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Performing transnational family with the affordances of mobile apps: a case study of Polish mothers living in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Affordances provided by digital technologies and mobile apps (WhatsApp, Skype, Messenger) help in maintaining familyhood. These mobile apps enable the creation of in-app family groups. They also afford image sharing, which is used for phatic purposes. Digital connectivity provides the illusions of togetherness and belonging, and allows for performing family in a transnational context (emotional transnationalism). However, it also generates the feelings of guilt through infrequent communication. In the auto-driven visual elicitation interviews, the study looks at family constellations and technologically mediated communication from the perspective of five Polish mothers living in Finland. Applying the technique of an interactive collage, participants visualised kinship relations, using colourful cards showing silhouettes of adults and children and icons of mobile apps. The findings reveal complexities in digitally mediated familyhood, performed in the polymedia environment and determined by technological affordances.

KEYWORDS

Affordances; collage; mobile apps; Polish migrants; transnational family; visual elicitation

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Introduction

Portable devices, such as smartphones or tablets, combined with social media and communication apps, camera lenses and constant internet connection, have become crucial elements in maintaining distant relationships in transnational families (Baldassar 2016; Cuban 2014). Mediated digitally, communication practices are part of daily routines in families, regardless of cultural and national contexts (Bacigalupe and Lambe 2011; Taipale 2019). The incessant cross-border connectivity creates an illusion of togetherness and belonging. Cuban (2014) indicates that information and communication technologies (ICTs) constitute a 'new family member'. In this sense, digital connectivity aims to fulfil the need for emotional support (Ryan et al. 2009; Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018). It facilitates maintaining relationships across life contexts, often in significantly more situations than a physical co-presence would have enabled. In-app communication focuses on mundane activities, such as doing shopping together (i.e. sending photos of products and asking for an opinion), telling about trips and day-to-day issues, showing-seeing, especially when travelling, sharing working-life stories and free-time activities, and a range of visual entertainment that includes videos, photos, memes and many more.

Digital connectivity facilitates emotional comforting from family members (Cuban 2014) and serves as a readily available channel for advice on a variety of issues (Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018). As a result, practices in digital communication immerse into everyday life, remaining essential to maintaining life apart from the loved ones. In this vein, Bacigalupe and Lambe (2011, 14) point out 'that the technologies fill a relational, emotional, and social void for families who have more than one country as their home'.

In this article, I introduce a case study of digitally mediated family communication of five Polish mothers living in Finland. In addition to their nuclear families in Finland, each participant is actively involved into family life in Poland. In this sense, their engagement with ICTs allows for maintaining 'familyhood' (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002) and can be seen as a form of virtual transnationalism (Pustułka 2015), while their kinship relations may be labelled as a digital family (Taipale 2019), or a transnational family. The latter can be further described as the 'ways of doing' and 'ways of being' (Bell and Erdal 2015), that is, performing family, by both a physical as well as the virtual co-presence across borders (an issue discussed by Baldassar 2016).

Research on transnational families and their adaptation of ICTs focuses either on individual apps, for example, the use of Skype by Polish parents in Ireland to communicate with grandparents in Poland (Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018), or on the specific activities requiring ICTs, such as distant caregiving by migrant Filipino mothers using frequent voice/video calls to contact their underage children left in the Philippines (Cabalquinto 2019a), or on maintaining a virtual co-presence with aging parents (Baldassar 2016). The study's specific contribution presented in this article is the exploration of the transnational family constellations along their communication practices in digital habitats adapted on the basis of kinship relations and technological affordances. Inspired by possibilities of

innovation and creativity in visual elicitation methodologies as well as by other studies on the topic of transnational family communication practices, I developed an interactive collage as an auto-driven (Pauwels 2015) visual elicitation technique. The interactive collage as a visual prompt has facilitated critical reflections among participants who mapped out familial relationships and communicative practices in digital habitats. This approach primarily unveiled the communicative benefits and tensions in a polymedia environment, providing encouragement to rethink the impact of digital communication on transnational family life. The article contributes to the growing body of research on the intersections of migration and digital media studies, with a particular focus on the Polish migrant community in Finland and their digital communication practices.

Performing transnational family

The term 'transnational family' has been used in migration studies, sociology and anthropology since the early 1990s. Initially, transmigrants were defined as those who 'develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political that span borders' (Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992, 1). In today's societies and in the era of constant digital connectivity and extensive migration flows, the transnational family, as a form of family life that span between borders, is widely performed across cultures. However, as a concept, it is used with a more flexible manner than in early 1990s. The current understanding of the 'transnational family' focuses not only on the physical cross-border practices of maintaining life both here (in the host country) and there (the homeland via periodic visits), but also on the 'ways of being' (Bell and Erdal 2015) that aim at strengthening emotional ties in relatively frequent communication practices. Due to technological advances and affordances (Gibson 1979) provided by communication apps, today's transnational family is able to maintain familyhood despite disparate geographical locations, as a so-called 'digital family' (Taipale 2019).

