

# New media, expectant motherhood, and transnational families: power and resistance in birth tourism from Taiwan to the United States

Media, Culture &amp; Society

2018, Vol. 40(7) 1070–1085

© The Author(s) 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0163443718782002

[journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs)**Tingyu Kang** 

National Chengchi University, Taiwan

## Abstract

This article examines the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in transnational expectant motherhood in the context of birth tourism, a growing form of transnational family arrangement. This research is primarily based on interviews with Taiwanese women who have participated in birth tourism in the United States. The findings suggest that long-distance intimacy is now primarily mediated through ICT use, which not only functions to fulfil the women's emotional needs but also largely serves to bring the women's reproductive bodies under the surveillance of their geographically distant spouses. This is because pregnant bodies serve as a spectacle of intimacy during expectant parenthood. To manage this digital surveillance, some mothers develop strategies of resistance regarding ICT use. This includes the choice of less media-rich tools and the delayed use of ICTs, which allow temporal and spatial distance from the digital gaze of the father.

## Keywords

birth tourism, gender, ICT, pregnancy, transnational family

This article examines expectant mothers' use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in cross-border family communication with their spouses in the context of birth tourism. In so doing, this article seeks to contribute to relevant literature in two ways. First, this article seeks to add to the literature on ICTs and transnational mothers

---

## Corresponding author:

Tingyu Kang, National Chengchi University, No. 64, Sec. 2, Zhinan Road, Taipei 11605, Taiwan.

Email: [tykang@nccu.edu.tw](mailto:tykang@nccu.edu.tw)

by exploring a less discussed context, that is, expectant motherhood. Second, while many studies have contributed to a functionalist perspective that illuminates how ICTs may help restore the 'normal' functions of families in transnational scenarios, this study takes a power and conflict perspective that, in addition to paying attention to the functions of a family, highlights how ICTs serve to reify gendered norms and power structure in the family domain. The findings also further demonstrate how mothers adopt various strategies to negotiate these norms and disrupt power.

Birth tourism, also called 'baby tourism' or 'maternity tourism', is a growing phenomenon in many parts of the world. It refers to a growing transnational family arrangement where expectant mothers travel to a country with a *jus soli* system so that their children will be born citizens of that country. While the mothers travel to the destination country for reproductive labour, their family members primarily remain in the country of origin, thus constituting an emerging form of geographically split families in transnationalism that is largely unexamined in existing studies.

Many studies have explored how transnational mothers utilize ICTs to communicate and create a sense of being together with their family members across borders (Baldassar, 2008; Baldassar et al., 2007; Madianou, 2012, 2016; Madianou and Miller, 2012, 2013; Uy-Tioco, 2007, among others). These studies identify the ways in which the experiences of being a mother are challenged by geographical separation. They demonstrate how ICT-based co-presence, namely, the family communication practices enabled by new media technology, serves to manage these challenges, including managing mothers' feelings of longing, securing their identity as a mother, and helping them regain a voice in family decisions. These studies have often focused on female migrant workers and their networked communication with their young children and husbands. However, it should be noted that there is heterogeneity within the umbrella concept of transnational mothers in terms of stages of motherhood, class, family structure, division of domestic labour, digital literacy and the temporality and spatiality of ICT use. Further studies may be required to explore the diverse experiences of transnational motherhood that is mediated by ICTs.

In the context of Asian mothers in transnationally split households, women in birth tourism have emerged as a prominent form of motherhood in the broader landscape of transnationalism. The flow of expectant mothers from Asia to the United States has rapidly increased in the past decade. Although there have not yet been any official statistics released, estimates on expectant mothers participating in the ever-growing phenomenon of birth tourism in North America by relevant businesses and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) range from 36,000 to 60,000 each year, with East Asian countries among the most discussed sending countries and with the numbers rapidly growing in the past few years (Grad, 2015; Kessler, 2015; Sheehan, 2015). Although this form of family arrangement has gained increasing attention in the press and in political discourses, there has been no academic attention to expectant motherhood and family communication in this context (for press discussion, see, for example, Chang, 2013; Davies and Boyle, 2013; Johanson, 2013). This article focuses on this growing form of Asian motherhood in transnationally split families and explores how this experience of being a mother in a transnational family is shaped by various ICT uses.

While existing studies on ICT use and transnational motherhood focus on mothers' labour of parenting across borders, this article examines mothers' reproductive labour

during expectant motherhood. Transnational mothers' reproductive labour in birth tourism involves care for the foetus, for the pregnant women themselves and sometimes also for the husbands. This article examines a rapidly growing subsection in the broader overarching idea of transnational motherhood that has not yet been explored in the current discussion. It investigates women's mediated experiences of transnational motherhood at a different stage of motherhood, which is then associated with the largely different social, cultural, economic and technological environment where the transnational communication is embedded.

