



### **Cook it, eat it, Skype it: Mobile media use in re-staging intimate culinary practices among transnational families**

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Cultural Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	ICS-18-0032.R4
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Italians in London, transnational families, digital media, family rituals, mediated intimacy, food, transconnective habitus, Skype, Italian diaspora, emotional proximity
Abstract:	<p>This article discusses video-based platforms as drivers of transconnective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood. By looking at how Italians living in London use Skype to restage family rituals at a distance, I examine the centrality of culinary practices in relation to family work. In doing this, I also expand on the role of polymedia environments in enabling emotional proximity and the formation of a sense of mediated co-presence within transnational contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Facebook group Italian Gals in London to unpack how lived geographies of migration intersect with media technologies and practices to create a new transconnective habitus around food preparation, cooking and dining. The study reveals that while Skype provides emotional connectivity, communicative challenges and tensions can also occur as a result of the 'ephemerality' of video calls and as technological asymmetries emerge among transnational family members.</p>

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

## Abstract

This article discusses video-based platforms as drivers of transconnective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood. By looking at how Italians living in London use Skype to *restage* family rituals at a distance, I examine the centrality of culinary practices in relation to family work. In doing this, I also expand on the role of polymedia environments in enabling emotional proximity and the formation of a sense of mediated co-presence within transnational contexts. In-depth interviews were conducted with members of the Facebook group *Italian Gals in London* to unpack how lived geographies of migration intersect with media technologies and practices to create a new *transconnective habitus* around food preparation, cooking and dining. The study reveals that while Skype provides emotional connectivity, communicative challenges and tensions can also occur as a result of the ‘ephemerality’ of video calls and as technological asymmetries emerge among transnational family members.

## Introduction

I feel like I don’t belong here, nor I belong to Italy anymore. It is the existential crisis of the migrant, I think. However, [technology, *author’s note*] makes you forget, at least for a moment, that you are far away. Distance does not matter anymore (Anna, interview with the author)

The quote above is from Anna, a 50 years old Professor from Calabria, in southwest Italy. She recently moved to London from New York in order to live closer to her relatives in Italy, a country she left more than twenty years ago. She calls her mother and her aunt every evening after dinner because, she says, ‘it’s almost like a survival instinct and a necessity for me and for them. It’s the idea of staying in touch that makes me feel better, in a way reassured, even if it’s only virtual’. She associates this ‘survival instinct’ to a set of familial obligations she feels are related to her being ‘the only daughter and the only nephew’ who left and never returned. Anna’s words allow me to present the core argument of, and inspiration behind, the research here discussed. In *skyping* home as part of her daily routines, Anna becomes protagonist of a performative architecture of love and of familial togetherness that is uniquely shaped and enhanced by digital media. More than simply a communication tool, Skype is used to recreate a *sense of mediated co-presence* among geographically-separated individuals through the (re)-enactment of family rituals that were once performed in physical togetherness.

In discussing the role of technology in helping migrants to bridge socio-spatial distance, I echo King-O’Riain’s argument that Skype’s technical affordances deeply affect migrants’ transnational relationships in multiple and often contradictory ways (2015). From this, I here mainly look at how Skype enables the creation of trans-connective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood through the re-staging of family rituals and most especially around food preparation, cooking and dining. In noting how powerful “digital evocations of home through food” are (Hegde, 2016:71), the research here presented insinuates how problematic and ambiguous these transnational circuits can also be. While Skype enables emotional connectivity, communicative challenges and tensions can occur as a result of the ‘ephemerality’ of video calls and as technological asymmetries emerge among transnational

1  
2  
3 **family members.** This is supported by previous research outlining how media use not only  
4 mitigates some of the difficulties associated with living apart thanks to their temporal and  
5 spatial simultaneity (Paragas, 2009), but also inevitably remind migrants of the ‘illusion of  
6 co-presence’ (Madianou and Miller, 2011), thus exacerbating feelings of nostalgia and  
7 loneliness (see also Cabalquinto, 2018; Cabanes and Acedera, 2012; Chib et al., 2014).  
8  
9

10 This **study** reflects the author’s long-standing scholarly interest in the politics and materiality  
11 of migration. In exploring the multiple ways Italian migrants engage with and use digital  
12 technologies, I have been mapping a complex scenario where different platforms are used for  
13 different social and emotional needs (author, 2015a, 2015b; 2014). In looking at how these  
14 needs are performed in often creative ways, previous research has also uncovered the  
15 complexities of food within processes of community bonding among migrants (author, 2017).  
16 This paper brings such interest a step further and **identifies the centrality of mediated culinary  
17 practices in rekindling connections through sharing recipes and cooking at a distance; in  
18 enabling social capital and in performing commensality at a distance.** From here, my  
19 research intends to contribute to existing literature on media, migration and food by  
20 introducing the concept of a *transconnective habitus*, a connective and connected  
21 transnational everyday reality where families can renew their intimate bond **around food  
22 preparation, cooking and dining.**  
23  
24  
25  
26

## 27 Methodology

28  
29  
30 This study purposely concentrated on a small number of participants in order to gain insights  
31 into the material politics of diasporic life and to possibly reveal emerging themes of interest  
32 to be researched and developed further. 10 in-depth interviews were conducted either face to  
33 face or through digital means such as Skype between 2017 and 2018. Participants were  
34 recruited online within the Facebook group *Italian Gals in London*, where I posted a  
35 description of the project following the admin’s approval. To date, the group has 1875  
36 members and only accepts female users who are Italian (or speak Italian) and live in London.  
37 This group was selected as a relatively new online community that interestingly only caters  
38 for female migrants and which the author initially joined as a member. Before I delve further  
39 into the study, two considerations should be made.  
40  
41

