

# Transnational connectivity and the affective paradoxes of digital care labour: Exploring how young refugees technologically mediate co-presence

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc)**Koen Leurs**

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

**Abstract**

Digital migration scholarship has foregrounded how migrants (refugees, forced migrants, expatriates among others) use smartphones and social media to technologically mediate co-presence with loved ones and friends abroad. Aural, visual and haptic affordances give shape to feelings of co-presence, triggering various affects. Affectivity refers here to bodily sensations like joy which can be circulated among migrant families and friendship groups, through digital networks. Paradoxically, maintaining bonds as well as keeping face can be felt as emotionally taxing, triggering negative affective intensities such as fear, anxiety, shame and guilt. Still, the young refugees I have interviewed feel strongly compelled to transnationally connect because they strongly care. Therefore, this research note proposes the notion of digital care labour to attend to the emotional, digital labour involved in maintaining transnational connections between people living at distance, in starkly diverging material conditions.

**Keywords**

affectivity, co-presence, digital care labour, digital migration studies, young refugees

Almost every day. I have to do it. All my family and friends stay in other countries.

It is difficult, but I think social media really helps to make contact with people living abroad. You can talk, send photos, videos.

–Jack (‘I’m 16-years-old. My nationality is Palestinian. I have loads of friends. I’m a foreigner here’)

**Corresponding author:**

Koen Leurs, Graduate Gender Programme, Department of Media and Culture, Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2A, 3512 EV Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Email: [K.H.A.Leurs@uu.nl](mailto:K.H.A.Leurs@uu.nl)

We have to talk with our cousins. We love them. I can't live without them. My nephew, he is very far away, but via the apps and so on I can see him crying.

—Ela ('17-year-old girl from Syria, originally from Palestine. I'm here in the Netherlands for two years and I love books')

Forced migrants across the world are increasingly digitally 'connected migrants' (Diminescu, 2020; UNHCR, 2016) as they commonly use smartphones and social media to keep in touch with family and friends who stayed put or who have migrated elsewhere. Digital migration scholarship has addressed how interpersonal digital connectivity creates a sense of transnational synchronicity and geographical proximity. These exchanges have been studied to give shape to ambient, virtual and transnational forms of 'co-presence' (Diminescu, 2020; Madianou, 2016; Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016). Most commonly foregrounded in these accounts are the ways in which transnational connectedness allows migrants to maintain their family bond across borders. Highlighting the ordinariness of exchanges, they are commonly reported to stimulate positive emotional outcomes, affects and sensations such as joy, hope, relaxation, confidence, enthusiasm, energy, reassurance and security (Greene, 2019; Twigt, 2018). Illustratively, in my own research with young stranded Somalis awaiting family reunification in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with parents and loved ones living overseas, I documented in particular their positive feelings. Informants commonly used Internet cafés for video-chat messaging and emailing their families. I analyzed their experiences through the notion of 'transnational affective capital', recognizing transnational connectivity as a repository of resourceful practices these youth tap into to make do with their situation of adversity and hardship (Leurs, 2015). Humanitarian discourse, too, champions digital connections for their potential of 'improved refugee well-being and self-reliance' (UNHCR, 2016: 22).

However, over the course of fieldwork I conducted with young refugees<sup>1</sup> living in the Netherlands between 2016 and 2019 I have realized this is only part of their experience. I have come to realize the affects and emotions of transnational co-presence are multiple and often paradoxical. Informants shared feeling a strong desire – a compulsion – to maintain a strong emotional bond by being "always-on". Like Jack and Ela quoted in the epigraph above, informants feel they *have to be* connected. They send and receive a constant stream of calls, audio, image, video and text messages to reassure the health and safety of family members and friends living in precarious circumstances including war, deprivation and devastation. Aural, visual and haptic (touching the screen) affordances of voice and video-chat establish a sense of technologically mediated co-presence which allows for affectively grounding oneself in the 'ontological safety of the family . . . at least momentarily' (Witteborn, 2015: 361). Simultaneously, the time, energy and attention required to maintain those ritualistic bonds as well as the expectations of keeping face can be felt as emotionally taxing. In some instances, it becomes a burdensome obligation triggering negative affective intensities such as fear,

shame and guilt. In some instances, connections are also felt as forms of transnational surveillance that constrain actions. Such paradoxes are not sufficiently discussed in existing scholarship.

