

DIGITAL TRANSNATIONALISM: THE ROLE OF REMOTE COMMUNICATION IN PRESERVING THE VALUE ORIENTATIONS OF THE SERBIAN DIASPORA

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Abstract

Migration theory has traditionally been grounded in the assumption of cultural rupture and linear assimilation, positing that physical distance from the homeland leads to the gradual erosion of original value orientations. The spread of digital communication technologies, however, has fundamentally transformed the phenomenological experience of migration. Focusing on the highly educated Serbian diaspora, this paper proposes the 'Virtual Hearth' hypothesis to explain how digital transnationalism operates as a conservative mechanism of value preservation. Through a theoretical synthesis and comparative analysis of remote communication platforms, most notably Viber, the study demonstrates that these tools generate 'ambient co-presence' that mitigates the hysteresis effect typically associated with displacement. By sustaining a continuous 'transnational habitus,' migrants maintain intersubjective bonds and everyday cultural rituals with the origin country, effectively slowing the acculturation process and reinforcing traditional values. A comparative matrix of digital behaviors among stayers in Serbia and leavers in the diaspora reveals a technological inversion: while the youth in Serbia use digital platforms for globalised modernisation, the diaspora employs them for cultural conservation and psychological validation. The paper concludes that contemporary integration policies must account for forms of 'segmented integration,' whereby migrants may achieve structural integration in the host society while remaining axiologically anchored to their homeland.

Key words: digital transnationalism, Serbian diaspora, transnational habitus, ambient co-presence, value orientations, remote communication, Virtual Hearth hypothesis.

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ДИГИТАЛНИ ТРАНСНАЦИОНАЛИЗАМ: УЛОГА КОМУНИКАЦИЈЕ НА ДАЉИНУ У ОЧУВАЊУ ВРЕДНОСНИХ ОРИЈЕНТАЦИЈА СРПСКЕ ДИЈАСПОРЕ

Апстракт

Теорије миграција традиционално се заснивају на претпоставци културолошког раскида и линеарне асимилације, полазећи од идеје да физичка дистанца од матице неминовно доводи до постепеног слабења изворних вредносних оријентација. Ипак, развој дигиталних комуникационих технологија суштински је измењено феноменолошко искуство миграната. Фокусирајући се на високообразовану српску дијаспору, овај рад предлаже хипотезу 'виртуелног огњишта' како би објаснио на који начин дигитални транснационализам делује као конзервативни механизам очувања вредности. Кроз теоријску синтезу и компаративну анализу платформи за комуникацију на даљину, пре свега Viber-а, рад показује да ови алати стварају 'амбијенталну ко-присутност' која ублажава хистерезу типично повезану са физичким измештањем. Одржавајући континуирани 'транснационални хабитус', мигранти очувају интересубјективне везе и свакодневне културне ритуале са матицом, чиме успоравају процес акултурације и јачају традиционалне вредности. Компаративна анализа дигиталних пракси младих у Србији (они који остају) и дијаспоре (они који одлазе) показује инверзију функције технологије: док млади у Србији дигиталне платформе користе за глобализовану модернизацију, припадници дијаспоре их примарно користе за културну конзервацију и психолошку валидацију. Рад закључује да савремене интеграционе политике морају узети у обзир феномен 'сегментираних интеграција', у оквиру које мигранти могу бити структурално интегрисани у друштво домаћина, али истовремено остати аксиолошки везани за матицу.

Кључне речи: дигитални транснационализам, српска дијаспора, транснационални хабитус, амбијентална ко-присутност, вредносне оријентације, комуникација на даљину, хипотеза 'виртуелног огњишта'.

INTRODUCTION

The sociological understanding of migration has long been predicated on the concept of rupture, the assumption that the act of crossing national borders necessitates a gradual detachment from the home community and an inevitable assimilation into the host society. Classical theorists such as Park (1928) and Gordon (1964) conceptualized this as a linear trajectory: as the physical distance from the homeland increases, the intensity of cultural retention decreases. In this “uprooted” model, the migrant was expected to eventually shed their original cultural skin to survive in the host environment, moving from a state of marginality to full integration via structural and identificational assimilation. It is important to note, however, that this classical model rests on several simplifying assumptions: that the culture of origin and the host culture are sufficiently distant to produce unavoidable value rupture; that migration entails a definitive severance from the homeland community; and that assimilation into the dominant culture of the host society is the normative endpoint. Each of these premises is

open to challenge. Cultural distance varies considerably across migration corridors; diaspora communities in ethnic enclaves have historically sustained homeland culture without full severance; and the integration literature has long recognised that segmented, selective, or multicultural outcomes are empirically common (Berry, 1997; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). However, the digital revolution of the 21st century has fundamentally dismantled this linearity, giving rise to a new social morphology: the “connected migrant” (Diminescu, 2008). For the Serbian diaspora, particularly the highly educated sector often referred to as the “intellectual diaspora” (Dinić, 2018; Stanković, 2014), this shift is profound and quantitatively verifiable. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), there were more than 950,000 Serbian emigrants globally in 2024, with a staggering 93.3% residing in Europe. The concentration is particularly dense in Western Europe: Germany hosts 272,690 Serbian citizens (Destatis, 2024), Austria is home to nearly 150,000 Serbia-born residents (Statistik Austria, 2023), and Switzerland accounts for over 50,000 Serbian citizens (FSO, 2024). These figures represent a significant portion of the citizens of Serbia living outside the territorial borders but arguably remaining within the digital borders of the nation.

