Extraordinary everydayness: Young people’s affective engagements with the country of origin through digital media and transnational mobility

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Abstract
Literature on transnational families has established that both digital media and visits are important to maintaining relationships across distance. While studies foreground family ties and adult perspectives, few have focused on how young people create and experience affective engagements with the country of origin. This is largely because youth mobility has either been ignored or studied retrospectively from the country of residence. This study investigates youth mobility as it unfolds and explores what transpires during country-of-origin visits. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium and Ghana with 25 young people of Ghanaian background, I argue that young people experience an extraordinary everydayness during visits to Ghana. Young people build affective connections with people and places through digital media before, during and after visits. The resulting everydayness is extraordinary as it takes place in an unfamiliar space with peers previously only known in the online sphere.

KEYWORDS
affect, digital media, extraordinary everydayness, Ghana, peer relationships, transnational youth mobility

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INTRODUCTION

‘James!’, Ama (19) shrieked in excitement after we had just entered an open-air pub in Accra, the capital of Ghana. She ran towards a young man, flung her arms around him and stayed in his warm embrace for several seconds before introducing him as her friend. Like the friend who brought us to the pub, James and Ama had met on social media. ‘When was the first time you saw each other in person?’ I later asked. Ama sat still and only realized after a few moments that ‘that was the first time.’ It turned out that her relationships with most of the friends she hung out with during this trip in 2019, as well as with her boyfriend, had started out as online relationships.

Emotional encounters with peers like the one described above struck me as curious during my fieldwork on the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth who grow up between Belgium and Ghana. While I was aware that many young people around the world with a migration background maintain existing transnational relationships through digital media, the situation described above is different. Before young people visit Ghana, digital media play an important role in establishing new relationships with transnational peers, which spill over into the offline world during young people’s visits to the country of origin. These peer relationships come alive during visits, as they create an affective space of connection and familiarity in Ghana, but also exist beyond them.

Scholars in transnational migration studies have highlighted migrants’ efforts to build ‘affective circuits’ of emotions, goods and people that allow them to facilitate, block and control emotional connections with kin from a distance (Cole & Groes, 2016). Yet face-to-face contact still has significance for the maintenance of transnational relationships (Baldassar, 2008), and return visits to the country of origin have been described as emotional events worthy of investigation (Skrbiš, 2008). While much research has focused on family reunions and foregrounded adult perspectives, recent research acknowledges that investigations of youth mobility and of young people’s emotions ‘can serve as a window to their social embeddedness’ (Cheung Judge et al., 2020, p. 3).

To unpack young people’s sense of self and the emotions that emerge through their mobility, this article focuses on experiences with people and places in the origin country. I argue that through physical and affective experiences in a new environment with previously unknown people, young people create an extraordinary everydayness, a concept Valentina Mazzucato and I developed together in the MO-TRAYL project (www.motrayl.com). As illustrated in the opening vignette, it is extraordinary that young people can run into a friend on the street in a country where they have either never lived or not in several years. It is extraordinary that they experience an everydayness with peers whom they have never met in real life, and in a space that contains many unfamiliar elements. This sense of extraordinary everydayness is shaped through young people’s mobility and their digital media use before, during and after visits. The concept helps to foreground the affective nature of their experiences in the origin country, including embodied and emotional aspects that are generated through relational encounters with the environment or other people (Massumi, 2002; see also Cole & Groes, 2016). It also draws attention to young people’s transnational mobility, and the resulting engagement with specific places and people, which provides opportunities for new forms of subjectivity and affective experiences to emerge (Conradson & McKay, 2007; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Rather than using the metaphor of ‘affective circuits’ (Cole & Groes, 2016) which focuses on the emergence of social networks via transnational exchange from a distance, this article explores how young people experience extraordinary everydayness through the affective engagements or connection they create, including both transnational practices and affective aspects of trips themselves.

Previous studies have looked into migrant youth’s affective engagements with their or their parents’ country of origin and how these are maintained through digital media or shaped by visits. Research on second-generation transnationalism shows that migrant youth use digital media from within the country of residence to sustain relationships with family members in the country of origin (Levitt & Waters, 2002; Madianou & Miller, 2011). This literature often perceives young people’s ties to the country of origin as a continuation of their parental ties and as limited to the family sphere. As such, it has failed to consider young people’s agency in creating their own transnational networks with peers in the origin country (but see Akom Ankobrey et al., 2021). Furthermore, this body of literature commonly conceptu-
alizes migrant youth as sedentary and has ignored their physical mobility, even though almost half of all migrant youth in European secondary schools visit the country of origin at least annually (Mazzucato & Haagsman, 2022; Schimmer & Van Tubergen, 2014).

The emotional effects of visits to the country of origin have been shown in emerging research on second-generation returns. Studies demonstrate that visits ‘home’ impact migrant youth’s sense of belonging and identity (King et al., 2011; Vathi & King, 2011). Yet since most of these studies are conducted in the country of residence, based mainly on retrospective accounts of adults reflecting on their youth, they often focus on where migrants feel they do or do not belong (Mazzucato & van Geel, 2022). We know little of what transpires during visits, which might help to understand what contributes to feelings of connection or disconnection.

