

Transconnective Space, Emotions and Skype: The Transnational Emotional Practices of Mixed International Couples in the Republic of Ireland

Dr. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain
National University of Ireland, Maynooth
Rebecca.king-oriain@nuim.ie

People use technology in a variety of ways to express their emotions on a daily basis. They text their mothers everyday with family news, they email their colleagues to share jokes and build camaraderie, they Facebook their school friends to exchange information and photos, and they use webcams to Skype their family and friends who live in distant places. In doing this, the type of emotion and the expression of emotion, as well as the emotion itself, are shaped in subtle ways by the technological forms being used. Few studies have analyzed the relationship between emotions and the varied modes of technology used and yet everyday more and more people develop a wide-ranging repertoire of digital emotional practices.

Studies of Facebook show that 91% of teens on Facebook use it to connect not to strangers, but to people they already know and see frequently. 82% use the sites to stay in touch with existing friends they rarely see in person (Lenhart and Madden 2007). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) assert that Facebook is used to build 'maintained social capital' with people users previously knew, but that those who used Facebook most frequently used it to build 'bridging social capital' solidifying their weak ties into stronger ties due to the ease and low cost of staying in touch. Facebook also "lowered barriers to participation so that students who might otherwise shy away from initiating communication with or responding to others are encourage do to so through Facebook's affordances" (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007: 1162).

While studies of Facebook tell us much about how people use this particular social networking site, they tell us less about what using it means in emotional terms to users. Building on studies of the sociology of emotion (Hochschild 1983), emotions can be understood as shaped by the social context in which they develop including in virtual or technological contexts. Particularly with increasing mobility, migration and transnational practices, the emotions that bind people together are also shaped by the social conditions of migration and technological connections (Svasek 2008; Svasek and Skrbis 2007). Often people use technology in direct response to spatial and temporal distance to ease emotions such as loneliness, friend and home ‘sickness’. In using static technology such as email and Facebook, they mediate these emotions differently from face-to-face interactions. So while technologies like Facebook can solidify weak ties and even distant ties, it is very difficult to determine how deep those emotional ties really are. Outside of the ‘status’ update, the format of Facebook does not allow us to understand how these emotional ties expressed through Facebook are different from each other. In this sense, Facebook flattens emotional ties out so that connections to one’s spouse may not appear much deeper emotionally than passing acquaintances on the face of it. Facebook then seems like a good way to maintain pre-existing relationships or as a “low maintenance way to keep tabs on distant acquaintances,” but not to create deep emotional connections (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007: 1163).

Migrant global families, such as the ones studied here, have always sought ways to stay in touch with distant family members, local hometowns, and ethnic communities abroad. The use of technology to do so then is no new discovery. Migrants have

always been on the cusp of finding and using technology to increase contact with home, find jobs, and emotionally stay in touch with those they love across the world. Burrell and Anderson (2008) found that Ghanaians living abroad used ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) to 'look homeward', but that they also used it "to explore to world more broadly searching for opportunities, information, contacts and new ideas" (p. 203). Baldassar (2007) found that the use of email in Italian Australian families increased the "frequency of transnational emotional interaction over time" which in the end increased the need for in person visits to fulfill care obligations (p. 385). Mitra (2008) found that Indian migrants far from home use cyberspace itself to quell homesickness by blogging. Mitra states, "for people who have to move from place to place and undergo the diasporic experience, the anxieties of movement and placelessness produced by diaspora can be partly managed by entry into the cybernetic space produced by bloggers" (p. 457). The writing and reading of blogs helped to quell homesickness and ground migrants in a virtual if not their local community.

Ruckenstein (2010), studying the use of technology in Finland, claims that in effect, this use of technology and its link to mobility are often the prerequisites for better understanding the processes of globalization. "Mobility, both in the physical and computer-generated sense, is critical for these discussions, because it is understood as being at the heart of the...project of being a part of the global arena: mobility is valued over stability" (p. 502).

