and communication technologies, discussing it in the context of transnational family communication. Next, the paper describes some key characteristics of Polish migration to Finland, outlining the research context. After this the applied methodology is explained, which leads to the study findings, which highlight four thematic patterns in participants’ digital communication: (i) children’s agency in creating family WhatsApp groups, (ii) digital caregiving strategies, (iii) the use of family digital communication for language learning, and (iv) the role of digital photographic practices as a form of visual co-presence with relatives living elsewhere (Cabalquinto 2019).

## Theoretical points of departure

### *Virtual proximity*

Today, transnational family communication is strongly influenced by the ubiquity of portable devices, constant internet connections and a variety of communication apps and social media.

Connections established in digital habitats may require different kinds of interaction and generate different forms of intimacy (Bissell 2013) from those established face-to-face, but they remind us that ‘presence does not necessarily imply physical copresence’ (Callon and Law 2004, 5). Thus, we can talk not only about ‘physical proximity’ but also about ‘virtual proximity’ (Urry 2002). Virtual proximity is afforded by digital technologies and mobile communication devices (Bissell 2013) and can be achieved between family members living in different geographical locations.

### ***Children’s transnationalism in digital habitats***

Relationships established by digital means engage children in the development of kinship with distant relatives, and their heritage culture and language. Moskal (2015) observes that the communication and social relations of migrant children are ‘always stretched beyond their localised presence’ and are characterised by the ‘coexistence of closeness and remoteness’ (148). In this context, it is important to look at children’s practices in building relationships with distant family members. For second-generation children, the need to remain (digitally and physically) connected with geographically distant relatives may be mediated by their parents – either through frequent visits to Poland or with a range of digital technologies. However, as Share, Williams, and Kerrins (2018) point out, technology-based communication, such as Skype video-calling, requires a significant element of performance from both parents and grandparents to enhance children’s engagement. Furthermore, trying to encourage their children to communicate with grandparents in Poland may involve considerable emotional labour on the part of the parents (Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018). Nevertheless, with the availability of a variety of communication tools, children learn that the digital co-presence of grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles is a natural element of their everyday life. Through this, the older children often become agents in keeping family relationships alive across borders (Sime and Fox 2015).

Young people’s agency in forming and keeping transnational connections with their country of origin has been researched in connection with identity formation, home and belonging (Haikkola 2011; Mand 2010; Moskal 2015). Some attention has also been given to how migrant children maintain contact with friends left behind in a home country, through both letters and digital forms of communication, such as emails or Skype calls (Sime and Fox 2015).

In the context of transnational family communication, Martín-Bylund and Stenliden (2020) studied how children recreate their relationship with emotionally close, but geographically distant relatives using online video calling apps. Martín-Bylund and Stenliden (2020) conclude that for the families participating in their study, video calling provided an opportunity for togetherness, while the spoken communication remained a side issue. Based on this finding, the authors argue that although multilingualism remains a central issue in discussing the transnational family, linguistic pedagogy might be less important than affect in building familyhood. In contrast, Palviainen and Kędra (2020) focus on the role of WhatsApp chat conversations in multilingual families as a space for the informal learning and practice of heritage language. The authors perceive digitally mediated communication between children and their parents or grandparents as an opportunity for language development in informal settings. Their argument echoes Lanza and Lexander’s (2019) point that engaging with instant messaging can lead to informal language learning.

Communicating via mobile apps also gives agency to children in terms of the frequency and mode they use to remain connected with relatives living elsewhere: it might be, for example, photo-sharing, chatting, emoji exchange, or voice messages. Slany and Strzemecka (2018) indicate that children are very important kin-keepers of transnational family bonds, especially inter-generational ones. Growing up with new technologies, children may also be more adept than their parents at recognising how the various affordances<sup>1</sup> of mobile apps will match their needs and abilities, and making use of these affordances, particularly when choosing visual

modes of communication such as emojis, self-made gifs, or photographs with filters and stickers applied to them.

