

“I CAN HUG HER WITH MY EYES”: VIRTUALIZATION OF AFFECTION IN CONNECTED TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

“Posso abraçá-la com meus olhos”:
Virtualização do afeto em famílias transnacionais conectadas

 Priscila Chalá-Mejía¹

¹Universidad de Las Américas,
Quito, Pichincha, EC

 Ximena Suquillo¹

¹Universidad de Las Américas,
Quito, Pichincha, EC

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Abstract

This paper explores how the accessibility to and appropriation of information and communication technologies (ICT) has enabled a group of Ecuadorian transnational families to virtualize their expressions of affection. A thematic analysis was applied to examine 41 interviews with a) Ecuadorian migrants who live in Spain, b) relatives of migrants who remain in Ecuador, and c) migrants who have returned to Ecuador while some of their family members remain in Spain. The findings suggest that ICT allows them to adopt strategies to function as *connected transnational families* because the connectivity that accompanies migrants in the destination country (Spain) shifts to families in the country of origin (Ecuador), thus establishing more symmetric communicational exchanges. Furthermore, migrants who have returned to Ecuador use ICT to sustain the relational continuity of affection with the members of their families in both places.

Keywords: virtual copresence; smartphone; E-families; Spain; Ecuador

Resumo

Este artigo explora como a acessibilidade e a apropriação das tecnologias de informação e comunicação (TIC) permitiram que um grupo de famílias transnacionais equatorianas virtualizasse a expressão de seus afetos. Uma análise temática foi aplicada para examinar 41 entrevistas com a) migrantes equatorianos que vivem na Espanha, b) parentes de migrantes que permanecem no Equador e c) migrantes que retornaram ao Equador enquanto parte de sua família ainda está na Espanha. Os resultados sugerem que as TICs permitem que eles adotem estratégias para funcionar como famílias transnacionais conectadas, pois a conectividade que acompanha os migrantes no país de destino (Espanha) se transfere para as famílias no país de origem (Equador), estabelecendo assim trocas comunicacionais mais simétricas. Além disso, os migrantes que retornaram ao Equador, por meio das TIC, mantiveram a continuidade relacional de afeto com os membros de suas famílias em ambos os lugares.

Palavras-chave: copresença virtual; smartphone; e-famílias; Espanha; Equador

Introduction

Absence is inevitable in the migration process. Due to the rupture in family coexistence, feelings of guilt may arise among those who leave. Sayad ([1999] 2010) suggests that for migrants, daily life is marked by a double absence: a physical absence in the host country and an imagined absence in the homeland. Thus, they are "neither here nor there", which causes them distress and anxiety.

However, in recent decades, owing to the emergence of new ICTs, absence and presence are no longer necessarily antagonistic. In this sense, migratory experiences can be analyzed through the evolution of communicational processes. At different historical moments, postal mail (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1996) or telephone (Vertovec, 2004) has allowed migrants to maintain contact with their families. The emergence of the internet, but specifically that of smartphones, represented a turning point, leading to the emergence of "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008) who have appropriated information and communication technologies (ICT), giving new meanings to space-time and restructuring transnational family relationships that, from this perspective, relativize absence and remoteness.

The habitual use of ICT allows the virtualization of affection (Alfama *et al.*, 2005), "virtual (co)presence" (Baldassar, 2016), "being together" practices (Nedelcu, Wyss, 2016), or the development of virtual intimacy (Wilding, 2006), from which family relationships are negotiated (Acedera, Yeoh, 2021; Benítez, 2011).

For Diminescu (2008, p. 568), the conditions associated with ICT cause human mobility to produce a double presence (at the origin and destination). Their habitual use has determined that "immigrating and cutting your roots" has given way to "circulate and keep in touch" since both migrants and nonmigrant relatives develop communication strategies to "doing families" (Nedelcu, Wyss, 2016; Qiu, 2022).

On the other hand, as Sayad ([1999] 2010) had already identified, migrants feel a moral obligation to send economic remittances (Ambrosini, 2023) and to exchange emotional remittances with their loved ones: solidarity, gratitude, love, compassion (Chalá Mejía *et al.*, 2022). In this context, ICTs have contributed not only to maintaining affective relationships but also to making care demands available at any time (Ahlin, 2020).

Using qualitative methodology, through 41 semistructured interviews, this research analyzes how information and communication technologies (ICT) have allowed members of Ecuadorian transnational families to virtualize the manifestation of their affection. The aim is to learn about the transformations in the uses of ICTs among a group of Ecuadorian migrants living in Spain, the relatives of migrants in Ecuador and migrants who have returned to Ecuador to give continuity to their affective relationships. It is, therefore, this multisite study aims to understand the realities produced at the origin and destination and those of the actors who have been in both scenarios.

Affection and virtuality

Transnationalism refers to how migrants create and maintain multidimensional bonds between countries of origin and destination countries (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1992). According to this theory, migrants establish themselves in the host society but reinforce family, economic, cultural or political connections with their homeland (Basch *et al.*, 2003; Usta, 2023).