The findings of this study disrupt a popular portrayal in existing studies that views ICT-based co-presence as a generally positive emotional experience that restores the normal functions of family for the transnational mother and other family members. In addition to ICT-mediated positive emotional functions of the family, this study seeks to also demonstrate the ways in which ICT-based co-presence brings back the pre-existing gender norms and reinforces power dynamics in expectant motherhood that were once destabilized by geographical separation, thus illustrating the dual role of ICT-based co-presence. This article also further identifies transnational mothers' strategies of media technology use as resistance to the power structure created by ICT-based co-presence.

## ICT-based co-presence in transnational families

A transnational family is one 'where core members are distributed in two or more nation-states but continue to share strong bonds of collective welfare and unity' (Huang and Yeoh, 2005: 380). These families are often structured through continuing sharing of economic resources, visits, exchange of letters and photographs, and other communication methods (Baldassar, 2008; Climo, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997; Parreñas, 2005, among others).

In the increasingly digitized communication environment, members of transnational families largely use ICTs to create the experience of 'co-presence' to maintain intimacy, which is a form of being together mediated through technology. Although ICT-based co-presence has also become prominent in non-transnational families, it plays a much more significant role in transnationally split families. This concept of ICT-based co-presence is a central thesis in the literature on migrants' intimate relationships. It is often suggested that ICT use to some extent addresses the difficulties transnational families have with regard to emotional stress, exploitation, and destabilized identity that are brought about by geographical separation (Baldassar, 2008; Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016; Robertson et al., 2016). While exchange and support within families have long been considered sustained by physical proximity, it is argued that ICT use has produced an alternative form of togetherness for transnational families, which largely takes up the traditional role of geographically proximate co-presence in families. Overall, these studies demonstrate how ICT-based co-presence stands in for physical togetherness 'for transnational families to function as "normal" families' (Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016: 216).

Long-distance practices of ICT-based co-presence take a wide variety of forms. Baldassar (2016) distinguishes between *immediate co-presence* and *intermediate co-presence*. Whereas the former refers to live, real-time connection with loved ones, the latter involves asynchronous text-based family communication, such as SMS and

WhatsApp, which encompasses collapse and discontinuity in the temporality of ICT use. Whereas immediate co-presence creates an immediate sense of being present, intermediate co-presence provides a sense of being present in the background. That is, even when family members are not currently online and not interacting live, they can still be in the form of *ambient co-presence*, where they develop awareness that family members who are geographically distant are close because they can be reached with a simple click (Madianou, 2016). This creates a sense of 'always-on' intimacy, where people feel connected even when they are not – geographically or digitally. In certain migratory contexts where real-time conversation and asynchronous texting are unavailable for political, economic or other reasons, ICTs are also utilized to create *imagined co-presence*. For example, Robertson et al. (2016) discuss how refugees use digital photography to create an imagery of being with their family members across borders when both physical and mediated communication are inaccessible.

### Transnational motherhood and ICT-based co-presence

In the specific context of motherhood in transnational families, a geographically split family structure presents many challenges to migrants' experience of being a mother. First, the feeling of longing for the loved ones and loneliness become central to these mothers' daily emotional experiences (Baldassar, 2008). Second, the identity of being a mother is often threatened. In the context of migrant domestic workers whose young children are 'left behind', mothers' care work is outsourced to female relatives or other helpers in the origin countries, thus constructing the migrant women as unfit, irresponsible mothers (Parreñas, 2005). These women often find themselves having to negotiate with their families with regard to ideals of motherhood and marriage.

Studies have identified many ways in which ICT-based co-presence helps transnational mothers manage challenges in their family life. First, several studies have demonstrated how ICT use functions to help transnational mothers ease the emotions of longing for their loved ones and loneliness (Baldassar, 2008). For a long time, many migrants had experienced an emotional geography of 'double absent', whose emotional attachment is neither here nor there (Sayad, 1999, cited in Baldassar et al., 2016). With increasing ICT use, another mode of geo-emotional experience has emerged among migrants, who perceive themselves as 'being everywhere'. The feelings of being dislocated and emotionally detached are found to be largely eased during these practices of connected togetherness. Other mothers utilize ICTs to reconnect with their identity of being a mother. Madianou and Miller (2012) explore Filipino migrant workers and identify how these women reconnect with their left-behind children through frequent use of ICTs that allow for cheap, fast and high-quality communication. Migrant women tend to enjoy the increased time they spend with their children transnationally as they regain their voice in parenting. It also renders them fit according to the cultural norms of good mothers.

It should be noted that while ICT use may empower mothers with regard to satisfying their emotional needs, allowing them to regain a voice in parenting and care work decisions and securing their identity as a mother, such empowerment has its constraints. For example, the digital divide plays a key role. Many transnational mothers' use of ICTs is contingent upon younger generations' and male users' assistance due to the mothers' lack of

access and digital literacy (Kang, 2012). Political economic factors are also central. The type and place of employment significantly shape the ways in which transnational mothers communicate with their separated family members (Parreñas, 2005). Mothers working in domestic environments have less time to use ICTs than those working in hospitals. Their communication is also more likely to be interrupted by employers.