### **Visual co-presence via photo-sharing practices**

Regular practices in photo-sharing require dedicated time and effort and are emotionally engaging. Smartphone photographs are momentary images, created and shared not only for what they show, but for the phatic communication they initiate with the distant relatives. They help in transnational family display, enabling visual co-presence from a distance (Cabalquinto 2019). Research in family photography has a long tradition, going back to the physical form of family photograph albums. However, in the era of digitally mediated communication, photographic practices are more a collection of ordinary stories of daily activities of any kind, with far fewer of the sort of images that would have been preserved in family albums. This is partly a consequence of the convergence of the camera and the mobile phone, which changed the meaning of what photography is (Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012). Today, the digital photograph is used as one mode of communication, relying on certain affordances that both the mobile devices and the development of the medium offer.

Having analysed the photographic practices of transnational families, Cabalquinto (2019) proposes four dimensions of visual co-presence, namely, casual, practical, curated, and strategic. These four dimensions are defined on the basis of the purpose and function that particular photographs fulfil in a family display, i.e. phatic, visual reporting, preserving (family) memories and following family members' life trajectories. Although Cabalquinto's four categories are limited with regard to the rich variety of possible practices of digital photo-sharing (and are based on the specific research context of Filipino overseas migrants), they can serve as a starting point for analysis of the role of photographic practices in family communication, particularly in the context of doing family and fulfilling familial roles across borders.

### **Digitally mediated caregiving**

Digital technologies have been researched from the point of view of their role in transnational caregiving and virtual co-presence (Baldassar 2008, 2016). According to Baldassar (2016), 'any discussion of caregiving and mobilities in contemporary family life leads directly to an analysis of the role of new media (internet-based communication) and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in sustaining relationships across distance' (19–20). Care and caregiving are often understood in connection to culturally informed obligations, and family and gender roles. Thus, for instance, in Polish society, cross-generational care, mainly of grandparents over grandchildren, is widely undertaken, but in transnational contexts it meets with challenges. Digitally mediated communication and care nevertheless play a significant role in performing virtual co-presence for family living apart.

### **Poles in Finland and their transnational communication**

The Polish community in Finland is relatively small, with around 5400 people of Polish nationality registered as living here (all population data is based on Statistics Finland). This number may not include children born to Polish-Finnish parents, who can be registered as having Finnish nationality. In the past few years, the flow of Polish immigrants to Finland has been at the rate of around 300–500 per year, slightly higher among men than women. After Poland entered the EU in 2004, migration to Finland increased, but not as significantly as to other European countries, where Poles are one of the main migrant groups.

The Polish community in Finland has rarely been studied. One exception is Matyska's (2014) extensive anthropological research (based on data from 2006 to 2009) on Polish migrants in Finland and their family formation in the transnational context. Matyska's study addresses the family life of

Poles migrating to Finland during and after the Cold War and residing permanently or temporarily in Finland, the life of their children who have grown up in Finland, and family members in Poland. Matyska also offers a retrospective view of Polish migrants' transnational communication practices. Following participant narratives, Matyska goes back to the 1970s, showing the role of letters and postcards, followed by the possibilities – at first rare – for short telephone conversations (pre-ordered and state monitored), and continues up to the introduction of digital technologies with their affordances of video calls. According to Matyska (2014), the new communication technologies did not significantly change the life of Poles in Finland and their relatives in Poland, but rather they allowed 'desires to be addressed which have been culturally well established, but previously unfulfilled or fulfilled only partially' (105). Maintaining frequent contact with members of both close and distant family is part of Polish cultural identity, although practices may vary from person to person. Currently, remaining connected in transnational contexts is performed either by visits to Poland or by the use of communication technologies.

The present study, conducted over a decade later (the data collection took place in 2019), complements Matyska's research on the Polish transnational familyhood displayed between Finland and Poland, bringing out some aspects associated with kinship keeping in digital habitats. The study looks at practices in digitally mediated family communication from the perspectives of Polish migrant mothers and their children. For children growing up in Finland, the experience of Poland is limited to recurrent visits to Poland and digital communication with family members living in Poland. In the families participating in the study, Polish is one of the languages spoken at home, in addition to at least one, two, or even three other languages used on a daily basis.