42  
43 First, it is important to note that this research is limited insofar as its findings can only be  
44 evaluated within the parameters of the community here observed, which has restricted the  
45 recruitment phase to women only. The author is aware that this selection bias can further  
46 reiterate the link often made between culinary practices, domestic spaces and women,  
47 **together with the** assumption that female migrants tend to communicate with their  
48 transnational parents more frequently than men (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2008). As  
49 Hegde also explains, the link between food and domesticity has often been gendered,  
50 especially in diasporic context (2016:70). While this aspect has been **acknowledged**, the  
51 present discussion will not engage with **the issue of gender for two main reasons.** On the one  
52 hand, **the community was selected because discussions around food seemed to emerge with  
53 particular emphasis among users. On the other hand, the fact that the group was created fairly  
54 recently in 2017 made it an** interesting case study compared to other mixed-gender online  
55 communities already previously and amply discussed by the author. The second  
56 consideration calls into question the process of self-reflexivity. Berger (2015:220) defines  
57 reflexivity as “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the  
58 researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 position may affect the research process and outcome”. In this particular context, my own  
4 **identity** as a female migrant seemed to facilitate **access to and interaction with my sample**,  
5 which might not have been possible or easily conceded **had I been** a male researcher. In  
6 thinking about this, I echo Finlay’s argument that reflexivity produces research that is *co-*  
7 *constituted* by researchers and participants (2002). **In this particular context then**, self-  
8 reflexivity represented a journey of introspection where different experiences and  
9 materialities intersected to create a fascinating portrait of diasporic life.  
10  
11

12  
13 **As for the practicalities involved in conducting the interviews, it has to be noted that these**  
14 **were performed** in Italian in order to investigate the deep and often unconscious meanings  
15 attributed to food that only native language can convey. **Information about the content of the**  
16 **interview was provided in advance and respondents were required to sign a consent form.**  
17 Permission to record the interview was obtained. Interviews were conducted in public places  
18 or on Skype, they lasted between one hour and one hour and a half and were later transcribed  
19 and translated into English. All respondents agreed to be quoted either with their full names  
20 or with their initials. Respondents were from different age ranges (23 to 50 years old),  
21 geographical provenience, professional life and motivations for being in London. However,  
22 they all similarly used a wide range of information and communication technologies as part  
23 of their daily ‘media diet’. Skype, WhatsApp and Facebook are used almost on a daily basis  
24 to communicate with friends and family. In addition to these tools, one of the participants  
25 also mentioned using Line (a free messaging and video calls application) and Hangouts  
26 (Google’s communication platform). The sample recruited for the present research is of  
27 course only partially representative of the population of Italians living in London. According  
28 to recent statistics (Statista, 2018), the number of female Italian citizens officially registered  
29 as resident in London is 122.415 compared to 139.170 males (Statista, 2018). Data from 2014  
30 also shows us that 74 percent of Italians are under 34 years and come from the north of Italy  
31 (55%), with Lombardy and Veneto as the most representative regions. Among these, 89  
32 percent of Italians have a high school diploma, 58 percent hold a degree, and one in five  
33 holds a doctoral degree. The case study here observed seems to reflect the variety of  
34 educational backgrounds and geographical provenience. In particular, 4 respondents were  
35 originally from the South of Italy (Calabria, Sicily and Campania), 5 from the north of Italy  
36 and mainly from Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria) and only one respondent from Emilia  
37 Romagna, in northeast Italy. Almost all of them hold a diploma, one – Anna – has a Master  
38 and a PhD in Languages.  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43

## 44 Literature

45  
46 **In this section I** will first introduce existing research on the emotional tensions existing in  
47 doing ‘family work’ within transnational contexts, with a particular focus on theories of  
48 mediated co-presence in polymedia contexts. I then discuss the role of digitally-mediated  
49 food practices and discourses in an attempt to understand how culinary practices can support  
50 interactions at a distance.  
51

### 52 *Co-presence in polymedia contexts: intimacy and proximity*

53  
54  
55 The use of communication technologies by migrants is not a recent discovery in migration  
56 studies (Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc, 1992; Appadurai, 1996; Vertovec, 2004).  
57 Throughout history, migrants have creatively shaped, adopted and negotiated ways of  
58 maintaining emotional and material connections with home and with other diaspora  
59 members, from letters (Borges and Cancian, 2016) and telephone calls (Vertovec, 2004) to  
60

1  
2  
3 Internet and social media use (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Diminescu, 2008). In exploring  
4 ICT transnational use, scholars have highlighted the fundamental role that new media have  
5 played in building and sustaining familial intimacy through the recreation of a sense of  
6 distant co-presence (Baldassar, 2016). More importantly for the present study, ethnographic  
7 studies of migratory contexts have also observed the different ways migrants creatively use a  
8 variety of platforms “to balance distance and intimacy in communication” (McKay,  
9 2018:137). As Madianou and Miller have noted, new media have radically transformed the  
10 experience of migration by providing opportunities for ongoing connectivity while mitigating  
11 the problem of physical and social separation (2012). In their comparative ethnography of  
12 Filipino and Caribbean transnational families, anthropologists Madianou and Miller observed  
13 the emergence of a ‘polymedia’ environment where migrants decide which communication  
14 tool they should employ in any given situation and in response to different social and  
15 emotional needs. In this particular context, Madianou and Miller’s theory provides an  
16 interesting framework for understanding the rationale behind my respondents’ creative use of  
17 media technologies. In particular, the theory proves valid insofar as it focusses on the social,  
18 emotional and moral consequences of media use, which will be here discussed in relation to  
19 how Skype is used by migrants in order to stay ‘present’ to their family.  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 As McKay points out (2018) the ever-expanding role of social networking sites and the  
25 advent of polymedia in transnational contexts have contributed to the emergence of creative  
26 ways of sustaining intimacy at a distance. In observing long-distance parenting between the  
27 UK and The Philippines, not only she described polymedia at the centre of a theoretical and  
28 methodological shift in global migration studies, but she also discussed the intersection  
29 between questions of visibility and intimacy in transnational contexts. The present research  
30 engages with such questions by highlighting two specific aspects that emerged with particular  
31 vigour during my interviews. First, visibility on Skype intersects with different kinds of  
32 emotional attachment to a sense of family that has lost its everyday nuances but remains  
33 nevertheless at the very centre of migrants’ practices and discourses away from home.  
34 Second, as Nicolescu (2016) observes in his study of social media use in Southeast Italy, the  
35 enhanced visibility provided by social media allows migrants to recreate different layers of  
36 intimacy.  
37  
38  
39

