



Virtual Caregiving: Digital Communication as Emotional Lifeline for Elderly Parents

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Abstract: In the context of transnational families, especially among the Indian diaspora, elderly parents often experience emotional isolation due to physical separation from their children. This study explores how digital communication technologies—such as video calls, messaging apps, and social media serve as tools of virtual caregiving, offering emotional support and a sense of connection. Using a narrative approach, this research analyzes the lived experiences of elderly parents left behind in India to understand how they perceive, engage with, and are impacted by these virtual interactions. The findings reveal that while digital communication mitigates loneliness and fosters emotional reassurance, it also exposes gaps in digital literacy and emotional fulfillment. This article argues that virtual caregiving, though not a substitute for physical presence, has become an essential component of modern eldercare in diasporic contexts.

Keywords: Virtual Care, Digital Divide, Digital Communication, Transnational Families

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, transnational migration has become a defining feature of globalization, leading to profound shifts in family structures and caregiving arrangements. Among the most affected are elderly parents in countries like India, whose adult children have migrated abroad in search of better educational and economic opportunities. This growing segment of the Indian diaspora—estimated at over 18 million globally (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2022)—has given rise to transnational families where intergenerational relationships are maintained across borders through a combination of remittances, occasional visits, and increasingly, digital communication.

The phenomenon of transnational caregiving challenges traditional notions of eldercare, which in India have historically been rooted in co-residence and daily familial involvement (Lamb, 2009). As physical proximity diminishes, the emotional and social dimensions of care require new forms of mediation. Technology particularly digital platforms like video calls, instant messaging, and social media has emerged as a critical lifeline for elderly parents seeking connection, reassurance, and emotional support from their children abroad (Baldassar, 2007).

The concept of virtual caregiving has gained prominence in recent scholarship to describe these forms of technologically-mediated care that maintain emotional closeness despite geographical distance (Wilding, 2006; Madianou & Miller, 2012). For elderly parents left behind, virtual communication is not just about the transmission of information it is deeply intertwined with feelings of presence, intimacy, and relational continuity. However, the effectiveness and emotional impact of these virtual interactions are far from

uniform. Factors such as digital literacy, access to technology, cultural expectations of care, and the emotional tenor of communication shape how these interactions are experienced and interpreted (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018).

This article seeks to explore the emotional dimensions of digital communication in transnational caregiving through the lens of the Indian diaspora. Drawing on narrative accounts of elderly parents residing in India, whose children have migrated to countries such as the United States, Canada, and the Gulf nations, this study examines how they perceive and experience virtual care. By focusing on their lived experiences, this research aims to move beyond simplistic assessments of technology as either a solution or substitute for physical caregiving. Instead, it interrogates how digital tools are embedded in the emotional fabric of transnational family life, reshaping both expectations and expressions of eldercare.

The findings of this study contribute to broader discourses on migration, aging, and technology, particularly within the South Asian context, where the cultural ethos of filial responsibility often collides with the practical realities of global mobility. As India grapples with a rapidly aging population and a steadily expanding diaspora, understanding the role of virtual care becomes essential in reimagining eldercare frameworks in an increasingly digitized and transnational world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The phenomenon of virtual caregiving emotional and social care facilitated through digital means emerges at the intersection of transnational migration, technological mediation, and changing norms of eldercare. This literature review explores four interrelated areas: (1) transnational families and caregiving; (2) digital communication in diaspora studies; (3) elderly well-being and emotional support; and (4) the digital divide among Indian elders. It also clarifies key concepts that frame this study.

Transnational Families and Caregiving

Transnational migration, especially among the Indian diaspora, has resulted in dispersed family units where caregiving must be reimagined across distance. Scholars like Baldassar (2007) and Wilding (2006) argue that transnational families maintain “care circulation,” a flow of moral, emotional, and practical support across national boundaries. Baldassar (2007) emphasizes that emotional care, expressed through regular communication, is central to sustaining familial bonds in the absence of physical proximity. Similarly, Wilding (2006) introduces the idea of “virtual intimacies,” highlighting how care and closeness are reproduced through digital technologies.

These frameworks challenge the assumption that care is inherently spatial and instead assert that emotional closeness can be maintained through frequent, meaningful digital interactions. In the Indian context, where filial piety and co-residential caregiving have traditionally dominated (Lamb, 2009), the shift to transnational virtual care presents both emotional adaptations and sociocultural tensions.

Technology and Virtual Communication in Diaspora Studies

The rapid adoption of digital tools has significantly shaped transnational interactions. Madianou and Miller (2012) introduce the concept of **polymedia**, wherein migrants and their families use a variety of media

platforms—video calls, instant messaging, and social media—to manage emotional closeness, conflict, and care. These platforms are not merely channels but part of a “media ecology” that shapes the quality and meaning of interpersonal relationships.