Unlike older types of technology, Skype has a media richness in its ability to deliver both audio and video information from a mobile platform. This can be a double-edged

sword in terms of emotions. It allows a broader channel for emotions to be expressed across geographic distance and thus facilitates increased intimacy. However, such intimacy and emotional connection are also overwhelming for some users as it highlights the very fact of absence and distance while working to bridge them. Skype then gives some emotional stability within increasing experiences of mobility using technology to claw back some space/time for intimacy/connection to those you love and who love you from a distance. Technology, in this sense, could be seen as a 'soothing force' from the hyper mobile and distant and risky life of late modern capitalism not just as an intrusion into one's emotional and intimate life (Ruckenstein 2010:504).

Technology in the past has been seen an unnatural place for 'real' or 'true' emotions. The virtual world has been a space where true identities and emotions are masked or emotional companionship comes in the form of a techno-intimacy formed via virtual friendships (Allison 2006). Skype is different from these virtual examples because it blurs the boundaries of virtual and 'real' life in new ways in an attempt to move away from inauthentic emotional presentation and practice to authentic emotional 'work' – to see, hear, feel, but not smell or touch those you love. Skype web cam use illustrates the lyrical movement between the actual and virtual as 'part and parcel of the ordinary self' (Ruckenstein 2010:509).

Technology, in this sense, is used more for 'social' or 'phatic' (Miller 2008: 387) reasons than just to exchange information. Anderson and Rainie (2012) found that the millennial generation both benefits and suffers due to their hyper-connected life styles. In their study of social networking, they found that nearly "20 million of the

225 million Twitter users follow 60 or more Twitter accounts; there are more than 800 million people now signed up for the social network Facebook spending 700 billion minutes using Facebook each month; Facebook users had uploaded more than 100 billion photos by mid-2011 and YouTube users upload 60 hours of video per minute and they triggered more than 1 trillion playbacks in 2011 – roughly 140 video views per person on earth” (2012:9). With all this technology connecting people to their friends and those they love, these techno users are hyper-connected. They are good at multitasking with a level of quick thinking and multi thinking, but are also compulsive, impatient, and have less ‘deep’ or critical thinking. Does this mean that there are fewer ‘deep’ emotional connections for this generation?

Valentine (2006) argues that the use of the Internet ‘stretches intimacy beyond the boundaries of the domestic’ (p. 387) and that there is an increasing belief that intimate relationships are changing for the worse (Beck-Gernsheim 2007). However, the actual technological practices of intimate emotions “may not be changing as much as anticipated because the Internet offers a way of rearticulating offline practices of everyday familial life that can, at least in part, compensate for the limits of intimacy elsewhere” (Valentine 2006:387). Geographical and temporal closeness then may not be necessary for emotional closeness. However, Valentine is careful to point out that there are limits and that ICTs are not substitutes for physical intimacy and “the absence of actual touch can serve only to accentuate the emotional pain of missing or longing for another body” (p. 388).

Alinejad (2011) who studied on line blogs of Iranian immigrants also found that these transnational spaces illustrated ‘transnational embodiment’ - a strong awareness of

bodily presence in offline locations and situations, which continually informed and shaped online expressions.

The importance of physical travel to, proximity to, and sensory impressions of particular places within two bounded, politically distinct nation-states shows that diasporas rely heavily on embodied experience in constructing transnational spaces not only on psychic ties and recalled memories. Members of second-generation Iranian diaspora reveal unique types of embodied ties to a diaspora 'home' through their apparent search for authenticity (Alinejad 2011:43).

These are emotions, which traverse along 'intimate circuits' (Bloch 2010:13) but are not disconnected from the sights, smells and bodies of real places. Part of how global capital shapes people's lives involves looking beyond just the working conditions of people's lives to see the emotional and intimate worlds of migrants (Bloch 2010: 14) and how they are shaped.