By studying young people’s transnational mobility in its own right, this article shows how emotion, mobility and the digital are intertwined. It does so by investigating youth mobility trajectories, meaning young people’s geographic moves in time and space and the concomitant family constellations (Mazzucato, 2015). Such an approach enables me to explore mobility as it happens and considers how emotions are ‘made tangible through practices’ (Everts & Wagner, 2012, p.1) during country-of-origin visits (see also Mazzucato et al., 2022). Following young people’s lives before, during and after visits to Ghana, and contextualizing visits within broader mobility trajectories, allows me to study in-depth affective engagements with the origin country across time and space. Drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium and Ghana with 25 Ghanaian-background youth aged 14–25, this article shows that young people make new transnational peer relationships online before visiting Ghana, and use digital media during visits that create affective connections to people and places. They move peer relationships from the online to the offline world and navigate an unfamiliar space with apparent ease. Their experiences leave a lasting impression well after young people return to Belgium.

TRANSNATIONAL YOUTH MOBILITY, AFFECT, AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Migration often separates family members, which can cause feelings of guilt, longing and distress for both migrants and those who stay behind in the country of origin (Baldassar, 2008; Dreby, 2007; Poeze, 2019; Schmalzbauer, 2004). While visits and face-to-face contact are still important to maintain transnational relationships (Baldassar, 2008), most transnational migration studies focus on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in mediating negative emotions caused by separation, maintaining a sense of ‘familyhood’ across borders, and facilitating long-distance circulation of care and support (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Baldassar, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2011; Parreñas, 2005).

ICTs are also central to my analysis. ICTs, scholars have argued, enable different forms of virtual ‘co-presence’ for members of transnational families living in different countries. ‘Mediated co-presence’—through texting, and audio and video calls—allows family members to ‘be together’ (Baldassar, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2011), while ‘ambient co-presence’ implies a peripheral awareness of significant others abroad through an ‘always on’ culture (Madianou, 2016). These forms of ICT-based co-presence shape parental caregiving practices across borders (Baldassar, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2011), facilitate emotional closeness within families and shape migrant parents’ sense of belonging (Madianou, 2016). Much research, however, focuses on adults’ use of ICTs to maintain kin relations from a distance. Methodologically, these studies tend to collect ethnographic data either in the country of residence or origin. This article contributes to this literature but seeks to take it to new directions. I explore ways that ICTs are used to establish and not only to maintain connections to the country of origin, I shift the focus away from adults towards migrant youth and I employ mobile methods to study the emotional and embodied aspects of youth mobility.

While some literature on second-generation transnationalism has explored how young people of migrant background use digital media from within the country of residence to maintain transnational connections, young people’s agency is seldom of central concern. Migrant youth engage in diverse practices that link countries of origin and residence, maintaining religious and ethnic ties, for example, and performing transnational identities online (Levitt &
Waters, 2002; Levitt, 2009; Leurs, 2015). Young people use ICTs to stay in touch with family in the country of origin and maintain a sense of familyhood from afar (Haikkola, 2011; Z. Robertson et al., 2016; Zontini & Reynolds, 2018). But studies find that it is the parents who ensure their children’s emotional connection to the country of origin: parents pass on the phone to their children when relatives call from abroad (Haikkola, 2011), and they transfer a sense of belonging and nostalgia to the second generation (Wessendorf, 2007). Such conceptualizations hide young people’s agency in forging their own transnational engagements and establishing their own social networks in the origin country. Recent research shows that as young people grow older, relationships to family members in the country of origin wane, while peer relations—maintained through ICTs and mobility—become more significant (Akom Ankobrey et al., 2021) and constitute a source of social capital for migrant youth (Ogden & Mazzucato, 2021).

Research exploring what role transnational mobility plays in shaping migrant youth’s emotional engagement with the country of origin is only recent. Second-generation returns literature, which often includes studies on the first and 1.5 generations, finds that mobility to the origin country impacts how migrant youth relate to the country where they or their parents were born. Mazzucato and van Geel (2022) have argued that this literature is especially interested in how such visits and more permanent returns shape young people’s identity and sense of belonging (Gardner & Mand, 2012; King et al., 2011; McMichael et al., 2017; Phillips & Potter, 2006; Vathi & King, 2011; Wessendorf, 2007). Their sense of identity and connection can be complex. For example, Gardner and Mand (2012) show that ‘home’ for British Bangladeshi children ‘is often situated in two places, because close family members live in both London and Bangladesh’ (p. 976). King et al. (2011) state that ‘there is the emotional attachment to Greece and the Greek way of life, often built up continuously over the individual’s life-course and deriving from […] frequent visits to Greece during childhood and beyond’ (p. 499). McMichael et al. (2017) find that young refugees feel connected to family in their origin country, yet not to the wider national community, resulting in an ambivalent sense of belonging after visits.