In summary, studies on transnational family communication have largely portrayed ICT-based co-presence as a generally positive experience. Although often contingent upon the political-economic structure and the digital literacy among the users, ICT-based co-presence is often depicted as helping manage mothers' feelings of longing and helping them regain a voice and a secure identity. This portrayal highlights how the 'functions' of traditional families were once lost in transnational families and how they are now restored to a certain extent through ICT use. This functionalist account of transnational family communication constructs a triumphal discourse regarding the use of technology.

However, it should be noted that families are about not only functions but also conflicting roles underlined by power structures. ICT-based communication in transnational families does more than just recover the 'lost' family functions. In addition to a functionalist investigation, ICT-based co-presence in transnational families can be examined as a new field where differentiated roles and power are redistributed and negotiated. Findings of studies on ICT use among daughters and adult children in transnational families have hinted that media technologies may serve to bring individuals back to the pre-existing family hierarchy and gendered division of labour (for the role of a daughter, see Hsu, 2015; for adult children, see also Nedelcu and Wyss, 2016). Many existing studies on mothers in transnationalism have adopted a functionalist perspective that analyses how mothers create innovative forms of ICT-based co-presence to access family intimacy and thus maintain the functions of families in transnational scenarios. This study seeks to demonstrate the dual role of ICT-based co-presence in transnational families. That is, in addition to demonstrating ICT-mediated positive 'functions' of the family, this article adopts a power and conflict perspective. It seeks to illuminate not only the positive functions of ICT-based co-presence but also how ICT use reproduces the power structure underlying reproductive labour among transnational mothers and how these mothers adopt various strategies regarding ICT use to resist and negotiate it.

## **Power, families, and expectant motherhood**

The reproductive labour of women participating in birth tourism mainly involves care work throughout pregnancy, which includes taking care of the foetus, the women themselves, and the emotional needs associated with expectant parenthood of the husbands. This stage is often viewed as the 'transition to motherhood' (see, for example, Belsky and Rovine, 1990; Roy et al., 2014).

Norms and practices surrounding the transition to motherhood have significantly changed over the past decades in many societies. With the rise of pre-natal technologies, the underbelly has increasingly become a key site for intervention by scientific discourse and technological practices (Duden, 1993). In the past, pre-natal care mainly involved taking care of mothers. With the prevalence of pre-natal technologies, such as continuing advances in ultrasound technologies, the object of care has largely shifted. The boundary

between foetus and baby is blurred. The foetus has increasingly become an independent site for care work of the mother.

This shift has led to many changes in the construction of motherhood in the family sphere. First, pregnancy is now considered the beginning of motherhood, whereas it was once maintained that giving birth was the starting point of parenthood. Second, the autonomy of pregnant women's bodies is challenged. In medical discourses and in marital interactions, expectant mothers' bodies are increasingly considered separate from the foetus, and thus, constant conflicts of interest among the foetus, the father, and the mother emerge (e.g. Manning, 1989; Mattingly, 1992; see also Sandelowski, 1994). In the context of Taiwan, decisions regarding pregnant women's bodies are made by not only mothers but also their husbands and other authoritative figures in their extended families as the mothers' bodies are regarded as intertwined with those of the offspring (Hsieh, 1996; Ma, 2002).

Closely linked to the changes in expectant motherhood are the shifting ideals regarding expectant fatherhood. Studies on many countries in North America, Western Europe and Australia have identified that it was once considered inappropriate for fathers to participate in care work regarding pregnancy and childbirth. From taking care of pregnant women and women in labour to caring for newborns, care work was assigned to female family members or outsourced to other female workers while fathers' participation in childbirth has now become normative (Blackshaw, 2009; Leavitt, 2003). This gendered division of labour is underlined by several constructions. Care work has long been identified as feminine. Female bodies have also been associated with threats to masculinity (Draper, 1997). Since the 1980s, expectant fatherhood has shifted rapidly in many societies. New masculinities have emerged where ideal expectant fatherhood means participation in care work during wives' reproductive labour.

These changes in expectant fatherhood have also occurred in Taiwanese families in recent years. Studies on Taiwanese reproductive experiences have shown that the portrayal of ideal expectant fathers in popular culture has shifted. Whereas it was mainly considered a feminine task to take care of pregnant women and newborns, men's participation in such labour has now been largely constructed as a key element of normative fatherhood in Taiwan (Chen, 2007; Lee, 2009).

Although fathers' participation in reproductive labour has become the norm in many societies, its impacts are not necessarily desirable. In general, most studies suggest that fathers' participation has brought about positive emotional outcomes for their spouses. This includes feelings of security, companionship, comfort, and so on (Bondas-Salonen, 1998; Chen, 2007; Kainz et al., 2010; Sapkota et al., 2011; Somers-Smith, 1999). However, other studies demonstrate how fathers' presence reifies the image of women in labour as fragile and feminine. With fathers' presence, higher doses of painkillers are given to mothers during labour (Ip, 2000). It has also been found that during labour, fathers' participation tends to lead medical attention to privacy issues regarding their wives' bodies (Lan, 2000, cited in Lee, 2009), which inscribes women's bodies with a sexual script.