A more emotionally fulfilling way to communicate with a facial and bodily dimension with those you love increasingly is to use Broadband Based Visual Communication technologies. There have been studies of Broadband Visual Communications (BVCs) use in order to share information and build social ties (O'Donnell, Molyneaux and Gibson 2010). The focus of this research was on video conferencing and its use as a form of synchronous audio-visual communication. They find that BVC technologies allow for 'the exchange of visual information like facial expressions that encourage trust and intimacy,' (p. 529) and are also cheap, environmentally friendly and a good way for people who are far apart to connect. And while Hardey (2004) argues that these types of technologies "are supplementing or replacing traditional routes to potentially romantic encounters" (p. 207), I was interested in finding out how the regular use of Skype as a BVC impacted the emotions, emotion practices and expressions of those who use them to communicate across great distances in non-

technologically established mixed international couples. By 'mixed' I mean that one partner was from Ireland and one was not originally and by international I mean that the couple defined themselves as international or global in focus and were in regular contact with loved ones (partners and others) in distant (often culturally diverse) locations. But why study this topic in Ireland?

Ireland

From 2000-2010, the Republic of Ireland was one of the fastest growing places in Europe in both economic and demographic terms. The Celtic Tiger economy brought many multinational companies into Ireland and the demand for workers in many industries was satisfied by non-Irish migrants. This has meant that Ireland has been one of the fastest changing societies in Europe in terms of ethnic/racial diversity in the last ten years. Today 10 percent of the population in Ireland is non-Irish born and it has the highest birth rate in Europe - 16.8 children born per 1,000 inhabitants in 2009, compared to an EU average of 10.7 (Taylor 2010).

Alongside increasing growth and cultural diversity, Ireland also had one of the most recent expansions of broadband access in Europe. In 2005, 45% of households with at least one person ages 16-74 had a computer connected to the Internet. By 2008, that number rose to 62% and broadband use had increased from 7% in 2005 to 43% in 2008 (CSO 2008). More people had computers and access to the Internet at faster speeds needed for VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) or Broadband Visual Communication (BVC) technologies.

This chapter brings together a study of emotion with the impact of technology by examining how international mixed couples and their loved ones ‘do’ or practice love in relation to the use Skype BVCs. The focus of the study is on *transconnectivity* which I term to be about the practices that people ‘do’ to create and maintain emotional connections, both through technological and emotional means, that people have across nation-state, cultural and political borders. It is this criss-crossing of places and spaces through emotional networks on technological platforms which enables transnational senses of belonging, habituses and identifications. The chapter asks: How do mixed couples use technology, particularly new broadband visual communication technology such as Skype, to maintain, create and sometimes cut off emotion networks? What effect does the technology have on the ways they experience emotions and their understanding of space in the global world?

Methods

The data in this article come from an in depth qualitative interview study of mixed international couples living in the Republic of Ireland. I conducted 40 interviews through English in 2010-2011 with same sex and heterosexual couples (ages 26-60) and adult children, from Ireland, France, Canada, US, UK, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Poland, Zimbabwe, China living in Ireland, the UK and the US. In Ireland interviewees were from: Cork, Kildare, Galway, Tipperary, Dublin and the surrounds. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

Thirty-five of the couples interviewed were heterosexual and four were same sex couples (three lesbian and one gay male couple) and one refused to state (one partner was transgendered and felt they couldn’t answer the question). All couples had one

international partner or spouse who described themselves as ‘international’ and not Irish. More non-Irish women with Irish men were interviewed and constituted about 2/3 of the interviewees. There were men interviewed, but again they tended to be in relationships with non-Irish women. While these interviews, due to sampling methods, cannot be generalized to all inter couples in Ireland, they do mirror demographic and gendered trends in intermarriage in Ireland.

The chapter concludes that the mixed international couples interviewed here used Skype to create a *transconnective* space. To do this I found that: 1) Skype, and technological devices more generally, were often introduced or learned with the explicit goal of maintaining and creating emotional ties across generations and partners in international families 2) Skype enabled interviewees to maintain distant geographic but emotionally close ties over time and space and 3) the accentuation of pain of missing ‘actual bodies’ (Valentine 2006) actually made some transconnective relationships shift away from Skype precisely because of its bodily and facial intensity.