But while emotion is at the centre of these studies, they rarely investigate what transpires during visits to make young people feel as they do. Studies do not give ‘real time’ insights into everyday emotions and the dynamics of sociality that help explain why young people feel a sense of connection. One important reason for this is methodological: most research on visits to the country of origin has been conducted in the country of residence, based on retrospective accounts by adults of their youth. Data collection has been removed in both space and time from the actual events studied. Yet to fully understand migrant belonging and emotions on the move, it is important to conduct multi-sited research (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Mazzucato, 2009) and to pay attention to material, embodied and sensorial experiences (McMichael et al., 2017; Mazzucato et al., 2022).

New research agendas do seek to adequately address—theoretically and methodologically—the increasing complexity, diversity and emotionality of transnational youth mobilities (Cheung Judge et al., 2020; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018; S. Robertson et al., 2018). By putting youth mobility at the centre of the research and by investigating youth mobility trajectories (Mazzucato, 2015), this article responds to their calls. My aim is to study all types of mobility, including initial and subsequent migrations, visits to the country of origin and changes in residence. I study youth mobility over the life course by using mobility trajectory mapping, by interviewing young people before and after visits, and by following them in real time during their visits. Such an approach allows me to research mobility as it unfolds, investigate how it is intertwined with digital practices and pay attention to its emotional and embodied aspects (Mazzucato et al., 2022).

To analyse young people’s affective experiences with people and places during country-of-origin visits, I use the concept of extraordinary everydayness developed in the MO-TRAYL project. This concept describes the unique nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space that is made possible by young people’s use of digital media and their physical mobility. The concept combines insights from different fields, especially youth studies and urban studies, to explore the tension between novelty and familiarity. Scholars in youth studies have focused primarily on the online world, while urban studies have shown how ICTs facilitate affective encounters with unknown others in the offline world. Digital media thus make encounters with strangers in urban life a matter of choice rather than chance, and blur distinctions between proximity and distance, connection and disconnection (Koch & Miles, 2021). Drawing on these insights, the notion of extraordinary everydayness enables me to study affective
encounters with transnational peers during country-of-origin visits that young people meet online prior to visits to the country of origin.

Because these face-to-face encounters with peers happen outside of the country where young people reside, it is essential to recognize the importance of space. Mobilities research has shown that our senses of self are connected to particular places, and these places provide opportunities for affective experiences (Conradson & McKay, 2007). When visiting the origin country, young people engage with unfamiliar places they have not been to before, or not for several years. Rather than getting lost or relying on others, young people use digital media to navigate this unfamiliar space. Extraordinary everydayness thus enables me to explore how young people create mundane experiences in a novel environment, and to shift the focus to embodied, emotional and everyday aspects of country-of-origin visits.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this article come from the Belgian case study of the ‘Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives’ project (MO-TRAYL; www.motrayl.com), which aims to understand the impact of youth mobility on young people’s life outcomes. The sample consisted of 25 young people (12 males, 13 females) aged 14–25 at the beginning of fieldwork. Participants were recruited through Ghanaian churches, African youth associations, schools and snowball sampling, and were selected based on the following criteria: (1) having a Ghanaian background, with both parents born in Ghana, regardless of the young person’s birth country (20 were born in Ghana, four in Belgium, and one in the Netherlands); (2) having attended secondary school in Belgium; and (3) having made at least one international move to or from Ghana. Nine participants (three males, six females) had made between one and five trips to Ghana ranging in length from one week to six months. Of those, four were born in Ghana, four in Belgium and one in the Netherlands. Visits were made primarily to see family and friends, but encompassed touristic activities and sometimes vocational training. Participants’ families were predominantly from Kumasi, Ghana’s second largest city, though some also had ties to the capital city Accra, and a few came from other regions.

I conducted multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, interspersed with communication via social media platforms, between January 2018 and February 2020, of which I spent 18 months physically in the field. Most fieldwork was conducted in the greater Antwerp area, where participants lived, but I also joined three young women on trips to Ghana (six weeks in total). These fieldwork visits to Ghana lasted between four and 16 days, and I accompanied the women during leisure activities and family visits, gaining insights into their embodied experiences. The close contact in Ghana, usually including co-habitation, and my long-term involvement in the field facilitated relationships of trust.