This study applies the term 'transnational family' by focusing on digitally mediated practices of kinkeeping communication (Braithwaite et al. 2017) that span borders, and which involve passionate engagement reflected in the 'emotional labour' that remaining connected implies (Skrbiš 2008). Narratives of transnational familyhood show that 'family is something that we do, not something that simply is' (Neustaedter, Harrison, and Sellen 2013, 2). The ways of doing, especially in the context of digital technology apps (e.g. Skype), 'requires a significant element of performance in which parents, children and grandchildren engage as performers, directors and audience to create meaningful communication' (Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018, 3012).

The key to familyhood is to remain connected. Thus, 'the ability to be co-present across distance is important in sustaining transnational family relations' (Baldassar 2016, 145). In addition to either or both voice and video calls, a classic example of distant and cross-generation communication practices is family photography (Prieto- Blanco 2016), which often includes photographs of children and various important events within the circle of family life. Affordances provided by mobile apps, especially by WhatsApp or Messenger, have moved visual sharing beyond the traditions of family photography, providing diverse forms of visual co-presence that harnesses family life at a distance (Cabalquinto 2019b). Routines in digital communication include exchanges of a variety of visual entertainment, visual tutorials, and practices, which for convenience, have been moved into visual modes of communication (for example, questions posed as snap photographs). Moreover, geographically distant family members remain digitally connected via dedicated family in-app

groups. These groups are used for sharing everyday issues (and also special occasions) in pictures, often with the minor addition of a textual mode.

Affordances of mobile apps in a transnational context

Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances, initially proposed as a contribution to psychology (Greeno 1994), has recently been extensively explored in other fields and topics. Thus, affordances are used in relation to technologies (Hutchby 2001), or polymedia and transnational family care (Madianou and Miller 2012, 2013), in a study on non-professional networked camera use (Lehmuskallio 2012), or in the context of family photography (Prieto-Blanco 2016). Humans orient themselves on objects, based on the affordances they provide. The affordances of the objects are 'the possibilities that they [the objects] offer for action' (Hutchby 2001: 447). In this sense, a person may choose a certain app to contact a particular family member, based on the affordances that app provides. The affordances of an object exist 'independent of whether someone actually uses an object according to its affordances for that specific person' (Lehmuskallio 2012, 65). In other words, certain affordance(s) are inherent to the object, while the same object may offer different affordances regarding the individual interacting with it.

Context of the study

Polish migrants and communication technologies

The Polish community, as one of the largest intra-European migration groups, has been studied from a variety of perspectives (Erdal and Lewicki 2016), inclusive family relationships (Ryan et al. 2009), but mostly within the context of states that are the most popular migration destinations for Poles. Thus, for example, Bell and Erdal (2015) explore the transnational family life of Polish migrants in Norway, focusing on (cross-border) practices and identifications (i.e. emotional attachment, identity construction, belonging) – the two elements that according to Bell and Erdal, constitute the transnational family of today. However, the authors pay scant attention to the role of communication technologies in maintaining distant relationships. Moskal and Sime (2016) discuss the issues of belonging and linguistic adaptation in the transnational context from the perspective of Polish children migrating with their parent(s) to Scotland. The authors focus on the role of heritage language as connecting young people transnationally, but they pay scant attention to the role of ICTs in forming transnational relationships.

By contrast, in a study on the experiences of Poles migrating to Norway, Germany and the United Kingdom, Pustułka (2015) underlines significant role of ICTs in strengthening cross-border ties. Providing a retrospective overview on distant communication practices, participants in Pustułka's study praise the affordances of new communication technologies, which at the time were limited to phone calls and video Skype calls. Furthermore, in the context of Polish migrants in Ireland, Share, Williams, and Kerrins (2018) underline the role of communication apps, especially Skype, in 'doing family' across borders. However, Share, Williams, and Kerrins (2018) point out the significant element of human performance, which the digitally mediated communication requires.

Polish migrants in Finland

Currently, there is about 5400 registered Poles living in Finland (all data population based on Statistics Finland). In a past few years, an immigration flow of Poles to Finland has been around 300–500 per year, slightly higher among men than women. Interestingly, the proportion of those with double citizenship, that is Polish-Finnish, is significantly higher among female population. This tendency may indicate that Polish women consider their migration to Finland as permanent, compared to men whose migration trajectories are often motivated economically and based on fixed-term employment contracts in various parts of Finland. Except for statistical information and anthropological overview of the migration trajectories of Poles during and after the Cold War (Matyska 2014), the Polish community living in Finland is still under researched. Poles in Finland also rarely create any visible landmarks of their cultural and linguistic presence in the urban land- scape, contrary to the practices in the UK, where 'Polski sklep' (Polish shop) is one of the easily recognised elements of any British cityscape (Hua, Wei, and Lyons 2017).