Emotions Driving Technology – Getting on Skype

Many have written about how technology, and in particular digital social networking technology, is making the world a smaller place (Miller 2011). It is easier now to reach out across the globe to meet and sometimes become intimate emotional partners with those who are from very different cultural backgrounds, religions, languages and emotional understandings than oneself (Ben-Ze’ev 2004). Technology, and in particular, mobile technologies, should be making the global world a more connected place where the flow of emotional connections can take place in almost any space (Elliott and Urry 2010). However, some social networking sites (Miller 2011) and on-

line dating (Ben-Zee's 2004) move primarily from on-line to off-line relationships where the on-line content is fairly superficial and when people want to have more emotionally fulfilling interactions they move the relationship off-line. Skype is slightly different to these because of its ability to enrich face-to-face pre-established off-line relationships when they can't physically be together in the same time and space. The *emotional intentionality* of Skype then is very different as it is focused on close emotionally connected relations and not old school chums or passing acquaintances.

The distance created by migration of one partner in my sample, sometimes motivated older relatives, such as grandparents, to become more technologically proficient and to join Skype driven primarily by the desire to maintain strong emotional connections to their grandchildren. Maria, from Milan, Italy met her husband Liam, from Dublin, Ireland in Italy while studying. She later married him and they migrated to Ireland where they live with their five-year-old son on the outskirts of Dublin. Her parents, back in Milan, treat Skype as a form of a phone call, but as she and her husband talk more about how they use Skype it is clear that it moves far beyond a voice only phone call. They explain:

Maria: We do schedule it (*Skype call*) because for my parents it is a bit of a procedure. They are not really spontaneous users of the Internet. So you kind of have to say, 'oh we will call...' But then we are kind of flexible, because obviously the main aim is to see the grandchild, so he runs around and he shows them things and we kind of run around with the laptop. It is kind of nice.

Liam: Yes so I wouldn't say it is like a phone call in that way, I mean they bake and stuff and talking to the computer, and sometimes if he is not in the mood he might be watching TV in the evening, if he is tired or something and they would be watching him watching TV.

Maria: Yes it is very flexible. Or sometimes I am like, 'oh you play with your grandparents and I am going for a shower'. And he is just there at the computer playing games with my parents.

It turns out that both parties have Skype now on mobile/laptop devices and try to use the mobility of the technology to 'show' more of their lives. In fact, while they only Skype once or twice a week, they often leave it on so they are capturing the ebb and flow of daily life doing things like baking or even watching their grandson watch TV via Skype. They argue that while they feel trapped behind the computer in order to see him, they enjoy just seeing their grandchild in his natural setting and they feel they are emotionally closer to him because they chat with him in Italian in a more natural way. This type of unscheduled intimacy or everyday emotional connection was not possible for them via email or the telephone, but Skype webcam allows them not strictly to interact with each other face-to-face, but also to watch each other thus mediating emotions in a more casual and natural way – almost like 'being there.'

Malia a Turkish/French woman married to Irish man living west of Dublin, Ireland discusses the difference between using the phone and using the visual cues of Skype to communicate with her parents now living in France. Malia explains:

There is a difference. I see my daughter. She changes her whole behaviour as well. She jumps. She starts to get excited and she jumps on the couch and she is a bit more, I don't know how you say it in English, she is showing them that she loves them whereas on the phone she would be distracted by the TV or other things. But she really enjoys talking to them and she'd be chatting away in English sometimes and they don't understand her. Sometimes she would be going on in English and they would say, 'talk in Turkish.' She says, 'I am talking in Turkish.' But she doesn't realise that she isn't. With the webcam on Skype they are closer.