In this research note, I tease out how young refugees themselves narrate their paradoxical affective experiences of maintaining transnational connections with loved ones and friends abroad. Conceptually, I seek to account for this complexity by developing the notion of ‘digital care labour’, by bringing into dialogue scholarship on affect, care and labour in the fields of migration and Internet studies. The article is structured as follows: first I will set the terms, and second I elaborate digital care labour by grounding it in fieldwork findings.

## **Setting the terms: Transnational connectivity as digital + care + labour**

Rethinking transnational connectivity as a form of digital care labour will allow for an alternative, multi-layered understanding of how paradoxically positive and negative affects always interrelate in keeping in touch across borders. While we are seeing growing attention for affect and emotions in media, communication and Internet studies in the last decade, critical strands of sociology, geography and migration studies have embraced the affective turn since the early 2000s (Clough and Halley, 2007). Contributing to the emerging research focus of digital migration studies (Leurs and Smets, 2018), here I am taking stock how the two fields have approached affectivity of transnational interpersonal relations: media scholars have been principally concerned with how migrants engage with medium-specific affordances to digitally mediate transnational connections (Alinejad and Olivieri, 2020; Witteborn, 2015), while migration scholars have foregrounded how migrants maintain care networks across borders which may be circular but are always also shaped by hierarchies (Walsh, 2018). These two strands illustrate the broader focus, in particular on the materialities of humans engaging with technologies spurring ‘networked affect’ (Paasonen, 2018) in Internet studies while migration studies have specifically focused how care circulates as ‘transnational affect’ (Wise and Velayutham, 2017). However, in both strands, positive affects are emphasized. In addition, both networked and transnational affect require forms of labour (time, energy and dedication), in the form of digital labour and care labour respectively. However, these dynamics have remained understudied in scholarship on transnational communication among migrants.

To situate my use of the term *affect*, I bring together critical theories and applications of affect in migration and Internet studies. The Deleuzian approach to affect is here taken as a starting point, referring to affect as a transition of bodily intensities caused by something or someone: ‘from one state to another, from one image or idea to another, there are transitions, passages that are experienced, durations through which we pass to a greater or a lesser perfection’ (Deleuze, 1988: 48). Sarah Ahmed (2004) has further conceptualized the cultural politics of emotions, arguing that affective passages ‘change things’: ‘they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments’ (p. 119).

In Internet studies, this approach has been translated into scholarship on digitally networked affect, which Susana Paasonen (2018) argues ‘allows for an examination of how intensities shape our ubiquitous networked exchanges, how they circulate, oscillate and become registered as a sensation by bodies that pass from one state to another’ (pp. 283–284). Jodi Dean (2010) theorizes users perform free digital labour needed for ‘communicative capitalism’ because they feel a ‘drive’, as emailing, tweeting, blogging affectively moves us and rewards ‘a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention’ (p. 21). Migration studies have centred on the geographies of ‘transnational affect’: ‘a methodological and theoretical lens through which to understand how affects and emotions reproduce (and sometimes redirect) transnational social fields’ (Wise and Velayutham, 2017: 117), addressing their enabling structures, materialities and in particular the emotional care-work involved: among migration scholars, ‘care is the dominant theoretical tool for analyzing transnational families’ (Walsh, 2018: 27). Care for family and kin involves ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 2008), including regularly sending remittances, personal objects and making phone calls.

These approaches have resulted in two diverging frameworks to study transnational connectivity and affect (e.g. Oiarzabal, 2020). However, recently, successful initial connections between the two branches have been made, as scholars have begun to highlight hierarchies in transnational co-presence and the intricacies of communicating care in transnational families and friend-groups. Focusing on how members of transnational families are commonly unevenly positioned, Earving Charles Cabalquinto (2018) analyzed mediated rituals of transnational Filipino families through the notion of ‘asymmetrical mobile intimacy’. He distinguishes between six factors that disrupt forms of connected presence ‘access, socio-technical competency, quality of connectivity, rhythms, affective experience, and communicative space’ (Cabalquinto, 2019: 49). Donya Alinejad (2019) proposed the concept of ‘careful co-presence’ to refer to how migrants make a ‘careful’, deliberate selection between particular platforms that each have distinct emotional affordances, while being ‘care-full’ in how they circulate their ‘feelings of care’ in transnational families (p. 2). Here, I contribute to further bridging the two approaches by foregrounding the multiple forms of labour required in maintaining transnational co-presence.

