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Transnationalism and New Media. Transcontinental migrants and interconnectivity of cultures.

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This research programme focuses on a range of issues related to the wellbeing and recognition of people who traverse continents devoid of citizenship. Issues related to refugees remain crucially unanswered in debates and policies surrounding migration. In the wake of acknowledgement within the academy that it is not always possible to isolate refugees from migrants, this programme analyzes a range of contexts where dignity and human rights are compromised through the absence of legal and political recognition. By focusing on situations of extreme vulnerability and on lives lived on the borderline, this research programme seeks to articulate and address urgent needs with regard to the stateless migrants who have entered Europe.

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Executive Summary

Since the early 1990s, transnationalism has been a strongly debated topic in political, social and economic sciences. Vertovec (1999) suggests a broad, encompassing definition of transnationalism, which "refers to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states." (idem: 447). When it particularly refers to migrants, transnationalism, understood as interconnectivity of cultures, becomes a key concern for both individuals and societies. For transcontinental migrants it is particularly important, due to the fact that the more distant in both socio- and geo-cultural terms these individuals and their home and host societies are, the stronger the effects that interconnectivity of cultures could have on them.

This report aims to illustrate that, in the interest of everyone, also for those issues arising for migrants as individuals, policy-makers need to take into account new ameliorating practices to help improve integration. In particular, new technologies seem to offer further opportunities to improve immigrants' integration. This report suggests the idea that local governments should consider fair access to new technologies as a priority and national governments should also invest in this direction through external aid programs and external relations policies.

Introduction

Immigrants' integration is a key issue for migrants, for societies and for states. For migrants, successful integration means better conditions of life. For societies, successfully integrated migrants means harmonization of social relationships between exogenous (outsider) and endogenous (local) communities. At a higher level, for states, successfully integrated immigrants means improvement in the process of Intercultural Dialogue. In fact, from past research carried out by UNU-GCM (Bello 2013), it has become clear that, currently, in the UN Security Council, it matters if insiders and outsiders and their relative communities establish good relationships, particularly when the agenda concerns "international security".

Immigrants' integration depends on a variety of factors: economic, social, political, cultural and health factors. These all impact upon the successful participation of migrants in the life of host societies. Among these factors, we can also find personal satisfaction or, at its opposite, cultural distress and other psychological discomforts. This depends on the ability or not of individual migrants to enter local social networks and simultaneously to deal with cultural and identity issues arising when interacting with home and host societies.

The interconnectivity that migrants establish between home and host society can offer a wide range of examples of these dynamics (participation into host society personal network; migrants associations; multi-cultural business – with for ex. mixed cuisines, like Spanish-Mexican restaurants, or Pakistani-Indian shops; etc.). Single individuals and groups could manage this interconnectivity successfully or unsuccessfully. For this reason, since the early 1980s, individual discomfort has become a key topic within the interdisciplinary area of study of transnationalism, investigating phenomena related to interconnectivity of cultures. This is particularly the case for those approaches navigating across socio-psychological sciences. However, business studies, human geography works and economical and political science approaches have also produced investigations in this area (Butcher 2009; Ghosh and Wang 2003; Novicka 2007; Wang and Kanungo 2004).

This report aims to examine those circumstances contributing to coping with discomforts and thus improving patterns of migrants' integration, which do not depend on individuals' options and abilities only. In fact, the interest of this work lies in those relevant factors upon which policy-makers can impact in order to offer them guidance about ways in which new practices can

ameliorate the patterns of integration of outsiders for everyone's benefit. Among these, it becomes clear that new technologies can play a crucial role.

New technologies and interconnectivity of cultures

In recent years, particularly during the anti-governments protests which started in early 2011 in some Northern African and Middle East countries[1], also known as the "Arab Spring", it has become clear how new technologies can impact societies. At least, where telecommunications are widespread and the public authorities do not restrict Internet access, they provide immediate tools to communicate news of crucial happenings over the world. If this reason alone is not sufficient to prove the necessity of improving fair access to new technologies, then this report adds another important reason to policy-makers aiming to improve social, political and cultural conditions of people, to move in this direction.

In the area of study of transnationalism, for decades scholars have highlighted a particular type of psychological discomfort resulting from immigrants' needs of managing different social and cultural identities. When a person settles in a new place, in fact, his/her interaction with the surrounding social environment and host society's social networks[2] makes him/her develop a social identity related to these places which can sit uncomfortably with his/her social and cultural identities of the place of origin. This particular type of discomfort is also known as the "dual identity discomfort", as it emerges from the contradictory needs for migrants to behave in a way which is coherent and appropriate in the host society and at the same time to keep their own identity and the specificity of their own cultures (Butcher 2009).

