Intensive care: Mediatized parenting and the circulation of transnational family care between Hong Kong and the Philippines

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Abstract

Studies of transnational families have explored the various approaches by which separated members of the family exchange care across distance. In the context of the Philippines, transnational caregiving is widely studied as transnational mothering, looking at how migrant mothers balance their breadwinning and mothering roles using available communications. In this article, I investigated how the circulation of global care among migrant families is increasingly and intensively mediatized in the past decades. Using Andreas Hepp's (2013) mediatization approach and Loretta Baldassar and Laura Merla's (2014) care circulation framework, I conducted interviews with 20 migrant parents in Hong Kong and their 25 left-behind children in the Philippines to reveal the stories of how digital and convergent technologies have altered the communicative practices surrounding the four main modes of transnational care circulation: gifts, cross-border mobilities, remittances, and transnational communication. I have also found how mediatized parenting is now a more intensive and embodied mode of distant caring that has sustained families across borders. This study aims to contribute to the mediatization research paradigm and draw practical implications for sustaining families affected by this transnational phenomenon.

Keywords: mediatization, transnational familyhood, global care circulation, mediatized parenting, left-behind children

Plaridel Open Access Policy Statement

How to cite this article in APA

Introduction

The World-Wide House that intersects Des Voeux Road, Connaught Road, and Pedder Street in Central District in Hong Kong, is known to be the city's Filipino Town. Every Sunday, it runs abuzz with mostly domestic workers shopping, sharing food, and catching up in its shops that are mostly owned by Filipinos too. I usually skip going to this mall during the weekends as it gets too cramped with Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) lining up in Filipino banks and remittance centers and packing boxes after boxes of gifts to be sent to their families back home. But in cases when I would get to talk to some of them, they often say that it is "family day" and that the gifts and money that they send back home are the only means of manifesting their love for those they had left behind.

I see these Sunday family days as a crucial experience in the transmission of care from migrant parents in Hong Kong to their left-behind children in the Philippines. Hong Kong is among the three countries with the greatest number of OFWs. In 2022, the Philippine Statistics Authority reported that of the 1.83 million Filipinos who worked abroad from April to September 2021, 6.7% were in Hong Kong (PSA, 2022). I imagine the outflow of remittances and *balikbayan* boxes every Sunday as a manifestation of care that sustains Filipino familyhood traversing the approximately 1,140 kilometers between Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Studies of transnational families have explored the various approaches by which separated members of the family exchange care across distance. Baldassar and Merla (2014) proposed the framework of care circulation, which allows the examination of family members and the nature of their care activities. They defined care circulation as "the reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies" (p. 25). Remittances, gifts, cross-border mobility or visits, and long-distance transnational communication are seen as main modes of care circulation among migrants and their left-behind family (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Horn, 2017; McCallum, 2022; Repalam et al., 2021). This is the concept of transnational family care where members of a family maintain a sense of kinship, collectivity, and unity on a transnational field (Baldassar et al., 2007).

In the context of the Philippines, transnational caregiving is widely studied as transnational mothering (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas, 2001; Peng & Wong, 2013). Given the normative, patriarchal ideals of Filipino familyhood, Filipino migrant mothers face the tension of being the 'natural' and 'best' carers for their children while serving as a breadwinner abroad

(Acedera & Yeoh, 2021). The authority of mothers as caregivers is challenged and even undermined by distant and more powerful caregivers and new affordances of polymedia, resulting in a pervasive sense of lack in mother-migrant families (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021). Balancing their breadwinning and mothering roles using available communication channels, migrant mothers in Hong Kong seek the most feasible strategy from among three differentiated mothering patterns: intensive mothering, or playing a powerful and dominant role in child care; collaborative mothering, or actively incorporating their husbands or the substitute caregivers in child rearing; and passive mothering, or focusing on one's economic contribution instead of providing emotional support to prevent unpleasant interactions with their children (Peng & Wong, 2013). Intensive mothering at a distance is also facilitated by an integrated environment of digital communication affordances, enabling Filipina migrants in the UK to still take a role as breadwinner in their households and mother to their children across distances (Madianou, 2012). Also studying Filipina mothers in the UK and their children in the Philippines, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2011) found that the mobile phone, more than just affording them the means to reconstitute their asymmetrical identities as breadwinner and mother, also allowed them to deal with the ambivalence that was deeply ingrained in their decision to migrate or even prolong migration. Left-behind children tended to be much more ambivalent about the consequences of transnational communication compared to their mothers: some regarded mobile phones as positively able to facilitate a meaningful relationship with their mothers, while others viewed it negatively.

