



# Sustaining Ghanaian Transnational Parent–Child Relationships through WhatsApp: A Youth-Centric Perspective

Onallia Esther Osei, Valentina Mazzucato,  
and Karlijn Haagsman

## 1 Introduction

Information and communications technologies (ICTs), and smartphones in particular, are speedily modifying how societies operate and transnational families are no exception. Transnational families, that is, families separated due to international migration, can experience ‘co-presence’ while not being physically close through their use of ICTs (Baldassar et al., 2016). Through ICTs, transnational families remain connected despite geographical separation, which allows them to continue to act as families, with the associated material and emotional care that this entails (Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013; Lim, 2016). Studying ICT-based co-presence thus helps us understand the ways in which family members maintain a sense of ‘being there’ for each other across distance.

For about two decades now, transnational family studies have shown that ICTs are vital to keeping parent–child relationships alive during separation, mainly by looking at how migrant parents interact with children who remain in their country of origin (Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012).

Little work has been done to date on children’s own experiences of ICT-mediated relationships with their parents. Yet, we know that transnational families involve power asymmetries (Faist et al., 2015; Serra Mingot, 2020) and that people negotiate such asymmetries through ICTs (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005). This makes it important to ask how stayer youth, that is children who stay home while their parents migrate overseas, display agency through their use of social media.

There is an important reason why focusing on youth’s experiences may shed additional light on ICT-mediated parent–child relationships. We already know much about how parents experience digital communication. Children in origin countries might have less access to ICTs than their parents due to the costs of cellphones and calls, but they are also usually more literate in using Internet-enabled media (Madianou, 2014). Age influences people’s views and experiences of social interaction that takes place through ICTs (Baldassar, 2016; Cabalquinto, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Consequently, it is important to look at how young people experience digital interactions differently from their parents.

Alongside phone calls and text messaging, children and parents currently rely on social media to stay in touch during geographical separation (Anh Hoang & Yeoh, 2012; Madianou, 2014; Parreñas, 2005). The social media platforms predominantly discussed by scholars

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O. E. Osei · V. Mazzucato (✉) · K. Haagsman  
Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [o.osei@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:o.osei@maastrichtuniversity.nl); [v.mazzucato@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:v.mazzucato@maastrichtuniversity.nl); [r.haagsman@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:r.haagsman@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

of transnational parent–child relationships are Skype and Facebook (Ahlin, 2018; Baldassar, 2016; Baldassar et al. 2016; Madianou, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2011). Due to the proliferation of social media platforms, however, there is a need to widen the scope of research and to explore other platforms. Facebook and WhatsApp are the most popular social media platforms used by youth (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Pew Research Centre, 2018), and Ghana is no exception (Markwei & Appiah, 2016). But despite its popularity, WhatsApp has been neglected in current studies of ICT-mediated relationships in transnational families. WhatsApp is a free communication technology used on smartphones with an Internet connection. It therefore reduces one of the hurdles that youth face in staying connected with migrant parents during separation, namely, cost (Lam & Yeoh, 2018).

This chapter is based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Ghana with 38 young people whose parents had migrated abroad. While the literature often refers to these young people as ‘left behind’, we use the term ‘stayer’ to avoid negative connotations (Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2020). We conducted this investigation in Ghana because many young people there grow up far from their parents due to parental migration. Close to a quarter of all secondary school-age children have at least one parent who has migrated (Ghana Statistical Service, Ghana Health Service, & ICF International, 2015).

In the next section, we discuss the literature on ICTs and transnational parent–child relationships, showing that most studies focus on the perspectives of parents. We review our methodology, including our entry into the field, participant selection, consent, data collection and analysis. We also provide background information on our participants. In the third section, we discuss the media ecology of our participants. In the fourth, we analyse our findings on the strategies young people employ for communicating with migrant parents using WhatsApp. We end with concluding remarks and recommendations for further research.

## 2 Communication Technologies and Transnational Parent–Child Relationships

Communication is key to maintaining social ties at a distance, providing a sense of being together and ‘doing family’ despite being far apart (Ahlin, 2018; Baldassar, 2016; Leurs, 2014; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005; Madianou & Miller, 2011). Due to international migration, it is common to find children and parents living separately across countries. Stringent migration laws, which apply especially to migration from Global South to Global North countries, often make it difficult for children to migrate with their parents (Botezat & Pfeiffer, 2019; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2020; Jordan et al., 2018). Leaving children in the origin country may also be seen as a better option for some parents who come from cultures where child fostering is a common phenomenon (Poeze et al., 2017). During such geographical separations, members of transnational families stay connected through communication technologies, remittances and visits (Dreby, 2006; Poeze et al., 2017; Schmalzbauer, 2008). Of the three means, ICTs are the most accessible to a wide variety of people as they entail fewer financial resources, or formal documentation than remittances and home visits (Veale & Donà, 2014). ICTs also help transnational family members to provide affective support during separation (Benítez, 2012).