## Material and methods

The data collection for this study was carried out in 2019 with five Polish migrant mothers and their children, all living in Finland (see Table 1 for the basic demographics about the participants). The participants (mothers) were recruited via two closed Facebook groups: (1) Polki w Finlandii (Polish women in Finland), and (2) Matki Polki w Finlandii (Mother Poles in Finland). During several home or work-place visits (the venue chosen by the participant) a variety of data was collected, including (i) individual auto-driven visual elicitation interviews with mothers, who created family collages using coloured cards showing silhouettes of adults and children and icons of mobile apps (for more details, see Kędra 2020), (ii) visual elicitation interviews (Pauwels 2015) with children and mothers using their smartphones as stimuli for fast reference to concrete (visual) communication practices, (iii) semi-structured interviews, conducted individually with mothers and children, and (iv) fieldnotes compiled on the basis of participant observations and informal chatting with the study participants (both during the visits and online). The data collection occurred mainly in Polish, with the occasional insertion of other languages, and was concerned with the families' linguistic repertoires and the communication context (for details, see Table 1). The interview extracts included in this article are the author's translations. The names used for all of the participants are pseudonyms.

**Table 1.** Key characteristics of the study participants.

Participant, pseudonym	Years living in Finland	Children, pseudonyms (age)	Home languages
Beata	3 (+7 in UK)	Son (6)	Polish, Finnish, English
Olga		Julia (10)	Polish, Finnish, English, French
Ilona	9	Lidia (8)	Polish, Finnish, English, Ika
		Kasia (10)	
Anna	12	Jaś (3)	Polish, Finnish, English
Dorota	19	Sari (8)	Polish, Finnish
		Daughter (14)	
		Son (10)	

Using participants' smartphones as stimuli during the interviews was especially useful in helping participants to recall their photographic practices. However, the majority of visual data was unavailable for normal viewing due to device storage capacities; in other words, the participants had sent or received photographs or short videos as part of their in-app chatting with another family member but had soon deleted the images from their phones' memory cards due to limited storage capacity, so that during the interview only the blurred squares remained. This indicates the ephemeral nature of digital photographs, used as one possible mode of in-app communication. Nevertheless, each study participant was always able to provide rich contextual information about the images that we could not see. In this way the researcher looked at photographic practices through the lenses of the participants' narratives on these practices, exploring the role of photo-sharing in family digital communication.

One of the aims of the ethnographic data collection among Polish-speaking families was to get to know children's perceptions of their digital communication practices within the family network. Sime and Fox (2015) claim that 'the existing literature is only beginning to give a voice to migrant children' (377). Therefore, in addition to hearing the mothers' voices in all five families, in two families also the children were interviewed: a 10-year-old girl in one family, and two sisters, one 8 and one 10 years old, in another family. All three girls have been very active in maintaining transnational kinship using digital tools of communication. Listening to the children's voices was particularly interesting because they were more open and emotional when pointing out various elements in their digital communication, recalling some stories and events from quite different perspectives from those of their mothers.

All the ethnographic data was looked at using descriptive analysis, that is, by searching for the main thematic patterns in the participants' communication practices in digital habitats.

## Findings

For the study participants, digitally mediated communication in the transnational context is a natural extension of family life in between their visits to Poland; physical proximity is complemented by virtual proximity, always more intensely immediately before or immediately after the physical visits.

### *Family groups: children as initiators*

Mothers are usually the ones who establish digital contact between their children and grandparents and other relatives in Poland, particularly in the case of younger children. However, contrary to what is often the case with younger children, who require their parents' presence and encouragement to perform communication at a distance (Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018), older children who already own smartphones often take the initiative in developing family relationships, especially with their grandparents. Olga, for instance, reports that since her daughters (10-year-old Julia and 8-year-old Lidia) are already fluent in using the tools available for digital communication, she only needs to remind them that it is time to contact their grandparents:

OLGA: Sometimes I just say: 'call grandma and grandpa now', so that they will arrange this call for me, this contact; that it does not have to be me who does it, but I delegate it.

In a similar vein, Kasia, Ilona's 10-year-old daughter, says:

KASIA: Mom installed for me a variety of — a lot of apps, so I will be able to communicate.

