The Intimate Lives of Left-Behind Young Adults in the Philippines: Social Media, Gendered Intimacies, and Transnational Parenting

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ABSTRACT
Familial and intimate relationships at a distance are reconstituted in a multitude of ways, as the proliferation of social media and communication technologies afford the scaling up of privacy and publicness, also blurring the lines between presence and absence in transnational space. Based on a longitudinal and mixed method research on the impact of migration on Filipino left-behind young adult children (n = 28) and their carers (n = 28), we seek to examine the mediation of transnational parenting and how it shapes the ways left-behind sons and daughters (aged 17-19 years old) navigate heteronormative ideals of marriage and familyhood.

Introduction

The rise of communication technologies has purportedly reconstituted social relationships into intensive ‘always on’ connections from which it is harder to disconnect and be absent. Empirical studies on the transnational family have established that symbolic and material ties of familyhood continue to endure and stretch across space and time. This suggests a re-consideration of Bauman’s (2013) argument that we are in the midst of an era characterized by the liquidity and fragility of human bonds. Baldassar et al. (2020), for example, observe that transnational families reproduce similar ways of fulfilling caregiving and homemaking roles and obligations that usually take place in proximate settings, albeit through digitally mediated virtual co-presence. In this light, they propose applying the concept of ‘digital kinning’, whereby the rituals and routines of giving and receiving care are translated, delivered, and exchanged through various forms of digital technologies. However, scholars have also noted that these technologies are not neutral tools that enable or disable connections and relationships, but are imbricated in the “power geometries of time-space compression” (Massey 1994, p. 149).

This paper is interested in uncovering and mapping out how the ‘power geometries’ of communication technologies manifest in the transnational household. In particular, we seek to examine the changes and shifts in parenting dynamics and care relationships between parents and their young adult children in transnational families, and the role that communication technologies play in their relationships. Madianou and Miller (2013) highlight that when we choose amongst the plethora of communication technologies available, we are not only choosing the means of communication; instead, implicated in our decision are moral choices that (de)activate the emotional and social affordances of specific types of technologies. Hence, particularly for...
the transnational family where relationships and identities are heavily intertwined with digital technologies, it is important to attend to the mutually constitutive relationship between communication technologies and the transnational family. We are particularly interested in analyzing how the specific affordances of communication technologies are deployed by both parents and young adult children, and the heteronormative and cultural norms that undergird specific digital kinning practices that arise within the household.

In the case of Southeast Asia, the presence of transnational families (in which one or more members of the nuclear family live across national borders) has become increasingly prevalent, if not commonplace. The lure of gaining socio-economic mobility through overseas employment has tempted many fathers, mothers, daughters and sons to leave their families in the homeland for work opportunities overseas. As labor migration pulls more families spatially and temporally apart, the role of communication technologies become critical to the symbolic and material ‘doing’ of family across borders (Acedera & Yeoh, 2019; Madianou, 2016; Peng and Wong, 2013). As families go transnational, traditional gender roles and identities become more challenging to fulfill, as the family shifts and expands to accommodate different changes brought about by migration. The burgeoning scholarship has been mostly centered on parents who move and the accompanying moral panics surrounding whether parenting obligations and duties can be truly fulfilled virtually and transnationally (Chib et al., 2014; Parreñas, 2008; Poeze, 2019). Although some scholarly interest has shifted to left-behind family members, more work is needed to attend to the degrees of agency of those who stay behind in understanding mobility regimes (Fortier et al., 2003). Studies that avoid framing the experience of left-behind children in terms of stasis have emerged in recent years, although the tendency is still to see these children as the recipients of unidirectional caregiving (for exceptions, see Parreñas, 2005; Lam and Yeoh, 2019). The focus on left-behind children's experiences is crucial in understanding how gendered identities and heteronormative ideals circulate (perhaps in reified or even new forms) in the transnational family. Adult policing and regulation of children's behavior is often motivated by a strong imperative to protect children's innocence in compliance to cultural ideals of the moral, gendered, and sexual self (Allen 2005; Holloway and Valentine 2004). This has purportedly intensified in the age of the Internet and digital technologies, as adults deploy different means of digital surveillance on children in the guise of protection and care (Albury, 2017; Steeves, 2012).

**Literature review**

**Online, offline, and mediated spatio-temporalities**

As ‘cyberspace’ is deemed to be disembodied and disconnected from material space, it is sometimes argued that engagement in this ethereal space also disentangles one from the burden of embodiment and visible markers, such as race, gender, and class (Cairncross, 1997). On the other hand, pessimistic and dystopian discourses have argued that instead of a democratic and liberal space, the rapid advancement of communication technologies has served to widen pre-existing gaps in age, gender, race and class through the ‘digital divide’ (Graham, 2013; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). This paper avoids falling into the trap of such binary divides. We instead privilege the theory of mediation (Silverstone, 2005), in which we acknowledge the mutually constitutive relationship between the ‘online’ space of communication technologies and the ‘offline’ space of social relationships. The ‘saturation’ of our everyday lives with electronic and communication media makes it ‘difficult to tell a story of space without also telling a story of the media, and vice versa’ (Couldry and McCarthy, 2004, p. 1).