ICTs promote virtual co-presence and are rapidly replacing old forms of telecommunication interaction and interpersonal exchange during long-distance separations due to massive technological developments (Licoppe, 2004; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005). Although several scholars have conceptualised different types of co-presence, this article relies on Baldassar’s (2016) definition of virtual co-presence as sociability or sociality that results in a feeling of ‘living together’ based on the flow of social exchanges via ICTs (Madianou, 2014; Licoppe, 2004; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005). Virtual co-presence includes ‘real time-shared communication of voice over the telephone, video, Skype or Facetime, text over SMS

mobile devices, and text and/or images on Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp chats' (Baldassar, 2016: 153). Baldassar distinguishes between active and passive co-presence based on differences in 'expectations of attentiveness, the pace of reciprocity, and the depth of emotional engagement' (p.150). By comparing real-time streaming and immediate co-presence via Facetime and Skype with texting by SMS and WhatsApp, she argues that texting enables 'intermediate', 'selective' or 'discretionary' co-presence because individuals choose when to read and reply to messages. She highlights the capacity of text-based communication platforms to store information for reading or rereading later. Although such discretionary co-presence fails to deliver the opportunities of being there in the moment that streaming and immediate forms of co-presence provide, it nonetheless helps create and maintain a strong sense of kinship. Hence, discretionary co-presence creates opportunities for passive, ambient or continuous co-presence in the background, as opposed to actively staying connected in the foreground.

In recognition of the increasing use of a wide variety of ICT, Madianou and Miller (2012) coined the term 'polymedia' to refer to the various media ecologies used for personal communication and relationship building. These media ecologies are made up of different communication platforms, such as Skype or Facebook messaging, each with its own functionalities. Treating them as an ecology recognises the fact that different media or platforms do not exist in a vacuum but in relation to each other. Through this perspective, an emphasis is placed in media analysis on how people use media and the social relations people have through the technology. But for polymedia to have such function, it must meet 3 prerequisites: accessibility, affordability and technical literacy (Baldassar, 2016; Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Users must have a good range of media that they can afford and use confidently (Madianou, 2014). However, accessibility, affordability and technical literacy are not the same across generations and geographical space (Baldassar, 2016; Alampay, 2012; Elul, 2020). Madianou and Miller (2012)

found that stayer youth are better at using modern communication tools than migrant parents, but ICTs are more accessible and affordable for migrant parents than the young people they studied.

The concept of polymedia has been criticised for how the proponents applied it in origin countries' contexts. In many countries in the Global South where migrants come from, access to technologies is limited and the polymedia lens omits less privileged groups (Alampay, 2012; Elul, 2020). Yet one of the proponents of polymedia argue that the concept is useful in identifying inequalities and socio-economic gaps in communication (Madianou, 2014, 2015). Madianou (2014) states that differences in economic status, media access and technical literacy have a high impact on transnational communication and the quality of transnational relationships. Additionally, age and duration of separation shape how different members of transnational families use particular communication media to stay connected (Cabalquinto, 2018; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2014). Madianou and Miller (2012) found that available media, age of separation and quality of parent–child relationships before migration defined how stayer youth viewed their experiences of mediated transnational relationships. Furthermore, Wilding (2006) shows that families experienced regular communication as helping to minimise the significance of distance, at least until there is a crisis, like a family conflict or illness, when the impediment of distance increases.

Knowing that various factors shape the nexus between communication and transnational relationships, we examine the media ecologies of Ghana and how our young research participants use particular media to which they have access to shape and sustain their transnational parent–child relationships. We focus on social media, in particular on WhatsApp. It is important to know how stayer youth adopt and use social media for transnational parent–child engagements because youth are frequent users of Facebook and WhatsApp as compared to other communication tools (Pew Research Centre, 2018; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Social media can

improve the quality of transnational relationships (Francisco, 2015). Social media platforms also support regular long-distance communication if the will and ability to use them are in place (Baldassar, 2016). But scholars have largely ignored WhatsApp. The existing literature primarily talks about how migrant parents stay connected with stayer youth through phone calls, webcams, emails, Skype, Twitter, Facetime and Facebook (Dreby, 2006; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Parreñas, 2001; Schmalzbauer, 2008). Little is known about the use of WhatsApp, though it is a tool commonly used by young people. WhatsApp's affordability, as compared to traditional international calls, means that cost is not a major barrier to communication for young people (Lam & Yeoh, 2018). By studying how young people use WhatsApp, we show how stayer youth display agency in transnational parent-child relationships.

Our focus on young people runs contrary to much of the literature on transnational families and ICTs. This literature has focused on migrant parents, reflecting the fact that power relations within families are unequal, with power usually laying in the hands of the parents. Furthermore, until recently, the cost and accessibility of communication technologies favoured migrant parents relative to their stayer children, giving researchers another reason to focus on the parents. In the past, much communication was done by phone call. Migrant parents have been found to make phone calls weekly and even daily to stayer youth (Dreby, 2006; Haagsman & Mazzucato, 2014; Jordan et al., 2018; Madianou, 2014; Parreñas, 2001). Yet this adult-centric perspective has had the consequence of positioning stayer youth as passive actors in transnational family relations. But with the arrival of new media, and WhatsApp in particular, young people can initiate communication and can actively stay connected to their parents, which could result in increased youth agency and hence changing positions of power.