This phenomenon exposes the self to a psychological stress for the subject. At the same time, this experience is amplified because of the nostalgia felt for those left behind (Butcher 2009). Reducing the strength of this paradox allows a decrease in the level of discomfort. One way is to develop mobile identities; that is the ability to move from the social identity of the host

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[1] In order Tunisia, Egypt, Lybia, Yemen, are those countries where power has subsequently been deposed; in Syria, Bahrain, Saudi, Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Oman and Kuwait protests and uprisings are still ongoing.

[2] For further details on this debate, please see Appadurai and Breckenridge 1989; Basch, Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Clifford 1994; Glick Schiller, Bash and Szanton-Blanc 1992.

society to that of the society of origin according to the specific network in which in turn the immigrant is interacting.

In "Ties that Bind", Butcher defines identity as "a set of everyday practices, values recitations and recurring relationships" (Butcher 2009: 1354). According to her, mobility affects all of these three aspects and perturbs the familiar cultural frame of reference. This entails a re-evaluation and a re-systematization of identity processes, creating a psychological discomfort that needs to be resolved. The ability to solve this discomfort depends on immigrants' opportunities and abilities, which Butcher identifies in two main strategies:

1) Establishing associations within new relationships networks.
2) Supporting and reinforcing the boundaries of the cultural identity of the familiar cultural frame.

The strategies chosen to sort out this discomfort will affect immigrants' integration in host societies. These two strategies are not mutually excluding alternatives; they can converge in individuals' experiences. The more they converge, the more mobile are individuals' identities. This characteristic describes the possibility for individuals to adopt either the social identity of the host society or the one of the homeland according to the social network within which they in turn interact. Butcher's argument is that the ability of individuals to develop mobile identities helps them to move between relationship networks.

Some scholars (Wardinger and Fitzegerald 2004) claim that it is impossible to develop such mobile identities. However, the great majority of sociologists, social psychologists who have developed a whole branch of study on the theme of identity[3] believe that both individual and collective identity are very dynamic. Evidence from research carried out by UNU-GCM in the first report series "Migration, Media and Intercultural Dialogue" also points in this direction[4]. Some studies have demonstrated that the more mobile is immigrants' identity, the more they will succeed both professionally (Portes et al 1999; Nowicka 2007) and psychologically, resolving their identification problems (Butcher 2009; Gosh and Wang 2003).

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[3] For an interdisciplinary discussion on identity construction processes, please see Bello (2011).

[4] See UNU-GCM first report series at < http://gcm.unu.edu/index.php/publications/policy-reports/125-migration-media-and-intercultural-dialogue-unu-gcm-policy-reports-series-01 > (last retrieved 14 February 2014).

Interestingly, there are indications from both everyday practice and the literature (eg. Vertovec 1999) that new media, and particularly Skype, can play a significant role in affecting the formation and management of dual identities. Despite the interesting book on transnationalism, family relationships and the effects of new media that Madianou and Miller (2011) have recently published, yet, there is not any scientific work investigating empirically the effect of free video-calls on dual identities.

Empirical findings from a pilot study

In the early 2000s, software packages were developed to allow people having free video-calls through Internet. Among these, Skype (Microsoft) and FacTime (MacIntosh) are clearly designed mainly targeting at high mobile people and particularly migrants in order to cope with problems arising with the move. Skype itself declares on its website that:

> "Skype is for doing things together, whenever you're apart. Skype's text, voice and video make it simple to share experiences with the people that matter to you, wherever they are." (http://www.skype.com/en/about/, retrieved on Nov 27th, 2013)

Other providers make similar claims:

> "FaceTime. Be in two places at once. Hang with friends in one city. Visit family in another. Make that important meeting." (http://www.apple.com/hk/en/ios/facetime/, retrieved on Nov 27th, 2013).