40 Of particular relevance for this study is Baldassar’s extensive work on tactics of co-presence  
41 among Italian migrants in Australia and their distant kin (2008). Co-presence is defined as  
42 “the emotional support experienced as a sense of emotional closeness or ‘being there’ for  
43 each other” (Brownlie 2011, in Baldassar, 2016: 145). Baldassar documents how platforms  
44 such as Skype, FaceTime and social networking sites have made virtual co-presence possible  
45 while reinforcing the sense of ‘being there for each other’ (2007). To certain extents, the  
46 content of communication is not important *per se*, compared to the opportunity to see each  
47 other whenever and wherever needed (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005; Wilding, 2006). On a  
48 similar note, Mirca Madianou defines *ambient co-presence* as a “peripheral, yet intense,  
49 awareness of distant others made possible through the ubiquity and affordances of polymedia  
50 environments” (2016:199). In the context of my research, the ‘always on’ pattern that  
51 Madianou has observed in her research is contradicted by my respondents, who confirmed  
52 using Skype only at the end of the day and before going to bed. Yet, the intensity of poly-  
53 mediated experiences creates new geographies of diasporic life that involve migrants as well  
54 as parents, who often need to acquire digital skills. Among others, Wilding confirms how this  
55 “mediated intimacy at a distance” (2006:133) has very practical and tangible consequences  
56 for all parties involved. This is further reiterated by Baldassar, who argues that ICT provide  
57 “new possibilities for sustaining intimacy across time and space, providing revolutionary and  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 ever more sophisticated avenues for the exchange of emotional support and for delivering a  
4 sense of emotional closeness or ‘being present’ across distance” (Baldassar et al., 2016:135).  
5 As this paper will argue, emotions are at the very centre of a sense of transnational intimacy  
6 that is renewed every time a call is made. This is supported by King-O’Riain (2015) in her  
7 study on Skype use among transnational families in Ireland. Here, *a trans-connective space is*  
8 *created through processes of ‘emotional streaming’*, where families negotiate “micro and  
9 highly intimate interpersonal understandings and practices of love” (262). In the discussion  
10 that follows, I expand this concept further to emphasise how routine Skype calling accounts  
11 for the creation of an everyday reality where the process of ‘doing family’ takes on a very  
12 tangible form.  
13  
14  
15  
16

## 17 Food practices, intimacy, and transnational family life

19 The theme of food, and its cultural significance for migrant communities and identities, has  
20 been the object of numerous sociological and anthropological analyses. Among others,  
21 Fischler (1988: 280) emphasized the extent to which food is located at the very centre of  
22 migrants’ sense of national and collective belonging as they “mark their membership of a  
23 culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat”. Culinary practices have been  
24 described as an element of personal and social identification (Zontini, 2004), as *drivers* of  
25 nostalgia (Vázquez-Medina and Medina, 2015), and at the centre of community building  
26 processes (Marte, 2007). Brah (1996) discussed how food can provide transnational identities  
27 a sense of continuity *with the past*, which might alleviate the sense of disjointedness that  
28 migrants often experience when living in a new country (Bhugra and Decker, 2005; Locker et  
29 al., 2005; Philipp and Ho, 2010). In observing the centrality of food in *diasporic contexts*,  
30 scholars have paid attention to questions of authenticity (Petridou, 2001) and to the  
31 malleability of food as recipes are adapted to suit the availability of ingredients (Fonseca,  
32 2016; Hegde, 2016). Other authors have emphasised the emotional and ‘sensory’ qualities of  
33 food (Vázquez-Medina and Medina, 2015). Along these lines, Lupton (1996:30) has  
34 observed how food “stirs the emotions” precisely because of its physical nature and sensual  
35 affordances, which “call the continuity of identity through a vivid nostalgic experience”  
36 (Vázquez-Medina and Medina, 2015:137).  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41

42 As I have argued elsewhere (2017) these theories can well be adapted to the study of the role  
43 of food within the Italian diaspora. However, an additional dimension should be considered,  
44 which is how the experience of commensality takes on new material nuances when it is  
45 recreated at a distance. For Italians, sitting at the same table and consuming the same food is  
46 a celebration and a moment of joy that reinforces intimate bonds within the family (Cinotto,  
47 2013; Ochs and Shohet, 2006; Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997). Hence, food should be  
48 considered as a *visceral experience* that connects host and home countries by blending  
49 together familiar and new tastes, smells and textures (Locker et al., 2005; Longhurst et al.,  
50 2009). This is confirmed in many studies on previous generations of Italian migrants moving  
51 to the UK (Fortier, 2000; Sprio, 2013). In this respect, food not only act as a personal,  
52 cultural and collective identity marker; at the same time, food is at the centre of circuits of  
53 love that connect the community together.  
54  
55

56 My contribution to this already solid literature is twofold: first, I am interested in exploring  
57 how mediated conversations and practices about food bring this relationship between food  
58 and migration to a whole new level of complexity. As Vázquez-Medina and Medina (2015)  
59 have noted in their research on Mexican food markets in California, the awareness of  
60