In the Indian diaspora, platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, and Facebook have become routine means for emotional check-ins and updates. Leurs and Ponzanesi (2018) argue that digital connectivity fosters a sense of “ambient co-presence,” where even passive consumption of family updates contributes to emotional bonding. Yet, this connectivity is not without limitations; frequent digital contact does not always translate into emotional satisfaction or deeper relational engagement, especially when interactions are routinized or surface-level.

Elderly Well-being and Emotional Support

Elderly parents left behind in India often experience loneliness, social isolation, and anxiety stemming from their children’s physical absence (Lamb, 2009). Emotional support, defined as expressions of empathy, love, and reassurance, is a critical component of their well-being. The United Nations (2023) warns of growing vulnerability among aging populations in developing countries, especially when traditional family structures are eroding.

Studies on the psychosocial health of the elderly underscore that emotional support whether physical or virtual is linked to reduced depressive symptoms, improved self-worth, and stronger coping mechanisms. While occasional remittances address material needs, emotional well-being hinges on consistent, meaningful interaction with family members, particularly children.

Virtual caregiving, therefore, becomes a crucial but complex mode of elder support potentially fulfilling, yet always mediated and sometimes insufficient in moments of crisis or illness.

Digital Divide and Technology Use Among Elderly in India

Despite the potential of digital caregiving, its impact is mediated by unequal access to technology. The **digital divide** marked by disparities in access, affordability, and digital literacy remains a significant barrier for older adults in India. Many elders rely on others to access smartphones or use apps, and initial engagement with digital platforms can be marked by fear or confusion (Neves et al., 2018).

Government efforts like India’s Digital Literacy Mission have increased access in urban areas, yet rural and lower-income elderly populations continue to lag behind. Even among those with access, the emotional nuances of virtual communication are sometimes lost due to generational and cultural differences in digital expression.

Thus, while virtual caregiving may offer emotional sustenance, its effectiveness is uneven and often dependent on external support—both familial and institutional.

Conceptual Clarifications

This study is informed by three key concepts:

- a. **Virtual Caregiving:** The provision of emotional, psychological, and relational support through digital

means, particularly in contexts where physical caregiving is unfeasible due to geographic separation (Baldassar et al., 2016).

- b. **Emotional Support:** Interpersonal expressions of empathy, love, validation, and reassurance, which contribute to the psychological well-being of the care recipient (Thoits, 2011).
- c. **Polymedia:** A communicative environment where individuals choose between multiple digital platforms to express care, shaped by emotional, relational, and contextual factors (Madianou & Miller, 2012).

These concepts enable a nuanced understanding of how technology mediates emotional care within Indian transnational families.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in **narrative inquiry**, aiming to explore the lived experiences of elderly parents in India whose children have migrated abroad. Narrative inquiry is particularly suited to this study as it centers on the personal stories of participants, offering deep insight into their emotional worlds and everyday negotiations with virtual caregiving.

Participants were selected through **purposive sampling**, focusing on individuals aged 60 and above, residing in India, and having one or more children settled in diasporic countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, or Gulf nations. A total of 35 participants were engaged for the study, ensuring a diversity of backgrounds in terms of region, class, and gender to enrich the narratives.

Data collection

Involved in-depth interviews that allowed for open-ended, reflective storytelling. These were either conducted face-to-face or via telephone, depending on participant comfort and accessibility. Participants were encouraged to narrate their experiences of staying connected with their children through digital means such as video calls, messaging apps, and social media. Their stories provided valuable insights into the emotional dimensions of transnational family life.

All ethical protocols were diligently followed. **Informed consent** was obtained from each participant, with clear communication about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, and care was taken to handle emotionally sensitive topics with respect and empathy.

The **data analysis** followed the **thematic analysis** method as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed, coded, and grouped into recurring themes to identify patterns in how digital communication was experienced as a form of emotional support. The themes were then interpreted in relation to the broader theoretical framework of transnational caregiving and emotional well-being.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following major themes emerged from the narratives of elderly parents in India regarding their experiences with digital communication and virtual caregiving. These themes highlight the role of video

calls, social media, and digital literacy in maintaining emotional support across transnational boundaries. The findings reveal the strengths and limitations of virtual care, along with the shifting dynamics of intergenerational bonds in the context of diaspora.

"Seeing is Feeling": The Emotional Power of Video Calls

A dominant theme among participants was the significance of video calls as a critical means of emotional connection. Many elderly parents described how seeing their children's faces, even on a screen, helped reduce the emotional distance created by physical separation. As one participant, a 68-year-old retired teacher, shared:

"When I see my daughter on video call, it feels like she's right here with me. I can see her smile, hear her voice. It's not the same as being with her, but it makes me feel less alone."