Study participants and 'Matka Polka' cultural reference

In this article, I explore the transnational family constellations from the perspective of five Polish women, who have lived from 3 to 19 years in different parts of Finland (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key characteristics of the study participants.

Participant (pseudonym)	Years in Finland	Children (age)	Home languages	Collage of family constellation
Beata	3	son (6)	Polish, Finnish, English	Figure 3
Olga	15	daughter (10) daughter (8)	Polish, Finnish, English, French	Figure 4
Ilona	9	daughter (10) son (3)	Polish, Finnish, English, Ika	Figure 5
Anna	12	daughter (8)	Polish, Finnish, English	Figure 6
Dorota	19	daughter (14) son (10)	Polish, Finnish	Figure 7

Each of the five has a non-Polish partner (three are Finns, one is Nigerian, and one is French). All five have one or two 3–14 years old children, and all except one have at least one child aged 8–10 years. I recruited the study participants via two closed Facebook groups, of which I have been a member for several years. These are: (1) Polki w Finlandii (Polish women in Finland), which as of January 2020 has 1130 members; (2) Matki Polki w Finlandii (Mother Poles in Finland), which as of January 2020 has 408 members. These two Facebook groups have created online communities with members actively participating in the discussions, answering questions and even arguing. The groups also serve as places to find other Polish women from the same city or region (and frequently hold regular coffee-meetings in physical spaces). The 'Matki Polki w Finlandii' group particularly aims to create a supportive and close-relation community, for instance, by organising thematic events such as sending handmade postcards with inspiring wishes to each other on Poland's Mothers' Day.

The context of this study alludes to the cultural myth of 'Matka Polka' (Mother Pole or Mother Poland), which refers to early nineteenth century Polish literature, art and history. Originally, this lacunary expression – 'Matka Polka' – connotes an image of a self-sacrificing woman, who is able to bear all responsibilities, maintain the family and the house and raise her children in a patriotic spirit that includes knowledge of Polish history, traditions and language (Szerszunowicz 2013). Even though the expression – 'Matka Polka' – is used today in a more of a sarcastic manner, the administrators of 'Matki Polki w Finlandii' played with its semantic heritage to create the name of their Facebook group. In this context, I was also interested in recruiting study participants whose migration trajectories may engage with the 'Matka Polka' cultural reference. All five women live in multilingual and multicultural environments. Thus, using the Polish language with their children, cultivating Polish traditions and keeping transnational ties with Poland require some effort.

Furthermore, as a member of the Polish minority in Finland and a mother myself, I am interested in gaining both the female and maternal perspectives on familyhood in migration and transnational circumstances. Thus, when recruiting for the study, my familial criteria were mothers who were Polish-speaking, had at least one child age of six years or more, spoke at least two languages at home and used mobile apps in daily family communication. The study participants have all graduated from a tertiary education institution, are employed or self-employed, one of whom was on parental leave, and live in Finland either in the capital region Helsinki or in other major cities. They all had one of three reasons to move to Finland: (i) accompanying their partner; (ii) joining a partner encountered in a distant relationship; (iii) continuing their education. Although they all have developed an established lifestyle (family, friends, work, house) in Finland, each of them remains in a close relationship with their relatives living abroad, mostly in Poland.

Methodology: interactive collage as a visual stimulus

This study is part of an ethnographically driven research with five multilingual families living in Finland, with Polish as one of their home languages. In this article, I focus on findings from auto-driven visual elicitation (Pauwels 2015) interviews conducted in 2019 with Polish-speaking mothers. The study participants were asked to visualise family constellations using colourful cards (four colours available) of adults and children's silhouettes (see Figure 1) and mobile app icons (see Figure 2). I termed this technique as interactive collage, because it enables the study participants to create and modify visualisa- tions of family constellations throughout an interview. The collage acts as a visual prompt to elicit specific thematic data in an engaging manner. Desille, Buhr, and Nikielska-Sekula (2019) states that visual research methods have the potential to open new trajectories in migration studies, particularly in terms of data collection and analysis, often resulting in more engaged participation. Providing a visual stimulus, such as a photograph, an image, or any other physical object, or asking the study participant to create any kind of visual representation (drawing, collage, sandboxing) during an interview, helps to elicit information that may not otherwise emerge.