This mutual constitution of the space of communication technologies and everyday life is reflected in empirical studies showing how intimate relationships and gendered subjectivities are shaped through social media. The literature on gender and communication technologies has forwarded both utopian and dystopian views on how these technologies shape our social relations. On the one hand, much has been written on how communication technologies provide
creative spaces to circumnavigate stringent heteronormative identities and ideologies by offering a reprieve from the gendered and moral surveillance of communities (Costa, 2016; Herrera, 2014; Jyrkiäinen, 2016). Meanwhile, other scholars working in the context of the feminization of migration argue that the affordances of these technologies have also served to reify heteronormative patriarchal ideologies that entrap migrant women into intensified roles of what it means to be sacrificial and ideal migrant mothers (Parreñas, 2005; Madianou and Miller, 2011).

Scholars using a gendered lens in understanding migration processes have underlined the more contentious gender negotiations migrants and their families experience in the transnational space. Studies focusing on the gender negotiations of children and adolescents in transnational families highlight how the heteronormative ideologies and values of the homeland do not simply disappear once one migrates to a new country. Somerville’s (2019) work on second-generation South Asian young adults in Canada elucidates on the double standards daughters and sons experience in the socialization of gender expectations and roles. Intergenerational conflicts arise between parents and children, but daughters were seen to be under more stringent social surveillance compared to sons. Daughters’ virtue and purity were often linked to the family’s reputation and honor (Somerville 2019; Zaidi et al. 2014). Lalonde et al.’s (2004) quantitative study on second generation South Asians in Canada highlights how expectations and practices for seeking traditional partners remain strongly South Asian for second-generation sons and daughters. There is also greater pressure for daughters to conform to the traditional expectations of their parents and communities compared to sons. Despite migration, the social pressure to conform remains strong not only through the family and communities’ surveillance, but also due to the internalization of these gender expectations by the individuals themselves. More importantly, there is greater surveillance and control of women’s adherence to these prescribed gender roles and identities than for men.

More recent work on gender, migration and communication technologies suggests that ICT-mediated space cannot be read through a purely emancipatory or reifying lens, and instead work should be done on how the digital space facilitates more complex gender identity negotiation involving multiple actors with different subject positions (Acedera and Yeoh 2018; Graham et al., 2012). Communication technologies are neither tools of entrapment or liberation, but instead create a malleable online space where gendered identities and gender relations are negotiated among multiple actors and in multidirectional ways. This perspective on ICT-mediated space accords with Baldassar et. al’s (2020) conceptualization of ‘digital kinning’, which posit that ‘digital media provide a means of materializing that which is not immediately within reach’ especially in the context of familial obligations and emotional ties within a complex, transnationally spanning web of caregiving. Further nuancing transnational caregiving, other empirical work have pointed to the crucial role of proximate kin or non-kin carers in the maintenance and reconstitution of the transnational family. The concepts of the ‘care triangle’ (Graham et al., 2012) and ‘kinwork’ (Di Leandro, 1987, 442 cited in Poeze, Dankyi and Mazzucato, 2017, 113) are important in excavating the complex multidirectional and asymmetrical flow of care, intimacy, and power involving proximate carers, migrant parents, and children. Francisco-Menchavez’s work (2018, p. 604) further highlights the ‘uneven exchanges of care work’ (p. 604) within the transnational family. She deploys the concept of sukli (translated as ‘monetary change given after paying for goods’) to understand how left-behind children attempt to repay migrant parents’ sacrifices. The exchange is not with money or material goods, but with affective performances of being good sons and daughters (mainly displayed through children’s acts of showing academic report cards via communication technologies). These studies highlight how transnational kinwork and familyhood in the digital space is not completely detached from the normative values and ideologies that shape the family in the offline world.

Other works on the impact of social media are quick to point out that although social relationships are entwined with digital space, the mediated space of social media and communication technologies also have their specific affordances that are different from what is enabled offline. The blurring of private and public lives and the intensified contact in digital space have raised
moral and ethical debates on the deployment of digital surveillance on citizens and users. In the context of a long-running public anxiety that the Internet poses ‘an unmanageable threat to children’s safety’ (Livingstone, 2009, p. 151), the use of digital media to watch young children’s activities has gained ground. The argument for surveillance over children's activities online is rooted in the view that unlike offline physical spaces where parents can intervene, monitor, regulate and yet as a means of ‘protecting’ children from various dangers, the unmitigated access of children to the internet puts them out of reach of parental protection (Albury, 2017; Marx and Steeves, 2010). Surveillance of children's digital activity – as a form of ‘protecting’ children's ‘innocence’ from malicious content and communication on the internet (cybersex, bullying, violence, exposure to inappropriate sexual contents and dangerous sexual predators) – has in fact been co-opted into a narrative of ‘loving and responsible parenting’ (Steeves, 2012, p. 356).