The images these companies use to give publicity to their packages clearly show members of families living apart and/or individuals of different background meeting virtually through video-calls[5]. The increase in the usage of these technologies is impressive (see Figures 1 and 2). Figure 1 makes clear that the general volume of international phone traffic has increased from 2005 to 2012, but, as the line shows, Skype's increase is particularly relevant.
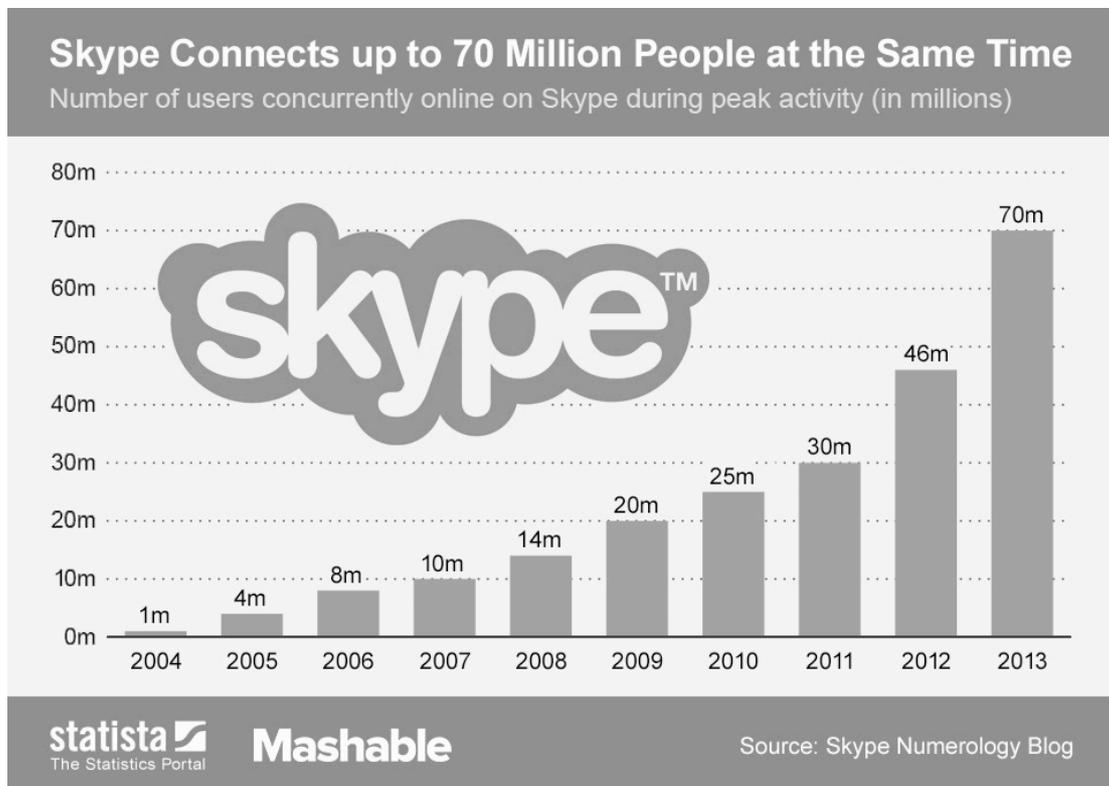
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[5] See http://skype.com and http://www.apple.com/mac/facetime/?cid=oas-us-domains-facetime.com .

Figure 1: The Increase in the volume of international phone traffic
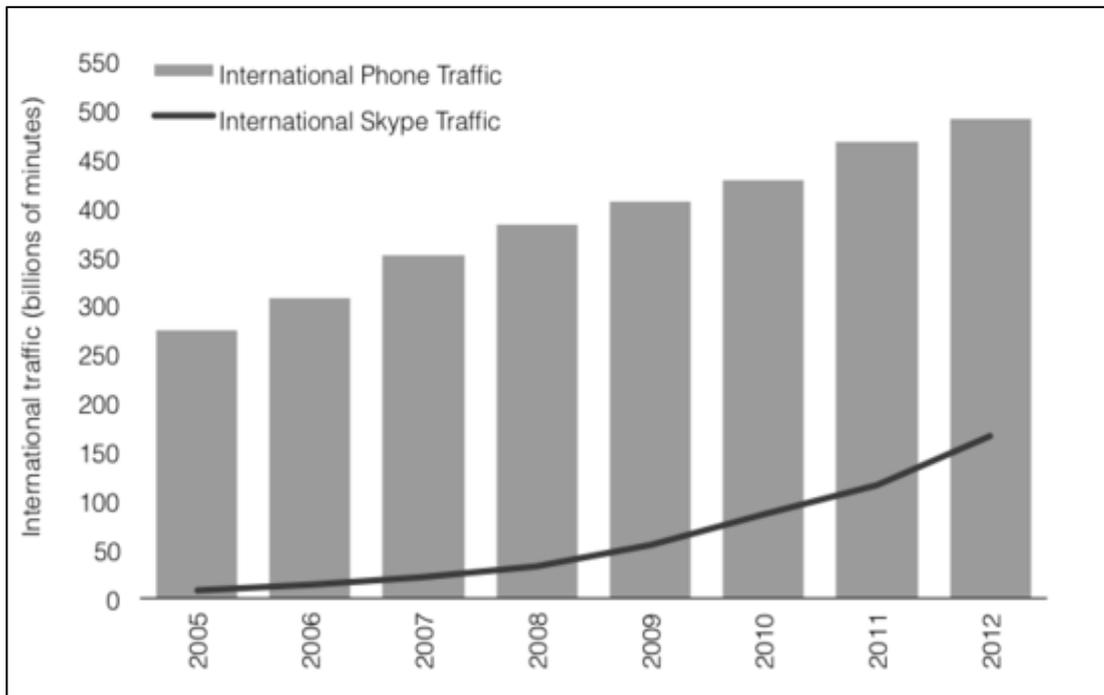
© Telegeography's research (www.telegeography.com)