Studies in the Philippines present how female migrants use phone calls, letters, and other means of long-distance communication to actively maintain a sense of connection with their left-behind children (Asis, 2002; Parreñas, 2005). Peng and Wong (2013) presented a brief history of how Filipina domestic helpers in Hong Kong communicate with their children in the Philippines. Before the wider accessibility of mobile phones, migrant mothers were limited to prepaid public phones during their days off to contact their children. And these international calls were expensive, so communication with their children would be infrequent and short. Other means of communicating, like letter writing and tape recording, also took a long time to reach their children.. As communication technologies and platforms became more accessible in both the Philippines and the host country, both migrant parents and children can now initiate regular and frequent contact with each other (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021; Repalam et al., 2021)

Due to bureaucratic and financial obstacles to migration, for example domestic helpers with low wages or undocumented migrant workers, cross-border mobility may be limited (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009), and while money and gifts "cannot compensate for the daily pain and strain of transnational separation" (Espiritu 2003, p. 93), transnational communication is largely seen and studied as the main way through which family members can bridge the proximity gap to maintain familyhood across national borders. The pervasiveness of media and communication technologies in the modern milieu must have somehow changed transnational family life and care exchange among its members. Thus, this study asks the question: How is transnational family care mediatized? In this paper, I illustrate how the circulation of global care among migrant families, aside from transnational communication, has been increasingly and intensively mediatized in the past decades. I show this through the communication landscape and the corresponding communicative practices of both migrant parents in Hong Kong and left-behind children in the Philippines, as well as the social changes across spatial and temporal planes, in their efforts to sustain their transnational familyhood. Furthermore, although the concept of transnational parenting is often developed as a form of transnational communication, I will show how mediatized parenting is in itself a more intensive mode of distant caring, instead of being just a mode of maintaining contact between family members across distance.

Theoretical framework and research approach mediatization

The mediatization framework emerged from two traditions in communication research, those of Roger Silverstone (2005) and Stig Hjarvard (2013). While Silverstone's "mediation" theorized the material implications of specific media forms on broader social life, Hjarvard's "mediatization" specifically theorized institutional changes in and related to the media (Bolin, 2016; Hepp, 2013). Silverstone (2005) looked at mediation as an overall metaprocess that describes modernity together with other macro-level social phenomena such as globalization, individualization, and commercialization (Krotz, 2008), while Hjarvard (2013) talked about the so-called annexation or subordination of particular social institutions like politics, journalism, and other mass media institutions. Borrowing from David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979), Hjarvard (2013) called this influence "media logic," or the various organizational and technological formats, modes of presentation, or modus operandi of the media, as embodied in their formal and informal rules. According to Hjarvard, some of the ways that mediatization has transformed political practices include the restructuring of the political process with media's increased role as

negotiator of public consent for political decisions and the role of journalism in mass political communication and agenda-setting.

Taking after both approaches, Hepp (2013) saw mediatization as a conceptual lens for critically analyzing the interrelated changes between media and communications on the one hand, and culture and society on the other. Hepp further operationalized mediatization as communicative figurations, or the "patterns of processes of communicative interweaving that exist across various media…that orient communicative action" (p.623) and consists of four instances:

> First, each communicative figuration is characterized by a specific *constellation of actors*, which can be regarded as its structural basis.

> Second, each communicative figuration has a *thematic framing* that serves as action-guiding topic.

> Third, we are dealing with their *forms of communication*. This concept refers to the concrete patterns of communicative practices that characterize communicative figurations and can include forms of reciprocal (media) communication, of produced media communication like mass communication or of virtualized media communication in computerized environments.

> Fourth, in relation to this form of communication, a specifically marked *media ensemble* can be identified for each communicative figuration. This describes the entirety of the media through which or in which a communicative figuration exists. (pp. 623-624)

Care

Care in the transnational familyhood context is defined by Baldassar and Merla (2014) as "the reciprocal, multidirectional and asymmetrical exchange of care that fluctuates over the life course within transnational family networks subject to the political, economic, cultural and social contexts of both sending and receiving societies" (p. 25). Scholars have identified four main modes by which migrant parents and their left-behind children exchange care across distance: remittances, gifts, cross-border mobility or visits, and long-distance transnational communication (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Horn, 2017).

Integrating the concepts of mediatization and care circulation among transnational families, this study posed this research question: How is transnational family care mediatized? To answer this question, data was analyzed according to the four modes of care exchange proposed by Fresnoza-Flot (2009) and Horn (2017) and using Hepp's (2013) social constructionist and micro-level approach of identifying the corresponding media ensemble and communicative practices in each of these forms of care.

This study aims to contribute to the mediatization research paradigm by providing a communication perspective to this labor migration phenomenon in the Philippines and drawing practical implications in sustaining the transnational families that experience its realities.