Participatory visual techniques, with visual elicitation at their core, are frequently applied methodologies in (visual) social sciences and beyond, with photographs being the most popular elicitation artifacts. The creative techniques in eliciting data have theoretical underpinnings in photo elicitation, first used by Collier and Collier (1986) and later systematized by Harper (2002). Recently, in addition to the classic usage of photographs and drawings, elicitation techniques have taken inspiration from psychological interventions in therapy-based settings by applying the technique of sandboxing (Mannay, Staples, and

Edwards 2017). Sand- boxing is particularly useful when interviewing children, studying sensitive topics and exploring areas challenging to be verbalised by the research participants. A key aspect of sandboxing is the interactive mode, which enables a participant to rearrange the elements in their sandbox throughout the duration of the interview.

Figure 1. Cards depicting silhouettes of adults and children, used to create family constellation collages.

Figure 2. Cards depicting icons for mobile apps and other communication technologies, used to show family communication practices in family constellation collages.

In the Basic Taxonomy of Participatory Visual Techniques (Pauwels 2015), interviews, in which the study participants produce visuals and reflect upon them, are systematized as auto-driven visual elicitation. Pauwels points out the key advantage of this technique, which is to generate two types of data: visual and verbal. He indicates that any produced visual(s) should be also analyzed in addition to, and beyond, the comments provided by the research participants. Nevertheless, contrary to some other visual stimuli, an interactive collage technique is only meaningful when looked at in combination with participants' verbal narratives, accompanying the creation process, along with researcher's field notes compiled immediately after each interview.

An immediate inspiration for the technique of an interactive collage was the 'circle of reference', introduced by Prieto-Blanco (2016). In order to map photographic sharing practices of transnational Spanish families living in Ireland, Prieto-Blanco used small colour cards representing significant 'others' and a card with an 'X' that indicated the study participant. The participant could freely spread out the cards on a black surface following each interview question, creating the 'circle of reference'. It generates valuable visual data that illustrates participant's perspective on their photo-sharing practices.

Similarly, as in the collage technique, it may help the study participants to reflect upon these sharing practices. However, as the 'circle of reference' would provide far too impersonal visual data set for my study, I prepared similar colour cards, but with adults and children's silhouettes printed on them (see Figure 1). The silhouettes helped participants to associate one card with a concrete family member, and thus to visualise their family con- stellations in a more detailed manner.

With a help of the cards, I asked a participant if she could tell me about her family and specifically: Who do you consider as your family? In response, the participant was free to spread out any of the cards in any of the four colours on the blue board (which acted as both a physical space for visualisation and for the sake of the final photo-recording of the collage). The cards provided for the collage made a visual distinction between male and female figures. (NOTE 1)

However, some participants used them unrestrictedly, without paying any attention to matching the card's gender to that of a family member. For example, one participant depicted her husband using a female silhouette card and silhouettes of girls to indicate a number, but not the gender, of children in her husband's family (see Figure 3).
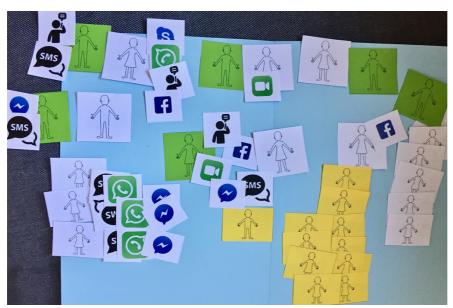

Figure 3. Beata's family collage: In the centre are Beata, her husband (depicted as a female silhouette) and son; at right is her husband's family: brother and sister, both with all children, and their parents; at left is Beata's Polish family: her brother and his family and their parents.

The 1 card: 1 family member strategy helped me with the next step in the visual elicitation process, which concerns mapping digitally mediated communication practices between particular family members. This step was inspired by Lexander and Androutsopoulos's (2019, 6) mediagram – a 'visual representations of patterns of language, modality, and media choices

in family communication' of Senegalese living in Norway. Mediagram shows the participant's communication practices (with the study participant at the centre), and the channel of communication (for instance, WhatsApp or a phone call), and the mode of communication (voice call, text messaging) and the used language(s). Lexander and Androutsopoulos (2019) collected all this information in subsequent interviews, including the one involving a language portrait, (NOTE 2) and only later the researchers created a visualisation in a form of a mediagram. Some of the ideas used to create mediagrams, I further incorporated into the collage technique. My aim with this study was to map family communication practices – but although I used the perspective of an individual family member, the results did not comprise individual-centered visualisations of these practices (as is the case of mediagrams). I provided the study participants with small cards with printed coloured icons for mobile apps, phone calls, emails and SMS (see Figure 2). When the participant completed her collage of family constellations, I asked her to associate the app's icons and symbols with family members, telling me how they communicate with each other in the family. If the study participant was unable to explain without prompting, I asked the follow-up questions about possible family in- app groups, languages they use, and the modes and frequency of communication.