As a result, ideals and norms surrounding the distribution of care work during expectant motherhood are rapidly shifting. While taking care of pregnant women and foetuses during this stage was once exclusively assigned to women, it is now increasingly a key element of ideal expectant fatherhood. This article investigates how this recent norm

surrounding care labour during expectant motherhood is destabilized in the context of birth tourism as the fathers are largely physically separated from the mothers during the transition to parenthood. In particular, this research examines the experiences of mothers participating in birth tourism to whom the absence of fathers from their expectant motherhood leads to new structures of feelings, power dynamics and gender norms in transnational families, where ICT uses are embedded.

## **Methods**

This study is based on semi-structured interviews and informal talks with 21 Taiwanese women who have participated in birth tourism to the United States. Since the 1980s, birth tourism from Taiwan to the United States has emerged, with Southern California as the main destination. With the increasing influx, local businesses, such as maternity hotels and childcare services catering specifically to Chinese-speaking birth tourists, have emerged. The spatiality of birth tourism among the Chinese-speaking population then gradually expanded over the past decades from Southern California further towards Hawaii and other parts of the West coast (for news coverage, see Fang, 2015; Yu, 2015). During their stay in the United States, most interviewees stayed in maternity hotels. Others rented local flats that offered short leases specifically for birth tourists.

The data are part of a 2-year study on birth tourism in the United States. All the interviewees are married women. The interviewees are from relatively well-off socioeconomic backgrounds. The occupations of the main breadwinners, mostly the husbands, in these families include business owners, various professionals and freelance investors. Nearly half of the women are housewives, including those who quit their jobs right before their trips to the United States to be able to stay abroad for an extended duration of time and take up reproductive roles. Other occupations of the women include teacher and engineer.

The interviewees travelled to the United States mostly during their third trimester and stayed until 1–2 months after childbirth. The total length of stay ranged from 3 to 7 months. Most of the interviewees were separated from their family members most of the time during their transition to parenthood in the United States. This transnational spatial arrangement of households is linked to a gendered division of labour. As most husbands serve as sole breadwinners in their households, they are less likely to leave behind their economic role in the origin country and travel abroad for birth tourism. Women, however, are considered more likely to be exempt from the economic role and to travel abroad to take on reproductive labour. A typical arrangement involves the husband accompanying the wife when they first travel to the United States. The husband then returns to Taiwan for work and remains there until childbirth or shortly thereafter.

In explaining why they chose to participate in birth tourism, all of the interviewees state that they envisaged citizenship in the destination country as presenting opportunities for better education and employment for their children. Most of the interviewees plan to have their children study in the United States. This plan is rationalized by various accounts underlined by neoliberal calculations, which include their own positive experiences of education or employment in the United States or other English-speaking countries, the gap between salaries in Taiwan and in the United States and other economic advantages in education that may be available to US citizens.

This focus on ‘for the children’ serves as a background for family communication in the decision-making process of birth tourism. Most of the interviewees suggest that it is their husbands who propose giving birth to their children in the United States in the first place. This is particularly significant among women who have no prior experience living abroad and women who are having their first child. During family communication among families where the husbands first propose this migration, the rationales underlying the wives’ reluctance to participate in birth tourism include the medical and legal risks faced by the women, which are intertwined with the wives’ concerns over being alone in the United States. In these cases, discourses that are most often utilized to seek assent from the wives are the ethics of motherhood. Some husbands also make arrangements regarding legal and medical services for their wives to manage their wives’ concerns. This serves as the background that structures the cross-border communication between the wives in the United States and the husbands in the origin country during the wives’ visit to the United States.

This study does not focus on a single ICT but rather includes all the digital tools that are mentioned and used by the interviewees. The main ICTs that are used by the interviewees include instant messaging tools, audio and video chat services, and social networking sites. The experience of ICT-based co-presence in transnational families is one grounded in today’s polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2013). Various ICTs are no longer perceived as distinct communication tools in geographically split families. Rather, they are considered ubiquitous by migrants who constantly deliberate among different tools to better express their feelings and engage in care work across distance in a variety of social, economic, cultural and emotional scenarios.

## Constructing ICT-based co-presence

While staying in the United States for birth tourism, the interviewees use various ICTs to connect with their husbands in the origin country. These uses are embedded in the politics of emotions in birth tourism. Echoing the narratives in previous studies on ICTs and transnational families, the interviewees report feelings of longing to be a main theme of their daily emotional experience:

I am here all alone. I feel bored [...] I really miss [my family]. (BL)

Although my husband sent me here, he is the type of person who always wants his wife around. When we can’t see each other, we don’t feel at ease. (TTB)

In addition to longing, this research identifies perceived helplessness as another theme that structures the politics of emotion in birth tourism. An interviewee explains,

It feels very hard. The child is as much mine as my husband’s. I am here all alone without help [...] Having a baby is a time when a woman needs care the most [...] You can’t let your husband feel like it’s ok that he is not part of it. (UF)

The feeling of helplessness structures the interviewees’ experiences of birth tourism, which is closely linked to the norms surrounding expectant fatherhood and motherhood.