The researcher conducted interviews with a total of 20 migrant parents in Hong Kong and their 25 left-behind children in the Philippines. Purposive, snowball sampling was employed in this study to include parents doing domestic and professional work in Hong Kong and with children below 18 years of age. The study used an interview questionnaire following a semi-structured design to establish the "the socially produced experiences and actions of the individual subjects" (Bolin, 2016, p. 5257) vis-à-vis the techno-historical and "objective" moments in the media landscape across the generations within the transnational families.

All of the participants used Facebook as their main social media channel for maintaining contact with their distant family members. After each interview, the researcher added the interviewee to his list of Facebook friends to be able to observe their online posts, practices, and interactions in this "liminal space" to further understand family care exchange in the virtual world.

This study has undergone ethics review and approval by the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong. To ensure ethical conduct of this research, I developed two sets of guidelines and forms to obtain parental consent and assent from the children. Data analysis was done on three levels of initial, axial, and theoretical coding to probe and saturate emerging themes and categories.

Mediatized care circulation

Mediatized gifting as more coordinated, faster, and better appreciated

While for the parents, communication is the most essential element in maintaining their familyhood across distance, gifting seems to be the most appreciated mode of care especially for younger left-behind children. This is

the mode of care that is most tangible for the children who do not seem to know when remittances are received and what they are spent for.

A parent like Marina has noticed that her 4-year old child does not really enjoy talking to her on video calls and only does so when Marina sends her new toys. Still, she sees this as the least that she can do to make up for the time that they are apart. Maricar, another parent, admits this too:

Let's admit it, it's just the material things. You give them stuff, but it's not exactly extravagant. For example, it feels so good when you send them money, they eat in a restaurant, like that. And then you buy them something, buy them new shoes, and if she wants a laptop. Like that.

According to Parreñas (2001), this strategy of overcompensating for the mother's absence by bestowing material goods is called commodifying love. Parents give their children what they need and want to allay emotional tensions brought about by their inability to provide personal, physical, and daily care for their left-behind children. This is especially true in the context of Filipino migrant mothers who face the double-pronged responsibility of being breadwinners to their children while also providing emotional intimacy and assuming domestic care work for them (McCallum, 2022). Remittances and material gifts, as with a previous study on Filipino migrant mothers in Japan, can thus be seen as a symbolic gesture to affirm and renew their commitment to the family members they left behind (McCallum, 2022).

The typical gifts that the children receive from their parents are clothes, shoes, cellphones, toys, and milk. Their parents use *balikbayan* boxes to send their gifts once or every other year. Some parents would regularly send boxes home during Christmas time. All year round, they would buy things for their children and other family members at home, pile them up in a box until it gets full by the month of November, and then send it by freight so that it reaches the Philippines by December. Sometimes they would take the entire box with them when they go home for visits. Fresnoza-Flot (2009) earlier described sending gifts as a form of transnational mothering based on the stories of the Filipino migrant mothers in France who would send an average of two boxes a year containing chocolates, wine, perfume, canned goods, clothes.

Parents in Hong Kong have observed though that sending gifts happens to a lesser extent nowadays because children now prefer to ask for money because a lot of the brands that they request for (e.g. Uniqlo, Apple) are now also available in the Philippines. This way, the children also get the items faster than having to wait for their parents to come home or to send these items using the balikbayan box, which usually takes a month to arrive. The mothers in France in 2006 resort to "money gifts" because it is faster,

practical, and "safer" especially for undocumented migrants and because they do not really know the likes and dislikes of their children back home (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). Furthermore, money gifts may be interpreted by the child as a sign of their parent's confidence in their ability to entrust them with their earnings and to use them wisely and responsibly (McCallum, 2022). Sending money gifts is now mediatized with mobile apps like GCash, which is a mobile wallet application that allows migrant parents in Hong Kong with Alipay mobile wallets to transfer money digitally and directly to GCash, the widely used digital payment system in the Philippines.

For left-behind children Charmaine, Abigail, and Noel, parents would use Messenger to coordinate gift-giving. Their parents would send photos or take videos of shoes or clothes to see if they would like it before their parents would buy and send these items to them. Children would then post on their Facebook timeline photos and messages of thanks to their parents for these gifts. Parents would then reply to these messages online.

Another evidence of mediatized gift-giving was shared by Charmaine and her mother Princess. Charmaine said that during her birthdays, her mother would send her gifts from Hong Kong by ordering, purchasing, and booking deliveries online. On her last birthday, her mother sent her cakes, flowers, and a life-sized teddy bear. Princess told me that she enjoys putting this "extra" effort and surprise for her daughter.