Kasia also points out that any photographs of herself or her brother that she shares have first to be approved by their mother and can be further shared only with family members. Similarly, Olga installed the FamilyLink app on both her daughters' smartphones so that she could decide which apps they can download and to monitor their screen activity. Despite these mothering practices, the children remain active in digitally mediated communication, often surprising their mothers



with ideas they have with regard, for instance, to creating and administrating family groups, their creativity in photo-sharing, and the frequency of their voice messaging. An example of such practices is the family WhatsApp groups created in both Ilona's and Olga's families by their 10-year-old daughters (Kasia and Julia, respectively). The key to group membership is a shared language (Polish) and a trans-border kinship relationship. Julia's Polish group is also indexed by an icon image of a Polish flag, which visually indicates the group content and context. Julia shows rich, mostly photo- and emoji-based chat conversations in the group (which includes her sister, mother and grandparents), but cannot say much about why she created the group. Kasia, Ilona's daughter, on the other hand, recalls the context in which her family's WhatsApp group, which includes her mother, grandmother and aunt (her mother's younger sister), was created:

Researcher: So, you created this group for your family?

KASIA: Yes! I simply had this idea. At first, it was that I would just give a photo of myself and Jaś [*Kasia's 3-year-old brother*], but later, when I sent it to mom (...), mom wrote something more under it, because she was on a course and I couldn't call her, and so we had to write. So, I just made a screenshot of it, and gave, and I changed it so that there's me and Jaś, so that on the screen there's me and Jaś and a conversation between mom and me, and then it's something like a photo of that group ... in this way what it shows is more like a family.

The screenshot of the selfie photo of Kasia and Jaś was sent, individually, to mother, grandmother and aunt, so Kasia realised that it would be convenient to have a family group for sharing these kinds of photographs, and so she created it. However, later, this photograph-sharing led to an argument among the group's members, which Kasia, as group creator, decided to put a stop to:

KASIA: My mom's younger sister posted an awful lot of photographs from her holidays: Monaco, Italy, France. And then grandma just got annoyed that [there were] too many photos. And so I reported on her that this is spam, and I said: I will throw you [all] out if you continue to argue, because it was not a group for that.

Kasia gave all the WhatsApp group members administrator status. However, the situation she recalled indicates that she is the one who actually acts as the group administrator and moderator in that she sets the tone of the discussion and the rules of the group.

The highly emotional nature of WhatsApp family group chatting as well as Kasia's idea for a screenshot of the children's selfie with the daughter-mother exchange of messages ('what it shows is more like a family') indicate that communication in digital habitats plays an important role in building kinship relations. In this sense, achieving virtual proximity helps in fulfilling desires to remain a family despite geographical distance.

### ***Mobile communication for (heritage) language learning***

As already mentioned, Julia, Olga's daughter, was unable to explain what motivated her to create the Polish family group on WhatsApp. She only made it clear that creating a family group was one of the first things she did when she got her first smartphone. During the interview, Julia and her younger sister Lidia showed all the chats, images, videos and emojis exchanged in the group since its creation nine months earlier. Although for Julia using the family WhatsApp group was just an everyday activity, the purpose of which did not require further elaboration, her mother, Olga, had a clear aim for Julia's digital communication, which was that it should be a space in which to practice her written Polish:

OLGA: We have a group as well (...) My daughter created this group — this is called the Polish group.

Researcher: Okay, and who is in this group?

OLGA: Grandpa, grandma and me, and Julia; so it's something we all share. And there we share mainly — mostly photographs. I also encourage the child to write more so that she can write more correctly in Polish.

Despite Olga's wish for her older daughter to practice Polish in the chat conversations, most of Julia's messages in the group are combinations of emojis. Julia says that this was her way to communicate with her grandmother before she learned how to write in Polish. But even now, when Julia already has some writing skills, she still relies on certain affordances of the communication apps, particularly on voice messages and the dictate option. Her mother comments on these practices when she scrolls through the WhatsApp family group conversations:

OLGA: They [Julia and Lidia] record [these voice messages] and usually grandma responds to that, but I don't play with this, I terribly dislike these; but of course, if it's sometimes difficult to write correctly, so they get round this like that. There is also supposedly an option, Julia had this, that you can turn on the microphone and it writes as you speak.