The interviews were audio-recorded, and the final versions of the collages were photographed. Due to a variety of reasons, including difficulties in recruiting study participants and applying a collage-based interview in the very first meeting, and participants' resistance toward the presence of a camera, I decided not to video-record the elicitation process. Instead, I collected detailed field notes, written immediately after each interview and used as a secondary data source. All communication with participants occurred in Polish, with some occasional insertion of words in Finnish, English and other languages, regarding family linguistic context. As a result, I collected photographs of the collage created by each participant (see Figures 3–7), which with the interview transcripts and field notes comprise the material for analysis. The names of all the study participants are pseudonyms.

Findings of the study

The families I researched, frequently communicate via mobile apps on carefully planned schedules, especially when children's participation is involved. For example, Anna calls her brother each morning on her way to work, but video-call her father every Saturday to include her 8-year old daughter in the call. These communication practices are ritualised in two ways. First, by the choice of medium assigned to each family member. For example, Ilona uses Skype to speak to her aunt in Canada, WhatsApp to her mother in Poland and phone calls and SMS to her father in Poland. Secondly, by the mode of communication (e.g. video or voice calls, image or video-sharing). In each case, the participants explained their choice of app or medium and mode of communication on the basis of kinship relations and affordances of particular apps and technologies.

Family constellations

Performing family transnationally means constant negotiations on who is included and who is not. The participants' collages consist of nuclear family, i.e. partner, child/children, as well as of extended family, including (grand)parents, sibling(s), nephew(s), parents-in- law and partner's siblings. Creating a family collage was an enjoyable experience for all participants. Thus, for example, both engagement and joy were visible in Olga's approach to making a collage that, as she indicated, assisted her in looking at own family constellations:

OLGA: so yes, I will just arrange this a bit ... here East [*Olga puts cards with family members in Poland on the right ...*], here West *[... and family from France on the left*] (...) ok, I should do like this [*Olga arranges family members from each country in the same colour cards; see Figure 4*], now I will play with these colours ... (...) I will at least analyze our family ... so colourful it will be.

Figure 4. Olga's family collage: At the bottom of the collage are Olga, her partner and two daughters; at right are her Polish relatives; at left is her partner's family.

Although all five collages I collected differ due to their distinct family constellations, they all include family members living in Poland. After completing the visualisations, each participant indicated that the collage shows (only) 'the closest family', which might be explained by general understanding of 'a family' in Polish culture. A family in Poland, by default, includes other significant relatives (grandparents, aunts, siblings) in addition to parents with children. Each family, though, considered keeping in digital contact with distant family members as a natural rather than an exceptional activity. In this sense, transnational families maintain kinship across space (and locality) as well as time. Thus, Ilona included in the family collage her grandparents, who had died (some time ago), but who remain important figures in the family constellation (see Figure 5).
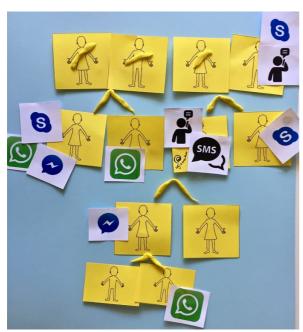

Figure 5. Ilona's family collage (depicting only her Polish relatives): On the second line from the bottom are Ilona and her two children; on the top line are her grandparents (three of them marked with a diagonal playdough indicating 'deceased').

Digitally mediated communication practices

Following the completion of the collages, the participants mapped their digitally mediated communication practices with those depicted in the constellations. In each family, barring one, the participants reported maintaining regular contact with relatives living in Poland. What can be observed from these narratives is a sort of dichotomy between practices of individual participants: ritualising and routinising communication versus feelings of guilt due to infrequent and insufficient contact. Anna, for instance, tries to implement fixed weekly or even daily schedules for her voice and video-calls with family:

> ANNA: ... mornings, in a train, when I am going to work, I talk with my brother (...). With my dad, I usually talk each evening (...) before my daughter goes to sleep (...) and on Saturdays we always talk with grandpa, me and my daughter, with a camera, always on Saturdays (...). And with my daughter – always around 12.00 when she finishes school.

Anna further explained that her regular and frequent phone calls to her brother and father had occurred, initially, as a consequence of significant changes in their lives: her mother died (and her father lives alone) and her brother broke up with his girlfriend. Although both of these situations took place a few years ago, the passage of time did not influence the intensity and frequency of communication (see Figure 6). The phone calls to brother and father occur now on regular basis, becoming a part of Anna's daily routines. The calls with her brother, as Anna commutes to work, can be regarded as ritualised practices: they talk briefly about their work schedules, share feelings and emotions, and plans for the day. In contrast to Anna' routines and communication rituals, Ilona has feelings of guilt caused by infrequent contact with some of her distant relatives, despite regularities in earlier practices:

> Researcher: And do you frequently contact your grandpa or parents?
> ILONA: I should. But before, I did it more frequently. When Kasia [Ilona's daughter] was small, we made daily calls to this grandma, who died. But ... not now. I should have been calling. The whole time I think about grandpa, but all the time ... you know what, it's easier for me to just write, send them a photo ... they also do like that ...
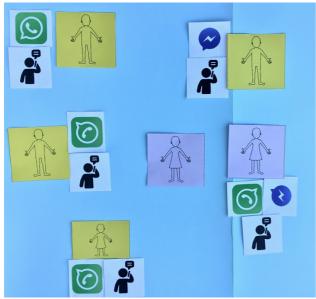

Figure 6. Anna's family collage: In the centre is Anna; at centre-right is her sister; at centre-left is Anna's partner; at the bottom is Anna's daughter; at the top are her father and brother, with whom she communicates daily.

Although ubiquity and availability of communication technologies puts pressure on Ilona's communication behaviours, she is unable to meet the requirement of frequency and regularity in the actual practices. Instead, she relies on certain affordances of mobile apps, such as sending short messages and photo-sharing, which allow her to stay in contact with distant family members and reduce her feelings of guilt. However, she refers to the amount of work that transnational communication requires, and which she is not able to bear due to the lack of time resources:

> ILONA: Also, we haven't sent anything to grandpa for quite a while ... all the time is like this. Always these [photos] should be sent to somebody ... This is really a lot of work when you want to send something to everybody.

The amount of work required in photo-sharing practices is combined in Ilona's case with the variety of communication channels her family uses (see Figure 5). She is a member of family groups on Messenger (with her mother and sister) and on WhatsApp (with her mother, sister and daughter). She maintains contact with her father via phone calls and SMS, and her grandfather via phone calls and Skype. She uses Skype to talk with an aunt living in Canada and communicates with an aunt living in Poland via Messenger and WhatsApp. Ilona's communication practices with family members links to polymedia theory (Madianou and Miller 2012, 2013), which understands new media as an environment of affordances. Thus, Ilona has to adjust her photo-sharing and communication practices to particular affordances that the channels and apps she uses provide, depending on the type of relationships maintained (from less to more intimate). Madianou and Miller (2013, 170–171) argue that 'navigating the environment of polymedia becomes inextricably linked to the ways in which interpersonal relationships are enacted and experienced'. Therefore, the communication choices made by individuals are connected to social and emotional concerns rather than to specific technical features of particular media.

The emotional and social factors in using communication technologies are particularly evident when participants reflect on their digitally mediated relationships with their partners' family who all live elsewhere (either far away in Finland or in another country). Beata, for example, maintains only a formal contact with her husband's family-

> BEATA: ... only Facebook, and this is also more on the principle of following who-what kind of photo posted and, alternatively, commenting, congratulating, or ... or some birthday wishes.

The occasional character of this relationship is also evident in the visual representation of Beata's family constellations (see Figure 3), in which she decides to use a single card with a Facebook icon to depict her communication practices with all her in-laws (except her mother-in-law with whom she has infrequent, but still more personal contact via Face- Time chat).

The limited (or absence of a) digitally mediated relationship with the partner's family is clearly represented in all the collages, to the extent that Ilona does not even include her husband in the family constellations (see Figure 5). However, the communication practices do exist, often on daily basis, as in Olga's and Beata's families, but they occur solely between the partner, along with their children, and the parents-in-law. Olga indicates that her partner's Skype calls to his parents in France have become a daily evening routine to the extent that they have to remember to inform her parents-in-law if they are unable to make a call due to travelling or other issues. In this context, and similar to Ilona's narratives on insufficient

photo-sharing practices, Olga complains about the lack of regularity in having video-calls with her parents in Poland:

> OLGA: We tried to arrange some regular hours that we call once per week and talk sufficiently, but it is always like that – the time somehow flies that it is impossible to organise this; so more spontaneously. But I also try that these few times per week there will be a contact, and thus, I encourage children that they themselves would call.

Olga's communication strategy with relatives in Poland focuses on arrangements of making as frequent as possible video-calls between her parents (her father is retired and her mother semi-retired) and two daughters (age 8 and 10 years). She perceives this digitally mediated contact as 'very intensive', although irregular. Olga's family's communication practices are organised along specific affordances that mobile apps offer, however different in regard to who is communicating with whom. Thus, in the calls between children and grandparents, Olga underlines the importance of using the camera-mode and the device with a bigger screen (hence the choice of tablet and Skype). She perceives it as particularly important for her mother, who requires her granddaughters to be visible on the screen and to at least say 'hello', rather than shout something unseen from the device. By contrast, Olga prefers to voice-call her parents if she has some- thing to discuss, ask or arrange, and thus, she usually uses WhatsApp, which is available on her smartphone. In addition, Olga's two daughters created a 'Polish Group' on WhatsApp, enabling them to connect in one virtual space with both their mother and their grandparents in Poland.