1  
2  
3 dislocation is instrumental in encouraging families to ‘get together’ around common (food-  
4 related) reference points. Second, I am not only discussing the power of mediated  
5 performances of food, which I have discussed elsewhere (author, 2017), but also the role of  
6 Skype in **re-staging** – on a more sensory-based level of imagination – typical family routines  
7 that enhance a sense of **emotional** proximity. While contributing to existing literature on food  
8 and migration, this research hopes to address a gap in existing literature on the Italian  
9 migration. As noted, while first and second generations of Italian migrants have been  
10 observed quite extensively in the UK and in the US already, we still know very little about  
11 how Italians ‘do family’ through digital forms of connectivity. **The remaining part of this**  
12 **article is organised as follows: first I discuss how transnational family connections are**  
13 **rekindled through sharing recipes and cooking at a distance; then, I look at how transnational**  
14 **culinary practices enable the circulation of social capital, which I here interpret as another**  
15 **form of ‘doing family’ by engaging with ‘fictive’ kin such as friends. Lastly, I will conclude**  
16 **the discussion with a reflection on the technological asymmetries and communicative**  
17 **tensions emerging as part of these transnational communicative patterns.**  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22

## 23 Discussion

### 24 Restaging family rituals at a distance

25  
26  
27  
28  
29 At the beginning of their journey, Ilaria (27 years old, from Sicily) and MJ (a 24 years old  
30 hairdresser from Turin) used to call their parents almost on a daily basis. Their conversations  
31 were mainly focused on their new life in London and the challenges of living abroad for the  
32 first time while working as au-pairs in the city. Within the walls of their new home in  
33 London, Skype was used to ask for support with the preparation and cooking of food, as the  
34 following quote demonstrates.  
35

36  
37 MJ: When I moved here, I used to call my mum almost every day on Skype. I usually  
38 asked her how to cook specific recipes, and she was happy to help. Now I don’t do  
39 that very often. I still do it sometimes, but not as often as at the beginning.  
40

41  
42 I asked Ilaria, who seemed to be more passionate about food, to describe a typical situation  
43 **involving the use of Skype:**  
44

45  
46 Sometimes I am desperate because I don’t know what to cook. I then text my aunts  
47 and my mum [she has a WhatsApp group with them, *author’s note*] and I list the  
48 ingredients I have in my fridge. They then come up with different options, and I  
49 decide which one I would like to make. Only after this initial conversation I call my  
50 mum on Skype [or the person who suggested the recipe, *author’s note*] so that she can  
51 explain how to cook it.  
52

53  
54 Ilaria’s words deserve further considerations. On the one hand, she – as many migrants – uses  
55 a variety of different devices depending on what is more convenient or more appropriate for a  
56 particular purpose. Among other scholars, Madianou explains that “when users have access  
57 to dozens of different applications, platforms and devices, they can easily exploit the qualities  
58 of each to compensate for the limitations of other platforms” (2016:186). In Ilaria’s case,  
59 WhatsApp supports more immediate patterns of communication that are then followed by  
60

1  
2  
3 richer forms of connectivity, thus supporting the common view that sees migrants as  
4 protagonists of creative media adaptations and negotiations (Madianou and Miller, 2012).  
5

6  
7 On the other hand, Skype seems to be associated with a sense of ‘need’: a necessity that the  
8 migrant articulates in order to ‘get on’ with the new domestic life. Ilaria draws from a family  
9 patrimony – the ability to invent a recipe with the ingredients available randomly in the fridge  
10 – that she, perhaps, has not yet acquired. In participating to the conversation by suggesting  
11 potential recipes, the entire family takes care of the migrant, while showing empathy and  
12 understanding. From here, we can see how the process of ‘doing family’ in a transnational  
13 context seems to follow a linear route: first, there is a very practical need that the migrant  
14 voices out; second, the family gets involved thanks to its knowledge and expertise in running  
15 the household; third, a creative mix of technologies is used to make the most of such  
16 expertise.  
17  
18

19  
20 The significance of a food-related cultural capital is also called into question by Anna, a 50  
21 years old Professor from Calabria. She says that her conversations around food have less to  
22 do with the practical need that Ilaria’s quote displays, and more to do with intimacy.  
23

24  
25 Recipes are an excuse; actually, we are not particularly obsessed with food. At a  
26 personal level though, this is a way of staying alive, a necessity to remember what’s  
27 good about Italy, which is mainly food and art. I combine this necessity to see and  
28 call my family with good food. I call if I want to bake a particular type of bread, a  
29 focaccia for example, and they are happy to help. They are incredibly happy to share  
30 their knowledge.  
31

32  
33 Here, we can see how Skype fulfils a *visceral necessity* to recreate a sense of family through  
34 conversations around what is for Italians a very typical cultural and linguistic code: food. By  
35 recreating family moments such as cooking together or sharing traditional recipes, the  
36 transnational family stays alive, renews its bond and creates a bridge that both parts can  
37 easily navigate thanks to the ‘comfortable’ memories that food inspires and re-creates. It then  
38 becomes clear that Skype suits a very peculiar function that is the creation of a *trans-*  
39 *connective habitus*, a term I use here by merging O’Riain concept of trans-connective space  
40 (2015) and Nedelcu’s habitus (2012). Not only Skype creates a space where emotions and  
41 intimacies are streamed, but it does so while providing the conditions for a *transnational*  
42 *everyday reality*. Here, old and new practices are negotiated and re-staged: previous routines  
43 such as cooking together and new necessities such as preparing food from scratch take on  
44 new forms that reflect the migrant’s new life and the need for the family to acquire digital  
45 skills in order to remain *present*. This is mentioned by MJ in the following quote:  
46  
47

48  
49 My parents did not know what Skype was. Sometimes they like it and they’re happy  
50 to see me, other times they would rather have me home.  
51

52  
53 As I will discuss later on, media use comes with tensions and ambiguities. Here, I want to  
54 focus on the practicalities of maintaining family connections at a distance. As Baldassar  
55 notes, these relationships are affected by ability, cultural expectations and negotiated  
56 commitments (2007: 392-392). Family rituals cannot take place without the ability to use and  
57 switch platforms, the prospect/commitment that the family will provide support when needed  
58 and finally the expectation that the migrant will call – more or less frequently – in order to  
59 maintain the relationship alive. The emotional proximity enabled by Skype has an impact on  
60 the whole transnational family dynamic. MJ, for example, points out the following:



1  
2  
3 Distance has improved our relationship. Since the moment I left, the relationship  
4 between my mum and my aunt has also improved, maybe because they found  
5 something in common, which is not having me around anymore.  
6

7  
8 This is confirmed by Anna, who says that *‘through sharing recipes, our relationship is*  
9 *somehow confirmed and strengthened, a confirmation that this relationship is alive and*  
10 *necessary’*. On a similar note, Ilaria says that she always had a good relationship with her  
11 parents, but this relationship has also been transformed by the distance. When in Italy, she  
12 cooks new recipes that she has invented while living in London, thus creating new  
13 experiences and memories that make food a catalyst for family time. The way transnational  
14 relationships acquire new meanings is then duplex: first, distance reinforces the *necessity* to  
15 be there and to ‘prove it’ in tangible ways; second, it also affects the way such relationships  
16 are lived when in physical co-presence. Distance, as many have argued, can bring people  
17 closer. On this issue, Madianou and Miller (2012:146) point to the potential of new media to  
18 create the “‘ideal distance’ necessary for a relationship to flourish”.  
19  
20

21 This is further corroborated by Anna, who recognises that since her family started to use  
22 digital media, and Skype in particular, relationships have improved:  
23  
24

25 We now know each other a little bit better. We grew closer by talking about food. For  
26 example, when I ask a traditional Christmas recipe [...] the emotional aspect is very  
27 important. It’s not just the recipe, it’s about our identity as well. Food is part of your  
28 identity, it’s what connects us to our memories, for example when I cook the same  
29 biscuits I used to eat while I was little, using the same recipe my mum used to follow.  
30  
31

32 Without discussing the theme of memory, which is beyond the scopes of this article, it is  
33 important to stress how food becomes an object that brings old memories alive and creates  
34 new ones. This is confirmed by R., a 34 years old sales assistant from Emilia Romagna.  
35  
36

37 It does help a lot. Sometimes I feel like I never left as I more or less do the same  
38 things I used to do back home. Cooking together, eating together, sharing moments of  
39 daily life around the table. The only difference is that I do this on Skype. It’s not  
40 ideal, but it’s better than nothing.  
41

42 In this poignant quote, R. brings forward a new element to the discussion: the centrality of  
43 commensality. The next section will delve deeper into that.  
44  
45

## 46 Commensality and transnational social capital

47  
48 In facilitating the formation of mediated co-presence, video-based platforms allow migrants  
49 to perform and experience different ways of ‘doing family’ in a transnational context. I will  
50 here discuss two interesting examples that allow us to reflect more deeply on the centrality of  
51 *mediated commensality* within wider practices of familyhood. The first example considers  
52 Skype use in relation to the circulation of social capital among migrants living in London and  
53 between migrants and their families. The second example specifically addresses the  
54 importance of eating together in a once common physical and social setting.  
55  
56

57  
58 In observing the complexity of doing family work in a transnational context, this research has  
59 revealed how Skype is used by migrants to recreate a sense of family with fictive kin such as  
60 friends. This is evident in the following conversation between Ilaria and MJ:

1  
2  
3 Ilaria: We had this absurd conversation on Skype one day. We decided to cook  
4 arancini [a typical Sicilian dish, *author's note*] with MJ and the other girls. I took  
5 some pictures of the girls while they were cooking and sent them to my mum. I told  
6 her 'Look mum what they are learning today!' They [the girls] didn't know how to  
7 make arancini, so my mum was asking them how they usually cook rice in the North  
8 of Italy [Ilaria is from Sicily, while the other girls, including MJ, are from the  
9 northern area of Italy. The way rice is cooked in order to prepare the typical Sicilian  
10 recipe is different from the way risotto - a dish from the North - is made, *author's*  
11 *note*]. It was an interesting evening...

12  
13  
14  
15 MJ: Yes, the risotto night was fun [laughing, *author's note*]

16  
17 Ilaria: Our families enjoyed it too. Also, it was an opportunity to meet each other's  
18 parents. I think that we [as in Italians, *author's note*] involve our parents a lot in what  
19 we do. Other friends, like my Polish friend, not so much. I never 'met' her mum but  
20 among us is different. For example, a friend of mine might say, 'my mum says hi' and  
21 I don't know her, but I say hi to her nevertheless.

22  
23  
24 A number of interesting aspects emerge here. First, Skype is used to record important  
25 socialising activities among migrants; here, food acts as a catalyst for new forms of  
26 friendship and cooperation around the table. By preparing, cooking and eating the typical  
27 food that relates to the migrant's culinary patrimony and heritage, a very tangible bond is  
28 created. Second, the shared values and understandings that surround the centrality of food  
29 and of commensality help Italians to perceive themselves as distinct from other migrants who  
30 do not share the same traditions. Third, the circulation of social capital does not seem to stop  
31 here; in calling home, families are invited to participate, to acknowledge and to share the  
32 connection that migrants have created around food discourses and practices. Food becomes,  
33 once again, an easy conversation-starter between people who do not know each other well. In  
34 this new networked environment when multiple Skype conversations are activated at the  
35 same time, thus connecting different geographies and households together, new  
36 understandings of familyhood seem to emerge.

37  
38  
39 The second example specifically addresses the importance of commensality in situations of  
40 digital togetherness. The experience of eating and drinking together is deeply rooted in the  
41 Italian culture. For example, the ritual importance of the Sunday meal is accounted for by  
42 scholars such as Cinotto (2013), Gabaccia (1998; 2000) and Mancina-Batinich (2009).  
43 Cinotto, for example, talks about a 'Sunday ceremonial' among Italian migrants in the US  
44 that is characterised by "abundance and conviviality" (2013:53-54). Among my respondents,  
45 L., a 23 years old Hospitality Management graduate from Campania, makes a similar  
46 argument:

47  
48  
49 [...] the Sunday lunch, for example, is a typical Italian tradition of which I am  
50 particularly proud of. I have never been able to re-experience the same emotions I  
51 used to experience after spending hours at the dinner table with my family. It's  
52 amazing to see how everyone makes an effort in order to make this lunch special:  
53 those who have worked very hard during the week, those who have been cooking for  
54 days, those who cannot wait to share some good news, those who are just happy to be  
55 together. It's a very fulfilling experience.