In this context, a transnational family is one who, due to the affectivity that unites migrants and nonmigrant family members and despite the distance that separates them, manages to give continuity to their relationships and maintain affective ties (Bryceson, Vuorela, 2002).

Affect is understood as the capacity of individuals to affect, be affected, act and connect; thus, it can influence the state of mind toward others (Brennan, 2004). It is the nonconscious bodily intensity that responds to the words and visual and sound stimuli to which people are exposed (Massumi, 1995).

Moreover, affectivity refers to feelings (well-being, collectivity and fraternity) and the expression of emotions that modifies the bodily experience. It encompasses the state of mind that involves each individual's perception of the world (Brennan, 2004). According to Spinoza (Deleuze, 1988), affectivity is related not only to the capacity to affect or cause affection (*affectio*) but also to that of being affected. Affections are translated into feelings (*affectus*) or affective responses.

The force of an affecting body and the impact it leaves on the one affected. *Affectio* may be fleeting, but it may also leave a residue, a lasting impression that produces particular kinds of bodily capacities. (Watkins, 2010, p. 269)

Intimacy comprises practices of “close association, familiarity and privileged knowledge”, which generate strong positive emotional bonds that, associated with trust, imply a particular form of “closeness” and of being “special” to another person (Jamieson, 2005, p. 189). Affectivity is an element that contributes to generating greater intimacy (Brennan, 2004).

In intrafamily relationships, affectivity and intimacy are disrupted when one or more members emigrate because the link between corporeality, expressiveness and sensoriality is associated with space and proximity (Alfama *et al.*, 2005). To overcome the physical and temporal distances that separate them, transnational family members seek mechanisms so that affectivity is not limited to corporal presential status (Jaji, 2022).

In this context, communication tools have defined specific forms of interaction in affective manifestations leading to the virtualization of affection, i.e., the disembodiment of affectivity marked by the capacity for interaction through technological support (Alfama *et al.*, 2005). Imagination, knowledge and memory activate virtualization (Lemos, 2009), creating a space where conversation and human-machine interactions are combined. This process allows humans to organize communication according to their interests (Lévy, 1999).

Transnational communication and affectivity

Affectivity and intimacy, mediated by communication, between migrants and their families have been conditioned by the technological progress of each era and the tools available to them (Portes, DeWind, 2004). This process makes it possible to develop varied emotional registers because ICT reveals the conditions under which communication occurs and provides information about the management of those emotions (Demirsu, 2022).

Long ago, postal mail was used for transnational communication. Epistolary exchange, marked by dilation and asynchrony in the flow of information (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1996), has, in terms of expressiveness, been defined by the profusion of details to convey moods (Borges, Cancian, 2016).

The telephone presented an advance in family interaction due to the synchrony established in calls. Voice brings intimacy and reduces the feeling of remoteness, providing the technological

basis for increasing transnational family ties (Vertovec, 2004). Although the telephone has not been available to all due to accessibility conditions, its use has been more widespread than that of other media. Although the cost of calls has limited the duration of conversations (Wilding, 2006), with prepaid cards, prices have dropped, generating closer contact that has reinforced familiarity (Vertovec, 2004).

E-mail, but especially chat, has significantly shortened the emission and reception times of written messages (Hernández-Cordero, 2017); however, as with postal mail, it sometimes causes misunderstandings (Alfama *et al.*, 2005). This situation overcomes the real-time video streaming that provides nonverbal and contextual cues during interactions, allowing intrafamily problems to be solved in a more direct way and creating copresence (Baldassar, 2016). Regardless, the sense of physical separation has increased, making the actual distance more tangible, despite the digital closeness (Qiu, 2022).

For some families, use of the telephone and internet depends on their economic situation and accessibility conditions. Although use of telephones has gradually spread, family members sometimes had to channel communications through public call centers (*locutorios*) to make voice calls over the internet (VoIP system), despite the lack of privacy (Belli, Gil, 2011; Leifsen, Tymczuk, 2012).

The massification of cell phones overcame this situation, increasing the autonomy to establish communication, mainly by migrants (Ahlin, 2020), who used to call, especially their children and parents, whereas relatives did so on special occasions, such as birthdays (Reist, Riaño, 2008). In addition, the cost of prepaid cards was reduced (Horst, 2006).

Recently, smartphone innovations have modified interaction dynamics (Waruwu, 2022). The smartphone is both a material device and a symbolic gadget that connects two realities incorporated into ritualized dynamics (Zapata-Martínez, 2020) that, for transnational families, have meaning and significance (Larrinaga-Bidegain *et al.*, 2024).

Easy-to-use applications such as WhatsApp reinforce synchronous and asynchronous communication (Kędra, 2023). Daily exchanges of images, text and voice messages, calls and video calls help younger people maintain the image of family and, through intergenerational communication, engage in cultural transfer between the origin and the destination (Demirsu, 2022; Eklund, Sadowski, 2023). Older adults have learned to handle ICT to communicate with children and grandchildren (Nedelcu, 2017).