Figure 2: Skype's simultaneous users

© Skype (www.skype.com)

As Figure 2 shows, the rate at which its usage increases is extremely interesting. In 2005, it increased of 200% but still in 2012 and 2013 it has increased of around 150%.

Despite these facts, the impact that new technologies could have on immigrants is an under-researched area. One interdisciplinary special issue considering the role of digital media on migration appears in *the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* in 2012 (Oiarzabul and Reips eds 2012). However, to knowledge, there is not any work addressing this question relating to the theme of the dual identities discomfort and the "transnationalism in question" (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004).

This research report presents results from an initial investigation through the analysis of seven in-depth interviews. The study does not aim to be representative but aims both to constitute a pilot for considering how to deal with more extensive data and to inspect in-depth whether the intuitions developed both from daily experience and the review of the literature could prove to be correct.

As the descriptive statistics highlighted in the following Figures show (see Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7), the seven individuals interviewed were 5 females and 2 males, most of them young adults; however individuals of different ages are also included in the sample.

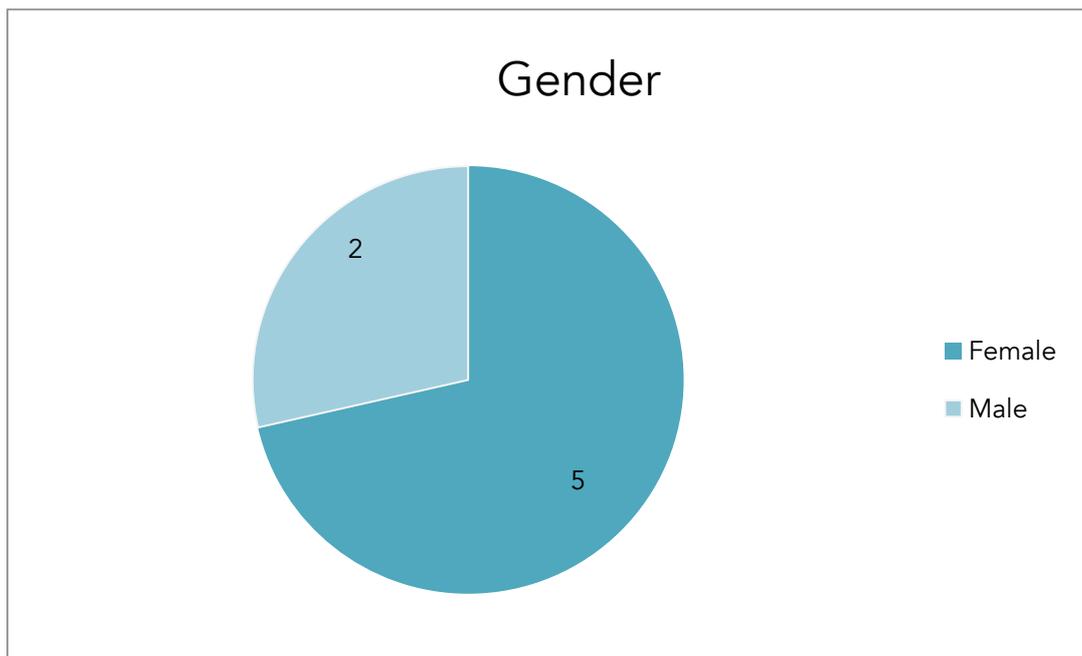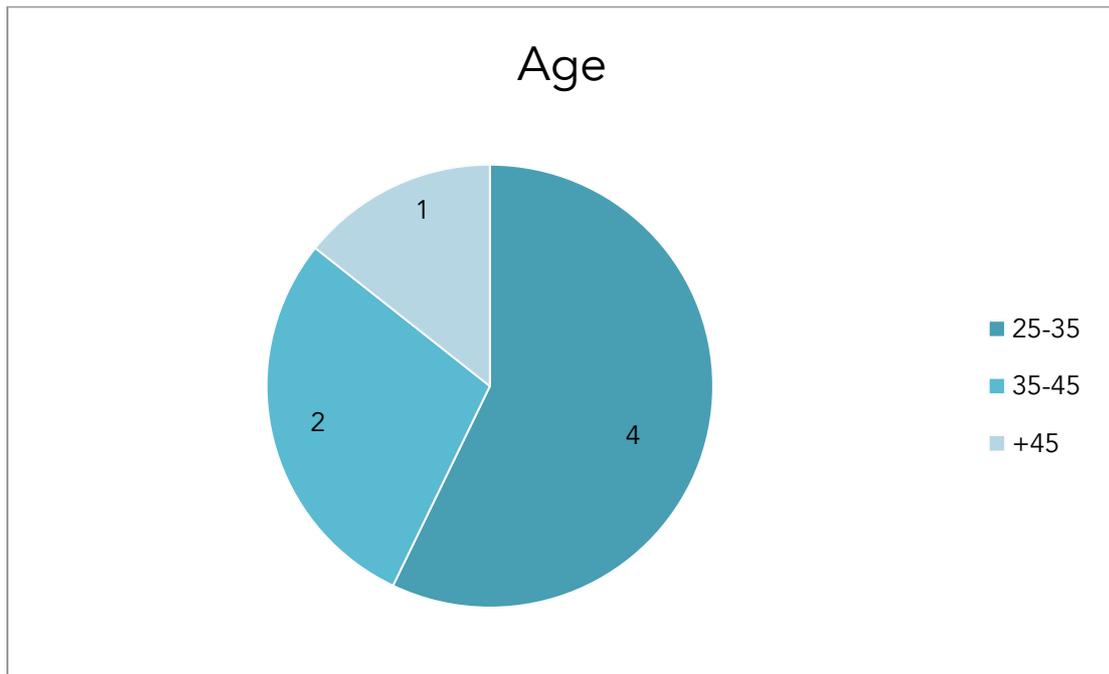Figure 3: Interviewees' descriptive data: Gender

Figure 4: Interviewees' descriptive data: Age

Age

■	25-35
■	35-45
■	+45

They are of different social classes and different places of origin. The only two regions for which this study does not have interviewees providing information are those of the Northern America and the Sub-Saharan Africa.

Five of them are from the middle class, respectively three belonging to upper-medium class and two to medium social class. This division was made according to the kind of employment they currently have.

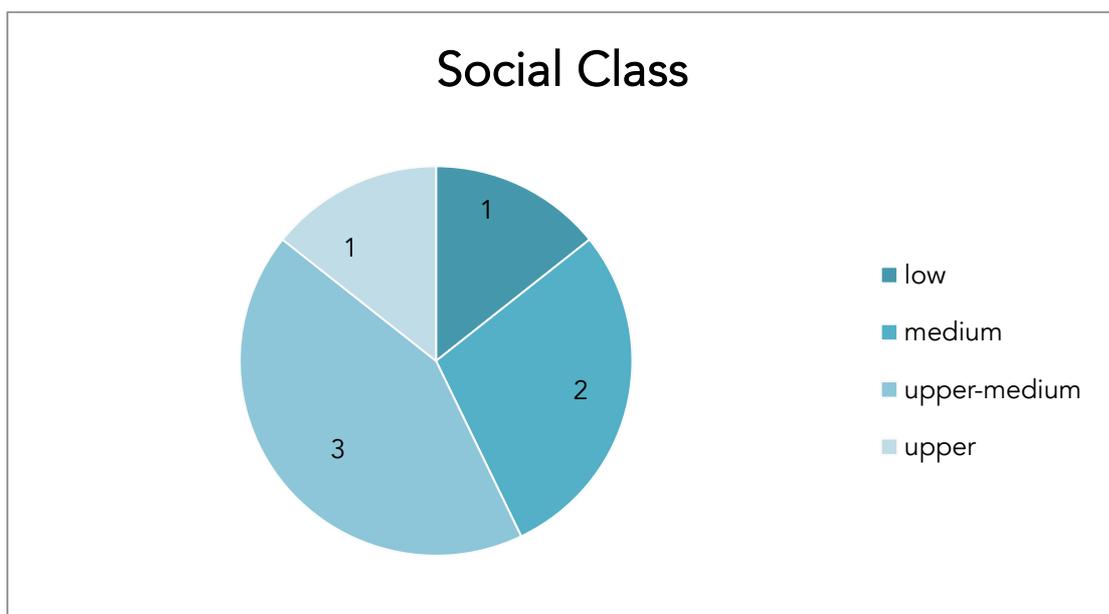Figure 5: Interviewees' descriptive data: Social class.