Olga's desire for Julia to practice her written Polish skills is shared by Anna with regard to her 8-year-old daughter Sari and their mother-daughter WhatsApp conversations:

ANNA: [Sari] tries to write in Polish. So I also prefer to write messages with Sari, although it takes longer. So I want her to learn to write in Polish, because three hours a week of Polish language is too little. Well, she still has some difficulties in writing. (...) [She] discovered that she can record her voice messages or, for example, she says something in Polish and everything is already written there. (...) I told her not to use this, but sometimes when she's in a hurry, she uses it. In this way she won't really learn to write.

Anna speaks Polish with her daughter and English with Sari's father, who communicates with Sari in Finnish. Recently, however, Sari asked Anna to use more Finnish at home instead of English as she wanted to follow her parents' conversations. In an environment already dominated by the Finnish language, Anna perceives in-app communication as an additional space in which her daughter can practice Polish language skills. Nevertheless, Anna faces similar challenges to those faced by Olga in her desire to utilise mobile apps to help her daughter learn (written) Polish, that is, the affordances of voice messages and the dictate option that Sari goes for when 'in a hurry', as Anna expresses it.

Using communication apps for language practice does not apply only to children and heritage language learning. For instance Beata, another participant in the study, refers to her chat conversations via FaceTime with her mother-in-law:

Researcher: And when you talk to your husband's mother, do you use English as well?  
BEATA: I try in Finnish, because she prefers Finnish to English — I, of course, prefer English to Finnish, but as I'm learning Finnish, she tries to encourage me in this way; because my problem is that I don't have many people here, in this environment, with whom I speak Finnish.

The English language has a strong position in Beata's home, mainly due to her migration trajectory. Before coming to Finland three years ago, Beata, her Finnish husband and their now 6-year-old son were all living in London. As a result, Beata and her husband use Finnish only occasionally and in the more jokey messages that she sends straight after her Finnish classes. Beata says that her husband does the same in Polish, after his Polish classes. Thus, although it does not happen very frequently, digital chatting in Finnish with both her mother-in-law and husband has become for Beata a significant space in which to practice her skills in written Finnish.

### **Mediated caregiving**

Enabled by communication apps, the distant caregiving performed by the study participants takes various forms, depending on the kinship relations and the specific circumstances. Anna reports that her digital communication practices with her father intensified when her mother died, and with her brother when his girlfriend broke up with him. Particularly in the case of her brother (as this was quite a recent event when we met for the first interview), Anna reflects upon the need she felt to take care of him, at least virtually:

ANNA: Previously, we used to talk maybe once a week, but then, when his girlfriend broke up with him, I started, I simply worried about him and we were calling each other. (...) At that time, maybe for a month or two, we talked three or four times a day. And even my husband was already a bit upset that I didn't have time to talk to him, [but] just all the time to my brother.

Anna's reflections on caregiving at a distance may be the product of culturally informed gender roles, where women are the ones who feel obliged to take care of other family members, particularly if they are males who find themselves left alone for one reason or another. Anna's family life is a constant mixture of virtual and physical proximity with close and distant family: her sister has recently moved permanently to Finland, her brother visits them several times a year, and Anna and her daughter make frequent two-week-long trips to Poland to visit Anna's father and other relatives. Additionally, Anna calls both her brother and her father daily and maintains regular contact with other relatives in Poland (mostly via in-app chats and Facebook).

Anna, Olga, Dorota and Ilona, all have school-age children who own smartphones and use WhatsApp a lot to communicate with their mothers. One of the ritualised practices in the daughter-mother communication is an immediate report on the daughters' after-school activities, as to whether they are back at home, or at their hobbies, or with friends. The frequency of daughter-mother daily WhatsApp communication is so deeply embedded in their everyday family life that Olga, when scrolling through her WhatsApp conversations with Julia, refers to the following message:

OLGA: And here: 'call grandpa if anything happens, because I'll be on the plane' — so that in that case she'll contact somebody.

Olga explains that on this occasion she was on her way back to Finland from Poland, where she had shortly visited her parents while Julia stayed in Finland with her sister and father. The grandfather to whom Olga referred in her WhatsApp message was the one who was physically in Poland but, with virtual proximity, could take care of Julia if she needed to call a close family member.