Malia explained that when her daughter was younger, it was important for her parents to see the baby almost weekly because she was physically changing so quickly and couldn't speak on the phone. The visual aspect, while not completely bodily because

they can't hug, does come into focus more clearly with Skype and changes her daughter's behaviour. Her attention to the visual, as perhaps a more general increasing importance of visual stimulation in her generation, is important and changes her behavior. She is able to show them her ballet dancing, sing for them and point out her new toys and books. She is also entertained for longer periods of time and thus interacting with her grandparents more deeply because of the visual cues. For Malia, she argues that being able to 'see' her grandparents makes them more real to her daughter and reminds them (because young children have a shorter memory than adults) of who her grandparents are and that this made their geographic distance less emotionally painful. Malia also told me that she found it interesting that her daughter can understand Turkish even though she doesn't speak back to her parents in Turkish and that this is primarily because of seeing and speaking with her grandparents on Skype since she is not really exposed to the language in her daily life. Both Maria and Malia's parents don't speak English and Skype has meant that they use technology to make emotional but also important cultural and linguistic connections to their grandchildren. Without his or her grandchildren learning the language of the grandparents, there would be no means or mode of communication and hence no emotional relationship, which would be common to all three generations.

Geographically Farther, but Emotionally Closer

Veronique, originally from Marseille, France, but now living in County Limerick also illustrates how her use of Skype to her family in France helps her Irish/French children to maintain not only their emotional ties to people, but to the French language and place. She says:

I'd be on Skype everyday. It would be on and if somebody wants to ring me or somebody wants to ring somebody that would be on. I use it for work as well, like with the university, I am still with the French University and I am using it to talk away with people over there. The phone in Ireland is very expensive. My children talk to my parents. I would say it helps them maintain a relationship with them. My husband is older so they don't have grandparents in Ireland and his brother and sister; they are kind of non-existent. The only family they would have, even though there are some here, would be my family in France, if you see what I mean. By using Skype, even though my family is further away distance wise, they are closer emotionally to them.

It is clear that the local Irish relatives are not the primary source of emotional support, but that using Skype allows her children to speak with and have a strong emotional connection to her family in France and to the French language, which they use exclusively on Skype. Veronique talked at length about the ability to speak French perfectly, with the correct accent, and how that would allow them to be seen in France as 'real' French children even though they are half Irish and live in Ireland. Her goal for her children was to keep up strong emotional attachment to her family, but also to her hometown and the French language through the frequent use of Skype.

While there are clearly similarities in terms of language and cultural connections being fostered by these French grandparents of their mixed French/Irish grandchildren, the children themselves identify much more strongly with being French than being Irish even though they live in Ireland and speak Irish as well. For Veronique, she has made a conscious choice for her children, to connect them both physically, spending the summers in France, but also via Skype culturally and linguistically with France and her side of the family. Even though her Irish in-laws are in the same village and same school as her children, she describes how the Irish cousins would have almost no relation to her children not inviting them birthday parties over other classmates. Who you choose to Skype in this instance may not be

your local neighbor or relations, but instead, those you love and who love you from a distance. They are the emotional connections that Veronique makes the effort to use Skype for when she is keeping it on all day. She would never dream of Skyping someone locally, but uses it daily to connect to France, French speakers and her French family AS IF they were around the corner.

Transconnectivity or Disconnect?

However, not all of the emotions expressed, created or maintained on Skype were positive. There were some emotionally negative experiences described in the interviews. Lily, who is a self-described rebel, originally from Seattle, Washington USA, is married to her Irish husband and lives with him and their four children in the west of Ireland. Lily loves to knit and described herself as 'raising kids full time' and her husband as being 'unemployed for quite a while.' Lily left the US spontaneously and didn't inform her parents until the last minute. They were shocked and hurt by her abrupt departure with their three grandchildren to Ireland and that rift took time to heal. She describes here how she has used Skype and how it didn't always create emotional closeness.

Skype can help in a good way but it can also help in a bad way. Like my mum is a bit of an alcoholic so she Skypes at night our time, so she Skypes at midnight [unclear 57 44 15] and she is not making the best impression on her grandkids. They haven't seen her in four years and when she calls on Skype she is completely drunk and slurring and the kids are like, 'oh my God, your mother, look at her.' They don't even call her their grandmother; they are like, 'your mother.' Your grandmother too. And then it is a bit embarrassing. But my dad is different, he is short sweet and to the point. A long conversation for him is 20 minutes but that hardly ever happens. We have ours (Skype) on all the time. It is on 18 hours a day so anybody can call us whenever they want but out of my dad, my mum and my sister, none of them are signed in all the time.