We draw on Licoppe and Smoreda's (2005) study of how, when and what people communicate via ICTs to understand how young people

use their agency through WhatsApp to shape communication with their migrant parents. Licoppe and Smoreda argue that ICTs, and specifically mobile phones, give individuals power to negotiate the constraints of communication. Additionally, they argue that ICTs provide new resources (i.e. communication tools) to negotiate time (i.e. absence and presence) and social exchanges, thereby adjusting social roles and hierarchies, and power asymmetries. Simply keeping in touch can also be important beyond what is actually said during communication. Licoppe and Smoreda show that the rhythm of speech, writing, gesture and silence are some ways people keep in touch through communication technologies. They also call on researchers to interrogate why people choose to use one mediated mode of interaction over another. People have reasons for communicating in a particular way, based on either conventional judgment or interpretive practice. For example, inner commitment to a relationship and inner experience of the strength of a bond shape the choice of communication technologies people use to maintain social ties across distance. Our study draws on different elements highlighted by Licoppe and Smoreda when analysing the strategies that young people adopt to communicate with their migrant parents via WhatsApp, even when parents seem unavailable or uninterested in communicating.

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### 3 Participant Characteristics and Methodology

Participants were selected from those who participated in a survey conducted in 2015 amongst secondary school students in three cities in Ghana (Sunyani, Kumasi and Accra) on the topic of transnational families (TCRA project [www.tcra.nl](http://www.tcra.nl)). 442 children of migrants and non-migrants participated in TCRA Ghana project. Out of the 81 people identified as stay behinds in the TCRA dataset, three later reunified with their parents abroad and 27 could not be reached. This left 51 potential participants, though 13 declined to participate in our research.

**Table 1** Characteristics of participants

Characteristics	Description
Age of participants	16–23 years
Highest level of education completed	Senior high school (all participants)
Home regions	Greater Accra, Northern, Volta, Ashanti, Bono and Ahafo
Type of transnational family	<i>Mother-away (5)</i> : Mothers left Ghana between 2000 and 2018. All gave birth to the participants in this study before leaving. <i>Father-away (24)</i> : Some fathers went overseas before participants were born. <i>Both parents-away (9)</i> : Some fathers migrated overseas before arranging for mothers to join them. Other parents travelled together. Not all of these parents are still married or living together overseas.
Location of parents	Europe, North America and Africa
Length of separation	From 3 months to whole lifetime
Communication technologies accessible to participants	Standard mobile phone calls, SMS, WhatsApp, Facebook, Facetime, Imo <sup>1</sup> and Instagram
Family visits to Ghana by migrant parents	15 young people had experienced at least one parental visit from abroad.

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Imo is a social messaging application used on computers and smartphones like other social media platforms. Only one participant said that he communicates occasionally with his migrant father via Imo

Our final sample consisted of 38 young people (Table 1).

The TCRA survey participants had given us their consent to trace them in the future. We contacted them through mobile phone calls and WhatsApp. Once we gained the written and oral consent of our 38 young people, plus the consent of the caregivers of two participants who were under the age of 18, we met in person for in-depth interviews. After these interviews, we conducted more in-depth research with a sub-sample of 15 young people. We met with them several times to conduct observations and conversations to enrich our understandings of emerging issues. The first author visited the young people at their homes, at school and during social activities. This allowed for occasional and unexpected first-hand observations of some transnational parent–child communications in action. We blended offline and online engagements in order to keep our contact with participants active even when we were collecting data in another location.

We compiled 38 youth files comprising field notes and interview transcripts amounting to over 2500 pages of written text. We gathered information on participants' actual experiences and perceptions of living separated from their migrant parents. The data include participants' socio-economic and family characteristics, their

communication practices and their feelings about sustaining transnational parent–child relationships through communication technologies. We conducted thematic analysis based on deductive and inductive coding.

## 4 Contextualising Stayer youth's Agency in Transnational Communication

In this section, we discuss how stayer youth in Ghana exhibit agency through their use of social media to communicate with their parents overseas. We first outline the media ecology, i.e., the polymedia conditions, of the study area and of the participants, before moving on to show how young people use WhatsApp to sustain their transnational parent–child relationships.

### 4.1 The Media Ecology of Young Ghanaians in Transnational Families

There are no statistics on current phone ownership and Internet usage for the period of our research, but in 2012, Ghana was described as becoming an information technology society

because a significant proportion of the population owned mobile phones (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). More than four out of every five households owned a mobile phone in 2014 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), while two years earlier, forty-eight per cent of the Ghanaian population aged 12-years-old and above owned mobile phones and 8 per cent used Internet facilities (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). As compared to other regions in Ghana, Greater Accra (74%) and Ashanti (56%) regions had the highest proportions of mobile phone owners. More urbanites than rural dwellers used the Internet and mobile phones in Ghana in 2012 due to affordability. While 63 per cent of Ghana's urban population used mobile phones and 13 per cent the Internet, usage in rural areas was 13 and 2 per cent respectively (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Internet infrastructure and limited financial resources pose the largest constraints (Elul, 2020).