1  
2  
3 While migrants cannot experience commensality in co-presence as they were used to, Skype  
4 seems to provide a valid alternative. In line with the concept of *online mealttime socialisation*  
5 that I have outlined elsewhere (2017), I asked my respondents if they used Skype to re-stage  
6 situations of ‘physical commensality’ by consuming their lunch or dinner at the same time as  
7 their families gather around the table. Although my respondents confirmed that time lag and  
8 work reasons make it difficult to recreate this habit, they however tend to be more flexible on  
9 special occasions such as birthdays or festivities, as the following quote from Ilaria  
10 demonstrates.  
11  
12

13  
14 I usually eat with the kids and we also eat at different hours, which is why I don’t  
15 have dinner with them while we chat on Skype. However, on special occasions like  
16 birthdays, they [her parents, *author’s note*] video call me when the whole family is at  
17 the table, so that I can see everyone and talk to them while they are eating. This  
18 happened recently for my dad’s birthday: they called me when they cut the cake.  
19

20  
21 We can see how Skype enables the transnational family to experience a sense of emotional  
22 proximity that is particularly desired during special moments of celebration. It is then not  
23 surprising that food is again at the centre of such emotional practices: for Italians,  
24 commensality is a very intimate experience of togetherness and love, it is a pleasure of the  
25 senses, a ritual of companionship, a way of reinforcing relationships through conviviality.  
26 Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) call it an ‘ordinary co-presence’, an attempt to reproduce the  
27 ordinary. By allowing migrants to co-celebrate occasions such as birthdays and festivities in  
28 virtual presence, Skype actively provides migrants with a sense of ‘at-homeness’. It is argued  
29 that this is fundamental for the wellbeing of the migrant: the family is a central node of  
30 security and stability, it represents what is ‘familiar’ and well known as opposed to the  
31 challenges of living in a new environment.  
32  
33

34  
35 That being said, it must also be noted that it is especially on these occasions that the  
36 problematic aspects of Skype’s emotional streaming materialise with particular intensity. As  
37 familial expectations of physical co-presence are not fulfilled, migrants feel the additional  
38 burden of not being able to celebrate with the family, and Skype becomes insufficient to  
39 bridge the distance. This is corroborated by Madianou and Miller, who observe how  
40 “webcam as well as phones can be accused of giving only an illusion of co-presence and  
41 being an even more poignant reminder of separation” (2012:119). This aspect will be  
42 discussed in the following section.  
43  
44

## 45 Asymmetries and tensions in family work. Feeling alone while 46 connected 47 48

49  
50 The asymmetries and tensions emerging in using Skype to re-stage family rituals mainly refer  
51 to the inevitable forces that shape the temporalities of digital media use on the one hand, and  
52 to the communicative tensions that develop when migrants are unable to return home on the  
53 other. These two dimensions overlap and affect each other in ways that future research on  
54 media and migration should probably explore further. In relation to the first aspect and  
55 bearing in mind that physical co-presence remains a privileged form of communication even  
56 in transnational contexts, I argue that Skype can in fact exacerbate feelings of nostalgia and  
57 migrants’ sense of de-territorialisation. This is evident in the quote below from Ilaria,  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 It's terrible because you realize that you are far away while they are still there, going  
4 on with their lives and you can't do anything about it. The feeling goes away after a  
5 few minutes when you rationalize the situation, but before you reach this point you  
6 just want to go home.  
7

8  
9 As Madianou (2014) asserts, when we discuss the concept of mediation we need to pay  
10 attention to the forces that **shape the temporalities, affordances and architectures of digital**  
11 **media use. In the case study here considered, these forces are of multiple nature. First,**  
12 **migrants need to adapt to a much hectic life that often leaves little space to call home**  
13 **whenever desired. Second, the time difference makes is difficult to experience – as discussed**  
14 **– situations of commensality even in virtual co-presence. Third, the digital skills that parents**  
15 **need to learn in order to stay connected can sometimes cause frustration on both parts, thus**  
16 **undermining the affective impact of digital conversations. These technological and technical**  
17 **'asymmetries' combine with a series of communicative tensions that have a more nostalgic**  
18 **nature and seem to especially affect migrants as they are unable to return home on certain**  
19 **occasions.** This is confirmed by MJ, who says that video-calling makes her feel '*extremely*  
20 *nostalgic. For my birthday everyone was at the table to celebrate, but I wasn't there*'. The  
21 limitations that are inherent to mediated communication emerge quite vividly here. This is  
22 further confirmed by L. in the following quote:  
23  
24

25  
26 technologies such as Skype and WhatsApp have shortened the distances, which is  
27 positive because you don't lose contact and you feel more reassured that relationships  
28 will continue. However, I do feel quite nostalgic, especially when I realise that I am  
29 missing out on important events such as Christmas, parties, and birthdays.  
30  
31

32 **The inability to return home often results in migrants' feeling guilty about not being**  
33 **physically present to celebrate with the family.** I., a 32 years old researcher from the North of  
34 Italy, explains this very clearly:  
35

36  
37 I feel like I should be there, and Skype doesn't really help in this sense. You think it's  
38 a great alternative – and indeed it is – but as soon as you end the call, you feel  
39 overwhelmed by feelings of nostalgia, loneliness, and isolation.  
40

41  
42 Baldassar (2015) describe this 'guilty feeling' as typical of migration processes, where the  
43 physical separation and longing for home motivate migrants' ongoing ties to their homeland  
44 through mediated forms of communication and virtual co-presence when home visits are not  
45 possible. Baldassar discusses the performative nature of guilty feelings and guilt trips in  
46 relation to a "sense of obligation to care" (88) for those left behind, which the present study  
47 did not seem to return as explicitly. While certainly implicit to some of the discussions I have  
48 had with my respondents, what appeared to be more compelling and guilt-inducing was the  
49 emotional distress caused by the inability to celebrate important moments with the family,  
50 which mediated communication did not seem to replicate nor to fulfil in its emotional  
51 intensity and preciousness.  
52  
53