## **Digital care labour in practice**

My contact with my friends in Egypt had separated me into two parts.

Mo, who is 18 years old and ‘from Syria’, introduced himself by stating ‘I lived in Egypt for five years before I came here’. His digital connections with loved ones abroad trigger paradoxical feelings of presence and absence, reminding himself of 3 years prior: ‘when I arrived here, I was here in my body but my mind was in Egypt, so I had two lives, one here and the other there, so I began to feel depression’. As a coping mechanism, he shares ‘what make me feel comfortable when I have pressure I draw’. In this section, I will bring the concept of digital care labour to bear on a selection of empirical findings from analyzing in-depth interviews and photo-elicitation activities with 42 young refugees (see Leurs, 2017, for methodological considerations). The majority of informants feel a

strong urge to connect with family and friends in their homeland, illustrating ‘the compulsion of proximity which every migrant experiences’ (Diminescu, 2020: 76).

Smartphone users, Jane Vincent (2015) argues, create unique, symbiotic bonds with their devices, turning them into ‘emotionalized social robots’: ‘enabling a communicable stream of consciousness and emotions that are intertwined between the mobile phone and their emotional self’ (p. 105). Young refugees maintain strong, but distinct relations with their phones. For example, Nour describes herself as a ‘16 year old, from Syria. I have been in the Netherlands for 3 years. I wear a headscarf and practice Ramadan. But I don’t pray. I’m into computer games’. She shares getting mixed emotions from communicating with friends in Syria and the Netherlands through WhatsApp and Instagram. Recently, this resulted in her breaking her smartphone. She can’t live with, nor without her phone: ‘when I’m without my phone, I’m sad . . . but when I’m angry, I cannot stand my phone. Sometimes I throw it’ out of frustration. To explain further this paradox, consider the experiences of Sam, who introduces himself as follows: ‘I’m 27 years old, from Aleppo, Syria, I did English literature for two years, and I’ve been living in the Netherlands for about 3.5 years now and I’m doing English teacher education’.

It’s important to me, because I like to keep in contact with my friends to know how they are doing and my family as well they see pictures and everything. But . . . I know that they always lie. I always don’t tell them what happens to me. I always tell my mum I’m very happy, I’m fine. There were periods when I was like very sad. But I don’t tell her, like what’s she gonna do to help me, you know? . . . I know if they are in a bad situation, and mostly it’s like this, of course it affects me in a bad way. They try to lie, most of the time, but I know they are lying. So it causes stress, and causes frustration to you, because you know you cannot do anything. I’m living here, and they are suffering there.

Sam’s detailed description illustrates digital care labour for transnational connectivity (1) revolves around performing *labour of care* for loved ones living at distance, and (2) this relationship is in *imbalance*, as Sam’s material circumstances differ widely from his family and friends living through civil war in Syria. (3) When mediated through deliberately chosen digital platforms this caring becomes a form of *digital labour* which in turn requires (4) distinct ritualistic practices of *emotional labour* such as impression management and keeping up appearances, observable both from his side of the exchange as well as from the perspective of his family and friends. For some, like Sam, withholding feelings and keeping up appearances is a way to make do with the frustrations of separation. The digital labour of impression management is also apparent from many informants who maintain several profiles on social media platforms. Nour maintains two profiles on WhatsApp and Instagram: one for her ‘special friends’ in the Netherlands with whom she shares her everyday life including school life, romance, entertainment, food and hobbies, and one for her audiences in Syria where she keeps a serious, neutral presence. Here we see how digital care labour for migrants involves spending time and energy to make the most of specific affordances (such as combining multiple social media accounts on a single device) to avoid ‘context collapse and collision’ (Dhoest, 2019: 397) between audiences such as kinship networks in their homeland, and friends locally and in the diaspora. For others, digital connectivity is too much of a pressure cooker and painful

reminder of trauma and pain, so they resort to alternative means of communication. For example, Amani, who turned 19 a week after our interview and describes she is into ‘painting, drawing, and many sports, like ballet, belly dancing, table tennis and fitness’, explains as follows:

I have a lot of people from Syria on WhatsApp, but with five friends we send letters. I have a friend, and he lives in Germany. I prefer for example that we don’t speak online for a week. But I will write everything down on paper, like the things I’ve done. And I’ll send them via the mail. You know, on paper, you can save it. And on your phone, all you write looks the same.

To balance the affective paradoxes of digital care labour of remaining in contact with loved ones still living through civil war, Amani and her close circle of Syrian friends living in the European diaspora together have embraced exchanging letters as a self-care oriented communicative practice. Here we see how young connected refugees selectively take up the distinct ‘affective affordances’ (Twigt, 2018: 2) of writing and exchanging letters over the instantaneity and always-on social media affordances to maintain various forms of co-presence with diverging scales of time and space. For some connections – particularly those with loved ones living through hardship – they feel affectively compelled to maintain synchronous and instantaneous links; with others who have also fled and now live in the diaspora, alternative co-presences are established based on different communicative modalities and rhythms which allow for contemplation and reflection.

## Conclusion

Digital migration scholarship has foregrounded how migrants use smartphones and social media to technologically mediate co-presence and stay connected with loved ones and friends abroad. Co-presence triggers various forms of affectivity, which refers to a sensation which can be circulated among migrant families and friendship groups, through digital networks: ‘a transpersonal *capacity* which a body has to be affected (through an affection) and to affect (as the result of modifications)’ (Anderson, 2006: 735). Ties can now be maintained through the digital, but often these forms of transnational connectivity are heavily imbalanced as a result of contrasting experiences and diverging material living conditions. There is thus urgency to tease out the paradoxes of the ‘compulsion of connectivity’ felt among migrants as a one-sided focus on positive dynamics perpetuates an ‘idealised vision of the individual/connected-citizen and of equally idealised digital connectivity’ which in everyday lived reality remains ‘full of exclusions’ (Georgiou, 2016: np). A common overemphasis on a ritual continuation of connectivity across distance and their accompanying positive affects – which might be tied to commitments to finding agency over structural constraints – risks flattening transnational connectivity into a one dimensional, balanced, frictionless and pain-free process.

Through a focus on care – which is emotional, commonly based on imbalanced relations, demands labour and is increasingly digitally mediated – I have sought to tease out the paradoxes of co-presence. Transnational migrant networks revolve around the circulation of care, which ‘binds members together in intergenerational networks of

reciprocity and obligation, love and trust'; however, as migration scholars have pointed out these 'are simultaneously fraught with tension, contest and relations of unequal power' (Baldassar and Merla, 2014: 7). In this research note I have therefore proposed the notion of digital care labour with the aim of understanding better how transnational connectivity paradoxically stimulates both positive as well as negative affects and feelings like fear, guilt, anxiety or shame. The affective paradoxes of transnational co-presence illustrate the need for media and migration scholars to attend more to the cultural politics of affectivity, feeling and emotions. Arjun Appadurai (1996) famously mapped the relationships of media and migration through five dimensions of global cultural flows – 'mediascape', 'ethnoscape', 'technoscape', 'financescape' and 'ideoscape' – but work on the intricacies of what can be called an 'emoscape' or 'affectscape' that are intrinsically bound to the other domains is long overdue.

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### **Note**

1. It is imperative to problematize the 'categorical fetishism' of labels like 'refugees', 'forced migrants' and 'economic migrants': 'these categories are not empty vessels into which people can be placed in some neutral ordering process' (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018: 49). For example, the force in forced migration is never as clear-cut as the institutionalized definition, but rather a continuum encompassing myriad migration motivations. Nonetheless, these categories are used to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate mobile subjects, dividing between those who are accepted as insiders and those who are projected as outsiders to Europe.



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