Through promotional activities by telecommunication companies and mobile phone traders, the utilisation of smartphones and the Internet is increasing, despite popular claims that communication is expensive in Ghana. Mobile phone traders in Ghana promote the consumption of communication technologies through the supply of affordable phones from China and sales of used phones. *The National Communication Authority also controls market pricing of telecommunication services to protect consumers.* The promotion of affordable smartphones and Internet access has been a major boost to WhatsApp adoption and use in Ghana.

Since its inception in 2009, WhatsApp usage has increased astronomically. At first, WhatsApp was a text messaging tool for iPhone users, before also being made available to Android users. Later, voice and video functionalities were added. Currently, WhatsApp enables most people in Ghana, including our participants, to have desired private interactions, as compared to Facebook, which is mostly for public engagements (Elul, 2020). Two study participants did not have direct access to WhatsApp or any social media. Still, they would use WhatsApp through someone else's phone, usually their

caregivers to stay connected to migrant parents. Additionally, some young people maintained contact through standard mobile phone calls and SMS, as pay-as-you-go (PAYG) subscribers.

PAYG is the same as pay-as-you-talk or prepaid mobile phone. Owners of PAYG smartphones must first purchase credit to use any of the communication services or tools on their phones. PAYG is the most available option for mobile phone communication as postpaid mobile phone contracts rarely exist in Ghana. Mobile phone users in Ghana purchase talk credit or data packages with their mobile money wallet or through top-up or refill cards from vendors usually found by roadsides or in grocery shops. Thus, while WhatsApp technology is free, it still entails a cost as it requires PAYG credit.

All the participants in our study commented on the costs of staying connected to their migrant parents. Sonna narrates:

It is like, my mother is not that knowledgeable. She is not that educated. So, it was difficult for her to use the Android phone that was given to her unless she gets someone to assist her in making the calls. I am the one who was supposed to call her. But it is difficult to buy airtime here in Ghana. If I buy like GHS 5airtime, I can't talk for long, and my mother is one person that when I call her, we can talk for long and that is why I don't call her. If I call her, we will talk for long, and so we don't get to talk often. Maybe in a week or two, we will talk once. (Sonna, 22 years old, male, July 2019)

The costs of communication fell on Sonna because his mother lacked the know-how. The issue of technological literacy is an important one. Our research corroborates previous finding that stayer youth have higher technical knowledge about smartphone and social media platforms than some migrant parents, especially when parents are illiterate (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Sonna's mother cannot call him due to what he describes as her lack of education. Hence, Sonna took up the responsibility of calling his mother to keep their relationship alive.

Not all our participants had smartphones. Accessing smartphones was also an issue for some of our participants. While the literature suggests that migrant parents often buy smartphones for their older children (Poeze

et al., 2017), this was not always the case amongst our participants. Some young people did not have smartphones before entering senior high school (grades 10 to 12) and could only get in touch with their parents through caregivers or other adults in the same house or neighbourhood. As the young people had to go through adults and sometimes non-relatives to call their parents, communication was intermittent and had to be scheduled. When participants reached secondary school age, boarders were permitted to use the school's mobile phone for a fee at designated times to get in touch with their parents. Some relied on their social contacts. For example, Neelde could easily access his school's mobile phone to call his migrant parents for free because his brother, the school prefect, had the school phone in his custody.

While some participants received smartphones from their parents, others had to purchase their phones with their own income or pocket money. In fact, most of the young people in our study got their phones from sources other than their parents, especially after secondary school. These sources included romantic partners and extended family members. Sometimes young people were creative in their attempts to get a smartphone from their parents, as in the case of Pippy:

For a few months, Pippy (18 years old, male) lost his smartphone and could not stay in touch frequently with his migrant parents. Pippy's parents wanted to keep in touch. So, they offered to buy him a simple cellphone. Pippy rejected this offer because the phone did not support social media. Pippy thus borrowed the smartphones of his caregiver and a friend to reach out to his migrant family until he was able to buy a smartphone out of his savings. When Pippy's parents asked him how he got the phone, he lied that a friend lent him a phone so that his parents would still get him a smartphone during his mother's home visit.

(Fieldnote about Pippy, July 2019)

When parents do give a phone to their stayer children, it can cause friction if only one child gets a phone. Jina made this clear when she explained that she felt her father wanted to cause enmity between her paternal half-brother and herself when her father chose to give the younger

half-brother a phone and ignored her several requests for one.

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## 5 Youth Agency in WhatsApp-Mediated Interactions

There are various ways that young people exert agency through their use of WhatsApp to influence communication with their parents abroad. Below we discuss the five ways that emerged from our data. Young people exert agency: (a) by using their technical abilities; (b) through the way they time their communications; (c) through the actual content of the communication, including what they don't say or say only partially; (d) by using their siblings to facilitate communication and (e) by using silence and brevity to show their dissatisfaction.