Webcams allow the exchange of different kinds of care. Real-time transmission integrates groups of people in everyday life (Zapata-Martínez, 2020). In addition, they function as visual surveillance systems (Francisco, 2015) and have a strengthened copresence but also demand permanent availability (Ahlin, 2020; Nedelcu, Wyss, 2016).

Likewise, smartphones, by approximating the reality of the destination country, do not facilitate returns to the place of origin (Hunter, 2015) and amplify pressures for the economic support of migrants to their families (Rössel *et al.*, 2023).

ICT reinforces family unity by reconfiguring the nostalgia of absence, return or regrouping, and recreating shared symbolic universes (Barros, 2023; Melella, 2016) that reduce homesickness (Cabalquinto, 2020). However, manipulation strategies also occur at a distance through lies and secrets, leading to suffering and affective ruptures (Larrinaga-Bidegain *et al.*, 2024; Lobo, 2020; Usta, 2023). This panorama shows that transnational families actively participate in the emotional

life of others, which creates opportunities while straining affective relationships at a distance (Barros, 2023; Benítez, 2011; Vázquez-Maggio, Mejía, 2023).

In this context, in accordance with Hall's (1985) proposal on the articulation or connections that require particular conditions of existence for their emergence, it is noted that within the current communication ecosystem, the exchanges and constant updating between the media, culture and society affect the message transmission circuit. Consequently, ICTs reconfigure the relational dynamics and affective manifestations of transnational families.

Research questions

The literature review reveals that, among transnational families, ICTs generate feelings relational proximity and relativize physical distance, despite being a source of conflict. In the Ecuadorian context, communication, affect and virtualization have not been analyzed or, at least, no evidence has been found pertaining to them. Hence, the following research questions are formulated:

RQ₁. How have communication practices among Ecuadorian transnational family members changed?

RQ₂. How do Ecuadorian transnational families use ICTs to maintain affective relational continuity?

Methods

Using the qualitative–interpretative paradigm, “where notions about particular human experiences in context are recognized from different subject positions” (Malterud, 2016, p. 120), we analyze the data collected through interviews that offer flexibility and dynamism to learn about the experiences (Edwards, Holland, 2013) of 21 migrants in Spain and 11 family members of migrants and 9 returned migrants in Ecuador.

The interviewees were selected via snowball sampling, which consisted of identifying participants who referred researchers to other interviewees. The selection criterion was membership in a transnational family with a presence in Ecuador and Spain. The participants were chosen to contrast the experiences of virtualization of affectivity according to the transnational family members' location (homeland and host country), and of those who have lived in both places.

The participants were informed about the objective of the research, and their verbal consent was obtained to record their responses (Lawton *et al.*, 2017). Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Spain and Ecuador in different places (home, work, study or association spaces). The participants responded to semistructured and complementary questions about family relationships at a distance and the use of technological tools for family communication.

The sample (Table 1) comprised 31 women and 10 men, ranging in age from 18 to 80 years. The average time of family separation corresponds to migrants aged 15.14 years, family members aged 15.64 years, and returned migrants aged 14.11 years, with an average return time of 4.70 years.

In terms of degree of kinship, the relatives of migrants who remained in Ecuador are children, parents, siblings and, to a lesser extent, partners. Among the relatives who migrated to Spain are children, siblings, nephews, uncles, aunts and cousins. Of those who returned to Ecuador, the relatives who remained in Spain are mainly siblings and, to a lesser extent, parents

and children, whereas in Ecuador, they are children, siblings, parents, grandchildren and, to a lesser extent, partners.

Table 1 - Characterization of the participants

Respondent No.	Age / Gender	Yfs*	Country Of Residence	Condition
R1	18–22/F	14	Ecuador	Return
R2	18–22/F	15	Spain	Migrant
R3	18–22/F	17	Ecuador	Relative
R4	18–22/F	19	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R5	28–32/F	19	Ecuador	Relative
R6	33–37/F	14	Spain	Migrant
R7	38–42/F	13	Spain	Migrant
R8	38–42/F	15	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R9	38–42/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R10	43–47/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R11	43–47/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R12	43–47/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R13	48–52/F	12	Ecuador	Relative
R14	48–52/F	13	Spain	Migrant
R15	48–52/F	15	Spain	Migrant
R16	48–52/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R17	48–52/F	17	Ecuador	Relative
R18	48–52/F	17	Spain	Migrant
R19	48–52/F	18	Ecuador	Relative
R20	48–52/F	18	Spain	Migrant
R21	48–52/F	20	Ecuador	Relative
R22	53–57/F	2	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R23	53–57/F	15	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R24	53–57/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R25	53–57/F	16	Spain	Migrant
R26	58–62/F	13	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R27	58–62/F	15	Ecuador	Relative
R28	63–67/F	2	Ecuador	Relative
R29	63–67/F	5	Spain	Migrant
R30	68–72/F	17	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R31	78–82/F	22	Ecuador	Relative
R32	18–22/M	17	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R33	28–32/M	20	Ecuador	Relative
R34	33–37/M	14	Spain	Migrant
R35	33–37/M	16	Spain	Migrant

R36	38–42/M	10	Ecuador	Relative
R37	48–52/M	15	Ecuador	Return Migrant
R38	48–52/M	17	Spain	Migrant
R39	48–52/M	20	Spain	Migrant
R40	58–62/M	13	Spain	Migrant
R41	58–62/M	16	Spain	Migrant

Note: * Years of family separation

Analysis

All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, analyzed and encoded. All data was anonymized. The data were processed using thematic content analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2006), which identifies, organizes and analyzes themes as a result of a meticulous review of the data to understand and interpret the phenomenon being studied.