In the main, the literature points to the tricky tension of parents’ use of digital surveillance and control as a protective stance, while encroaching on children’s autonomy, privacy, and rights. While the compulsion of moral guardians to control and regulate children's behaviors has existed long before the digital revolution, what is unique now is how the blurring of private and public spaces through digital technologies has further intensified this moral gaze.

Against the moral panic of losing privacy and power in the digital age, many studies veer away from technologically deterministic conceptualizations of a digital panopticon and instead foreground users’ agency in different contexts. Livingstone and Bober (2003) argue that the attraction of the internet for young people is strongly driven by how the online space of the internet allows young children to ‘experiment’ and explore activities and identities that would otherwise be impossible to enact under the gaze of parents and guardians in their physical and face-to-face engagements. Child and Westermann’s (2013) study of parental Facebook friend requests and children's negotiations of privacy and trust highlights that the reaction of children to their parents' Facebook friend requests (from accepting, rejecting, or altering their privacy and content settings) often reflects the preexisting levels of trust and open communication between parent and child in the household. Hence, the online social media habits of parents and children are tethered to their offline experiences of trust in everyday relationships.

In summary, these studies highlight the complex and mutually constitutive relationships of the offline, online, and mediated spatio-temporalities. In our exploration of ‘digital kinning’ and transnational familyhood, we wish to analyze the nuances of these distinct yet intertwined spatio-temporalities and the ways in which the affordances and normative values of each space contribute to the reshaping of young adults’ intimate lives and gendered identities. Mainly, we ask, how do young adult left-behind children negotiate their intimate relationships and gendered identities as they engage with their migrant parents and proximate carers in the offline, online, and mediated spatio-temporalities? We aim to answer this question in two ways. First, we analyze how the sense of gendered and intimate selves are shaped by the prolonged migration of one or both parents. Next, we explore ‘digital kinning’ processes in terms of the intimate and familial aspirations of young adult children in migrant families. Before delving into our substantive arguments, we briefly discuss the key methodological route to data-gathering.

**Methods**

This paper is based on the findings of a mixed methods\(^1\) longitudinal study on left-behind children and carers in transnational families. The subset of the data we are using here is based on the qualitative fieldwork in the Laguna Province of the Philippines conducted in 2016-2017. Given our interest in youth negotiations of gendered ideologies and intimacies, we focused on households containing young adults, conducting paired interviews with both the responsible adult carers (\(n = 28\)) and the young adult children aged 17-19 years old (\(n = 28\)). The young adult children dataset was chosen, as we found that with increasing exposure to and opportunities for romantic and intimate relationships beyond the family sphere in this age group, contestations and negotiations of gendered intimate selves with migrant parents and proximate carers become
a significant dimension of the transition to adulthood. Bearing in mind that family dynamics in the Philippines often go beyond the nuclear family to include extended family members such as grandparents, siblings, aunts and cousins, we designed our sampling strategy to capture how care is manifested and shaped within the relationship among migrant parents, proximate carers (nuclear or extended family members) and left-behind children. The addition of proximate carers to the sample is an important response to the prevailing focus on migrants and their children, and the lack of empirical studies that considered other significant carers in the transnational family. Relying on self-ascription to determine who played the role of main carer in the household, we managed to capture a variety of carers with different relationships to the children, including fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents and even paid carers.

Qualitative paired interviews were conducted in the respective households of the respondents. The semi-structured interviews covered a broad theme of topics that aimed to achieve a holistic view of the everyday lives of each household. This ranged from migration history, remittances, and finances to dreams, future aspirations, and relationships. The team of interviewers were Filipino females in their mid-20s to mid-40s. Although not necessarily planned, we noted that camaraderie was easier to develop when younger researchers were interviewing the younger segment of the sample. Similarly, it was easier to find common ground when carers were being interviewed by the researchers who were closer to their age group. For each household, a pair of interviewers conducted parallel and simultaneous interviews, where one is assigned to the responsible adult carer while the other interviewed the young adult in a different area of the house that is out of earshot of the other respondent. This strategy was employed to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the interviews, especially when talking about subjects that may be deemed sensitive to either respondent in the dyad. This paired interview strategy was especially useful in providing both respondents a safe space to discuss issues that they do not want the other party to know, including romantic relationships, sex, and conflicts that they may have. The interviews were conducted in Taglish (a mix of Filipino and English) and later on translated to English. The transcripts were anonymised then thematically coded using the NVivo software.