### 5.1 Technical Abilities

The participants in our study used the various functions of WhatsApp to engage with their parents. Below we show how some young people expressly chose to use specific WhatsApp functionalities that matched their parents' technical literacy. Others used their own technical know-how to search, find and connect with their parents after many years of separation. Sometimes also parents took the initiative to reconnect with their children after long times of separation using new technologies. Additionally, WhatsApp was a medium for children to monitor their parents' online presence to increase the likelihood of receiving replies to text messages.

Young people were found to adapt the ways of sending messages, to adapt to their parents' abilities. Marble, for example, would send voice messages instead of text messages, as her parents are illiterate. She explains,

My father didn't go to school . . . that's what I have heard, and I do not know if he can chat . . . When I call him, and he doesn't answer, I will just send audio [a voice message] to tell him that I was

calling to find out how he is doing. (Marble, 22 years old, female, July 2019)

Young people also use social media to gather information about their parents when they have had no contact with their parents for years and wish to re-establish communication. They gather details to find their parents online. Mape and his stay-at-home brother did this through Facebook and WhatsApp.

Although Mape (19 years old, male) was 3 years old when his father migrated abroad, the first time Mape heard from him was when Mape was already in university. To make the father's call possible, Mape and his younger brother had gathered their father's full name, nickname and country of residence from their mother in order to find him on Facebook. Mape's younger brother was the one who searched and found their father on Facebook. The younger brother then moved his communication with his father from Facebook to WhatsApp after requesting his father's WhatsApp details. During their interaction on WhatsApp, the father at one point requested Mape's contact details and established contact with Mape on WhatsApp. It took several more months for Mape's father to finally call him. This being the very first time they had ever communicated, the father sent Mape a picture of himself so that Mape could confirm with his mother that he was indeed his father. Mape was happy to hear from his father, who told him about the shop that he had in Kumasi and invited Mape to go there from time to time. Instantly, Mape thought that help had come his way through the unexpected call from his father. When Mape went home over the weekend from his university campus, he told his mum and showed her the picture of his dad. Mape's mother confirmed that the man was his father but had a sad look in her eye. She advised Mape to stay away from the man who called himself his father and instead focus on his education. And in fact, the mother's advice was a premonition for what happened. After that call on WhatsApp, the father vanished into thin air without calling or chatting to Mape again. (Fieldnotes about Mape, February 2019)

Mape and his brother actively sought out their father's details to establish contact with him. They succeeded, but as their case shows, this does not necessarily mean that such work will lead to continuing relationships. Below we will discuss the emotional toll that this can have on young people.

Some young people rely on the functionalities of WhatsApp to monitor and surveil their parents' interactions with them. When parents are not responsive to digital conversations, some young people resort to monitoring their parents' online presence to decide whether or not they should continue calling or messaging their parents. Mape again provides an example. He sends text and voice messages and calls to his father to request money for educational needs and to ask how his father is doing. Despite the numerous calls and messages, Mape's father has never replied after their first phone contact. Mape checks the ticks on his WhatsApp and therefore sees that while his father has read and heard his messages, he still does not respond. This disengagement hurts. Mape continues to contact his father, hoping that one day his father will respond.

Goshie also monitors his father's lack of communication, but unlike Mape, Goshie is fed up with his father for not responding to his calls. Instead of continuously calling and messaging his father, Goshie prefers solely to monitor his father's online presence via his WhatsApp status. Goshie monitors his father, who was separated from him at the age of 3 years, but says, he will not make contact again if his father will not contact him, his mother or sister. Goshie thinks that his father does not care about them.

The last time I heard from him was last year. I was trying to [tell] him that there are these people who normally don't get parental intervention: no control from the parents. They are on their own . . . We [Goshie and his biological sister] have never had a dad. . .we don't have a dad to do those kinds of things with us . . . he has been calling [my paternal step-siblings], he chats them on WhatsApp. But I don't chat him. (Goshie, 16 years old, male, March 2019)

Goshie: He is not aware of anything happening in my life. But when I post stuff at my WhatsApp status, he watches it but never comments. I always laugh when that happens. I don't chat with him [and] neither does he.

Interviewer: Do you also look at his status?

Goshie: No way! Actually, he seldom posts status. He rather watches mine, and it makes me laugh. I



don't even know why he watches because with the way he is behaving, it depicts that he has forgotten all about me. So, I don't get why he watches my status. It tells me he is available, but he does not want to contact me.

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel?

Goshie: I am used to it since this has been the situation from the time I was a child.

(Interview conversation with Goshie, July 2019)

Some young people wait to see that their parents are online on WhatsApp before connecting with them. For those whose parents prefer receiving text messages, young people sometimes expect an immediate response to their texts. Yet, when this does not happen, it can lead to hurt feelings. For example, Trendy has active text messaging interaction with her father on WhatsApp as her father asked her to send him messages instead of calls. Trendy becomes sad when her father is online but does not respond immediately to her messages. However, although the reply might take longer than she expects, Trendy knows that her father will reply in his own time even if he chooses not to respond immediately.