In accordance with Braun and Clarke (2022), the analytic process coded and categorized the information while identifying text segments with a theme and relating them to codes. The interaction between codes and themes involved several iterations. The data analysis was a reflexive process (Fereday, Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The process applied comprises the following phases: familiarization with the data, generating a codebook, establishing categories, searching, reviewing, establishing definitions, naming the themes from the data and writing the report. A deductive approach was chosen for the categories since they were established on the basis of a theoretical review (Braun, Clarke, 2006, 2022). This process was applied to the data extracted for each group of participants: a) Ecuadorian migrants, b) relatives of migrants, and c) migrants who returned to Ecuador.

Findings

The findings are presented in three thematic blocks. The participants' testimonies are shown in the form of key quotes that exemplify the essence of each theme.

Means used in transnational communication

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the main means of communication for the group of migrants who remained in Spain and those who returned to Ecuador was the telephone. Although some owned mobile phones, the cost of phone calls to Ecuador was high; the alternative was voice calls over the internet (VoIP), for which they had to go to public call centers, where they also bought prepaid phone cards and sent money.

In Ecuador, some families owned conventional and mobile phones, while others had to travel to neighboring homes or to telephone booths to receive phone calls, and they had to obtain phone cards. The VoIP call system in Spain and Ecuador was common. Letters and postcards were also communication channels, although they were used to a lesser extent.

Back then [2002], the novelty was the cell phone and prepaid phone cards that could be recharged... because I did not make phone calls by local telephone due to its cost... There were also phone booths... When we did not have phone cards, we would go to phone booths. (R3, family woman)

Gradually, as purchasing power and technological skills improved, tools became transformational. The use of computers in homes and public call centers allowed for the exchange of email, although not in a generalized manner. The most notable innovations have been the dynamics associated with chat and video conferencing applications (Messenger, Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, and WhatsApp). Facebook has enabled wider group socialization, where social events are announced and commented upon (birthdays and other celebrations).

In recent years, smartphones have become reference supports among these families. Their use is due to improvements in telecommunications infrastructure in Ecuador. A total of 59.6% of the Ecuadorian population owns a cell phone, 55.6% of which are smartphones (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 2023). Smartphones allow for constant communication flows because, owing to the reduction in internet costs, the perception is that using certain applications is less expensive or even free (open Wi-Fi signal), and they adapt to diverse needs (synchrony and asynchrony to manage the time difference).

I don't go to public call centers anymore. I communicate with them using my mobile phone. I also sent them a mobile phone...so we can see each other through the camera.... I call them every day. (R25, migrant woman)

Conventional phone calls continue to be used, as parents and older adults do not know how to use internet-based tools. Thus, for some families, public call centers remain the main system of communication, although they are no longer predominant.

Age is significant because writing in a chat, sharing photographs or videos, and holding video conferences are common among the younger members of the family, who are in charge of connecting the oldest members or teaching them how to use the applications. Some can make and receive phone calls on their mobile phones. Others simply prefer conventional phones.

Frequency of contact

Migrants maintain regular contact when their children remain in Ecuador or when one of their own parents is still living there, since this is part of their responsibilities as parents or children themselves. This is especially remarkable among women as a way to maintain their roles as mothers and daughters associated with caregiving.

In some cases, the main objective of migrating is to contribute to the economic well-being of the family. However, despite sending money home, the impossibility of physically taking care of the family generates guilt. Constant contact is a way of compensating for this inability, but it is also helpful for alleviating loneliness in Spain.

Since my whole family is over there [Ecuador], I talk to my daughters every day. Video conferences every day, especially on Fridays. Since I do not have them with me, at least I can see them and talk to them. (R9, migrant woman)

In the past, families had to schedule their communications. Migrants would go to public call centers in their spare time, while families organized "rituals" to wait for the phone call or to set up a video conference. All this waiting, in some cases, generated stress.

In the beginning [in 2000], it was not so frequent. It was not that we talked everyday... I remember my grandmother used to ask, "How are we going to communicate?" We would coordinate the schedules on a Sunday. (R5, family woman)

Currently, smartphones are used to make contact possible every day through chat or phone calls. Video conferences are carried out more sparingly, and while they are usually spontaneous, they still need to be scheduled owing to the time difference between the two countries and because work or school occupy specific schedules.

Since mobile phone or internet plans are more costly in Ecuador, migrants usually initiate communication, which is appreciated by some family members. These features add to the difficulties that older adults experience in handling ICT, so it is normal for migrants to be the ones to call, often through public call centers. In other cases, the initiative to establish contact comes from relatives.