With regard to communication technologies, we employed a bottom-up and open-ended approach, letting the respondents lead us to what particular social media and communication technologies they preferred to use and in which ways. We then follow up by probing further whether they know of or have also used other modes of communication. In the case of the Philippines, Facebook and Facebook Messenger came up as the preferred, if not main, technology with which the migrants and the left-behind family members communicated most frequently. Although some were familiar with Whatsapp, Viber and other existing social media applications, these were rarely used or, as in the case of Skype, slowly replaced by Facebook's messaging and video chat applications. Interestingly, the reason cited for Facebook being the preferred mode of communication was that it was the social media application that most of their social networks (i.e. friends, classmates and other relatives) widely used. Hence, it served as a common platform that makes it easier to connect to a wider set of people, and was also seen as a more dependable means of connecting.

**Findings**

**Mobile phone ownership and increasing use of polymedia**

Similar to many studies on the communication patterns within transnational families, our data confirm that despite the temporal and spatial distance, transnational communication remains strong and constant (Acedera, Yeoh, and Asis 2018; Cabalquinto 2018). As left-behind members of transnational families, both the adult carers and young adult respondents relied on different social media applications (like video calls and chats over Skype, Facebook Messenger and Whatsapp), layered with more traditional forms of communication (such as phone calls via landlines and mobile phones and SMS). Our data show that more than half of our respondents...
were relying on social media and internet-based applications as the main form of communication (62.9% of Responsible Adult Carers and 68.2% of Young Adult Children). Meanwhile, calls via landlines, which are considered as the more traditional form of communication relied on by migrant families, is at the lowest (3% of Responsible Adult Carers and 2% of Young Adult Children). This affirms the ubiquitous use of ‘polymedia’ (Madianou and Miller, 2013), where each family member use and layer different communication technologies to create the media environment that suits their communication needs.

With the rising dependence on social media and internet-based applications in recent years, access to ICTs has become more widespread. As long as one has internet connectivity, communication can be had for a small cost or even for free. This may explain the shift to a more everyday frequency of communication, as migrants and the left-behind family members are no longer tied to making expensive long-distance phone calls via prepaid cards like before (Cabalquinto 2018; Vertovec, 2004). Our data show that, pertinently for young adult children, most were communicating with their migrant parents daily (41%), while only a small group was communicating once a week (13%).

As young adults, the vast majority (96.8%) had access to their own mobile phones, while the remainder mainly had access to mobile phones through their adult carers who owned them. Mobile phone ownership is hence in part a function of becoming responsible ‘adults-in-the-making’. For the majority, young adult respondents are able to initiate communication with their migrant parents through their own devices. This frequent and constant access opens up opportunities for creating what Madianou (2016) calls ‘ambient co-presence’, which is the intensified awareness of distant others through communication technologies. In the next section, we will look deeper into how the use of ‘polymedia’ and the increased frequency of communication with migrant parents shape the young adult children’s gendered identities from afar.

The mediated and proximate gaze on young adult children’s gendered intimate lives

Similar to Graham et al.’s (2012) findings about the multi-directionality of care flows within the transnational family, this study also found evidence of the ‘care triangle’ comprising (inter) relational care practices between migrants, proximate carers, and left-behind young adult children. However, beyond this observation, the centrality of communication technologies in negotiating and re-organising care within the transnational family in our study also reminded us strongly of Baldassar et al.’s (2020) notion of ‘digital kinning’. In their conceptualization of ‘digital kinning’, distant care is not only translated through constant communication with family members in the homeland, but this care is also materialized through proximate carers who are in constant liaison with migrants about the logistical and material rearrangement of care.

This led us to focus specifically on how the ‘moral gaze’, as an aspect of pastoral care and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975 [2012]), is reorganized in transnational families through ‘digital kinning’. A key theme was the overlapping nature of care dynamics, as expressed in how migrants and their left-behind family members negotiated ‘seeing’ and ‘watching over’ the family’s welfare both through physical seeing (i.e. via proximate presence or virtual sight) and seeing by proxy (i.e. by asking proximate carers) which we illustrate below.

In Emerson’s (19 years old) family, while his left-behind mother was engaged in full-time care of the children in the homeland, his migrant father was equally ‘present’. Frequent communication and intensive video communication with Emerson’s migrant father in Qatar created a panoptic ‘moral gaze’ over the family, particularly the children. Emerson’s mother, Michelle (40 years old) shared how her husband kept track of the children’s whereabouts and activities through constant checking via Facebook chats and video calls. She explained that it was precisely because he was far away from home and ‘cannot see’ his children that the migrant father required stricter and more intensive measures to be in place as an assurance that the family and children would be kept safe despite his absence:
[Their father] is strict because he is not here and he cannot see, so I understand why he is strict. This kid of mine, when he gets home during High School, his curfew is at 6 pm...by six he has to be home. When they got older, in college, by seven [pm] they should be home. [The family] had to adjust [to these rules]. My husband doesn't like it when his kids come home late. Especially, when we women, don't have any company here.