Furthermore, all interviewed women reported that their app choices were usually made by family members living in Poland and the study participants had to adjust (willingly or not) to the affordances these apps provide. Prieto-Blanco (2016, 133) implies that 'the experience of the user is not determined by the affordances of the object'. However, the participants indicated that both the intensity of communication and the mode they use to remain connected with relatives (image-sharing, voice/video call), heavily depend on the app that was chosen for them as a communication channel. Thus, for instance, Beata shares with her mother a lot of photographs via WhatsApp or Messenger, but not with her father with whom she only uses traditional phone calls. However, both Beata and Ilona (who also only makes phone calls to her father) indicate that although they are unable to share visual content with their fathers, they always contact them to discuss important issues, related to work, children, or family life. In this sense, and in a Gibsonian approach, portable devices and communication apps can 'afford' only certain actions. In the case of Beata and Ilona, phone calls with their fathers afford immediate interaction, assuring intimacy in communication practices. Even though WhatsApp provides both Beata and Ilona with similar affordances, neither of them report the same intimacy level in the voice-calls made with the app.

Photographic practices

Dorota created her family collage (Figure 7) very quickly, and immediately used her phone to show me some sample conversations on WhatsApp with her son (10 years old), daughter (14 years old) and her husband, as well as those in the family WhatsApp group, which also includes her mother-in-law. Dorota has lived for nineteen years in Finland. Even though she still maintains some contact with her parents in Poland (mostly via voice-calls, emails and SMS and sometimes Facebook), her digitally mediated communication practices are the most intense with children and husband. The conversations she shows me are mostly visual,

including a lot of photographs that Dorota contextualises for me, and some images sent for entertainment purposes as well as some videos made by her daughter of their cats' activities.

Figure 7. Dorota's family collage: At the centre are Dorota, her husband and their two children; at the top are Dorota's parents; at the bottom are her parents-in-law.

Among the photographs that Dorota shows me are typical family holiday snaps (mostly sent to the WhatsApp family group for her mother-in-law to view) and some posed, home portraits of individual family members (e.g. a photo sent to her daughter of her son in a just-bought fashionable T-shirt). Along with a number of visual entertainment photos (mostly related to cats), all these images are shared not only for what they show, but for the phatic function they fulfil. Photographs are also used as visual evidence, as in the case of the mother-son conversation when Dorota travelled to Poland to bring their new cats back to Finland. Her son was worrying about his mother's safety, and thus she explains:

> DOROTA: I sent him these photos of my friends' flat where I stayed overnight, so he would not need to worry about me.

Finally, and mostly in conversations with her husband, Dorota uses snap photos as time-efficient communication practices:

> DOROTA: I'm in a shop, and there's an offer, and so I'm sending him a photo to ask if I should buy this.

In addition to photographs, some short videos of here-and-now situations are also shared, for example, a video of their cat catching a fly (made by Dorota's daughter), or a video by her husband of Dorota's son chopping wood in their summer cottage.

Besides using photos as a mode of communication, Dorota's WhatsApp conversations with her husband and children form a sort of momentary family album. Willingly and enthusiastically, she shares with me all contextual details about each photograph that appears on the screen. The nostalgic feeling of turning pages in family photo-albums is present in our conversation. However, WhatsApp visual conversations – as to their form of family albums –

are created without any intention to preserve memories photo- graphically. Instead, they are momentary practices that provide ways of being together while physically apart.

Furthermore, in Anna's case, a photographic exchange with her brother is a form of visual co-presence (Cabalquinto 2019b), performed across all aspects of everyday life:

> ANNA: My brother sends me photographs of absolutely everything [*laughing*], really everything! (...) where he was, what he bought for himself, what the weather is like, photographs of dogs (...), photographs of girls with whom he is currently dating [*laughing*] (...) When he goes shopping to buy a shirt or shoes, he always sends me photos of these clothes and I'm helping him to choose.
> Researcher: And what about you?
> ANNA: I'm also sending him a lot of pictures. A lot! From home, what we do at home. When we go on a trip with my daughter, 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.

For Anna, photographic communication is a routinised daily practice. By contrast, in Ilona's family, the overwhelming amount of holiday photos sent by her sister to the family WhatsApp group caused argument between Ilona, her sister and their mother, which Ilona's 10-year old daughter, as a group administrator, had to defuse. In digitally mediated communication, visuals are mostly used for phatic purposes, and thus might be less important for what they show, in contrast to the social (dis)connections that they create.