Before [the 2000s], we were the ones who would call more often because calling from here [Spain] was cheaper than the other way around [from Ecuador]. Now it goes both ways because we just press a button on WhatsApp and we are talking. (R12, migrant woman)

Technological changes and similar accessibility conditions in both countries generate reciprocal exchanges. Migrants and their relatives communicate equally because they have the same resources. The intention to stay in contact must prevail to foster copresence through simultaneous exchanges.

Parents who have returned to Ecuador usually call their children in Spain; the situation does not change when the children return and the parents remain in Spain. Regardless of their place of residence, mothers and fathers are responsible for communication as another way to exercise care.

Affective manifestations mediated by ICT

Those who initially communicated through letters might have felt expressive limitations when not knowing how to convey their feelings due to the delay in responses or correspondence that was lost in transit. The ability to now hear the voice and perceive the state of mind of their loved ones produces peace and a certain normality in family relationships.

You definitely cannot express all that you feel through words. They are simply short letters, with precise words and short phrases. (R19, family woman)

This type of communication generates happiness if such a feeling is recognized in the other person. If suffering is perceived, sadness is also experienced, causing feelings of powerlessness when one is unable to provide physical emotional support, especially when communicating bad news. Furthermore, there is always an inability to express feelings due to the distances that generate gaps in relationships. Listening to a voice but not seeing the body language also causes discomfort.

Similarly, video conferencing, although it permits seeing other people and feeling they are close, constitutes a barrier that prevents family members from hugging, so the perception of distance becomes stronger. Thus, some people avoid video conferencing because it is distressing. After several years of maintaining telephone communication, adapting to an exchange mediated by a screen becomes problematic because one's vulnerability is more evident, yet one may wish to show it.

He [the son] doesn't like me to see him too much. I don't like seeing him either. We feel that if we see each other, we miss each other more. I feel that when we talk [on the phone], it seems like he is closer, but [with video conferencing] it's an ugly feeling. (R13, family woman)

Nevertheless, seeing family is more often a source of joy. On Christmas, New Year's Day, Mother's Day, or birthdays, video conferencing is part of the celebration, which allows interaction through customs and traditions to be maintained at a distance. Additionally, video conferencing means that people will not seem like strangers when physical reunions occur because everyone will have watched how they have physically changed since the last reunion.

Depending on where they have been living, family members of the younger generations feel emotionally detached from those who have migrated or who remain in Ecuador. They usually have sufficient contact to formally greet those on the other side of the screen but do not feel sufficient familiarity to establish dynamic conversations. Although ICT fosters more frequent contact, its use does not prevent intergenerational ties from weakening.

Conversely, using WhatsApp for exchanging text messages, voice messages, or photographs, with immediate or delayed reactions, as well as the transmission of videos in real time, accentuates feelings of immediacy and well-being because it enables the feeling of spontaneous involvement in daily dynamics. WhatsApp has become the central and omnipresent node for family communication between the two countries.

The perception is that the connection is simultaneous, permanent, quick, and easy. This phenomenon contrasts with observations at the onset of migratory processes (in the 1990s and 2000s). Owing to technological problems, accessibility conditions, and schedule incompatibility, they rarely spoke; accordingly, while phone calls were frequent, issues were never addressed in depth. Conversations revolved around trivial matters. Thus, no one truly knew what was going on. One only knew what others wanted to express explicitly.

You would never talk about a problem. Then, would come the crying, the "I miss you," and then the "Perfect, let's talk the next month." Now you have more knowledge about what is happening. (R36, family man)

Although ICT contributes to preserving family ties, distance prevails. When health issues arise, the feeling of powerlessness caused by not being physically present might trigger tension because the situation involves negotiating matters that are not always easy to explain or understand at a distance (treatments, degree of responsibility, decision-making). In addition, the inability to physically take care of someone who is ill might generate reproach on the part of the caregiver toward those who are absent.

My husband's mother passed away, and he was not able to come [to Ecuador]. We had money, but the money is worthless if you don't have papers. It's horrible. Really bad. Time mends all that, not technology. (R8, returned migrant woman)

Another issue that becomes a source of conflict is affection, as it is mediated by money. Some migrants feel that their families contact them to complain, to demand material things, or to ask for more money. This feeling stems from the fact that, in part, migrants are perceived as successful people or because the purpose of migrating is specifically to contribute to the family economy.

The typical first conversations are "Look, your son needs this or that," or "I want a bicycle." The backbone of the conversation is purely economic and dramatic. "Mom is sick; she is in the hospital. We do not have money for medicine. It's time for you to send something [money]." This sort of conversation sometimes ended up being exhausting. (R39, migrant man)

Difficulties are also perceived in dealing with matters related to children's education, the care of parents, or personal affection, which are sometimes difficult to explain when the family

members are not face to face. In addition, verifying the veracity of certain facts, such as money management or intrafamily behavior, is impossible. These factors generate impotence, pain, or anger. Thus, using ICTs does not prevent mistrust that might arise if ICTs are not used. ICT also becomes a mechanism of control, especially between couples, which increases the problems stemming from physical separation.