The intertwined dynamics between the mediated and proximate gaze becomes particularly complicated in the arena of regulating and policing children's intimate lives. In their late teens, young adult children are usually considered old enough to have some independence, but still too young to be completely independent and have full autonomy over their own conduct and relationships. As a transitional zone ridden with possibilities and precarities, early young adulthood is often subject to a more intense parental 'gaze' operating as an apparatus of discipline and regulation. Coordination between migrant parent and left-behind carer becomes significant in ensuring that surveillance is tightly trained upon young adult children so that they remain within the boundaries of social norms in how they conduct their intimate and romantic lives. Our data further shows a gendered pattern in how the moral gaze is used to discipline young adult sons and daughters.

**The moral gaze on sons**

In terms of developing romantic relationships, young adult sons like Emerson, were openly allowed, even expected, to form romantic relationships with suitable girlfriends. Having interest in females was seen to be a part of young adult males’ transition to adulthood, and a testament to their masculinity. In the Philippines’ heteronormative gendered discourse and practice of romance and intimacy, it is expected for men to pursue women through the traditional practice of *panliligaw* or courting. The older and more traditional practice of *panliligaw* consisted of male suitors showing their interest through a consistent display of devotion and loyalty through acts of service to the women concerned and their family. These acts ranged from fetching water, chopping wood, serenading women with songs (*harana* in Tagalog) and flowers, to meeting the parents. In essence, these actions symbolically prove the purity of intent and devotion of the men to the women. In modern times, *panliligaw* does not necessarily include acts of physical service, but still ideally involves showing devotion and respect by visiting and meeting the parents, constant communication through text and calls, and bringing gifts and flowers. In the more traditional form of courting, there is a publicness involved in displaying one’s devotion to the pursued female. Usually, this is a means of gaining the elders’ approval of the relationship. This ritual of *panliligaw* influences the kinds of moral gaze trained on sons and daughters, where it is expected for males to be the ‘active pursuer’ and females to be the ‘passive pursued’. Still, regardless of gender, sex before marriage is seen as taboo for both young sons and daughters.

More modern forms of courting through texting and online interactions, allows young lovers to circumnavigate the stage of having to gain parents’ approval, as it is conducted mostly in private chats and calls. Hence here, courting becomes an act of independence during the initial pursuing stage, as it is conducted more on the private and intimate level between the potential lovers. The privacy afforded by this kind of courting is strategic especially in situations when parents are against their children getting into romantic relationships. It must be said that once the romantic relationship has been established, and parental approval gained, the online displays of intimacy (such as tagging in pictures, comments, and other visible online activities) are enacted as a means of embedding the relationship deeper within the family and community. In this sense, there is a mutual constitution of the deepening of romantic relationships, during the later stages, in both online and offline activities. This online presence serves to further complement the meaningfulness and authenticity of the relationships offline. It is expected that a male suitor will only court one female, while the female can accept the attention of multiple male suitors. This is true for both online and offline intimate interactions.

In Emerson’s case, despite his migrant father being strict with curfew hours, he is openly allowed to pursue his romantic relationship with his girlfriend. His mother-carer, Michelle,
expresses confidence that Emerson would not veer away from family values and teachings, as he is transparent with his parents on social media. She makes it a point to befriend her children on Facebook to ensure there is ‘no surprise at all’:

[I’m friends with my] kids in Facebook. [I see] where they go. No, my kids have no secrets. And we’re tagged in all [the photos]. They tag us. For instance, if they go out, we know where [they went]...so there’s really no surprise at all.

However, this ‘mediated moral gaze’ afforded by seeing her children’s activities and friends on Facebook is also complemented by physical vigilance and a proximate moral gaze. Michelle insists that her son and his girlfriend spend time in the family home under her watchful eye:

If you suffocate them or if you just let them be, two things will possibly happen, they can marry young or not finish school. I tell them that they can just hang out here. I prefer that I see them. And the girlfriend... they respect each other. They don’t go to the room...They don’t go there alone. Here, in our bedroom, they’re always here, we can hang out together here, but not just the two of them alone. They don’t lock the door.

Parental control of sons’ intimate lives is hence rooted in the notion that it is normal and healthy for young males to engage in the rituals and practice of panliligaw as part of the transition to adult masculinity. Yet, parents are careful of unwanted pregnancies, especially when young adult sons are still finishing up their degrees. This dynamic is hence carefully calibrated to allow sons to have romantic relationships and support for their romantic pursuits, while depending on both mediated and proximate surveillance to ensure that they do not cross the line set for them. Similar to Francisco-Menchavez’s study (2018), digital technologies and its affordances like Facebook ‘tagging’ have become reconstituted to accommodate Filipino parent-children dynamics and create new practices in the home. In this case, filial piety is performed by displaying behaviors of being ‘ideal’ and ‘good’ children in their online display of their activities through ‘tagging’ their parents. By ‘tagging’ parents and carers, children signal that there is nothing to hide, and that their activities outside of the home are still in line with the values and ideals underpinning the family.