In Antwerp, ethnographic fieldwork principally involved participant-observation and informal conversations in young people’s homes, schools, church settings and recreational spaces, as well as interviews with participants, teachers and members of the Ghanaian community. Depending on participants’ preferences, interviews were conducted in Dutch or English and included biographical discussions, photo-elicitation methods and walking interviews. Several mapping tools were designed for the MO-TRAYL project (Mazzucato, 2015; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018), and I filled these in together with participants to identify their mobility trajectories and transnational networks. Trajectory mapping allowed me to systematically track young people’s moves in time and space (including short trips and changes of residence), concomitant family constellations, and the schools they attended, ultimately resulting in a visualization of young people’s mobility and educational trajectories (Mazzucato et al., 2022). Using concentric-circle network mapping, I identified people who were important for participants and their locations in the world and gathered information on young people’s transnational peer relationships. While I discussed transnational relationships with participants in Belgium, the importance and affective nature of peer relationships created through online platforms first became apparent to me in Ghana in an instance similar to the one described in the vignette that opens this article. My observations in Ghana provided insights into embodied experiences and emotional aspects of young people’s lives that participants found difficult to put into words or deemed not to be worthy of mention.
After returning from the field, I used thematic analysis and visualizations of mobility trajectories and transnational networks to identify patterns within the data. I read and re-read fieldnotes, closely examined visualizations, used both inductive and deductive coding and generated and redefined themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Additionally, I used comic-based analysis, or word–picture interactions, to explore emerging ideas and to pay particular attention to embodied, sensory and emotional aspects of the data (Kuttner et al., 2018). Drawing significant moments again and again helped to re-story the data into a coherent narrative (Campbell Galman, 2022).

The analysis for this article is based on research with the nine people who engaged in at least one visit to Ghana and is informed by encounters with other Belgian-based Ghanaian youth and transnational peers in Ghana. I focus on the cases of Ama, Nana and Rebecca. These three cases provided the richest data and illustrate in-depth how young people invest in affective ties to the country of origin through digital media and visits while also representing a variety of mobility trajectories (including ‘first’ and ‘second’ generation).

HOW DIGITAL MEDIA AND VISITS SHAPE ‘EXTRAORDINARY EVERYDAYNESS’ IN GHANA

In this section, I present four vignettes that illustrate different aspects of the ‘extraordinary everydayness’ young people experience in Ghana. The first vignette shows how, prior to country-of-origin visits, social media allows young people to meet new peers outside of established family or friend networks. The second and third vignettes recount young people’s lived experiences of extraordinary everydayness during visits in Ghana—affective experiences that are composed of people and places. The fourth vignette illustrates the lasting impact of affective ties after visits to Ghana.

Before going to Ghana: Using social media to foster new relationships in the origin country

Ama (19) was born in Ghana and migrated to Belgium at the age of nine. She started to make new connections online at the age of about 14. Especially common at the time was meeting new people through WhatsApp groups with hundreds of members, mostly Ghanaian-background youth across the globe. Ama was sometimes added to groups of no particular interest to her, such as a group around the Champions League, but it still made her part of a large community and visible to others who could now message her privately. She explained: ‘They would message me sometimes “how are you?” to see how I was doing. And then, we just became friends, you know? I am no longer in the group, but I still have their number, that’s how it goes. We just became friends.’ A more common way for Ama to meet people today is through Snapchat. Ama will post something on her profile and someone will comment it. While Ama usually does not message new people, she receives reactions on her snaps and is asked for her number so that the chat can continue. In another instance, Ama was on a video call with a Ghana-based friend who added another friend to the call and introduced them to each other.

Nana (27), who was also born in Ghana and migrated to Belgium aged eleven, preferred Twitter because it created ‘community’ and was a ‘chill place’ to meet new people and find peers with common interests. She also used LinkedIn and, in the past, had used a personal blog on which she published interviews with Ghanaian artists. This was a deliberate strategy to build up an online presence and ultimately make new connections to peers in Ghana. Less frequently, she also met people through Instagram.

The vignette above illustrates young people’s agency in creating their own transnational engagements with people in Ghana. Rather than merely continuing parental ties to family in the origin country (e.g., Haikkola, 2011), young people use social media to forge their own relationships. Nana explained:
To be honest, the people I grew up with, when I go back to Ghana, I don’t see them. So if it is not thanks to that network that I have been able to build myself, […] then I don’t know anyone. So this new network that I built, I go to Ghana now and I’m like ‘hey, let’s hang out’ and I have someone. I am creating new friendships, new networks.

Technology multiplies possibilities for engaging with unknown others and means young people are not limited by existing links or geographic proximity. While both Ama and Nana had family ties and childhood acquaintances in Kumasi, all of their online peers were living elsewhere, mostly in Accra. The potential of social media to make new links was thus reflected in the geographic separation of family and transnational online peer networks in Ghana.

Social media promotes a generative form of encounter because it positions strangers as potential friends or romantic partners, which requires an openness towards the unknown (Koch & Miles, 2021). Illustrating this generative potential, Nana and Ama said that they knew most of their friends in Ghana through social media. Meeting others online also often means that people become closer faster. For example, Ama mentioned that people messaging her immediately made them friends: ‘I post something on my Snap[chat]. Someone sees it [and thinks] “oh, that is nice, I want to be your friend.” Voila, we are friends.’ Such relationships do not necessarily last long but can carry an extraordinary emotional intensity nonetheless, as I will show in more detail below.