Social Class

■	low
■	medium
■	upper-medium
■	upper

Figure 6: Interviewees' descriptive data: Region of origin

Region of origin

- European
- Australasian
- Eastern European
- Northern African
- Latin American

Figure 7: Interviewees' usage of video-calls

Who do you meet through free-video calls?

- Family
- Family+International Friends
- Family+Local Friends
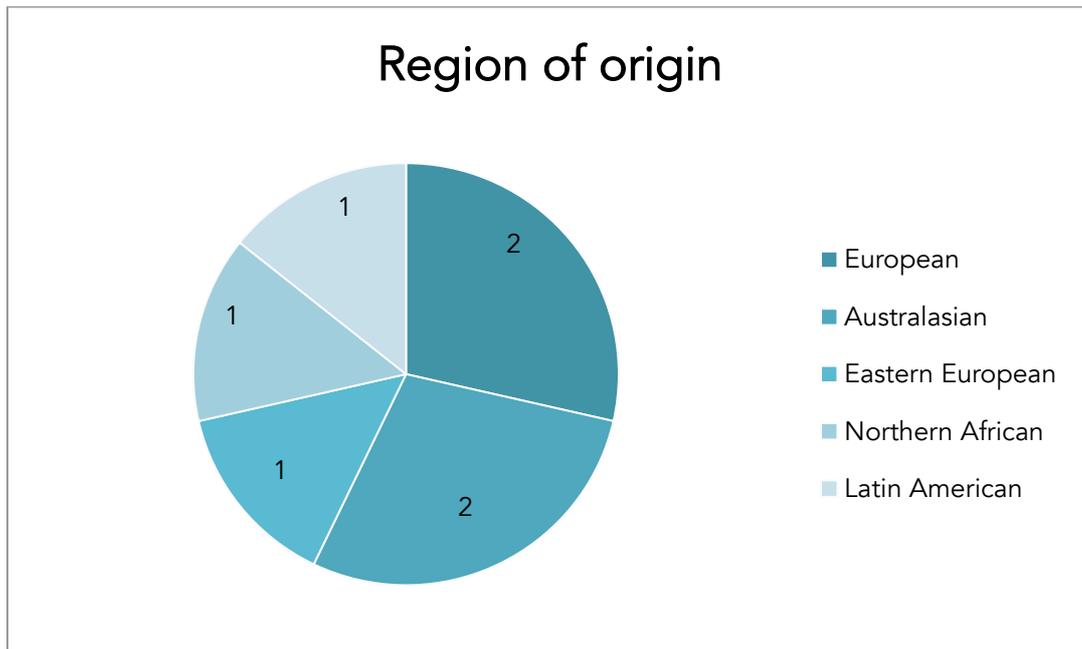
All of those interviewed use video-calls to meet with family, while some of them also use them to meet friends; in particular, two meet local friends – meaning friends from the receiving society; while the other two meet international friends, living far away.

When asked about the effects that using free video-calls, they all agree that both the possibility to see those left behind on a daily basis and the fact that those left behind could not only hear them but also actually watch their lives, affects a lot feelings and decisions of families and friends in homelands.