One of the most common gifts that migrant parents send to their left-behind children are cellphones, which allow for cheaper communication, especially with Internet access (Cabalquinto, 2019). However, this gifting practice emerged as quite controversial during my conversations with my participants. For example, Rose shared about giving her 4-year-old son Jacob a cellphone in order to call him anytime she wished, otherwise, she would get anxious or mad. When I asked Samantha, a left-behind child, if she could use a cellphone at her age of 4 years, her father replied that Samantha had already known since the age of 2. Meanwhile, some parents consciously restrict their young children from having their own cellphones due to perceived health issues like strained eyes, exposure to radiation, as well as addiction. While some children without cellphones, like Victor and sisters Anna and Margaret, could understand these issues, other children like sisters Monica and Ella expressed resentment towards their parents and count the days until they are "old enough" to be gifted with a cellphone.

More frequent visits and opportunities for travels

For left-behind child Julienne, they only become a family "when they are complete" or when "mother comes home" to visit them in the Philippines. For the younger children, aside from gifts, visits by their parents indicate

that they are still a family. "They come home anyway," they would say. But how often do parents go home to visit their children? They typically fly home once a year and stay for as short as around one week or as long as one month and schedule their visits in time for their children's birthday or graduation around March. Others try to schedule their leaves during Christmas or their children's summer break around May to give them more free time to bond with their children. Those with shorter contractual arrangements would only get to go home once every two years, at the end of a contract, to reenergize before embarking on another two years under a new contract.

Children travelling to Hong Kong can also be a mode of sustaining family connection. Though this mode may seem favorable for families whose parents are non-domestic workers because they have their own spaces to accommodate their children when in Hong Kong, they still tend to refrain from doing so because of the higher living expenses in their host country. For domestic workers who are in living-in arrangements with their employers, children are able to travel to Hong Kong when their employers are generous enough to shoulder the expenses of travel and provide accommodation for their children to visit Hong Kong. of living is significantly higher than in the Philippines.

Hong Kong is just approximately 1,140 kilometers, or around a two-hour flight, from the Philippine capital of Manila. The short distance, coupled with the growing number of budget airlines in the Philippine market since 2005, online booking options, as well as the no visa requirement for tourists from the Philippines, has made visits convenient and affordable for transnational families (Lowe, 2013).

For transnational families, it is "through cross-border mobility that social constructions of distance are transformed and feelings of longing and missing are modified" (Horn, 2017, p. 315). The idea that "Hong Kong is just near anyway" for parents like Antonio and Bianca, allows for the option of providing physical presence for their children in the Philippines. This option gives them a way of managing how they and their children miss each other. Budgeting one's paid leaves, for instance, or saving money for travel, also becomes a resource for showing emotionality and intimacy for migrant parents.

More efficient remittances as manifestation of sacrifice and love

For migrant parents in Hong Kong, love and sacrifice sustain familyhood for them and their loved ones left behind in the Philippines. Love for their family fuels them to make sacrifices of separation and hard labor, and to be able to send money home for their families and their children's future. The stories from my informants echo a UNICEF (2008) study that found that

an increase in money and adult attention is correlated with the level that Filipino children feel "satisfied." While parents feel that both money and adult attention are important, children, however, tend to value the latter than the former.

The older children-informants did say that as they grew older, they also grew to appreciate the sacrifices their parents made and began to understand them as signs of their love. For the children, remittances concretely translated into funding for their education, from tuition and miscellaneous fees to money for their school uniform. For the parents, remittances also encompass house rentals or mortgage payments, electricity, water, and Internet bills, and debt payments, aside from school expenses for their children. Some parents also remit money for long-term investments, like for residential and agricultural property.

Remittances are considered a "currency of care" because they are "a way of alleviating poverty and enhancing development" (Singh et al., 2010, p. 249). It can be in the form of regular or occasional remittances, or gifts as remittances, which are seen as keeping the connection, a broader look at continued communication, between members of transnational families. For my parents-interviewees, their remittances are the ultimate testament to their sacrifice as "[t]heir physical separation is legitimized by their feeling that working in another country is ultimately going to lead to a better future for themselves, their children and their families" (Trask, 2010, p. 75).

Sending remittances has long been considered an "errand that takes time", as it involves going to the bank to send money. But now remitting money has also been mediatized, making it faster and more reliable for parents to send money regularly to their families in the Philippines, which they usually do after getting their salaries on the first week of the month. Parents now use mobile phone applications like We Remit (a WeChat Pay feature), Alipay HK, and TNG wallet. Using these apps does not require the sender to have a bank account in Hong Kong. Parents consider these apps more convenient because they could just top-up with cash from any convenient stores like 7-Eleven and Circle K instead of going through long lines and filling out forms in traditional remittance centers like Western Union, Czarina, and Kabayan. Mediatized remittance also allows them to save up on cable charges for money transfers. Remitting through WeChat and Alipay is free, and although TNG now has a minimal charge, it is still lower than in remittance shops. My informants also observed that the exchange rates are higher in these apps than in remittance shops and banks. They also noted that transfers through Alipay, for example, take only around

20 minutes while it takes one hour through Western Union. It is now the "normal" way of using and transferring money, as Rowena put it:

> Because there is now online selling, and how do you pay for that? Sometimes they accept cash on delivery, but sometime they do not trust that. And so you can just top-up cash. Just like that.