Ama and Nana both invested time and effort in the online sphere to establish new contacts. Such ‘digital labour’ involves cultivating one’s online profile, sometimes on several platforms, by uploading pictures or videos and sharing information or tweets. It also includes checking apps frequently and engaging in conversations online that might not always be fruitful in terms of creating friendships. Talking about the blog she maintained to boost her online presence, Nana explained:

It was an online blog where I was promoting upcoming young artists. So that already gave me some sort of credibility and the ability to just go to somebody’s DM [direct message] and say ‘hey, I see you are doing good work, this and that, I want to interview you,’ and they would say, ‘yes, interview me.’ That’s how I made most of my social media connections and it helped me meet really cool, cool, cool people. […] And then from there, we keep that relationship till now. With all those people, I kept that good relationship.

The multiple online ties that young people build display a variety of relationships to the offline world and are related to their interests and plans for the future. Ama and Nana both used several social media platforms to establish new connections with peers in Ghana, though they differed in which platform they preferred, possibly due to differences in age and life phase. Upon first encounter, most of their online peers were completely separate from any offline networks and they searched for and met online peers through app-specific functions. Nana explained how she would notice someone on her Twitter timeline: ‘I have seen her appear on my timeline several times, cool. People are retweeting about her, lots of cool stuff. And for me, it felt like “ah this is a good contact you want to keep when you go back to Ghana.”’ Snapchat has a function that suggests strangers with similar interests as potential friends, which is how Ama’s friends might have first noticed her. Sometimes online friends would introduce new people by, for example, adding them to a video call. My third case, Rebecca (22), shows another relationship to the offline as she met transnational online peers through offline acquaintances. She was born in Belgium and had travelled to Ghana five times. Just before going to Ghana with another Ghanaian-background friend from Belgium at the age of 20, she had been to London where she met other Ghanaians who connected her to their friends in Ghana via WhatsApp. She reflected on these networks:

If you have connections in Ghana, Ghana is just a lot nicer. It makes everything easier. And because of the people in London, we met other people, […] so that we thought ‘ah okay, a network is really important.’ […] I really noticed that you make a lot of connections and it makes everything easier.
In sum, Rebecca, Nana and Ama illustrate that affective engagements with Ghana are neither limited to family ties nor to the so-called ‘first generation’. Young people fashion new connections to Ghana through social media and their own mobility. Shared interests, both personal and professional, curiosity and similar tastes in music or fashion help to facilitate these new connections.

**Extraordinary everydayness: Affective experiences with people and places in Ghana**

**The virtual and the physical meet: Transnational online peers in Ghana**

Nana (27) and I had just arrived in Ghana, unpacked, freshened up and met back at the living room. Abigail was on her way to meet us at the house and take us somewhere for food. ‘It will be the first time I see her,’ Nana mentioned at one point. ‘What do you mean?’ I asked. It turned out they had met over Twitter but never seen each other in person. Abigail had messaged Nana because she thought she was ‘cool’, and they became friends. It took Abigail some time to get to the house. We followed where the Uber was taking her through the app and watched Nana’s phone intently. The air was filled with suspense. ‘This is better than watching TV,’ I said. Nana laughed, ‘look at us.’

When Abigail did not arrive even though the Uber app said she had, Nana gave me her phone and went off to look for her. A couple of minutes later, they came walking towards the house and I saw Abigail: shoulder-long locks, black blouse, jeans ripped in a few places, stilettos, bright blue eyes. It was a bumpy dirt road and she had difficulty walking around the potholes. Nana reached out her arm to help her friend and they continued walking towards the house holding hands. ‘You’re so tiny,’ Abigail said and Nana was laughing, her face glowing. This was a theme that continued throughout the evening: they talked about the different expectations they had of each other, but especially related to height and appearance.

‘So were you nervous meeting me?’ Nana asked during dinner. ‘No,’ Abigail said determined. She looked down and shook her head, ‘I was excited!’ She had tried to cut her work meeting short because she was so eager to meet Nana. It was a relaxed atmosphere. Afterwards, I asked Nana, ‘so how was it meeting Abigail?’ She said it was exciting. After talking to someone for such a long time, they become ‘part of you’, and when you finally meet them, you see that they are ‘real.’

The vignette above illustrates that the peer relationships young people create through social media do not remain virtual (Allison, 2013; Helve & Bynner, 2007), but become ‘real’ and contribute to a sense of extraordinary everydayness. Even though Nana had not lived in Ghana for 10 years, she could meet a close friend just hours after arriving in the country. The first face-to-face meeting with Abigail described above was charged with the excitement of meeting someone new, but at the same time, it was a dinner between two friends who knew each other well, laughed intimately and made plans for their time together in Ghana. Nana appreciated just hanging out, ‘talking nonsense’ about boyfriends, current affairs and activities that she definitely wanted to do.