New media, with monitoring or surveillance functions, bring public online spaces to merge with private ones in building and sustaining transnational relationships. However, this combination can lead to negative emotions, such as feeling hurt when a parent seems to be online but does not respond. New media also allow members of transnational families to stay connected in the background, to have 'discretionary co-presence', as Baldassar (2016) calls it, when 'active co-presence' is impossible or denied. In the past, when phone calls were the main medium of communication, if a call was not answered, the caller could not know whether the receiver was unable to take the call or was avoiding them. WhatsApp, in contrast, allows users to check whether recipients receive and read messages, and to view status updates that people post about themselves. This functionality gives non-response a different meaning, bringing greater suspicion of being ignored or abandoned.

## 5.2 The Timing of Communication

As Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) suggest, the timing of a message can also be a way of communicating a message to someone. For example, some young people choose to delay replying to their parents' calls or messages if they are unhappy about the content of messages received. When Gusta's mother sent a message that she was unhappy about something, Gusta did not reply immediately. When his mother sent him messages stating she did not like his hairstyle in his profile picture, Gusta never replied. In another instance, when his mother asked him how he was progressing with his business plan, he took several days to respond. Gusta took the time to think of the most appropriate response so that his mother would not over-react.

Some young people take note of the times their parents are free to talk. Neelde, for example, considers the most appropriate time to call and talk to his mother so that they can have meaningful interactions, as Neelde depends on his mother for emotional support. Working parents are available at specific times of the week, especially after regular working hours in weekday evenings or in weekends. As Madianou and Miller (2011) found, weekend conversations are common in the transnational families we studied. Weekends were generally when young people conversed with their parents, invoking shared jokes and memories of when they lived together in Ghana.

Some young people prefer to wait for their parents to call them even when they have needs. These young people do not necessarily lack money for communication. Rather, they expect parents to call them and not vice versa, as Reso told us:

Every day he [Reso's migrant father] calls us. He calls my mum, my sister and me too: at times, in the morning, afternoon or evening. Today, I told him my phone is spoilt [broken] so . . . yeah. . . . As for him, he is always expecting us [Reso and her sister] to call. For my mum, he calls her. For my sister and I, he is expecting us to call him and not he calling us. We rather wait for his call on our mother's phone . . . Just greeting and maybe if I want something, I will ask. At times, just greeting, asking of his health, yeah, and at times maybe when

he wants to tell me something. (Reso, 18 years old, female, June 2019)

Reso and her sister are mostly at home when their father calls their mother through WhatsApp. By making sure they are at home when their father talks to their mother, these young women get the opportunity to speak to their father. They expect their father to call them and do not anticipate calling him. Reso never reported calling her father directly. Although, the majority of the participants actively called their parents, Reso's case suggests that not all young people instigate communication.

### 5.3 Content of Communication

During WhatsApp-mediated communication, migrant parents and stayer youth text or talk about their favourite games and about things happening at home or abroad. Young people make their needs heard, make requests, receive information about remittances, ask or receive advice or receive words of encouragement.

Oje regularly speaks with her father overseas. Given the frequency of his calls, Oje has the opportunity to tell her father about her needs and to request money to pay for her daily necessities, school admission fees and remedial classes. Through their regular conversations, Oje also discusses her future career plans with her father. Interestingly, it was only after her father visited Ghana that this frequent communication began. Oje's father uses WhatsApp voice calls to speak to Oje on her caregiver's phone. Oje knows her father calls her mother about her too because she sees her mother whenever she goes to the market for food to cook for her household.

He pays my school fees, he calls me to check on me, and everything. Shelter and food . . . He calls every month, multiple, to my real mum . . . my aunty (caregiver), and now me. (Oje, 18 years old, female, October 2018)

When young people perceive that their migrant parents have limited time for conversation but are willing to provide for their material needs, some young people limit their

communication to requests. These young people mostly request money for their education, food or household utilities like electricity. Veeka only contacts her father to request money for school fees, electricity bills and food. Veeka's father is a busy Christian missionary in the United Kingdom. Knowing her father's willingness to provide materially, but his lack of time to engage emotionally, Veeka only contacts her father when she has a material request. Veeka receives video calls from her mother in Germany almost every day, during which they speak for an extended time about family related and unrelated matters. Veeka appreciates her father's availability for her material needs. In another instance, Jina observed that her father only engages her if she calls to ask for money for her education.

Some young people, including Jina, tell lies to obtain much needed remittances from migrant parents for their own and their siblings' needs. Jina adds extra amounts to her demands for education whenever her father cannot verify how much she needs through a paternal cousin and uses the extra to pay for her beauty needs. In another case, Trendy brings forward the deadline for tuition fee payments for her and her sibling's school by two weeks, knowing that their father is always late with remittances. Before every vacation, Trendy tells her father the school will re-open two weeks earlier than it actually does, and communicates all their educational needs, such as books and hostel fees. Throughout vacations, Trendy sends voice notes and text messages to their father to remind him of their needs, especially for school fees, the deadlines for payment and consequences attached to late payment of fees.