The moral gaze on daughters

It was not a surprising finding that for the young adult daughters in our sample, having romantic relationships was neither encouraged nor treated with open latitude as it was for the young adult sons. While it was expected that young adult daughters would have suitors, being in a dating relationship with boyfriends was treated by both migrants and proximate carers with distrust and fear. This is related to the view that females carry the main burden and have the most to lose in cases of unwanted pregnancy. Having sex and being pregnant at a young age was seen to be a huge factor that would be likely to ruin the ‘good future’ of daughters on the cusp of adulthood. What is interesting is that this creates a complicated panoply of both mediated and proximate supervisory measures over daughters, involving complicity and secrets within the web of care linking migrant parents, proximate carers and left-behind daughters.

In the case of Jasmine (18 year old), her relationship status with her current boyfriend, Ralph, was kept a secret from her migrant father with her left-behind mother-carer’s help. When asked whether her father knew about her relationship with Ralph, Jasmine answered:

Not yet. My dad knows that Ralph is just a suitor. I... My mom didn’t tell dad. [I didn’t tell him that we are dating.] (laughs) I think my dad will get angry because he knew [that I had] a boyfriend [last time], so he says to me, “You must not have a boyfriend.”

As the proximate carer, Jasmine’s mother Sandra (42 years old) felt the need to go behind her migrant husband’s back and support Jasmine in cultivating romantic relationships. Sandra explained that she wanted Jasmine to be courted and pursued at the privacy of their home rather than in
public places. Not unlike Michelle (in Emerson's case), she reasoned that rather than forbidding Jasmine from having a relationship, being open with her daughter would build trust and enable her to exercise proximate supervision on her daughter's romantic relationships. However, in the case of daughters, there were further considerations. Sandra feared that if she forbade her daughter from being in a romantic relationship, her daughter would not only resort to hiding the relationship but would be the subject of *panliligaw* and its potential excesses on the streets:

I said [to Jasmine], if there is someone who wants to pursue you, it should be done here at home. I don't want to see you out in the streets. Of course, it is better that my daughter is being courted inside our house. In this age, you will just see them out in the streets making out. I don't want that to happen to my daughter. If he is decided on courting you, ask him to come to our house.

While the ritual of *panliligaw* affirms young adult masculinity as earlier discussed, public displays of intimate courting behavior under the public gaze may cast aspersions on young adult women's morals and decency and bring disgrace to their parents for not being able to give guidance to their daughters. In this sense, daughters' moral behavior is subject to greater public scrutiny than sons', making it all the more important that female intimate lives are not only kept under supervision, but within the private confines of the home.

Sandra's good intentions to allow Jasmine to conduct a romantic relationship at home under her supervisory gaze while keeping up the good image of their family and their daughter in the public sphere backfired when the migrant father came home on vacation and found out about the relationship. Jasmine said:

He got angry. He got angry [with] me and my mum [when he found out] from other people, and not from us.

In part, the tensions around Jasmine's intimate relationships stemmed from an amplification of the difference between the proximate and distant gaze. In strategies of digital kinning, distant care is partly virtual and partly materialized through proximate carers. When Sandra prioritized her own relationship with her daughter in order to enact her role as proximate carer and deliberately kept the migrant father out of the loop, the distant carer's role is diminished as the distance becomes amplified. In the politics of digital kinning, those in proximity may be seen to be more enabled to provide the appropriate care and supervision afforded by physical nearness while distant carers – despite the enablement of ICTs – may feel thwarted in exercising control from afar without the collaboration of proximate carers. As Sandra observed of her migrant husband:

He was shocked when [he found out about Jasmine's boyfriend] and was being introduced to him…Oh…Her daddy's feelings got hurt then.

For left-behind sons with fathers as carers, the young adult sons report developing a greater degree of closeness with fathers, in a way that allows fathers to share stories and lessons about women and relationships. Here, it is interesting to note that compared to left-behind daughters, there is less of a protective and prohibitive stance when it comes to courting and dating for sons. Hence, when sons keep their romantic lives a secret, it is not so much because the relationship is forbidden but more a consequence of desiring privacy. James (19 years old) shared how his left-behind father (his proximate carer) kept regaling James with stories about his own mischievousness with women when his father was young while encouraging James to introduce a girlfriend to the family:

[When my father and myself drink together, we talk.] Nothing [in particular], [just] about his mischievousness in the past. Like women that he used to woo. He said he had many girlfriends, but it doesn't seem believable. My dad once told me, "You're already 19 but you haven't brought a girl to introduce to us." I said, [I'll introduce someone] when I am about to get married. I brought a girl home once, during my grandmother's wake. I said, "Pa, my girlfriend." He said, "There! You finally brought [a girl]."
In Filipino society where sex and physical intimacy outside marriage are seen to be taboo, the gendered intimate lives of young adults living in migrant families are policed and watched through the superimposition of both the mediated and proximate gaze. While sons’ demonstration of *panliligaw* is considered a mark of the transition to adult masculinity, daughters’ moral, sexual, and intimate lives need to be protected not only to avert transgressions such as unplanned pregnancies, but also to avoid public censure. Digital kinning is a powerful mechanism that operates by aligning the distant and proximate gaze in exerting control over young adult lives. At the same time, disjunctures between migrant parents and left-behind carers may also lead to a loss of control on the part of the former, particularly when their moral policing over social media and communication technologies fails to physically rein in their children’s unruly intimacies. In the next section, we turn to how young adult children navigate the overarching ‘moral gaze’ over their romantic intimate lives through various strategies of regulating distance away from the gaze.

*Circumnavigating the moral gaze*

Averting the conjoined mediated and proximate moral gaze is seen to be doubly hard as young adult children’s lives are inextricable from social media applications, mainly Facebook, as the primary means of keeping connected to their friends group as well as their migrant parents. Jeremy (19 years old) shared how important Facebook is for daily communication with his siblings and migrant mother, but also highlighted the other relationships he fostered on Facebook at the same time:

> [Everyday] via chat, [Facebook] Messenger. [I chat] with many others [aside from my mom]. Mostly girls.

This intertwining of everyday lives with Facebook enables the amplification of the moral gaze, reducing physical distance through virtual presence online. As Facebook enables what Miller et al. (2016) calls as a ‘scalable sociality’, that is, one-to-many, what young adult children post on social media can be viewed by their migrant parents and carers if they do not put any privacy restrictions on particular posts. For example, although Kathleen (18 years old) avoided telling her migrant mother about her boyfriend, her mother soon learned about it through Kathleen’s own Facebook posts:

> [I feel she knows I have a boyfriend because] she saw a post on Facebook. I was so brazen at the time. [I posted] then there were suddenly so many [comments]...She said that I should study first, this and that... She asked me before but I didn’t have a boyfriend then [so I never got to tell her about this new one]. She just found out because of what I posted.

In Kathleen’s case, these public Facebook comments was akin to her mother exposing her transgressions in full view of Kathleen’s social circle—her friends and other family members who are on Facebook—as a form of disciplining her through the affective structure of shame.

The affordances of social media that enable the moral gaze is however not unilateral, and young adult respondents also engaged in strategies to resist the gaze. Jude (19 years old) talked about how he navigated being Facebook friends with his parents (migrant father and left-behind mother) and family members, while also keeping his social activities hidden:

> Yes, I’m careful [with what I post on Facebook since I’m friends with my family]. Like when we go gimpicking. Drinking, yes, [I don’t post those]. I tell [also tell my friends] not to [tag me in photos], yes. I would be reprimanded.

Here, unlike in Emerson’s case, although Jude was friends with his parents and family members (a sign of trust and openness to building a transparent relationship), he strategically curates a pristine image of himself by avoiding being ‘tagged’ and linked to vices like drinking and partying. Even in the online space of Facebook, the dynamics of obtaining parental approval and ‘saving face’ for the whole family is still at work, and may be more intensely so, as a single update immediately comes under the scrutiny of many family members and relatives near and far.
In other cases, an alliance with distant parents allows young adults to gain symbolic approval from afar to pursue romantic liaisons without being strongly bounded to the physical and proximate gaze of carers in the home. Such is the case of Kathy (18 years old), who has been keeping her romantic relationship a secret from her grandmother-carer at home, while openly sharing this with her migrant mother in Dubai:

Yes [my mother allowed me to have a boyfriend] I can. (laughs) I don't know [if my grandmother allows it.] (laughs) [My grandmother and I] aren't close anyway, that's why (laughs) [I had a boyfriend at] 16. [We dated for] 6 months. [I told my mum about it, and] she got angry [not because of the relationship but because] my ex-boyfriend cheated. (laughs)

As Kathy’s long-term carer (her parents are divorced and Kathy’s mother had been away since her childhood), grandmother-carer Alicia was particularly worried about her granddaughter getting into romantic relationships, especially when rumors about a blossoming relationship between Kathy and one of her teachers circulated. Although Kathy did not openly admit the relationship, Alicia persisted in warning her of sexual dangers and signaled her strong disapproval of romantic relationships at her age. These disciplinary measures only served to lead Kathy to keep her relationships a secret from her grandmother. Meanwhile, Kathy fostered a more open bond with her migrant mother. Despite the distance between migrant mother and daughter, Kathy attested that her relationship with her mother is more emotionally proximate than her relationship with her grandmother whom she lived with at home. In contradistinction to the earlier case where Sandra the left-behind mother-carer collaborated with her daughter Jasmine to keep Jasmine’s romantic entanglements from her migrant father, Kathy’s case shows the possibilities of other forms of alliances and divisions between migrant parents, left-behind carers and their young adult children.