Contributing to this everydayness in Ghana was the fact that young people could, quite by chance, run into someone they know but had never seen in person, as described in the opening vignette of this article in which Ama (19) had an unplanned but pleasant encounter with her friend James in a nightclub. Nana had a similar chance encounter with a Facebook friend in Accra whom she had never seen in person, and Nana’s Belgian-based friend who we hung out with at the beach one night knew people sitting close by. When we arrived at the beach, she excitedly greeted a young man sitting with his male friends and walked over for a brief chat before joining us at the table to order drinks. Such encounters created a sense of familiarity and social embeddedness in Ghana even though participants were only staying for a short time.

Young people also actively drew on friends, acquaintances and romantic partners in Ghana to create extraordinary everydayness which entailed experiences of sociality and comfort as well as aspects of leisure and luxury. They could meet peers for dinner, go to the beach, organize BBQs, go to concerts and special events, or just hang out at a swimming pool, their Airbnb or a friend’s house. Ama called upon her boyfriend whenever she needed help, and drew on other male friends in Accra to keep us company, escort us to a nightclub, pay for our rides, or bring food to the house.
Digital media were not only important prior to visits but also while young people were in Ghana. They provided a way to connect to peers at almost any time. Young people could rely on their social media relationships for company or advice on where to eat or what activities to do. Ama shared on social media when she wanted to attend an event and asked peers to join her. Yet sometimes young people could not rely on their peers—because they were tied up at work or in a different city—and we ended up driving around aimlessly, staying in the house, or doing touristic activities recommended online for want of better ideas.

Besides possibilities for direct communication offered by social media, the sense of being part of a community in Ghana was further reinforced through some app-specific features. An example is the Snap Map provided by the app Snapchat. Ama's Snap Map (Figure 1) shows all of her friends as bitmojis, their current location (provided they share their geo-tracking data) and status updates in the form of photos and videos. The map thus provides a visual representation of Ama's peer community in Ghana and creates ‘ambient co-presence’ (Madianou, 2016). While previous research has shown that ambient co-presence is important for the maintenance of transnational relationships and feelings of belonging and community from a distance (Madianou, 2016), it is similarly important for creating a sense of community when relationships are formed in a transnational social field and come together within the same geographical space. Not only was Ama constantly aware of her friends’ whereabouts and current activities when consulting Snapchat and other social media platforms, she could share status updates that initiated further exchange with her peers in Ghana.

Navigating unfamiliar space with confidence: Location-based technologies in Ghana

Ama and I took a trotro, a minivan, to visit her boyfriend Prince in Koforidua and go to a concert on his campus that night. It had taken us a while to leave the city and it was pitch-black outside throughout the two-hour drive on the meandering mountain road. Ama had already been to Koforidua a couple of times during this trip, always making the journey by herself, and I felt relaxed knowing she would get us there safely. Once we were approaching the city, Ama took out her phone and opened her Snap Map (Figure 1). Having enabled geo-tracking, her bitmoji was displayed sitting in a car at our current location. She moved around the map with her finger to get a sense of where we were, then pointed to a spot that was marked on the map and commented, ‘this is the junction where we have to get off.’ Not long after, she called the driver and told him to stop. Since Koforidua is a smaller city, there was no Uber, but we found a taxi a little later that took us to a point on the main road from where we could walk to Prince’s guesthouse.

Young people navigated their way round in Ghana with apparent ease. The situation described above would not have been possible just a few years ago when young people had to rely on others, mostly relatives, for almost everything. While some street names are commonly known in Ghana, the vast majority of streets do not have official names and houses are not marked by numbers. To get around, people refer to landmarks, street vendors, petrol stations, or even noticeable trees or bumps in the road. This makes meeting up difficult for anyone not familiar with the busy urban landscape.

With the rise of smartphones, young people’s independence and freedom of movement increased enormously. It is now easy to know where to get off a minibus by consulting an app. Rebecca here describes how Uber had granted her more freedom during her fourth visit to Ghana compared to earlier trips with her family:

Previously, I was dependent on my parents. So if I wanted to go somewhere, we all went there together, we had to go there together in a car. But now [...] you have Uber in Ghana and I just downloaded the app, typed in my location and in two minutes, the Uber is there. So I went to many different places, and I went to church alone as well. Because my family wanted to go to their church but I wanted to go to the big church. [...] I went there alone. And because of Uber, I was able to take initiative to go there alone. Before it was like ‘you are young, you can’t go there alone.’
FIGURE 1  Ama’s Snap Map, a service by the app Snapchat, showing some of Ama’s friends as bitmojis, their whereabouts when they last used the app, and their status updates.
Uber and similar ride-hailing services enable young people to move within Ghana independent of family, meet up with friends and engage in activities that are of interest to them. Or as Rebecca put it, new technologies allowed her to experience ‘the Ghana that everyone was talking about, but that I wasn’t allowed to see [before].’

Another app that granted independence was Airbnb. Ama rented different rooms in the greater Accra area via this app during the two and a half months that she stayed in Ghana. This allowed her to stay away from the watching eyes of her family but also to experiment with living by herself before moving out of her parents’ home in Belgium. Describing her last visit to Ghana, Ama said:

I did different things, you know. I went to Cape Coast; I have never been to Cape Coast. I went to Koforidua; I had never been to Koforidua. I booked an Airbnb myself; I had never done that. I was not independent [before], you know. [Now.] I had to do everything by myself. That was really cool.