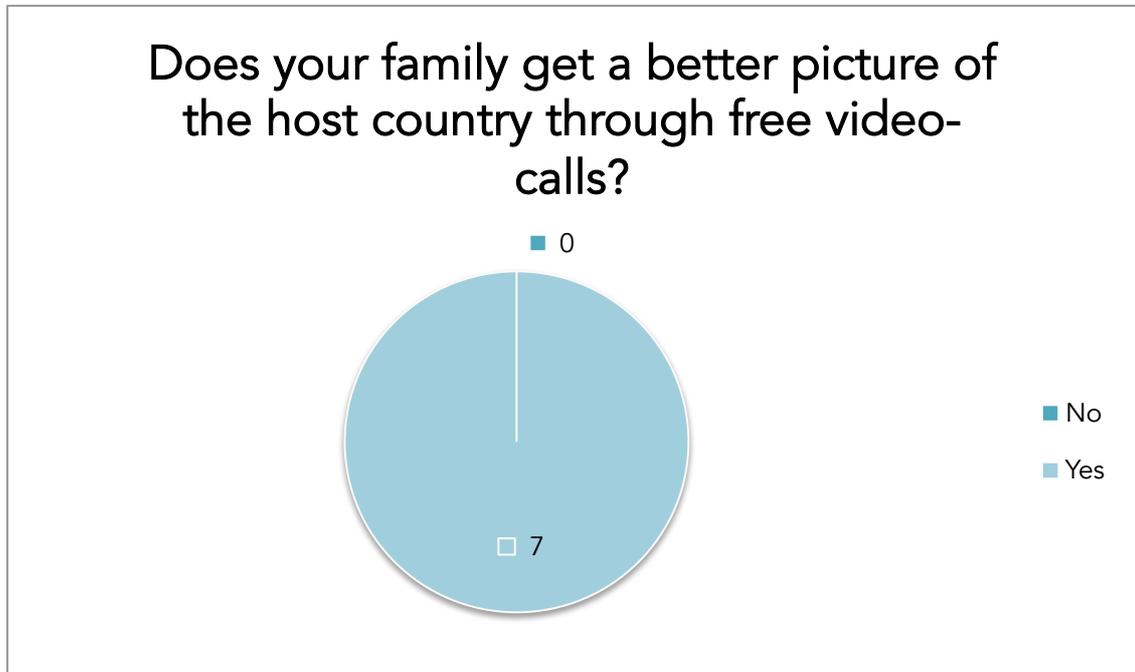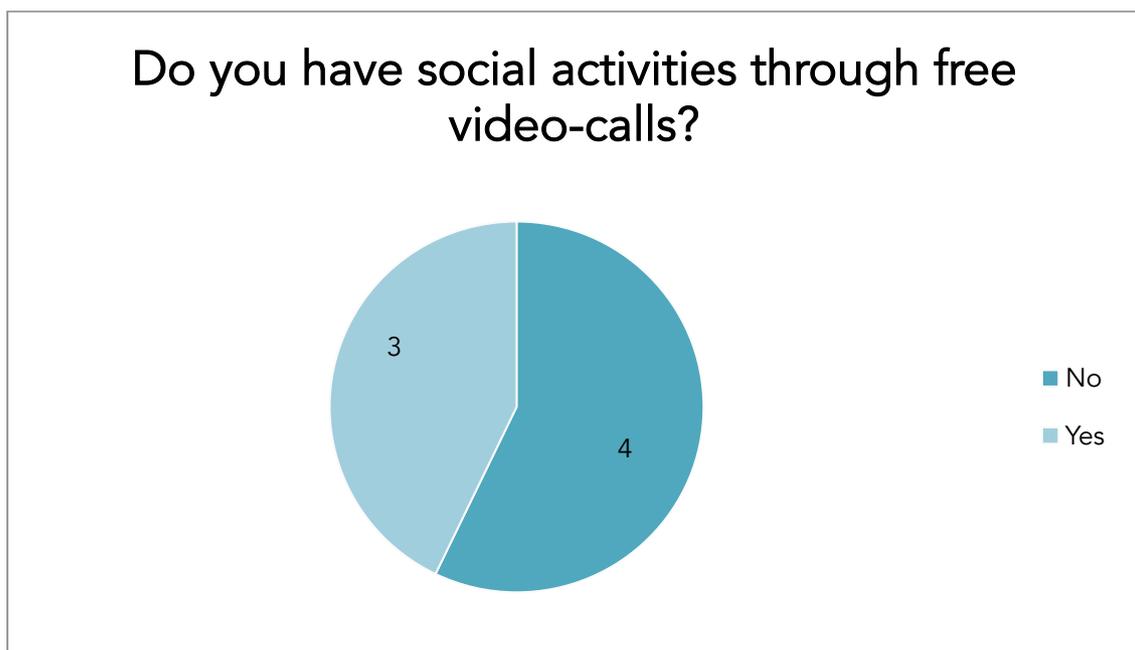Figure 8: Video-calls impact on perceptions of those left behind

Does your family get a better picture of the host country through free video-calls?