During the transition to parenthood, the fathers are considered the main caretakers of their spouses. As a result, the physical absence of expectant fathers in birth tourism leads to the mothers' perceived helplessness. The feeling of helplessness is not only a result of normative division of labour surrounding expectant parenthood but is also associated with the construction of femininity during pregnancy. The interviewees portray pregnant women as particularly fragile and requiring attention and care, thus constructing pregnant women not as the main caretakers but as those who receive care from other family members.

The feeling of helplessness is also grounded in the gendered production of transnational space:

I have never been to the US. I am not familiar with life in the States [...] It was my husband who told me to come. He said that he'd arrange everything before I arrive so he started to collect information and arrange everything. He's done all the work [...] His job requires him to travel around the globe so he is pretty good at this. I am not familiar with it at all. I leave everything for him to arrange. He is not around when I am here, though. (TJB)

The husband's role as breadwinner brings about his transnational spatial mobility. The wife's relative lack of transnational spatial experiences together with the husband's physical absence from birth tourism leads to her perceived helplessness.

The emotions of longing and helplessness shape the use of ICTs in birth tourism. The interviewees often express that they use ICTs to create ICT-based co-presence to satisfy these two types of emotional needs. Many interviewees report that the feelings of longing render them more apt to use ICTs to communicate with their husbands:

When we were both in Taiwan, we wouldn't use video chats at all. It's only because I am in the US that I want to see him more often. (US)

It's different when two people are separated in two different places. When we were back home, we didn't talk that much. Now that I am abroad, I miss him a lot. He'd think now that I am all alone here for our kid, he's obligated to spend more time to talk to me. When I am abroad, we talk much more on LINE [instant messaging service] than we did when we were both in Taiwan. (TC)

In addition to coping with the feeling of longing, the women also use ICTs to cope with their perceived helplessness. This is often accomplished through the husbands' remote management of the wives' daily life arrangements:

When I was here last time with my first baby, there was no LINE [instant messaging tool] nor were there smartphones. It's much better now. A couple days ago I was trying to move to another maternity hotel. I was all alone, clumsy with my belly. I really didn't want to run around searching for maternity hotels. My husband [while in Taiwan] went online to do all the house hunting for me. Then, he found this place [...] He wrote emails, browsed web pages and checked my preferences [on LINE]. It was very quick. The decision was quickly made [...] Some people complain that their husbands are not around while they are here. I am ok with that. My husband did all this. It's almost as good as the situation where he is actually around. (IS)

In addition to creating an emotional environment of being together, ICT-based co-presence further creates a physical environment of being together. That is, the former involves real-time textual, audio and visual intimate interaction, while the latter is created through transnational arrangements of physical daily life environments via various ICTs. These expectant fathers not only produce virtually connected experiences but also blend the virtual into the physical living spaces of the distant wives. However, it should be noted that the remote management of physical daily life echoes a largely gendered imagery where the tech-savvy and spatially mobile expectant fathers build a protective living environment for the fragile expectant mothers.

In summary, in birth tourism, the fathers' absence from care labour during pregnancy is a result of the spatial arrangement of birth tourism. ICT-based co-presence to some extent does restore the expectant fathers to the normative role, which serves to manage the mothers' emotional needs in transnational intimacy.

### **Differentiated virtual intimacy across spaces and media types**

The above data suggest that while the transnationally split family structure leads to the absence of expectant fathers from care work during the transition to parenthood, ICT-based co-presence serves as a way in which the fathers return to their role in family intimacy. However, it should be noted that this mediated restoration of fatherhood in birth tourism has its limitations.

Different media vary in their capacities of creating a sense of intimacy. Several interviewees identify perceived differences in levels of intimacy across different ICTs, with video calls being the most intimate experiences followed by voice calls and text-based interactions considered the least intimate:

Video-based interactions are the best. I want to see faces. I feel at ease if I could both see his face and hear his voice. Texts can't do that. Typing texts on LINE is just a way in which we arrange a convenient time for video-based chats. However, you still can't hug each other over video calls. (US)

Only voice and video chats reassure that this man is in good shape. I only use emails when I try to discuss serious stuff because emails are more structured. (ZT)

Video-based real-time interactions are considered ideal for the exchange of emotions, whereas text-based communication is often reserved for organizing routines. However, these mediated modes of communication are still perceived as less intimate than face-to-face interactions.

The spatiality of media use is also portrayed as shaping the level of perceived intimacy, that is, ICT use in certain spaces is considered more intimate than in others. According to the interviewees, using ICTs in the communication of intimate feelings is only appropriate in private spaces. Other spatial forms of ICT-based co-presence are considered less likely to satisfy the interviewees' emotional need for intimacy. An interviewee whose husband lives with his parents in Taiwan while the interviewee stays in the United States for birth tourism explains,

When my in-laws are in the living room, my husband only uses voice-based tools. Only when he returns to his own room will he turn on video calls for me so that I can be more affectionate. (TC)

Video calls are supposed to be better because we see each other. Emails are for business, and video calls are for us to see each other. However, when I was in the US, we wrote emails for intimate things and we used video calls for more general stuff. It's because other family members might hear our intimate conversations. (ZT, husband in Taiwan living with wife's parents)

The spatiality of ICT use shapes the perceived capacities of different communication tools for intimacy. Although many interviewees prefer video calls over emails for the communication of intimate feelings, the spatial constraints destabilize these sense-making processes of ICT use.