## 54 Conclusions

55  
56 This article has returned a dynamic and lively picture of family life in transnational contexts.  
57 In observing the role of Skype in enabling the re-staging of family rituals around food  
58 preparation, cooking and dining, I have attempted to articulate the impact of platform use in  
59 creating trans-connective spaces for transnational families to do familyhood. My findings  
60

1  
2  
3 have indicated that transnational family work can take on many different forms and creative  
4 adaptations. In particular, the research has revealed how Skype is used (1) to maintain  
5 connections through sharing recipes and cooking at a distance; (2) to enable the circulation of  
6 social capital within the diaspora and in-between migrants and relatives; and (3) to re-create  
7 moments of commensality that were once performed in physical togetherness. The following  
8 points can also be made. **First, this study contributes to existing literature on food, media and  
9 migration by highlighting the emergence of a *trans-connective habitus* where the frequent use  
10 of Skype – and the fact that the whole family participates – contributes to the creation of a  
11 transnational everyday reality that has in food its cultural and symbolical centre. Second, it is  
12 through the re-enactment of family moments such as cooking and eating together that the  
13 transnational family stays alive and renews its intimate bond. Third, this paper has also  
14 unpacked the emergence of tensions and obstacles. Such tensions mainly referred to **the  
15 inevitable forces (temporalities and affordances) that shape digital media use, and to the  
16 communicative tensions that develop when migrants are unable to return home and are  
17 unsatisfied by mediated communication. Towards the end of this article I also briefly turned  
18 to the concept of guilt which, although not explicitly mentioned by my respondents, seemed  
19 to make transnational family work more difficult to perform.** It is here then, in the often  
20 ambiguous and contradictory practices performed by transnational actors that the material  
21 politics of diasporic life can be fully appreciated. More research into the significance of  
22 affectivity and emotions is needed to further unpack the complexities and trajectories of  
23 global mobilities.  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30**

## 31 References

- 32  
33  
34 Appadurai A (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*.  
35 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.  
36  
37 Baldassar L (2007) Transnational Families and the Provision of Moral and Emotional  
38 Support: The Relationship between Trust and Distance. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture  
39 and Power* 14 (4): 385-409.  
40  
41 Baldassar L (2008) Missing Kin and Longing to be Together: Emotions and the Construction  
42 of Co-presence in Transnational Relationships. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29 (3): 247-  
43 266.  
44  
45 Baldassar L (2015) Guilty feelings and the guilt trip: Emotions and motivation in migration  
46 and transnational caregiving. *Emotion, Space and Society* 16: 81-89.  
47  
48 Baldassar L (2016) De-demonizing distance in mobile family lives: co-presence, care  
49 circulation and polymedia as vibrant matter. In: Baldassar L, Nedelcu M, Merla L and  
50 Wilding R (eds) *Migration and ICTs: 'being together' and 'co-presence' in transnational  
51 families and communities*. *Global Networks* 16 (2):131–256.  
52  
53 Baldassar L, Baldock C and Wilding R (2007) *Families caring across borders: migration,  
54 ageing and transnational caregiving*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 Baldassar L, Nedelcu M, Merla L and Wilding R (2016) ICT-based co-presence in  
4 transnational families and communities: challenging the premise of face-to-face proximity in  
5 sustaining relationships. *Global Networks* 16 (2): 133–144.  
6

7  
8 Berger R (2015) Now I see, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative  
9 research. *Qualitative Research* 15(2): 219–234.  
10

11  
12 Borges MJ and Cancian S (2016) Reconsidering the migrant letter: from the experience of  
13 migrants to the language of migrants. *The History of the Family* 21(3): 281-290.  
14

15  
16 Brah A (1996) *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.

17  
18 Bhugra D and Becker MA (2005) Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity.  
19 *World Psychiatry* 4(1): 18–24.  
20

21  
22 Cabalquinto ECB (2018) "We're not only here but we're there in spirit": Asymmetrical  
23 mobile intimacy and the transnational Filipino family. *Mobile Media & Communication* 6(1):  
24 37– 52.

25  
26 Cabanes JAA and Acedera KAF (2012) Of mobile phones and mother-fathers: Calls,  
27 text messages, and conjugal power relations in mother-away Filipino families. *New Media &*  
28 *Society* 14(6): 916–930.  
29

30  
31 Chib A, Malik S, Aricat RG and Kadir SZ (2014) Migrant mothering and mobile phones:  
32 Negotiations of transnational identity. *Mobile Media & Communication* 2(1): 73-93.  
33

34  
35 Cinotto S (2013) *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York*  
36 *City*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.  
37

38  
39 Counihan C and Van Esterik P (1997) *Food and Culture: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

40  
41 Dekker R and Engbersen G (2014) How social media transform migrant networks and  
42 facilitate migration. *Global Networks* 14 (4): 401–418.  
43

44  
45 Diminescu D (2008) The connected migrant: an epistemological manifesto. *Social Science*  
46 *Information* 47(4): 565–579.  
47

48  
49 Finlay L (2002) "Outing" the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of  
50 Reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research* 12(4): 531-545.  
51

52  
53 Fischler C (1988) Food, self and identity. *Social Science Information* 27: 275–293.  
54

55  
56 Fonseca V (2016) Targeting Hispanics/Latinos beyond locality: Food, social networks and  
57 nostalgia in online shopping. In: Hingley MK (ed) *The New Cultures of Food: Marketing*  
58 *Opportunities from Ethnic, Religious and Cultural Diversity*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press,  
59 163–179.  
60

Fortier AM (2000) *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity*. London: Berg.