The situations referred to were difficult to address at public call centers because of the evident lack of privacy. With mobile devices, these issues are dealt with “behind closed doors,” which is why deeper conversations can occur.

Moreover, they highlight the here/there and the now, which might be positive because immediate solutions are sought, although more prolonged conflicts might also arise.

There was almost no intimacy. We always had to discuss more general issues because you would have two or three people who were sitting next to you in front of the computer. There was no privacy. (R37, returned migrant man)

For returned migrants, although technology helps, they feel that important family moments were lost. Some feel that once they return to Ecuador permanently, they have sacrificed their economic well-being and have lost the lifestyle they had in Spain. They find that sharing time and space again with family in Ecuador compensates them.

As years have passed, certain families experience affective ruptures, which are due to the personality of each member of the family but also because distance has turned them into “close” strangers. While they keep in contact more or less frequently, they feel that the distance makes them unable to identify emotionally with members of the family who are not part of their nuclear unit.

My uncle was like a father to me. When he left, I did not even get a chance to say goodbye. Therefore, it feels that love was left half done. Every time I talk to him, the affection fades away. (R33, family man)

The youngest returned migrants confirmed that the caring actions and communication mechanisms sustained by migrating parents toward the family who remained in Ecuador allowed them to rely on a family support network upon their return, which made the new separation more manageable.

My grandparents and other relatives were strangers to me, since the memories I had were revived by photos. Since I came back to live here [Ecuador], my love and affection for them has grown. Now they are some of the most important people to me. I need to take care of them and be the intermediary in the communication they have with my parents [who are still in Spain]. (R32, returned migrant man)

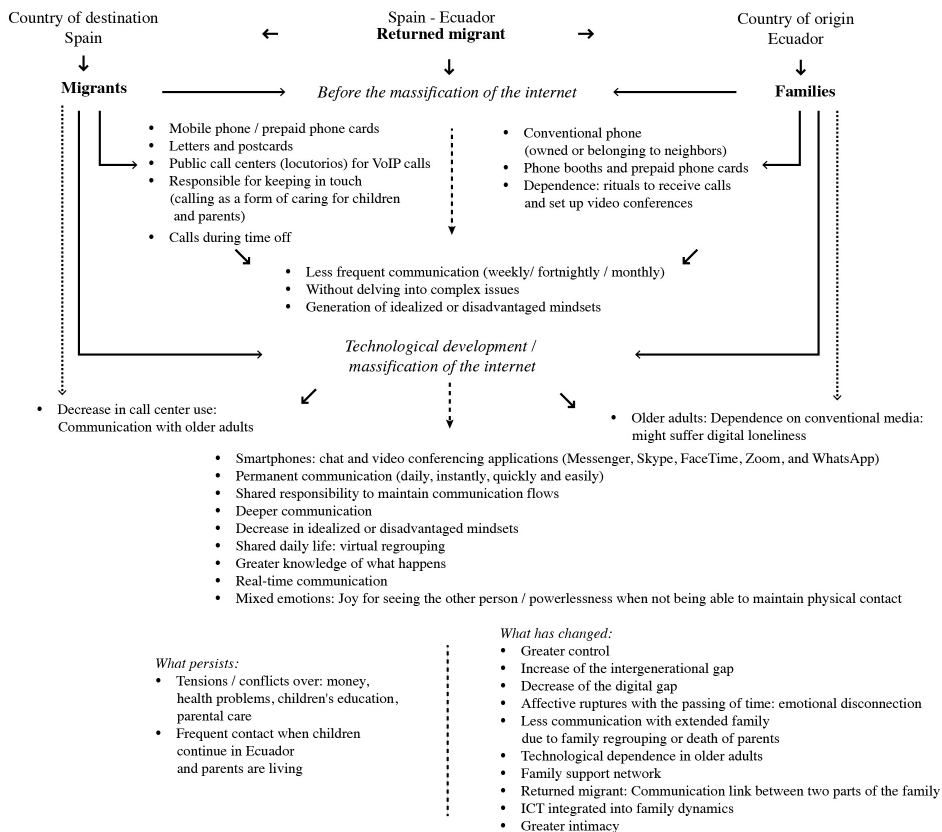
Communication is a key factor among transnational families. Technological advances allow those who remain and those who leave to deal with physical absences in both the country of origin and the country of destination to recreate affective connections that relativize distance, even though they may also increase feelings of emotional detachment.

Discussion

The analysis is conducted within the framework of virtualization (Lévy, 1999), a process in which reality does not disappear or dematerialize but rather adds a new dimension to everyday life.

Among the members of Ecuadorian transnational families who participated in this investigation, the use of ICT contributes to relational continuity. Its appropriation, as a process of creative renegotiation (Acedera, Yeoh, 2021; Jaji, 2022), enables affectivity to adapt, positively and negatively, to the changes experienced by these families when geographical distances separate them.