Technology also offered protections. Nana depended on Google maps to track our movements whenever we were in a taxi or an Uber to make sure we were moving to our desired location in the fastest way possible. ‘You have to be careful that they don’t take detours’, she said, explaining that Uber drivers try to make more money this way, especially if they know that you do not live in Ghana. Thus, while it was often evident to locals that Nana was only in Ghana for a visit, smartphones gave her and others the confidence to navigate busy urban landscapes and an assurance that they would not be taken advantage of.

**Lasting impressions of visits to Ghana**

The very first time I saw Rebecca (22), we met in a café in Antwerp for an interview. Someone had connected us via email, and since the only thing I knew about her was that she had participated in a Ghanaian community education project, I asked whether she would mind saying a few words about herself to start. She replied: ‘Okay, so I’m Rebecca, I’m 21 years old, and [...] I am a Ghanaian young person. Well, I was born here [in Belgium] but I have Ghanaian roots and I find it very important to know your roots. I mean, you are here, you are learning about everything, about the people in this environment. But I think it is more important to have a little bit of everything. [...] So I have been to Ghana regularly. Altogether, I went four times.’ As the interview went on, and in subsequent interactions, Rebecca shared how trips to Ghana strengthened her pride in being Ghanaian. She emphasized the value of knowing people in Ghana and exploring Ghanaian sites and history, first with her family but increasingly on her own with the help of technology and friends.

Young people’s experiences of extraordinary everydayness in Ghana had a lasting effect once they were back in Belgium. Trips to the origin country helped shape their sense of self and their affective engagements to Ghana. Sometimes young people were worried before first visiting Ghana. They worried, for example, that they might have a different mentality from Ghanaians in Ghana. Nana said: ‘I was scared when I was going to Ghana. But when I got there, things changed. [...] I just relaxed.’ The trip put Nana’s mind at ease and showed her that while people might sometimes ‘bother you’ because you act differently, you still belong: ‘With family, you feel at home. Places you go, you feel at home.’ In other instances, sociality experienced in Ghana offered her the opportunity to re-evaluate how life should be lived:

At least in Ghana, I will live life. Just have fun outside of work. And you can have it in Ghana. There is stuff that happens here [in Belgium] but I think it’s boring, whereas in Ghana you can get into quite a lot of interesting activities. It’s also a different vibe: the sun, enjoying good life, working but then it also it feels like I’m on holiday. [...] That’s the kind of life I want to have.
Trips to Ghana thus reinforced young people’s desires to engage with Ghana in the long term, often shaping their mobility aspirations and contributing to transnational lifestyles. Comparing herself in Ghana and Belgium, Rebecca explained why she enjoys being in Ghana so much and why she will continue to make trips in the future:

I am also more relaxed in Ghana. I don’t know, I just feel at home. I think ‘I am here to enjoy’ and I don’t stress myself over other people. Whereas here [in Belgium] I think ‘I have to pay attention, otherwise [people] will make a comment.’

Some young people plan to live in Ghana in the future, and ICTs provide an important tool to build up connections over time. Nana commented on the role social media had played in putting her plans into action:

I realized how important it is to have a network. Because if I should move back today, without a network, I would be so alone somehow. It would take me some time to find good people to hang out or share ideas with. But having that opportunity, using social media to tap into that, now I have a lot of people. If I go today, I know that I’m not gonna be alone. That I could ask for advice how to register my company, because they are there and they have this information. And you can trust them more because you built up a good relationship along the years.

Impressions of visits to Ghana can be long lasting even if transnational peer relationships are not. When I was in Ghana for the first time in June 2019, I spent time with Ama’s boyfriend Isaac and witnessed how she broke up with him from Belgium and blocked him on all social media platforms. Half a year later, I accompanied Ama during one of her visits to Ghana. She had a new boyfriend, Prince, whom she had met through a big WhatsApp group several years earlier. While their relationship also ended not long after Ama returned to Belgium, Ama referred to both Isaac and Prince when reflecting on her favourite moments in Ghana afterwards. For example, after her third trip to Ghana, Ama showed me videos of a BBQ with Prince, some friends and people from the neighbourhood and explained that it had been one of the nicest days.