- 1  
2  
3 Francisco V (2015) The Internet is magic: Technology, intimacy and transnational families.  
4 *Critical Sociology* 41(1): 173–190.  
5  
6  
7 Gabaccia D (1998) *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*.  
8 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.  
9  
10 Gabaccia D (2000) *Italy's Many Diasporas*. London: UCL Press.  
11  
12 Hage, G. (2010) Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building. In: Radstone S and Schwarz  
13 B (eds) *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*. New York: Fordham University Press.  
14  
15  
16 Hegde, RS (2016) *Mediating Migration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.  
17  
18  
19 King O'Riain RC (2015) Emotional Streaming and transconnectivity: Skype and emotion  
20 practices in transnational families in Ireland. *Global Networks* 15 (2): 256-273.  
21  
22 Licoppe C and Smoreda Z (2005) Are social networks technologically embedded? How  
23 networks are changing today with changes in communication technology. *Social Networks*  
24 27(4): 317-335.  
25  
26  
27 Ling R and Yttri B (2002) Hyper-coordination via mobile phones in Norway. In: Katz J and  
28 Aakhus M (eds) *Perpetual contact: Mobile communication, private talk, public performance*.  
29 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 139-169.  
30  
31 Locher JL, Yoels W, Maurer D and van Ells J (2005) Comfort Foods: An Exploratory  
32 Journey Into The Social and Emotional Significance of Food. *Food and Foodways* 13(4):  
33 273-297.  
34  
35  
36 Longhurst R Johnston L and Ho E (2009) A visceral approach: Cooking 'at home' with  
37 migrant women in Hamilton, New Zealand. *Transactions* 34(3): 333–345.  
38  
39 Lupton, D (1996) *Food, the body and the self*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.  
40  
41 McKay D (2018) Sent home: mapping the absent child into migration through polymedia.  
42 *Global Networks* 18 (1): 133–150.  
43  
44 Madianou M and Miller D (2012) *Migration and new media: transnational families and*  
45 *polymedia*. Abingdon: Routledge.  
46  
47  
48 Madianou M and Miller D (2011) Mobile phone parenting: Reconfiguring relationships  
49 between Filipina migrant mothers and their left-behind children. *New Media & Society* 13(3):  
50 457– 470.  
51  
52  
53 Madianou M (2014) Polymedia communication and mediatized migration: an ethnographic  
54 approach. In: Knut L (ed) *Mediatization of Communication*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 323-  
55 348.  
56  
57  
58 Madianou M (2016) Ambient co-presence: transnational family practices in polymedia  
59 environments. *Global Networks* 16 (2): 183–201.  
60

- 1  
2  
3 Mancina-Batinich ME (2009) *Italian Voices: Making Minnesota Our Home*. Minnesota  
4 Historical Society.  
5  
6  
7 Marte L (2007) Foodmaps: Tracing boundaries of home through food relations. *Food and*  
8 *Foodways* 15(3): 261–289.  
9  
10  
11 Nedelcu M (2012) Migrants' new transnational habitus: rethinking migration through a  
12 cosmopolitan lens in the digital age. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38 (9): 1339–  
13 56.  
14  
15 Nedelcu M and Wyss M (2016) 'Doing family' through ICT-mediated ordinary co-presence:  
16 transnational communication practices of Romanian migrants in Switzerland. *Global*  
17 *Networks* 16 (2): 202–218.  
18  
19  
20 Nicolescu R (2016) *Social Media in Southeast Italy*. London: UCL Press.  
21  
22  
23 Ochs E and Shohet M (2006) The cultural structuring of mealtime socialization. *New*  
24 *Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 111: 35–49.  
25  
26  
27 Paragas F (2009) Migrant Workers and Mobile Phones: Technological, Temporal, and Spatial  
28 Simultaneity. In: Ling R and Campbell SW (eds) *Reconstruction of Space and Time: Mobile*  
29 *Communication Practices*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, pp. 39 – 66.  
30  
31  
32 Petridou E (2001) The taste of home. In: Miller D (ed) *Home Possessions: Material Culture*  
33 *behind Closed Doors*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 87–104.  
34  
35  
36 Philipp A and Ho E (2010) Migration, home and belonging: South African migrant women in  
37 Hamilton, New Zealand. *New Zealand Population Review* 36: 81–101.  
38  
39  
40 Schiller N, Basch L and Blanc-Szanton C (1992) Transnationalism: A New Analytic  
41 Framework for Understanding Migration. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645  
42 (1): 1-24.  
43  
44  
45 Sprio M (2013) *Migrant Memories: Cultural History, Cinema and the Italian Post-War*  
46 *Diaspora in Britain*. Oxford: Peter Lang.  
47  
48  
49 Statista (2018) Number of Italian citizens living in London (UK) registered at the Registry of  
50 Italians Resident Abroad registry as of April 21, 2016. Available at:  
51 [https://www.statista.com/statistics/603114/number-of-registered-italians-in-london-uk-by-](https://www.statista.com/statistics/603114/number-of-registered-italians-in-london-uk-by-gender/)  
52 [gender/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/603114/number-of-registered-italians-in-london-uk-by-gender/) (accessed 15 June 2018)  
53  
54  
55 Vázquez-Medina JA and Medina FX (2015) Migration, nostalgia and the building of a food  
56 imaginary: Mexican migrants at “La Pulga” Market in San Joaquin Valley, California.  
57 *ESSACHESS. Journal for Communication Studies* 8 (2): 133-146.  
58  
59  
60 Vertovec S (2004) Cheap calls: the social glue of migrant transnationalism. *Global Networks*  
4 (2): 219–24.  
Wellman B and Haythornthwaite C (2008) *The Internet in Everyday Life*. John Wiley &  
Sons.

1  
2  
3 Wilding R (2006) 'Virtual' intimacies? Families communicating across transnational  
4 Contexts. *Global Networks* 6 (2): 125–142.  
5

6  
7 Zontini E (2004) Italian families and social capital: Rituals and the provision of care in  
8 British– Italian transnational families, Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group.  
9 London: South Bank University.  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

For Peer Review