Typically, guardians of left-behind children receive the remittances and manage the budget for the left-behind families, so children rarely appreciate the effort involved in remitting money back home. For these guardians, mediatized remittances have lessened frictions related to receiving money punctually and conveniently. For children without guardians like Cecille and Jake, mediatized remittances are also much more welcome. Cecille takes charge of managing the household budget, paying for the monthly rent, electricity, water, and Wi-Fi bills. Jake explains that though he still claims money through remittance centers like Cebuana, there are now other options like GCash and partner banks like Metrobank or BDO. They also appreciate that they can now easily tell their parents whenever they need money, especially for emergency cases, and that their parents can easily send money to them.

While remittance is now mediatized and sending money back home to the Philippines has become more regular and more convenient for the parents, children still use other communication technologies to complement this mediatized remittance. Children like Victor use chats and video calls through Messenger to remind their parents about tuition payments, while others like Peter would make special requests via Messenger for special occasions like birthdays or graduation. According to Jake, sometimes their school would have paid activities like sports leagues or tours, so it is now easier to ask for money from their parents than before Messenger became popular for transnational communication. These cases closely mirror those in a previous study which revealed that, in the case of Filipino migrant families, the embeddedness of communication technologies now makes it easier for migrant parents to be involved in familial activities and to fulfill familial obligations (Cabalquinto, 2019).

According to a study of Indian diaspora in Australia, tensions in care and remittances occur when "people in the home country think that money is earned easily in a foreign country" and that "the quantity of money in remittances, is lacking when weighed against the physical caregiving that the migrants cannot routinely provide" (Singh et al, pp. 254-255). The left-behind children among my respondents now better appreciate the value of remittances because transnational video communication allows them

to see their parents in real-time, making more visible the sacrifices the parents make to earn the money they send home. According to Jasmine, her daughter Christine now understands better why she had to leave to work in Hong Kong:

> She knows what domestic workers do. And I also show her (through video chat) when I am cleaning. "My child, this is what I do." It starts in the morning. And then I go clean the toilet. "That's three hours for the many toilets, my child. This is what I do!" I show her what I do inside the house. And then when I go out of the house, the places I go to, I also show her wherever I go. "Do you understand me now?" "Yes, mother."

And so when her mother offers to send her money gifts on top of the regular remittances, Christine would sometimes refuse:

> When she says, "Would you like this, or that?" I'd say, "No mom, it's okay. Because you also need it to buy things for yourself." I'd say something like, "Just use the money for yourself".

More open and embodied transnational communication

Migrant parents and their left-behind children may elect to use different media depending on "the convenience of use, perceived importance of the message, the cost of the medium, the medium's conceived reach, and the location of the migrant parent" (Samonte, 2018, p. 147), as well as the individual contexts and preferences in communication platform.

All my research participants identified Facebook Messenger as their main tool for transnational communication. The migrant parents are freely able to call their children either because they have access to free Wi-Fi through their employers or through cheap unlimited mobile Wi-Fi subscriptions in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, children rely on Wi-Fi at home or on prepaid packages to be able to access mobile Internet. This is why they are mostly reached by their parents only when they are home, usually before and after school. For those with mobile Internet data plans, communication is open anytime. My participants communicate through Messenger every day, typically lasting around 10 to 30 minutes. Others reported calling on an average of three to four times a week. These cases show how newer communication technologies and platforms have allowed communication to be more accessible and affordable between migrant parents and their left-behind children, a finding seen in a previous study on Filipino transnational

families (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021).

Facebook Messenger is used both for messaging and calls. Children typically send messages to their parents first to make sure that they are not in the middle of work before making a voice or video call to avoid the risk of employers getting mad at seeing the parents "always on the phone". Messages involve *kumustahan* or checking in on each other, such as greeting them in the morning, asking if they have already eaten their meals, or if they have already left home for work or school. Video calls involve longer conversations about school and homework, the household, and *chismis* or gossip about their neighbors. Some domestic workers only get free time at the end of the day, and so when they call at night, they only get to talk to their spouses and would just send messages to their children or have longer conversations during their days off on Sundays, when their children are expected to be at home. This is also true for some of the children-participants who do not own their mobile phones because they have to use the left-behind parent's phone at home to be able to talk to the other parent abroad. Despite these routine-specific disruptions, Facebook Messenger has made it much easier for migrant parents and their left-behind children to maintain a constant flow of communication, allowing them to remain more involved in their children's lives back home and instilling a sense of co-presence (Cabalquinto, 2019).