### **Digital photographic practices**

During the interviews, when the participants scrolled through their chat conversations with another family member or within the family group, they brought up a lot of contextual information about the photographs they had shared but which were now unavailable for normal viewing (only the blurred squares remained). In these cases, the materiality of the images seemed to be less important than the narratives built around them. In the event mentioned earlier, a screenshot of a chat interaction related to the selfie image of Kasia and Jaś, Ilona's children, prompted the setting up of a WhatsApp family group. Later, some other photographs shared in the same group caused an argument between the group members. In this sense, the photograph in the digital habitat may be perceived as an agent that enables communication (Kasia creating a family group, inspired by the selfie), or causes family disconnection (family conflict caused by the excessive photo-sharing).

In the participants' narratives, photographs are talked about as artefacts that provoke a lot of different emotions, are a way to prove their children's achievements, or are simply a fast communication tool to be used to open up ordinary activities to co-participation across time and space. Ilona makes clear the main topic of the photographs that she shares with geographically distant family members:

Researcher: And do you send photographs? What are the photographs about? What do they depict?  
 ILONA: About them [*she points at Jaś, who is sitting on her lap*]  
 R: Mainly the children?  
 ILONA: Yes, what they're succeeding in. What they've been doing lately when we've been to some nice place.

Sharing photographs about the children's achievements and the milestones in their lives helps to achieve virtual proximity with geographically distant kin. The photo-sharing practices have always played an important role in Ilona's communication routines. Ilona further recalls that before she switched to WhatsApp as her main communication app, she used to send the same photograph individually via different channels (Messenger, Skype, WhatsApp and email) to reach each of her significant family members.

Olga also points out the affordances of in-app photo-sharing, namely, using it like a postcard for greetings, or updating absent family members on current events, often related to festive occasions. These kinds of images fulfil more of a phatic role in family kinship relations, similar to traditional postcards, as the following extract shows:

OLGA: There's a lot of that sort of documentation: where we are, what we're doing and such like, you know, postcards, greetings from somewhere: 'New Year's Eve greetings from Turku' (...) 'Greetings from the beach' (...) 'The first snow that will probably disappear tomorrow' (...) 'Saint Nicholas' Day greetings'.

The photographs that Olga sends to her parents or to her brother always include some short commentary or seasonal greetings. These kinds of digital mini postcards are used to foster kinship, but they are also ritualised forms of communication. Nevertheless, digital photo-sharing, as a manifestation of visual co-presence, remains a key element of technologically mediated communication. Cabalquinto (2019), when proposing the four dimensions of visual co-presence, suggests that digital photo-sharing in transnational families provides a sense of togetherness. This aspect of photographic practices is even more visible in participants' casual visual communication on ordinary, everyday activities, such as shopping, playing, eating, learning or working. In this context, the study participants reflect on the affordances of in-app photo-sharing, which (metaphorically) shortens geographical distance and allows them to experience (virtual) proximity with living-apart kin. As an example, Anna refers to her photographic communication with her brother, who lives in Poland:

ANNA: My brother sends me photographs of absolutely everything [*laughing*], really everything! (...) where he was, what he bought for himself, what the weather's like, photographs of dogs (...), photographs of girls with whom he's currently dating [*laughing*] (...) When he goes shopping, to buy a shirt or shoes, he always sends me photos of these clothes and I help him to choose.

Researcher: And what about you?

ANNA: I also send him a lot of pictures. A lot! From home, what we do at home. When we go on a trip with Sari, we also send him photographs of this trip; and photographs of our cats. Well, just everything that happens during the day we document with photographs.

The visual co-presence experienced by Anna and her brother is similar to the photographic exchange by Olga and her mother in their WhatsApp conversations. Using snapshots with short chat messages, Olga's mother, for example, asks Olga's opinion when buying clothes for herself, or gives advice on natural medications for her grandchildren, Julia and Lidia, or asks which of the presents she shows in the photograph she should buy for them. The kinds of photographic practices between Olga and her mother reflect the familial roles they fulfil at a distance, particularly the close relationship between mother and daughter.