### **ICT-based co-presence as discipline and surveillance**

While the abovementioned data suggest that ICT-based co-presence is positively embraced as a way of satisfying emotional needs for expectant mothers in transnationally split families, it should be noted that it also serves as discipline to them. ICT-based co-presence brings the women back to their gender role during the transition to parenthood, thus rendering ICT-based co-presence not only emotional satisfaction but also a form of surveillance. This is because pregnant women's bodies are constantly subject to the monitoring gaze of their family members. Through ICT-based co-presence, pregnant women surrender their virtual bodies to the gaze. Although birth tourism allows for physical separation between the women's bodies and the gaze, ICT use creates a virtual form of the body that is again placed under surveillance.

Pregnant women are often assigned sole responsibility for establishing the emotional bonding between the foetus and other family members through various practices of technology-mediated emotional labour. During pregnancy, women's bodies serve as a spectacle of intimacy in maintaining family intimacy. In transnationally split families, while pregnant women's physical bodies are absent, they are still expected to utilize communication technologies to represent their bodies:

We used video calls. They wanted to see the size of my belly. I went to the US quite early. My belly didn't show back then so every now and then they wanted to see whether my belly was growing [...] I used photos. I sent photos of myself. I also sent photos of ultrasound exams. (IC)

[During video calls,] my husband wanted the camera to focus on the belly. He talked to my bump [...] It felt stupid but I tried to convince myself it was fun and intimate. (VK)

These examples illustrate how representing bodies virtually functions as a central element in the expectant mothers' emotional labour during the transition to parenthood in transnationally split families.

When the mothers participate in the emotional labour of presenting their bodies, ICT-based co-presence serves as a form of bodily surveillance and discipline. This is because a pregnant woman's body is considered intertwined with that of the foetus. Thus, norms

surrounding expectant motherhood suggest a lack of bodily autonomy of the women, which invites intervention and surveillance of the women's bodies by other family members:

My husband was quite worried. He didn't want me to go out shopping. He'd remotely control my daily routines using video calls. (IC)

[He'd] tell me what not to eat during pregnancy and stuff like that. It would be so much better if he couldn't see me. (VI)

In addition to the fathers, the disciplinary gaze can also come from wider family members as pregnant women's bodies are considered inseparable from the fetus and thus pregnant bodies are considered a 'family matter':

[My mother-in-law] doesn't intervene in our lives much. However, she was really worried that I ate too much and gained too much weight [...] She called on a daily basis to nag about that. (TT)

Taking care of the women's own bodies and the fetuses is considered central to motherhood in birth tourism. This care work is subject to the digital monitoring and disciplinary gaze of the fathers and sometimes wider family members across distance. The disciplinary gaze is focused on two aspects of the body. First, it gazes upon the health condition of the women's bodies through ICTs. Second, it examines the spatial mobility of the bodies.

## Negotiation and resistance

The interviewees develop various strategies to negotiate this monitoring gaze and the expectations of their embodied emotional labour through ICT-based co-presence. These strategies can be categorized as follows.

First, many interviewees strategize regarding the temporality of ICT use. An interviewee explains the rationale underlying her choice of the timing for transnational family communication:

[It] would be really painful for me not to go out. If there was a transportation arrangement that took me out, I'd go. My husband didn't want me to go out. Thus, before I went out, I wouldn't let him know. I wouldn't mention what I was going to do and I wouldn't contact him before I went out. I only sent him photos and told him I went out and bought something when I returned to [my maternity hotel] and made sure I was all right. (IC)

Delayed use of ICTs and deliberation over the timing of their use become key strategies for the women to avoid the constant surveillance of their bodies through ICT-based co-presence.

Second, some interviewees adopt a strategy that carefully distinguishes among ICTs with different levels of media richness. Contrary to classic media richness theory, which often suggests that users tend to prefer higher levels of media richness, ICTs with lower levels of media richness are preferred as they surrender less detail to surveillance:

My family didn't want me to drink tea [during pregnancy], but I really loved it. It's not even scientifically solid. My doctor said it's ok to drink tea. It's just you can't have too much of it. I just ignored [them]. When I drank tea, I wouldn't let [them] see me. Don't use video calls, don't take photos and don't check-in on Facebook [...] If he happened to call, I wouldn't answer. If we really had to chat, I'd use text messages. (RS)

When I was sick, I wouldn't want my family to see me. I'd use voice-based interactions. It's better than video calls. They can see me through video calls. (TTL)

In situations where family communication becomes a site for a monitoring gaze, a popular strategy to negotiate surveillance is to prioritize tools with lower media richness, which allows for less intrusion into the mothers' bodily activities in daily life.