Figure 1 - Transformation of family communication mediated by the use of ICT



In a certain way, the findings show that the influence of communication on affectivity is related to the evolution of technological mediation (Figure 1), especially that of the telephone from its analog version to new technologies in smartphones, which have become a more complete symbol of emotional communication (Waruwu, 2022).

On the other hand, the way in which ICTs, culture and society are intertwined and constantly updated is reflected in how messages are transmitted in the daily dynamics of communication established among members of transnational families and among members who are not part of such families; that is, there are a series of particular conditions that have made possible the emergence of new forms of virtualizing affectivity beyond long-distance communication circuits (Hall, 1985).

Although, this distance modifies the communication practices among members of transnational families in terms of the use of technology, these practices do not differ from those that may occur

in families living together in the same physical space. However, compared with what happened a few years ago in terms of emotional expressiveness between migrants and their families, ICTs that involve visual interaction, availability, asynchrony, and synchrony undoubtedly facilitate small daily acts that accentuate “doing family” through active practices and not as a given and static entity (Eklund, Sadowski, 2023; Larrinaga-Bidegain *et al.*, 2024).

At the beginning of the migration process (in the late 1990s and early 2000s), although postal mail and e-mail were part of the communication process, their use and expressive capacity were limited (Borges, Cancian, 2016). Analogous telephony with a greater presence among family members in Ecuador (by means of their own conventional telephone or one provided by neighbors, with expensive service, use of prepaid cards and telephone booths) meant individuals had to wait for migrants to call. As identified by Reist and Riaño (2008), this generated dependency.

In Spain, due to the inability of migrants to make conventional calls via landline phones, public call centers functioned as bridges of contact, which coincides with the findings of Leifsen and Tymczuk (2012). IP calls allowed them to attenuate homesickness and provide care, although they exhibited intimacy, facilitated by oral communication. Public call centers became repositories and showcases of sensitivity (Belli, Gil, 2011).

Family members organized rituals (Zapata-Martínez, 2020) to receive calls or hold videoconferences as acts of celebration and momentary regrouping. Migrants activated these rituals. They had responsibility for communication, apparently unidirectional, underscoring their condition of connected migrants (Diminescu, 2008) with the reality of their children and parents living in Ecuador (Leifsen, Tymczuk, 2012). This remains a gravitating factor for continued family communication (Barros, 2023).

The limited communication options led to less frequent interactions, in which certain issues were addressed but others were not, perpetuating idealized imaginaries (Reist, Riaño, 2008), since having to communicate verbally awakened the imagination, sharing symbolic universes made possible by nostalgia (Melella, 2016).

Gradually, the irruption of mobile telephony, first with cell phones and then with smartphones and the massification of internet use (Figure 1), has balanced coresponsibility in family relationships (Qiu, 2022). For migrants, it consolidates autonomy by reducing the use of telephone booths. Among family members, having similar access conditions stimulates proactivity.

Diminescu’s (2008) idea of the *connected migrant*, who develops in environments marked by ICT, became tangible with smartphones; by integrating various functions (with applications for calling, sending written and voice messages, equipped with photo and video cameras, audio and image players, etc.), they allow high connectivity favoring more complete, daily, instant, fast, easy and inexpensive communication flows (Eklund, Sadowski, 2023). This capacity generates a double presence (Diminescu, 2008): a real presence at the destination and an imagined, longed-for and, metaphorically, more evident presence at the origin. Due to the technologies condensed in smartphones, bidirectionality among family members is possible. Therefore, the notion of a *connected transnational family* has a place.

Applications, such as WhatsApp, facilitate the deepening of emotional manifestations. The joys and afflictions faced by migrants are extended toward families that, through virtual copresence, manage them together (Kędra, 2023). Migrants’ actions generate reactions in the

family; simultaneously, relatives' behavior affects migrants, establishing two-way symbolic synergies that turn them into e-families (Benítez, 2011).

By flowing continuously, connectivity fosters scenarios in which the virtualization of affectivity (Alfama *et al.*, 2005) becomes normalized and integrated into everyday life (Cabalquinto, 2020; Eklund, Sadowski, 2023). Real-time communication allows greater knowledge of what is happening, which decreases idealization and forces a constant renegotiation of affectivity (Jaji, 2022). For the migrant women who participated in this study, smartphones contribute to the strengthening of maternal unions focused on raising children.

The positive nature of these interactions does not hide the disagreements that cannot always be resolved through technological mediation. Sometimes, this mediation is problematic (Qiu, 2022). The use of certain tools can attenuate feelings of distance but, contradictorily, can cause it to be perceived to a greater extent (Vázquez-Maggio, Mejía, 2023), so in a certain way, the double absence alluded to by Sayad ([1999] 2010) acquires new meanings.

Smartphones can be used as control devices that increase the pressure exerted on migrants and family members (Francisco, 2015), which can impact intrafamily dynamics, creating, in addition to physical separations, affective dynamics. Discrepancies caused by demands and the use of money strain affective bonds (Ambrosini, 2023; Lobo, 2020; Rössel *et al.*, 2023). Likewise, the inability to deploy care actions *in situ* triggers guilt and resentment (Larrinaga-Bidegain *et al.*, 2024; Usta, 2023).