The strategies of young adult children show how they are able to navigate the surveillance enabled by communication technologies. By employing social media’s ‘scalable sociality’, they are able to limit how much their parents can know about them but also allow some form of moral gaze over their intimate lives. In an era when the pervasiveness of connection is palpable, there is an understanding that barring their parents from their social media might arouse more suspicion and distrust. Hence, a strategy of being in control of what they allow to be seen, paradoxically, enables young adult children to have some form of independence in conducting their intimate lives. In wresting control over their own intimate lives, a tricky balance of regulating both the proximate and mediated gaze becomes the key strategy in play.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined how ‘digital kinning’ practices of migrant parents, proximate carers, and left-behind young adult children are organized in terms of shaping the gendered intimate lives of left-behind young sons and daughters. First, we examined the literature on mediated communication technologies and support the argument that instead of treating the mediated space as a separate virtual space, the online and offline everyday spaces are entwined and mutually constitutive. In this sense, the affordances of communication technologies are not all-encompassing, but also tempered by the ideologies that shape the practices and discourses of familyhood. At the same time, the space of social media also allows for (re)negotiating different ways of ‘doing’ family in transnational and proximate space.

We examined how the increased frequency of communication and ‘ambient co-presence’ shaped young adult children’s gendered and intimate lives, especially in terms of the overlapping care dynamics between proximate and distantiated carers. We showed how intensive ‘ambient co-presence’ amplified the moral gaze and policing on the left-behind children’s romantic and intimate relationships. Unsurprisingly, although sex before marriage is still seen as taboo in the predominantly Catholic community of the Philippines, left-behind sons are given more leeway in terms of conducting these relationships while left-behind daughters face heightened restrictions and moral
Censure. The moral gaze provided by being Facebook friends with young adult children enhanced the feeling of trust and control for both the proximate carers and migrants. However, ‘ambient co-presence’ was not enough, as the proximate and physical gaze is deemed necessary to avoid sexual transgressions and unwanted pregnancies, especially for left-behind daughters.

Next, we examined how the gender of young adult children played an important role in the way the superimposition of the moral gaze was enacted. For young adult sons whose romantic and intimate lives are encouraged by the prevailing heteronormative ideals of masculinity, there is a sense of openness and acceptance of their romantic relationships by both proximate carers and migrant parents. For young adult daughters, romantic relationships are linked to sexual dangers and moral censure. However, instead of openly preventing them from having relationships, which may result in rebellion, the tricky balance lies in gaining their trust to enable some form of proximate or mediated moral gaze while allowing carefully surveilled degrees of freedom. In such a dynamic, the effect of distance in care and control becomes amplified, as the affordances of communication technologies to facilitate the mediated gaze of migrant parents may come into tension with the actions of proximate carers in restricting, liberating or controlling young adult children’s intimate lives.

Finally, we analyzed the strategies employed by young adult children to avert the superimposed moral gaze on their romantic lives. Despite the ambient co-presence enabled by the mediated and proximate moral gaze, young adult children were vigilant in regulating the levels of access their parents and carers had over their intimate lives. The choice of media technology or applications they engaged with allowed them to choose the level of presence their carers and migrant parents could have. We have shown here how the privacy afforded by Facebook through private chats and calls, has allowed them some leeway in conducting ‘courting’ dynamics away from the moral gaze and constant policing by both proximate carers and distant migrants. Although the publicness of the online space of Facebook is a means of imposing heteronormative ideologies upon young adult children, this space also provides an avenue where young adult children can ‘perform’ their own ‘ideal’ gendered moral selves. In other words, the private affordances of this social media space also allows the performance of romantic identities not necessarily enabled in the more restrictive offline spaces. At the same time, averting the moral gaze is a partial strategy, as not allowing mediated presence and choosing to totally disengage with migrant parents and other carers can signal a break and disruption in familial relationships. Conversely, allowing a certain latitude in the moral gaze on their intimate lives is a strategic move in fostering trust that may lead to more leeway over intimate affairs.

Notes

1. The larger project covers data collection from two time periods – 2008-2009 (Wave 1) and 2016-2017 (Wave 2) – employed mixed methods including qualitative depth interviews and large-scale surveys in four study countries in Southeast Asia.

2. The data is derived from a quantitative survey in 2016 (part of the larger project) with a total base of 159 young adult children and responsible adult pairs.

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