Some video calls are considered purposeless. Because Wi-Fi is available anyway, Julienne and her mother just watch each other go through their daily motions, like how Julienne would see her mother walking around Hong Kong or riding the MTR to go to the market or hanging out in the malls. Her mother would also just leave her video on when she cooks and cleans the house, while Julienne does school work on the other end. For mother Amalia, this way of video streaming is good because this a way for her daughter to see on a daily basis her sacrifices and to understand why she has to be away from the family.

Before the audio-visual streaming capabilities of Messenger, transnational communication was much slower and with less presence. At the end of the 1990s, migrant parents still used postal mail, tapes and videos, and landline telephones to maintain connection between those in Rome and Los Angeles and their left-behind families in the Philippines (Parreñas, 2001). Later, in the early 2000s, migrant parents began to use electronic emails, international text messaging, and voice calls, which were much faster but considerably more expensive (Parreñas, 2005). My own respondents who were already working abroad in the 2000s recounted having to send their left-behind families letters through postal mail, which took weeks to arrive and would only be appreciated by their spouses and

parents especially when their children could still not read nor write. Placing international calls was also expensive. Bianca recalled that call cards would cost around 50 HKD for 20 to 30 minutes of call. Arminda and Amalia remembered having to go out of their employer's house to access public phone booths or remittance centers to be able to call home. Eventually telephone and cellphone prepaid packages introduced in the Philippines starting in 2000 made international calls more affordable, though this mode was not easily available to all Filipino migrants. For migrant families in France in 2006, for example, installing landline telephones was possible especially if they lived in their own apartments (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009). This was not possible for domestic workers in Hong Kong as they were required by law to reside at their employers' houses.

The emotional and social impacts of migration on left-behind children have been widely studied and documented (Asis, 2006; Battistella & Conaco, 1998; ECMI-CBCP/AOS–Manila, SMC, & OWWA, 2004; Parreñas, 2005). Now, new communication channels provide new forms of "co-presence" across distance that are more "embodied and proximate" through the real-time and synchronous exchange of audio-visual cues, as compared to the merely "formulaic and ritualized" sending of letters and gifts that tends to take a long time (Baldassar, 2016). The affordances brought about by these new communication technologies thus amplify the sense of togetherness between transnational family members despite the geographical distance (Cabalquinto, 2019). Now, with the constant and more embodied mode of transnational communication through Messenger, my children-informants reported that they do not resent their parents for leaving them to work abroad. They said that they understand that their parents have to work for them to be able to survive and go to school. They are able to exchange affections and still get to know each other despite the distance through their daily messages. They are also able to see through their video chats the hard work that their parents endure to send money home. They are able to maintain their relationships as parents and children because they are able to communicate openly and regularly. Moreover, as discussed in the previous sections, transnational communication through Facebook Messenger is not only appreciated to be a tool for contact between parents and children, but also as a tool to coordinate gifts, travels, and remittances, which both parents and children recognize as causing less misunderstandings and frictions between them.

Exploring mediatized parenting

Going beyond those that Fresnoza-Flot (2009) and Horn (2017) identified as the four main modes of global care circulation, this study highlights

another mode of care circulation among transnational families: mediatized parenting. With the embeddedness of communication technologies in everyday life, even across geographies, parents can now practice their parental roles remotely and have a closer monitoring mechanism of their children.

This section is discussed under the following sub headings: Coordinating household tasks from a distance, Mediatized parental mediation of children's online media practices, "Hands on" performance of parental tasks, Surveillance as watching over their children in real time, and Towards a new mode of parental care in a mediatized milieu.

Coordinating household tasks from a distance

In my conversations with my participants, I found that there were some household roles that migrant parents passed onto to their children after leaving to work abroad. Among these roles were cleaning the house, washing of dishes and clothes, cooking, or taking care of the younger siblings and pets. The children I interviewed see passed-on or added household responsibilities as training to develop their leadership skills, similar to the children in a Parreñas (2002) study. This form of responsibility training by assigning light domestic chores is often expected of Filipino children, regardless of whether or not they belong to transnational families, when they reach around six to seven years old (Asis, 2006).

For parent Claudia, family means "getting along with each other," which also entails that they "monitor each other every day." Children like Liza, Noel, and John shared that they make sure to accomplish their tasks at home because their parents check in on their progress. Arminda, John's mother, explained how she does this:

> Washing the dishes, cleaning the house, the children do the cleaning because my husband has no more time. His schedule is so hectic. That's why as soon as I wake up in the morning, I tell the children about that: Have your breakfast as soon as you wake up. After that, get yourselves cleaned. And then clean the house. I message them because it's not every time that we get to chat, right? But sometimes, you still have to call them. Clean the house, give the dog a bath, these are my tasks for my eldest son… Yes, I do that! Show me the kitchen, like that. Show me the yard. Did you give the dog a bath? Yes, he'd say.