## Discussion

Constructed through various communication technologies, virtual co-presence is the most common form of contact in transnational families (Baldassar 2008). Madianou (2016) argues that 'the convergence of transnationalism and communication technologies has enabled sets of practices that support a new type of "connected family" at a distance' (184). Consequently, physical proximity is not always required to maintain relationships, perform familial roles, and display family (Finch 2007). Physical proximity can be complemented by the virtual co-presence afforded by digital

technologies, which create various opportunities for interaction between family members who live apart.

In the case of the Polish transnational families participating in this study, the four main communication patterns in digital habitats were identified as: (i) children's agency in creating and maintaining (Polish) family WhatsApp groups, (ii) the use of in-app family communication as a space for language learning and practice, (iii) distant caregiving by digital means that fulfils cultural and familial roles and expectations, and (iv) in-app photographic practices serving various communication purposes at a distance, and possibly redefining what family photography is in digital habitats.

Matyska (2014) concludes that the 'country of "origin" and the family members who live there do not disappear in the process of transnational mobility' (90). This was observed in participants' narratives on their engagement in communication practices over a distance. One example is digital caregiving, performed on a small scale when Olga asks her older daughter to call her grandfather if she needs to contact somebody while Olga is unavailable, or maintained as a long-term ritual in the case of Anna's frequent calls and visual communication with her brother and father.

For Polish migrants who live abroad on a permanent basis, the frequency of digital communication is also motivated by the desire for their children to learn and practice Polish language skills. This desire was verbalised by mothers participating in the study, but was noticeably absent from their children's perception of in-app family communication. Children's communication practices in digital habitats are built around the affordances of digital tools rather than on any practical considerations. Nevertheless, it is the children who introduce new approaches to distant communication by, for example, creating family in-app groups, for which they select family members who share the same language and nationality.

Finally, virtual proximity is achieved through in-app visual communication. Photographic practices at a distance fulfil a phatic function, providing a sense of visual co-presence for family members living apart, and helping to fulfil familial roles and give distant caring. However, some photographs may also play a highly affective role, leading to a mixture of feelings of togetherness and disconnection, like in the case of the photographic exchange in Ilona's WhatsApp family group.

## Conclusion

For families living transnationally, belonging to a wider kinship network can be achieved by means of digital communication. In this sense, achieving virtual proximity by digital means helps to meet aspirations to remain a family across distance and to fulfil familial roles. However, remaining connected requires time and effort, and is often emotionally exhausting. In this sense, virtual proximity is similar to physical proximity. In digital habitats, family members who live apart can see and hear each other, experiencing the co-presence of significant others during any of their daily activities.

The study participants (Polish mothers) freely chose their transnational life trajectories, and thus to live apart from their family network. The Polish mothers and children living in Finland and their relatives in Poland had all worked out specific strategies to remain connected at a distance. This study identified and discussed some of the communication patterns the families established using digital technologies. The research was conducted in 'normal' conditions, before the world moved even more intensively to digital habitats as a result of the enforced social distancing during the pandemic. In this context, future research may focus more on how previous engagement in digitally mediated family communication may have affected specific practices in the new normal of everyday life. Already living some part of their family lives in digital habitats, members of transnational families should have been more experienced and more used to virtual familyhood – but is this the case?

## Note

1. The concept of affordances, initially proposed by Gibson (1979) as a contribution to psychology, has been applied in other disciplines, including the field of new media and transnational family communication

(Kędra 2020; Madianou and Miller 2012). An object has specific affordances, on the basis of which, humans orient themselves toward the object. The affordances of the object are the possibilities that the object offers for action (Hutchby 2001). Thus, one person may choose a certain mobile app for communication based on the affordances this app offers, but the same app may offer different affordances to different individuals, because affordances exist ‘independent of whether someone actually uses an object according to its affordances’ (Lehmuskallio 2012, 65).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was conducted as part of the project ‘What’s in the app? Digitally-mediated communication within contemporary multilingual families across time and space (2018–2022)’, led by Professor Åsa Palviainen, Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, and supported by the Academy of Finland [grant number: 315478].

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