The notion of a *family connected* on a technological and affective level becomes more tangible when the analysis includes the experiences of migrants who have returned to Ecuador. They return to live with the family that stayed behind, but at the same time, they live this reunion from a different perspective because another part of the family remains in Spain (Bryceson, Vuorela, 2002).

If they previously lived as migrants connected to their country of origin, they now live in the country that welcomed them. They become the link between the two realities. The technological advances they experienced in Spain are now found in Ecuador. As members of an e-family, they witness the parallel virtual daily lives in the origin and destination, sustaining affective continuity with family members in both places.

There is no marked digital divide between Ecuador and Spain. The effects of globalization, both technologically and communicationally, allow similar access for migrants and family members. The gaps that are observed are emotional and intergenerational, especially with the extended family; this refutes the findings of Demirsu (2022).

Additionally, in contrast to the results obtained by Nedelcu (2017), older adults are overtaken by new technologies, which can envelop them in a "digital loneliness". The continued use of the conventional telephone means that migrants still resort to public call centers to communicate with them.

Conclusions

These findings suggest that the affective manifestations experienced by families when they live in the same spatial and temporal environment, although they cannot be compared when they experience them when living in distant places, are mediated by ICTs, attenuate nostalgia and constantly reactivate feelings of well-being and discomfort, which identify them as a family.

Transnational families use a series of technological tools to recreate the everyday life of Ecuador in Spain and that of Spain in Ecuador. Since emotions underlie communication as a two-way process, it is not technology itself that allows them to continue being a family; it is the relational practices made possible by this technology that open up a range of strategies for sustained affective interaction over time and beyond space.

In recent decades, ICT has shown a high potential to facilitate affect (*affectio*). The affection ratio (*affectus*), positive or negative, is greater for the transmission of a video than a letter. In part, technology has contributed to undermining the idealized or disadvantaged imaginaries from which the lives of others are configured, bringing the everyday life of the transnational space closer.

Migration is often associated with contradictory emotions (solidarity/selfishness, happiness/unhappiness, attachment/resentment, guilt/absolution, gratitude/indolence, hope/anger) corresponding to the absence/presence dichotomy. The impact of these emotions has been “captured” in images, voices and expressions that circulate, primarily through smartphone applications that allow us to perceive the joy or sadness felt by the other, and although they do not share the same physical space, the family can “embrace” it to celebrate or console each other. Those who have not developed intuitive learning of how to reconfigure affection in virtual environments feel the distance to a greater extent. They are “disconnected” from the other part of the family, despite maintaining regular communication.

The anxiety to establish contact and to know about each other, which was limited by the technological infrastructure and the economic situation and made each connection a “ritual”, has now diminished. Over the years, with technological development, the ease and frequency of contact has varied; however, family dynamics depend on the type of relationship established by each family. Greater contact does not translate into symmetrical emotional exchanges between all family members. Shared practices have become normalized, and the effects of the initial interactions have diminished; therefore, communication has become more colloquial and less intense.

Although the intimacy brought about by physical closeness cannot be easily replaced by technology, in today’s migration experiences, technology keeps bonds active. ICTs have led to virtual regroupings in which individuals take care of each other. Thus, they establish dynamic relationships between *distance–connection*, *space–time*, and *unity–fragmentation*, which is synthesized in the conversion of *the distant into the near*.

The frequency and intensity of contact have increased to previously unimagined levels. Immediate interaction means that the nostalgia for “being at home” is blurred because that home is now virtual, in which offline life is complemented by online life. The integration of technologies has turned smartphones into essential tools for some transnational families. Their use has created privileged spaces of intimacy with encounters and misunderstandings. Reciprocal exchanges make migrants and nonmigrants coresponsible for the negotiation of absence but also of presence and cohabitation in a symbolic space in which they are recognized and acknowledged.

As ICTs develop new devices and integrate more functions, their use becomes more complicated for older family members, raising new questions about the implications of digital illiteracy and the consequences for emotional relationships in transnational families.

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About the authors

Priscila Chalá-Mejía, Professor and Researcher (Department of Advertising, Faculty of Communication and Audiovisual Arts, Universidad de Las Américas, Ecuador). PhD in Media, Communication and Culture (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona). Her research interests focus on communication, with special emphasis on gender studies. Her academic work also addresses cultural studies, and sociocultural effects of the use of ICTs. Quito, Ecuador. E-mail: priscila.chala@outlook.com - ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9523-6865>.

Ximena Suquillo, Professor (Department of Mathematics, Faculty of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Universidad de Las Américas, Quito, Ecuador). Degree in Electronic Engineering, Master's degree in Leadership and Management in Education and Master's degree in Applied Mathematics. Her interests are focused on teaching technologies. Address: Campus Udlapark, Redondel de El Ciclista, Antigua Vía a Nayón, 170124, Quito, Ecuador. E-mail: ximena.suquillo@udla.edu.ec - ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4299-0594>.

Section editors

Roberto Marinucci, Barbara Marciano Marques