Discussion

The definition of a family results from the ongoing negotiations about who is and is not included. The definition is fluid, particularly in the contexts of human mobility and the affordances of trans-border communication via digital technologies. Moreover, the term 'transnational family' cannot be simply applied as a label to all immigrants who maintain relatively frequent and stable family communication over time and space. Transnationalism as a concept covers many areas of an individual's life, and is organised and maintained across the borders of both the home and host countries. In the context of this study, which explores individuals' involvement in family communication practices – and thus, only one aspect of transnationalism – I prefer to talk about 'emotional transnationalism'.

The term 'emotional transnationalism' reflects Madianou and Miller's (2012, 125) concept of polymedia, which they coined to 'explore significant differences that are exploited to enact and control the expression of emotions' in a context of communication technologies and new media environment. In this sense, digital and mobile technologies and the affordances they provide for transnational communication, allow for emotional engagement with the family members living far away. In Olga's family, the relationship between her daughters and their Polish grandparents is enhanced by the possibility of video-conversations. Similarly, Anna relies on daily and weekly communication routines with her father and brother, sometimes routinised as to its content (i.e. her morning conversations with her brother), for the purpose of kinkeeping (Braithwaite et al. 2017) across borders.

Applying the methodology of an auto-driven elicitation interview with an interactive collage as a visual stimulus, allowed study participants to look from 'outside' onto their family constellations and communication practices – the two issues that remain quite complex to

reflect on. As for the purpose of this study, the interactive collage helped in mapping the details of participants' communication habits, which otherwise could have been forgotten in the flow of a traditional interview. However, the material analyzed in this study, shows only what the participants think they do, rather than their actual practices (except for the interview with Dorota, who actually showed me some of her WhatsApp conversations with her husband and children). Nevertheless, the advantages of experimenting with an interactive collage indicate that visual research methods have potential to further advance migration studies, especially in the era of visual communication and mobile apps. An interactive collage is just one of possible techniques to be used in the auto-driven visual elicitation interviews, and which can be freely modified regarding the research topic.

Finally, the study brings forward the cultural myth of 'Matka Polka' (Mother Pole), under-stood as a commitment to fulfil the obligations of maintaining familyhood despite any adversities. Embodiment of this myth, although subconsciously implemented, is visible in the participants' narratives on obligations to maintain family communication, along with the responsibilities the mothers feel they have toward their children's mother-tongue linguistic development through digital communication practices. Thus, Olga points out her efforts to call her parents on more regular basis for her two daughters to speak 'properly and sufficiently' (in Polish) with grandparents. The image of 'Matka Polka' also echoes in Ilona's feelings of guilt caused by the lack of frequency in contacting her grandfather in Poland, or by irregular photo-sharing practices with other distant family members.

Conclusion

The study presented in this article contributes to the growing body of research on the intersections of transnational family life and digital media use. The study participants – five Polish women living in Finland – reflect upon their digital communication practices and familyhood in a transnational context. The participants' female and motherhood identities are still, to some extent, shaped by the cultural myth of Matka Polka. Thus, they indicated the amount of effort, time and emotions that digital communication requires, and the feelings of guilt caused by infrequent communication practices with relatives. The notion of 'emotional labour' deeply embedded in the transnational family context (Skrbiš, 2008) is also the case in digital habitats.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of photographic practices in digital communication, in which photographs are used for phatic purposes, often less important for what they show, in contrast to the familial (dis)connections that they create. However, further studies that explore participants' reflections on photographic practices in the digital habitat are needed.

Performing family transnationally, even in relatively close geographical proximity, which allows for frequent physical co-presence in the home country, has become the everyday life context for the majority of migrants in today's digitalised world. The current study shows that digitally mediated communication is closely interrelated with family constellations and enabled by mobile apps' affordances. The affordances of digital technologies offer the possibility for action (Hutchby 2001). However, the agency to apply certain affordances lies on a side of those, who may be potentially included in these communication practices.

Notes

1. When looking for suitable human figures to print on the collage cards, I aimed for the most neutral ones, in a similar manner as in a language portrait technique. Thus, the figures did not have faces drawn, or any specific hairstyles or clothes. Instead, these were blank male and female silhouettes, distinguished into adults and children only by resizing the figures. When preparing the cards, I also considered including a gender-neutral figure. However, being familiar with a community cultural context, I was aware that this could have raised questions and confusion, possibly distracting study participants from the collage creation process. Interestingly, some of the study participants ignored the gendering issue when choosing cards for their collage. Instead, they focused on numbers of relatives (e.g. of children) and associated family functions (partner, aunt, etc.).

2. In studies of linguistic practices, participants are asked to draw into the non-gendered body silhouette any languages that mean something to them. This technique pioneered by Busch (2006) is termed a 'language portrait'. An elicitation interview is conducted while the study participant is drawing, or immediately after the drawing is completed. The language portrait as a visual prompt is frequently applied in studies on multilingualism, also in transnational and migration contexts. The technique was used as one of the research components to create mediagrams in Lexander and Androutsopoulos (2019) study.

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