Third, many interviewees choose to selectively present their own emotions during family communication through ICT-based co-presence:

I'd only let him know about good news. I wouldn't let him know if I was in a bad mood. (FM)

I had some depression issues back then. I was there all alone. It was my first child. He was not here. I had a lot to complain about [...] Even if I told him, he was too far to help. If he knew, he'd just get sad. This is the trick. (TC)

On the one hand, concealing negative emotions from the distant husbands is described as part of the emotional labour the women take on in birth tourism, which serves to take care of the husbands' emotional well-being. On the other hand, this also serves as a way in which the women evade the monitoring gaze upon their role of being a mother during the transition to parenthood.

## **Concluding remarks**

The findings revisit the role of ICTs in transnational motherhood in at least two ways. First, this research focuses on ICT use during expectant motherhood. Studies on ICT-based co-presence and transnational mothers have contributed to the family practices among migrant mothers of young children, particularly among migrant workers taking up domestic labour abroad. By focusing on expectant mothers in birth tourism, this article seeks to highlight an emerging form of transnational motherhood that involves different sets of emotions and distinct emotional labour that have until now been rarely discussed.

Second, the findings not only demonstrate how the mothers utilize ICTs to manage their emotional needs but also examine and theorize how transnational mothers are subject to pre-migration gender norms and disciplinary power in the context of ICT-based co-presence. Studies on transnational mothers have contributed to a functionalist investigation that uncovers the role of ICT-based co-presence in 'recovering' the functions of families, addressing the mothers' feelings of longing and managing the challenged identity of being a mother and wife. In addition to discussing positive functions, this study further adopts a power and conflict perspective that identifies the limitations of these celebratory accounts.


The use of ICTs among the interviewees demonstrates the dual role of intimacy through ICT-based co-presence in expectant motherhood. On the one hand, the transition to parenthood has been widely accepted as a time when both fathers and mothers take part in care labour. The work surrounding caring for pregnant women is largely considered a key responsibility during expectant fatherhood. While birth tourism and its spatial arrangement lead to the absence of the fathers, ICT-based co-presence restores the role of the fathers. This virtual participation in care labour among the husbands is embraced by the mothers as fulfilling their emotional needs. However, this positive experience of ICT-based co-presence has its limits. The temporal, spatial and cultural constraints of ICT use structure the ways in which the mothers gain emotional satisfaction.

On the other hand, ICT-based co-presence also serves as a disciplinary gaze. Representing pregnant bodies through ICT-based co-presence is a key aspect of expectant motherhood in transnational families. This is because pregnant bodies are constructed as a spectacle of intimacy through which the emotional connections between the foetus and other family members are established. Thus, through ICT-based co-presence, expectant mothers' bodily movements, health conditions and other embodiments are subject to constant surveillance by their distant families. ICT use creates ICT-based co-presence that brings the women back to the traditional power dynamics surrounding the politics of gaze during pregnancy. Many interviewees adopt various strategies to negotiate these disciplinary gazes. These strategies include delaying ICT use, selection regarding media richness and selective representation of emotions.

## Funding

This research is funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan.

## ORCID iD

Tingyu Kang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9396-5228>

## References

- Baldassar L (2008) Missing kin and longing to be together: emotions and the construction of co-presence in transnational relationships. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29(3): 247–266.
- Baldassar L (2016) De-demonizing distance in mobile family lives: co-presence, care circulation and polymedia as vibrant matter. *Global Networks* 16(2): 145–163.
- Baldassar L, Baldock C and Wilding R (2007) *Families Caring Across Borders: Transnational Migration, Ageing and Long Distance Care*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baldassar L, Nedelcu M, Merla L, et al. (2016) ICT-based co-presence in transnational families and communities: challenging the premise of face-to-face proximity in sustaining relationships. *Global Networks* 16(2): 133–144.
- Belsky J and Rovine M (1990) Patterns of marital change across the transition to parenthood: pregnancy to three years postpartum. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 52: 5–19.
- Blackshaw T (2009) Fathers and childbirth. In: Squire C (ed.) *The Social Context of Birth*. Abingdon: Radcliffe Publishing Ltd, pp. 215–235.
- Bondas-Salonen T (1998) How women experience the presence of their partners at the births of their babies. *Qualitative Health Research* 8(6): 784–800.