### 5.4 Connecting through Siblings

Youth show agency in choosing to connect to migrant parents via siblings living in Ghana or abroad. These siblings act as mediators between stayer youth and migrant parents. If migrant parents are hard to reach, some young people connect to their parents through siblings who have also moved overseas. Pippy, for example,

maintains regular contact with his migrant parents via his younger sister, who lives with their parents. His parents are WhatsApp users too, but Pippy chooses to go through his sister in order to find out when his parents are home and available. Pippy explains that there is another advantage. By contacting his sister, Pippy gets the opportunity to hear the voices of his parents as his sister lets him talk to them directly. At other times, Pippy gets to hear his parents' voice as his sister's background noise while Pippy talks to his sister via WhatsApp voice calls. Over the weekends, Pippy mostly talks to both parents on WhatsApp video calls through his sister's phone. At other times, his mother calls him over the weekend to see how he is doing and to talk about how other family members are doing. When Pippy has a financial request to make, he always checks first with his sister via WhatsApp to get her assessment of whether their parents are in a position to support him or not. The sister never says that Pippy should not ask, but she sometimes advises him to adjust the timing of his demands if she thinks that their parents are going through a difficult time. Pippy explains that he trusts his sister's judgement and delays his request until the sister tells him that the parents can afford it. He notes that this strategy results in his parents responding to his needs most of the time.

Where parents lack the technical capacity for WhatsApp interaction, young people sometimes connect through migrant siblings, as Sonna describes.

Sometimes I would video call my sister, and then I will tell her to give the phone to my mother, so I could speak to her. It is like, my mother is not that knowledgeable. She is not that educated. So, it was difficult for her to use the android phone that was given to her unless she gets someone to assist her. (Sonna, July 2019)

Local siblings, those who remain in Ghana, also play a role in communications with a parent abroad. For example, Trendy liaises between her father and her twin brother, Master, to help her brother get what he needs. Trendy has an easier relationship with her father than does Master.

When Master talks to his father, the father sometimes asks him to shave his hair before he will give him what he wants or scolds him about his educational performance or supposed mental health problems. To avoid a scolding, Master chooses to communicate his needs through his sister. Throughout our fieldwork, Master communicated everything he needed from the migrant father, including renewal of his optical lenses, through his sister.

Some youth, like Gusta, try to protect their younger siblings from negative experiences and the harsh realities some parents live in overseas. Such youth act as intermediaries between stayer siblings and migrant parents. Gusta wants to uphold a positive image of his migrant mother to his brother; therefore, he lies occasionally to his brother about his communication with his mother. Gusta's mother resides illegally abroad and calls Gusta less often than Gusta tells his brother.

Even when my mum calls or she texts me or uses a voice note, sometimes she mentions it [that she does not have documentation], [. . .] but whenever my brother calls, I am like, oh mum called and says hello and then kind things. So, I just try to keep him in that state where he thinks that okay, my mom is somewhere, she is facing some kind of difficulty, so when that is done, then we will all be cool, and he is cool [. . .] He tries to get our mum's contact from me. But the way we put the story is like she is trying to get her paperwork. So even if she will call, then it will be a landline or something, and sometimes too she is broke, she doesn't have money for credit. She is really going through some really tough times so when you say that, he will be like, oh Charlie, no lie, [..]. We always put up a story, but the story should be good. [..] I should say that it is on a need to know basis [. . .] Like if it will affect you directly, then you need to know. If it doesn't affect you that directly then you don't need to know [. . .] So occasionally, when mum calls, she speaks to him. When I get a message, I tell him. So, in his mind, my mum is always calling to check up. So, what he needs to know is that mum checks upon him all the time. It is a standard. But what he doesn't need to know is that it is not that often as we make it seem. [. . .] It is not cool, but sometimes we have to do it to derive certain things, and when he grows up, he will understand. (Gusta, 21 years old, male, March 2019)

## 5.5 Silence and Brevity

Lastly, young people express agency through limiting interaction, via silences or brevity in their communications, with migrant parents. Young people, just like parents, make use of silences or short messages when they do want to stay connected. The young people either stop communicating with migrant parents or are brief in their responses to calls to let parents know they are unhappy about something. Examples are Ntonsu and Cross, who disengaged by not contacting and responding to contact from their migrant mother and father for weeks due to disagreements about their job plans and their appearance, respectively. In another case, Gusta became upset that his migrant mother hardly supported his stayer father financially in caring for him and his younger brother. Subsequently, Gusta stopped communicating with his mother for some years during his tertiary education. Gusta pretended his mother did not exist by not responding to her messages, despite his father and friends telling him he should reply to her. Gusta even told some friends he did not have a mother. Interestingly, Gusta checked up on his mother during this period of non-communication by monitoring her online presence via WhatsApp status tool.

Another example is Venta, who was also unhappy about the care that his migrant father provided. When we asked Venta how often he contacts his father, Venta chuckled and said '*me and him...no!*'. Venta's migrant father speaks mostly to his mum over the phone; only five times in 2018 did Venta speak to his father. When his stayer mother and father were communicating via WhatsApp audio calls, his father would ask his mother whether he could talk to Venta. If Venta was in, he could not get out of talking to his father even though he preferred not to. However, Venta made these father-son engagements brief because he did not want his father to know what he was doing in life.