Mediatized parental mediation of children's online media practices

For parents like Dolores, monitoring also means managing their children's screentime. She shared that she would call every day to check if her children were spending so much time online:

> When they are using their father's Facebook. When I call them and they answer, I will not stop calling until they turn off the Wi-Fi. And then it stops if they turn off the Wi-Fi. [I know it's off if] I can't call them anymore. That's what I do. They listen to me anyway, "Okay, mama." But she'll still ask for more time. "Mama, until 10:30pm." "Okay. Okay." And then I will call every time.

In this mediatized interaction, the children also enact their agency in the renegotiation of power in parent-child relationships, taking advantage that parental power is diffused by the physical distance and buffered by the communication technologies that bridge this distance. As seen in the case of Dolores, her daughter, Monica, would negotiate for extended time online. As children begin desiring more agency from their migrant parents, communication technologies such as phones also provide them with more opportunities to renegotiate the boundaries of adult control (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021). This finding is evident in the case of Walter, son of Claudia. Walter would reject her phone calls asking him to stop playing his favorite online game *Mobile Legends,* then send her messages through chat, a less synchronous mode of communication, saying he would be done in a few more minutes.

This experience between migrant parents and their left-behind children complicates the notion of parental mediation in transnational families. When distance is not a barrier, parents can use strategies active co-use, technical and interactional restrictions, and monitoring when mediating television viewing (Livingstone & Helpser, 2008). It would be challenging for overseas parents to apply these strategies when they are not afforded the space to perform active co-use, as well as the physical presence to ensure the ban of user-user or child-initiated online interaction. Parents from transnational families like Dolores resort to a strategy of total disconnection from the Internet for them to assert their parental role and control over their children. This process, while reducing the risks of harmful online content and connection for their children, also terminates the same connection that ought to maintain their familyhood.

"Hands-on" performance of parental tasks

Previous studies have emphasized the value that Filipino migrant parents place on their children's education because aside from being the primary cause of parents' migration, it is also seen as a means to escape poverty and to prevent more migration in the family (Aguilar, 2020; Samonte, 2018).

This emphasis on education can be found in several of my interviewees' cases. Parents help their children with their school assignments as they did before migration, but now through online means. Monica and Ella shared that before their mother Dolores left to work in Hong Kong, she used to be hands-on when it came to helping them with their assignments. Now Dolores does this remotely through video calls. In school, when they are asked to write essays or speeches, Adele would send chat messages to her mother Maricar to ask for ideas, which Maricar could give easily. Amalia, on the other hand, does research for her children's homework using faster Wi-Fi in Hong Kong and sends them information via Messenger after. Antonio has a similar experience with his son Jake. Jake sends messages through Messenger to his father Antonio to help him with assignments, and Antonio would think about it and then call his son when he gets home after work so that they can discuss more comfortably.

Filipino mothers working as nannies abroad experience the irony of caregiving for other people's children while being apart from their own, which is why they try to compensate this feeling of neglect through remittances and sending gift boxes (Parreñas, 2001, 2002). With communication technologies aiding real-time communication, migrant parents are now able to balance this emotional labor and also show care through mediatized parenting. At the same time, the above cases show that children who have access to such communication technologies can initiate contact with their migrant parents, which helps alleviate parental absence (Acedera & Yeoh, 2021).

Of the families interviewed, two families had children left behind to manage household affairs on their own. Cecille, 17 years old and taking care of her 14-year-old brother, feels the pressure of the task and at times expresses this by complaining when her mother comes home to visit. As a strategy to maintain familyhood, Rosario, their mother, tries to manage her parental roles from abroad, like this experience she had when Cecille got sick:

> I told her, "Go and get some medicines." "Mama, I'm tired, not feeling well." I said, "How are you going to get well if you don't take medicines?" What I did, I called her

godmother, our landlady, because she has a store. I said, "Friend, can you, do you have medicines there?"... And I am always there to assist them, even if I'm far away. As long as I can do it, I manage the things for them. I still do my responsibilities as their mother.

As for her 14-year-old son Jake, Rosario gets to manage his school responsibilities as a member of a group chat with other mothers of the children in Jake's class. Through the group chat, Rosario finds out about class projects and expenses for these projects even without her son telling her.

Surveillance as watching over their children in real time

Although the rise of new technologies has made it easier for migrant parents to communicate and forge trust with their left-behind children, this same affordance may bring forth communicative tensions within family members (Cabalquinto, 2019). These tensions are evident in the cases of Belinda and Bianca, who employ surveillance tactics on their children as an intensive mode of distant parenting and monitoring. Belinda goes the extent of knowing her son's Facebook password, while Bianca monitors her son's whereabouts through a CCTV she had installed at their house, and which she can access through a mobile application. Benedict knows that she did this to "see if [he is] doing anything foolish." Bianca said she did this to check on Benedict, who tends to only listen to her and not his guardians at home. But to left-behind child Abigail, this form of "surveillance" can get "suffocating" and might lead to further misunderstandings and conflicts between parents and children.