- 0

- No
- Yes

□ 7

Figure 9: Interviewees' usage of video-calls

Do you have social activities through free video-calls?

3

4

- No
- Yes

The most interesting result is that, despite the difference in ages, social classes, and regions of origin and of residence, all of them consider that free video-calls provide the opportunity for their family of origin to get a better picture of the place where they live.

From interviews, it emerged that those left behind understand both the limits and the opportunities that mobility entails. Some informants expressed the idea that "you cannot lie about the way you feel when your family can see you" (Informant 2). Yet, the majority (5 out of 7) but not all of respondents feel less nostalgia because of the daily usage of video-calls. A Romanian woman explains:

> I still feel nostalgia but my family are less worried about me and I am less worried about them (Informant 5).

This discourse is also present in the interview made with an Italian woman. Almost all of them (6 out of 7 informants) affirmed that video-calls help those left behind to be less anxious about their fate. They are all successfully integrated into the host societies, even if this does not mean that they wish to stay in the current host society. Sometimes, despite successful integration, new mobility is envisaged in order to obtain better opportunities than those offered in the current place of residence.

The virtual connection is sometimes also perceived as "almost" physical, confirming the relevance of the interdisciplinary debate around the issue of "copresence" (Campos-Castillo 2012; Zhao 2005). A Tunisian informant, in fact, declared:

> During the Arab Spring Revolution, we stayed connected day and night, never disconnect internet, to protect our mother and sisters. We knew I was not possible to intervene concretely, but we felt useful and they felt safer (Informant 6).

The virtual connection not only helps to mitigate the discomfort but also makes the distance disappear. The same informant went on to explain that:

> It destroys the magic sensation of visiting families (Informant 6).

There are then several indications that free video-calls helps to manage the discomfort. This discomfort management can respond to the difficulty noted by the literature on immigrant transnationalism that successful integration is hard to achieve as long as discomfort remains.

Free video-calls help persons to feel lest nostalgic and improve perceptions of those left behind. Those left behind get a better understanding of the host societies, but through the eyes of their beloved. If they feel less discomfort, the picture they will give back will be less traumatic and discomforting. Then, some reacting centrifugal forces which stretch the self disappear. This allows the formation of dual identities to occur with decreased discomfort, permitting the development of mobile identities.

As demonstrated by some works in economics, sociology and anthropology (Butcher 2009; Ghosh and Wang 2003; Portes et al 1999; Nowicka 2007), mobile identities allow more successful integration. The idea that developing mobile identities improves patterns of integration is therefore not new. An absolute novelty lies instead in finding alternative measures allowing better integration. Measures that do not depend on changing political, social or economic ways to access the host society but do depend on individual factors on which policies can indeed impact, for example by providing free internet connections or facilities for disadvantaged categories (for ex. subsidizing the usage of internet centers for migrants with low income). As other obstacle to establish free video-calls could depend on the homelands telecommunications and infrastructures, providing aid to poorer areas of the planet would also help to integrate migrants in host societies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Immigrant transnationalism brings with it a connectivity of cultures simultaneously producing risks and opportunities, comforts and discomforts. In more recent years, studies developed in the disciplines of economics, anthropology and sociology, demonstrate that the more mobile identities are, the more successful immigrants' integration is.

Vertovec suggested in the late 1990s that new technologies, and particularly those involving telecommunications, could play an important role for immigrants' transnationalism for different reasons. He was thinking of the role that Internet in general and satellite TV could play. Free video-calls as known today did not exist. However, he could already understand the astonishing power of new technologies when applied to telecommunications.

This report illustrates how the development of new technologies can be a key factor in diminishing the discomfort connected to the formation of dual identities. Immigrants feel less nostalgia and those left behind are less

worried about the conditions of their beloved and friends living apart. This direction of research has proven stimulating for the debate and worth further investigation in order to generalize the argument and deepen the knowledge about its consequences for both immigrants' integration and decisions and perceptions of those left behind.

Policymakers should then consider the importance of:
1) Providing fair access to internet to everyone within the borders of their states;
2) Undertaking steps to help migrants countries of origins to spread telecommunications facilities within foreign aid policies and bilateral technical cooperation programmes for infrastructures encompassed in external relations policies.
3) Promoting urgent research in this area, which is still left uncovered and yet promising.

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