## 6 Conclusion

We started this paper with the premise that we cannot understand transnational family life and transnational parent-child relations without taking young people's perspectives into account, something other authors also advocate (e.g. Dreby, 2006; Haikkola, 2011). Moreover, we argued that the proliferation of social media applications and increasing adoption and use of such media by youth all over the world, including stayer youth, merits attention. We need to know how these youth use social media applications to interact with their parents overseas. Only a limited number of studies have investigated stayer youth in transnational families: most studies focus on their parents abroad. Even more, only a few studies have looked at how stayer youth interact with migrant parents through ICTs, even though information communication technology is one of the main ways transnational families sustain their relationships. We applied a similar approach to Licoppe and Smoreda (2005), focusing on how, when and what people communicate via ICTs in order to understand the strategies that young people employ to shape their communication with their overseas parents. As such, we recognise the asymmetries that exist between family members, but we give an agentic voice to young people who have heretofore been mainly seen as passive receivers of parent-initiated communications.

The findings of this chapter show how stayer youth are agentic in transnational parent-child relationships. To understand how communication sustains transnational relationships, it is vital to know the media ecology, i.e., the accessibility of ICTs, their affordability and the technical literacy of the people involved. While intermittent mobile phone calls are still used by parents and children, our participants mostly engaged with their parents via WhatsApp on smartphones. Participants even used WhatsApp to communicate with parents who were illiterate, i.e. parents who have never been to school or could not read and write. In general, WhatsApp was used because it was more affordable than traditional international calls and

SMS within the Ghanaian media ecology, though some participants had difficulties affording smartphone and Internet costs. Participants who did not own smartphones relied on social networks in Ghana to use WhatsApp, nonetheless. This impacted the frequencies with which these youth could connect to their migrant parents.

Given the media ecology within which Ghanaian youth operate, we found that stayer youth exercise agency over communication with parents abroad in five main ways. First, young people displayed agency in the ways they applied their WhatsApp know-how. They used WhatsApp's monitoring and surveillance functionalities to stay connected to migrant parents in the background or foreground. Second, young people timed their communications with parents in strategic ways to stay connected or to express discontent. Some closely observed their parents' interactions to figure out the best times to call and to ensure their parents' maximum attention. Others delayed responding or never responded to messages from parents to show their displeasure. Third, some young people exhibited agency by raising specific topics during their communications with their parents. Some mostly called to make requests and receive advice or words of encouragement from migrant parents. Fourth, some young people deliberately chose to connect to parents through siblings in Ghana and abroad. Siblings who had a good relationship with their parents, or siblings who were currently living with the parent abroad, could mediate communications by providing information about the parents' situation or suggesting the best time to make a request. Others tried to protect younger siblings from unpleasant information about the parents' conditions abroad. Finally, silence and brevity were strategies used by those who did not want to connect or who were having disagreements with their parents. Silences, i.e., never responding to messages, allowed young people to express their disinterest in transnational communication. Others opted to keep interactions brief if they could not avoid communication completely.

There are also some downsides to using new communications media such as smartphones and WhatsApp for transnational connections. Poeze et al. (2017) noted some of these for migrant parents who have a hard time assessing stayer children's complaints about their caregivers and acting upon them without offending the caregivers. Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) also observed that social media can aggravate feelings of hurt, distance and abandonment. Through monitoring their parents' online presence, WhatsApp provides some young people with evidence of their parents' neglect, provoking negative or hurt feelings. WhatsApp also makes it easy for young people to express their hurt feelings. Silence, brevity and sometimes timing were strategic ways of expressing feelings of hurt, abandonment or dissatisfaction with the care they receive. This shows that while new communication technologies can empower youth, they may make relationships more complex, which can have adverse effects. The downsides of new media communication have received relatively little attention, while they can redefine transnational relations and are therefore worthy of further research.

Our study points to another aspect that requires further research: how sibling relationships are affected by new media and transnational communication. There are currently no studies on this. We found two contrasting dynamics. As communication technologies, such as smartphone and Internet, are not cost free, when parents gift smartphones to only one child, this may give rise to rivalry between siblings or hurt feelings towards a parent. In other cases, we detected collaboration between siblings, both those living in Ghana and those living abroad with the migrant parents. One sibling would make use of their different or privileged position vis-à-vis their parent in order to help the other sibling make requests via social media. These findings show that in order to investigate transnational parent–child relationships it is at times necessary to go beyond the dyad or triad of parent–child or parent–caregiver–child, which have been the main focus of studies on stayer youth.

In sum, the stayer young people we studied are agentic in transnational parent–child relationships rather than merely receivers of communications from their migrant parents, as is often portrayed in the literature. Through a youth-centric approach, we showed how young people access new media, even when they have difficulties affording it, and use their technical literacy in order to actively shape parent–child communications and relationships.

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