Such sentiments were common across narratives, with regular video calls functioning as a form of reassurance. For many, these calls were structured into weekly or daily routines, providing predictability and emotional stability. Participants noted that even brief interactions could lift their spirits, providing a sense of intimacy and continuity despite geographical distances. A 72-year-old retired government employee emphasized, *"The calls are a lifeline for me. It's part of my day now. It brings joy."* These rituals of digital contact, though virtual, were seen as essential anchors that maintained emotional well-being.

However, the emotional satisfaction derived from video calls was not without its challenges. Some participants expressed a sense of frustration that the virtual presence of their children could not fully substitute for the tactile and physical aspects of caregiving, such as hugging or being physically close during difficult moments. This is a key limitation of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2012), which refers to the variety of media channels available for communication but fails to bridge the gaps in physical caregiving.

"We Know Their Lives Through Social Media": Passive Yet Meaningful Connections

Social media, particularly platforms like Facebook and Instagram, also played a significant role in the lives of elderly parents. Although these platforms did not provide the direct, real-time communication that video calls did, they allowed elderly parents to stay passively updated on their children's lives. As a 65-year-old homemaker remarked:

"I don't talk to my son every day, but when I see his pictures on Facebook, I feel like I'm part of his life. It comforts me to see him happy with his family."

This form of passive emotional support was crucial for many participants, as it helped them feel included and connected to their children's lives, even from a distance. The shared experiences captured in photos, status updates, and family milestones helped maintain a sense of emotional involvement. However, some parents expressed mixed feelings about social media. While it made them feel connected, others reported occasional feelings of exclusion, particularly when they were not part of the social media activities or updates shared by their children. As a 70-year-old businessman noted:

"Sometimes, I see photos of family gatherings, and I feel left out. It's nice to see them, but it also reminds me of what I don't have anymore."

Thus, social media emerged as both a tool of emotional inclusion and a source of occasional emotional dissonance, demonstrating the complex role of **emotional support** in virtual interactions (Lamb, 2009).

"But It's Not the Same": Navigating the Limitations of Virtual Caregiving

While video calls and social media provided emotional support, the limitations of virtual caregiving were evident, particularly during times of illness, crisis, or special family occasions like festivals. The inability to provide physical care was a recurring concern. As a 74-year-old retired teacher explained:

"When I fell ill last year, I needed her by my side. A phone call can't bring you soup or help you walk. It was very hard to manage on my own."

Such instances underscored the emotional gaps that digital communication could not bridge. Despite the emotional solace provided by virtual interactions, participants consistently noted that the absence of physical presence during significant life events, especially during times of health crises or celebrations like festivals, left them feeling emotionally neglected. The inability to hug or offer tangible support created a sense of longing and a deep awareness of the physical limitations of virtual care, reflecting the digital divide (Norris, 2001) that exists in access to technologies and, subsequently, caregiving support.

Moreover, some participants highlighted the generational gap in digital literacy as an obstacle to engaging with technology. As a 68-year-old former professor recalled:

"I struggled at first. My daughter had to show me how to use the video call. I felt embarrassed and frustrated. But over time, I got used to it. Now, I feel more confident, but it took patience."

For these elderly parents, learning to navigate digital tools was a journey of gradual empowerment. While initially dependent on their children or other family members to facilitate communication, many participants reported a growing autonomy in managing their digital connections. As a 60-year-old homemaker shared:

"It was difficult at first, but now I feel independent. I can message my son and see his children grow up through pictures. It feels like I'm part of their life, even from here."

These narratives illustrate how the adoption of digital tools for caregiving, although challenging, could eventually lead to increased autonomy and empowerment for elderly parents, aligning with polymedia theory, which suggests that the use of multiple media platforms can offer different layers of communication and connection (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018).

CONCLUSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal that while digital communication offers significant emotional benefits for elderly parents in India, it also comes with limitations. Video calls provide vital emotional support, enabling elderly parents to feel connected to their children despite geographical distance. However, these

interactions are not a complete substitute for the physical presence and caregiving that are often essential for elderly well-being, particularly during health crises or festivals. Social media allows for passive emotional support but can also evoke feelings of exclusion when family members are more engaged in their online spaces than the elderly parents. Additionally, the digital divide and initial struggles with technology can hinder the full potential of virtual caregiving, though many elderly parents report growing confidence in managing digital tools. This study highlights the nuanced role of technology in reimagining intergenerational bonds, suggesting that virtual caregiving is a dynamic process that combines emotional support with digital mediation but cannot fully replace the tangible presence and physical care that are central to traditional caregiving practices.

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