Towards a new mode of parental care in a mediatized milieu

What I call mediatized parenting is not exactly new as it is merely an update of previous studies about Filipino migrants' parenting at a distance. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (1997) called this "transnational mothering" and defined this as the organizational rearrangements of motherhood to accommodate the temporal and spatial separations brought about by migration. But transnational mothering is subsequently studied in the context of the Philippines as a migrant mother's ways of maintaining intimacy across borders to compensate for their inability to physically enact their responsibility of nurturing their children, widely seen through remittances, gifts, visits, and transnational communication (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Parreñas, 2001, 2005). But the limitations of these technologies, mainly due to their highly asynchronous functions, makes this kind of parenting less "intensive".

Elspeth Graham and colleagues (2012) referred to this "parenting from a distance," from writing letters to their children to texting or calling through phones, which in turn was also replaced byto video calling through Skype on computers. Ma. Rosel San Pascual (2014) updated this and called it "communicated parenting." Both frameworks focus on how parents establish and maintain regular communication or contact with their children. Mediatized parenting, almost single-handedly facilitated now by Messenger, is seen to be more "intensive" and "embodied" as technologies are getting increasingly more synchronous and seamless (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Baldassar (2016) also calls this "distant care" as "it is precisely because new forms of media can deliver a more embodied experience, through video over internet protocols like Skype and FaceTime, that participants can exchange a sense of themselves as actual persons with specific care needs, in contrast to the constraints of the more formulaic encounters of traditional media like letters" (p. 30).

Conclusion

In this article, I have illustrated how the main modes of care circulation have significantly been more mediatized in the past three decades compared to the experiences of the families the 1990s and the early 2000s. Mediatization has now made gift-giving more coordinated— communications technologies complement if not almost displace the traditional *balikbayan* boxes, making transactions faster and more appreciated. Mediatized remittance now uses top-up technologies and apps to make sending and retrieval of money more convenient, resulting in less conflicts among family members. The proliferation of budget airlines that facilitate travels through online selling have now made visits and travels in the context of Philippines and Hong Kong easier, enabling more physical co-presence between my parents-informants and their children, as compared to the families with migrant parents in Canada and France. Finally, mediatized parenting has allowed a more intensive form of parenting from a distance, as more synchronous and convergent technologies allow parents to manage their roles of monitoring and helping their children in real time, even from afar.

The view of remittances, gifts, cross-border mobility, and transnational communication as modes of care has dominated popular and scholarly paradigms, and rightfully so (Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Horn, 2017; McCallum, 2022). Children left behind ought to be cared for by their parents because and in spite of the conditions of prolonged separation across national borders. However, a paradigm shift is warranted, and has actually gained ground among children and media scholars (Brown & Pecora, 2014; Livingstone & Bulger, 2014). Pushing this discourse further, I propose a

rights-based approach in studying and proposing policies for left-behind children. Both the Philippines and Hong Kong are signatories to the UN Convention on the rights of the Child (UNCRC), and this is an opportunity to uphold the "best interests of the child," particularly the special needs of left-behind children. A shift from a care perspective to a rights-based approach elevates the child to an active position of demanding and claiming their rights from duty bearers, instead of merely being a passive recipient of care. Governments, civil society, and businesses may now be obligated to and made accountable for, for instance, the provision and maintenance of a polymedia ecology that facilitates the transmission of care, transnational communication, and intensive parenting between left-behind children and their migrant parents. This means that sending and receiving countries alike may be compelled to provide efficient communication infrastructures, affordable services, and other social protection measures. A 2020 World Bank study found the Internet in the Philippines to be the slowest and yet most expensive in the world (Leyco, 2020). In a milieu where the Internet is pushed to be enjoyed as a human right, children and their migrant families may call for the Philippines and Hong Kong to provide accessible if not free communication across borders. They may also advocate for family reunification policies and programs using international legal frameworks like that of the UNCRC.

Migrant families may also solicit support from civil society to ensure that the rights of left-behind children are met. The business sector may engage in Public-Private-Partnerships (PPP) or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) projects to address the digital divides in the country, for instance. This has been done before, with the Department of Labor's *Tulay* (Bridge) Education Program, a partnership with Microsoft which provided overseas workers access and training in information technology to be able to communicate with their left-behind families (UNICEF, 2008).

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Notes

[1] Balikbayan means repatriating or visiting migrant.

[2] From Sharon Hays' intensive mothering defined as exerting "tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children." (1996, p. x).

Grant Support Details

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