Clearly for Lily, fraught emotional relationships are not resolved or made stronger by the use of Skype. In some sense, by leaving the Skype on all day, she is open to

communicating with her family if they are signed on, but in reality, her family life is quite busy and she appreciates the frequent, but shorter contacts.

Others also described their frustrations with the emotional and bodily limitations of Skype. Isabelle, a French woman from Paris, France, now living in the greater Dublin area with her long term Irish boyfriend, described how they use Skype when they are traveling apart from each other and the limitations of that over the long term. Isabelle says:

When we are apart, we talk every day, we have Skype phones.

Interviewer: And do you think it has helped you to...?

Yes, it helps to a certain point. Like at this point I am sick of it. We call each other because we got into that routine but I told him the other day that I am really sick of talking on the phone. I need to just be in the same place and do something together. But yes we made great use of it, the Skype phone and the video Skype.

A final interviewee explains how he sometimes prefers the telephone to BVCs like Skype because he feels that Skype is almost too close emotionally. Balaji, a multiethnic Indian/Irish college student in his early 20s from Dublin's Southside explained that his parents divorced when he was quite young and his Irish father emigrated to Australia while his Indian mother and sister (who has special needs) remained in Ireland. Balaji states:

The time difference is hard but not only that, it is the time that I am working and then in college and we have to arrange a time when he is not working. And I think it is also easier to use the phone, not on practical levels but on emotional levels it is easier to use the phone.

Interviewer: That is interesting, why?

I don't know, it is just hard to say goodbye when you are looking at the person, it is very difficult to disengage or disconnect and I hate the red button that says, disconnect call, I hate pressing that. And he is always quite hesitant, it is easier just to use the phone.

Balaji was quite clear that although Skype technology helps them to close the geographic space between Australia and Ireland, the time differences and the time rhythm of his day and his father's day make it difficult to coordinate communication. He also spoke of the bulky nature of being dependent (in his case) on the laptop or computer to communicate when sometimes he just wanted to be able to text or use a mobile device (like a phone) to have a quick chat or send a quick message and he did talk about working to try to afford a smart phone (iphone) so that he would be able to do this. His main objection though to Skype was emotional. He found it just too hard to be staring his father in the eyes and have to punch the red button to disconnect the call – hence making his image vanish into the Ethernet.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how mixed international couples and in some cases their children, use broadband visual communication technologies such as Skype to maintain and sometimes strengthen emotional ties to distant people, places and cultures/languages. While it is clear that Skype webcam technology is helping some mixed migrant families to stay in touch, keep up language acquisition, see physical development of children etc., most often the explanation given for using (or learning to use) the technology is an emotional one. The technology affords emotional connections to stay strong over long distances and time separations apart. While Skype is not a first choice, but it is a good second choice – the next best thing to being together in person and while apart, Skype helps people to manage the desire to be together again.

Skype then is changing how emotions are expressed and how they continue to develop with international families. They have become a key tool to maintain emotions between generations of migrant families and to experience 'everyday' as well as scheduled chats with distant family members between 'real' visits, which involve real and costly air travel. All the interviewees discussed how Skype had changed their emotional lives and expressions because of the cheap and easy to use nature of Skype – some even described it as revolutionizing their children's relationships to their parents – both as grandparents learned to use Skype and technology, but also as children learned to present themselves and their lives to their grandparents via Skype.

Skype however, clearly had its emotional limitations and was not a replacement for a hug, bodily contact/intimacy or even just a chat down the pub over a cup of tea. Balaji, Isabelle, and Lily make it quite clear that while they use Skype, there are emotional negatives or limits that come with it such as bad emotions as well as good ones fostered by the use of the webcam and limits on how much time they can spend on Skype or how bulky and immobile the technology can be (although this is changing with the increased use of tablet and mobile devices with Skype web cam capabilities). One of the strongest reasons though not to use Skype, was emotional. They felt that it was just too difficult emotionally, to face their loved ones and then have to disconnect.

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