Longevity of transnational relationships was thus not a prerequisite for experiences to be meaningful. The durability of relationships was in fact irrelevant, as both long lasting and ephemeral contacts contributed to affective experiences in Ghana that made young people feel connected. Brief encounters are meaningful and have a significant effect on migrants’ lives (c.f. Gladkova & Mazzucato, 2017; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2021). But they are usually neglected in transnational migration research. Previous research tends to foreground long lasting relationships, such as parent–child relationships and marriage and kinships ties (Cole & Groes, 2016), and the way that digital media helps to maintain these relationships across borders (Baldassar, 2016). Yet we have seen that even though Ama’s romantic relationships ended shortly after her second and third trip to Ghana, they still provided emotionality and connection, security and independence from her family during her stay in Ghana.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored the affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth with their country of origin as mediated by their digital media use and physical mobility. In doing so, I have investigated the mobility patterns of migrant youth in their own right and made several contributions to transnational migration studies. Conceptually, I have used the concept of extraordinary everydayness, developed in the MO-TRAYL project, to describe experiences of a new environment and previously unknown people that feel simultaneously extraordinary and very much ordinary or everyday. Extraordinary everydayness is made possible through the ubiquity and affordances of ICTs, used by young people to connect to unknown peers and navigate unfamiliar space. Applying this concept to the analysis of young people’s country-of-origin visits has enabled me to build on previous work on the intersections of youth mobility,
temporality and emotions (Cheung Judge et al., 2020; Mazzucato, 2015; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2018), and to make several theoretical contributions.

First, young people use digital media to forge their own ties to the country of origin and do not merely continue parental ties as much literature suggests they do (e.g., Haikkola, 2011; Wessendorf, 2007). This article has explored transnational relationships beyond the family sphere, such as friendships and romantic relationships, that take centre stage in this phase of young people’s lives. I have highlighted how digital media serve as a tool for young people’s agency and enable them to form affective connections before and during visits. Social media platforms and location-based apps spark sociality, confidence and independence.

Second, online peer relationships do not remain virtual but become part of young people’s affective offline experiences during visits to the country of origin. Previous research has looked separately at either the emotionality of visits (e.g., Baldassar, 2008; Skrbiš, 2008) or at how relationships are maintained from a distance through digital media (e.g., Madianou & Miller, 2011). This article aimed to show how mobility, the digital and affect become entangled and together contribute to young people’s connections to the origin country. The embodied nature of mobility and value of physical co-presence with peers further highlights the importance of country-of-origin visits for young people’s affective engagements.

Third, the mobility trajectory approach used in this article advances research on the intersection of temporality and mobility in several ways. By contextualizing visits in relation to earlier trips, I was able to notice changes over time and space (see also Mazzucato, 2015). Transnational peer relationships become more prevalent as young people grow older and are linked to themes of exploration, confidence and independence from family. My trajectory approach also brought to the fore ephemeral encounters through which young people create affective connections. Ephemeral relationships have significant impact on migrants’ lives (Gladkova & Mazzucato, 2017; van Geel & Mazzucato, 2021) in addition to long lasting bonds, such as kinships ties, that have been the focus in transnational migration research. Furthermore, a trajectory approach emphasizes the temporality evident in the practices before, during and after country-of-origin visits through which young people fashion extraordinary everydayness. Finally, foregrounding young people’s mobility trajectories, rather than focusing on whether they are first- or second-generation migrants, illustrates how their affective engagement with the origin country is a result of their visits and digital media use rather than their place of birth.

A mobility trajectory approach also has methodological implications for the study of transnational youth. While studies on second-generation returns have shown that visits to the country of origin are emotional events and impact feelings of belonging (e.g., Gardner & Mand, 2012; King et al., 2011), the methodology employed by these studies cannot detect everyday emotions because it investigated mobility from a distance by relying on interview data collected in the country of residence. By contrast, a multi-sited ethnographic approach provides real-time insights and enables a focus on embodied experiences (Mazzucato, 2009) that contribute to our understanding of young people’s social embeddedness. Multi-sited fieldwork enables the researcher ‘to capture smaller transactions or events which may otherwise have been forgotten, and to establish linkages which respondents themselves may not have been aware of’ (Mazzucato, 2009, p. 224). For this article, it allowed me to understand better the taken-for-granted use of technology and social media by participants. Researching how mobility unfolds over time, by accompanying young people on trips and interviewing them afterwards, further allowed me to observe how some relationships rupture and others flourish.

The limitations of this study suggest fruitful avenues for future research. First, all participants who travelled to Ghana during my fieldwork were female, yet research on affect indicates that women are more likely to engage in emotional work across borders (Cole & Groes, 2016). It would be instructive to explore how gender shapes young people’s affective engagement with the origin country. Second, my focus was on the experiences of young people living in Belgium. Since studies have emphasized the bi-directionality of transnational ties (Mazzucato, 2011), future research could look into how relationships created through digital media are experienced by transnational peers in Ghana. Third, this study is, to my knowledge, the first to describe affective experiences with ‘strangers’ in a transnational social field. Future research could explore what shapes these new forms of sociality, what role transnational power dynamics play and whether contact with transnational peers intensifies around visits.
Overall, the findings of this article show that young people are active agents in forging their own engagements with the country of origin. By considering their mobility trajectories and their use of technology, this article has helped provide a more detailed understanding of the various forms of affective experiences young people build over time and space through extraordinary everydayness experienced in the origin country.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTE
1 Valentina Mazzucato and I will further expand on the concept of ‘extraordinary everydayness’ in a forthcoming publication.

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