- Chang C (2013) In suburbs of LA, a cottage of birth tourism. *Los Angeles Times*, 3 January. Available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/03/local/la-me-birthing-centers-20130104>
- Chen C (2007) *From little worries to big anxieties: the medicalization of prenatal examination and women's changing experience of pregnancy in Taiwan, 1945–2006*. Thesis, Kaohsiung Medical University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan (in Chinese).
- Climo J (1992) *Distant Parents*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Davies K and Boyle L (2013) Maternity hotel for Chinese women to give birth to US citizens is found in the back of California hotel. *Daily Mail*, 14 March. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2293025/Maternity-hotel-allowing-Chinese-women-birth-U-S-citizens-claimed-operating-popular-California-motel.html>
- Draper J (1997) Whose welfare in the delivery room? A discussion of the increasing trend of fathers' birth attendance. *Midwifery* 13: 132–138.
- Duden B (1993) *Disembodying Women*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fang P (2015) The resurgence of birth tourism. *Epoch Times*, November 14 (in Chinese). Available at: <http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/15/11/14/n4573372.htm>
- Grad S (2015) Asian 'Anchor Babies': wealthy Chinese come to Southern California to give birth. *LA Times*, 26 August. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-asian-anchor-babies-wealthy-chinese-20150826-story.html>
- Hondagneu-Sotelo P and Avila E (1997) I'm here, but I'm there: the meanings of Latina transnational motherhood'. *Gender & Society* 11(5): 548–571.
- Hsieh S (1996) Factors of cesarean section'. *Taiwan Panorama* 21(8): 44–51 (in Chinese).
- Hsu F (2015) *Doing family in a transnational context: the gender politics of communication technologies*. Master's Thesis, National Chengchi University, Taipei (in Chinese).
- Huang S and Yeoh BSA (2005) transnational families and their children's education: China's 'Study Mothers' in Singapore'. *Global Networks* 5(4): 379–400.
- Ip WY (2000) Chinese husbands' presence during labour: a preliminary study in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Nursing Practice* 6: 89–96.
- Johanson M (2013) Birth tourism: LA's maternity hotels enrage residents, but are they illegal? *International Business Times*, 30 January. Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/birth-tourism-las-maternity-hotels-enrage-residents-are-they-illegal-1050206>
- Kainz G, Eliasson M and Yon Post I (2010) The child's father, an important person for the mother's wellbeing during the childbirth: a hermeneutic study. *Health Care for Women International* 31: 621–635.
- Kang T (2012) Gendered media, changing intimacy: Internet-mediated transnational communication in the family sphere. *Media, Culture & Society* 34(2): 146–161.
- Kessler G (2015) 'Birth tourists' and 'anchor babies': what Trump and Bush got right. *The Washington Post*, 25 August. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/08/25/birth-tourists-and-anchor-babies-what-trump-and-bush-got-right/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.8900cf698275](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/08/25/birth-tourists-and-anchor-babies-what-trump-and-bush-got-right/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.8900cf698275)
- Lan Y (2000) *The lived experience of accompanying husbands in labor*. Thesis, National Defense Medical Center, Taipei, Taiwan (in Chinese).
- Leavitt J (2003) What do men have to do with it? Fathers and mid-twentieth century childbirth. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 77(2): 235–262.
- Lee W (2009) *Taiwanese husbands involved in the prenatal and childbirth and the change in gender politics 1970–2008*. Thesis, Kaohsiung Medical University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan (in Chinese).
- Ma C (2002) *Bodily autonomy and decision making in cesarean section*. PhD Thesis, Taipei Medical University, Taipei, Taiwan (in Chinese).

- Madianou M (2012) Migration and the accentuated ambivalence of motherhood: the role of ICTs in Filipino transnational families. *Global Networks* 12(3): 277–295.
- Madianou M (2016) Ambient co-presence: transnational family practices in polymedia environments. *Global Networks* 16: 183–201.
- Madianou M and Miller D (2013) Polymedia: towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(2): 169–187.
- Manning FA (1989) Reflections on future directions of perinatal medicine. *Seminars in Perinatology* 13: 342–351.
- Mattingly SS (1992) The maternal-fetal dyad: exploring the two-patient obstetric model. *Hastings Center Report* 22: 13–18.
- Nedelcu M and Wyss M (2016) ‘Doing family’ through ICT-mediated ordinary co-presence: transnational communication practices of Romanian migrants in Switzerland. *Global Networks* 16(2): 202–218.
- Parreñas R (2005) Long distance intimacy: class, gender and intergenerational relations between mothers and children in Filipino transnational families. *Global Networks* 5(4): 317–336.
- Robertson Z, Wilding R and Gifford S (2016) Mediating the family imagery: young people negotiating absence in transnational refugees families. *Global Networks* 16(2): 219–236.
- Roy RN, Schumm WR and Britt SL (2014) *Transition to Parenthood*. New York: Springer.
- Sandelowski M (1994) Separate, but less unequal: fetal ultrasound and the transformation of expectant mother/fatherhood. *Gender and Society* 8(2): 230–245.
- Sapkota S, Kobayashi T and Takasev M (2011) Women’s experience of giving birth with their husband’s support in Nepal. *British Journal of Midwifery* 19(7): 426–432.
- Sayad A (1999) *La Double Absence: Des Illusions De L’émigré Aux Souffrances De L’immigré*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Sheehan M (2015) Born in the USA: why Chinese ‘birth tourism’ is booming in California. *The Huffington Post*, 1 May. Available at: [https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/china-us-birth-tourism\\_n\\_7187180](https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/china-us-birth-tourism_n_7187180)
- Somers-Smith MJ (1999) A place for the partner? Expectations and experiences of support during childbirth. *Midwifery* 15: 101–108.
- Uy-Tioco C (2007) Overseas Filipino workers and text messaging: reinventing transnational mothering. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 21(2): 253–265.
- Yu B (2015) Birth tourism’ booming in Bay Area despite fed crackdown. *CBS News*, 25 September. Available at: <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2015/09/25/birth-tourism-bay-area-operators-avoid-spotlight/>