The geographic distance between Serbia and these major diasporic hubs no longer imposes a barrier to social intimacy. Through the ubiquitous use of instant messaging (Viber, WhatsApp), video conferencing (Zoom, Skype), and social media platforms, Serbian migrants practice a form of “digital transnationalism” (Nedelcu, 2012). This technological infrastructure creates a “polymedia” environment (Madianou & Miller, 2012), allowing individuals to maintain a state of “simultaneous embeddedness” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004), physically residing in a host country while psychologically inhabiting the social space of the Balkans.

While existing literature has extensively documented the economic dimensions of this relationship, particularly regarding remittances (Arandarenko, 2021) and political engagement from abroad (Pavlović, 2019), there remains a significant gap regarding the axiological consequences of this hyper-connectivity. Specifically, how does continuous digital immersion in the “home” context affect the value orientations of migrants? This question is particularly pertinent given the socio-economic context of the sending country. With youth unemployment in Serbia standing at 22.72% in 2024 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia) and a net migration of -8,132 in the same year, the motivation for migration remains largely structural, yet the emotional tether to the “broken” homeland remains paradoxically strong.

This paper challenges the traditional assimilationist model by proposing the “Virtual Hearth” hypothesis. We argue that high-frequency digital interaction with the homeland does not merely facilitate communication; it functions as a conservative mechanism for value preservation. By

maintaining a continuous “digital habitus,” migrants effectively pause the acculturation process, reinforcing traditional values, such as collectivism, strong family hierarchy, and ethno-national pride, thereby shielding themselves from the liberal-individualistic pressures of the host society, a characterisation that, while broadly supported by cross-national value survey data for the principal receiving countries (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; EVS /WVS, 2022), should be understood as a structural tendency rather than a uniform cultural reality across all receiving contexts (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CONNECTED MIGRANT

From Uprootedness to Transnational Habitus

To understand the persistence of value orientations among the Serbian diaspora, it is necessary to move beyond static models of acculturation and employ Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the system of durable, transposable dispositions that function as structuring structures (Bourdieu, 1977). Traditionally, habitus was viewed as being linked to a specific physical field; when a person migrated, they experienced a “hysteresis effect,” a painful misalignment between their internalized dispositions and the new social environment, forcing them to adapt or suffer marginalization. However, Nedelcu (2012) argues that the digital revolution has mitigated this hysteresis. Migrants no longer simply “leave” a field; they carry it with them via mobile technology.

This emergence of a “transnational habitus” (Salazar, 2021) allows the migrant to navigate two social fields simultaneously. They effectively operate with a “dual consciousness”: a professional habitus adapted to the host country (e.g., German work ethic, punctuality) and a private, domestic habitus that remains distinctly Serbian, maintained through active, daily digital participation. As Salazar notes, the transnational habitus is not merely a blending of cultures but a strategic deployment of dispositions depending on the digital or physical context.

Schutzian Phenomenology and Intersubjectivity

Central to our theoretical expansion is the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, particularly his concepts of “intersubjectivity” and the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*). Schutz (1967) argued that social reality is constructed through the intersubjective understanding of others in the “world of daily life.” Crucially, Schutz distinguished between “consociates” (those we share a community of time and space with) and “contemporaries” (those we share time with, but not space). In the pre-digital era, migration transformed family members from consociates into contemporaries, fundamentally

weakening the intersubjective bond and the shared “stock of knowledge” (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

Digital transnationalism reverses this phenomenological transformation. Through video calls and instant messaging, distant contemporaries are re-constituted as virtual consociates. The “We-relationship” that Schutz described as essential for the maintenance of shared reality is preserved through the screen. When a Serbian migrant in Vienna interacts daily with their parents in Kragujevac via Viber, they are maintaining a shared “relevance structure” of everyday life. They are not merely exchanging information; they are mutually sustaining a specific moral and axiological universe. The “taken-for-granted” aspects of the Serbian life-world, aspects like its humor, its grievances, its hierarchies, are constantly reactivated, preventing the sedimented values from eroding (Schutz, 1967).

Polymedia and Ambient Co-Presence

The maintenance of this digital habitus is reliant on what Madianou and Miller (2012) term “polymedia”. This theory suggests that users do not choose media platforms based on cost or access (which are largely negligible in the age of flat-rate data) but based on social imperatives. In the context of the Serbian diaspora, this infrastructure is arguably culturally specific in its patterns of adoption and use, though systematic comparative data across receiving countries remain limited (Filipović, 2018). While platforms like LinkedIn or Email are reserved for the “host” world (mainly professional integration), specific apps serve as the “virtual hearth” (the term is developed here as an extension of Madianou and Miller’s polymedia theory and the concept of ambient co-presence in transnational family life).

Also, it should be noted that the use of contemporary communication platforms represents a qualitative shift from earlier migration technologies. While the letters analyzed by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-1920) or the intermittent telephone calls of the 20th century (Horst, 2006) provided isolated updates, modern digital tools facilitate ‘ambient co-presence’ (Madianou, 2016).

Madianou (2016) further develops this with the concept of “ambient co-presence.” This refers to the background awareness of the other’s presence, mediated by technology. Serbian migrants, as for transnational communities more broadly speaking (Baldassar et al., 2016; Madianou, 2016), this often manifests as an “always-on” connection, though the precise intensity and form of such connectivity among Serbian migrants specifically warrants dedicated empirical investigation. This ‘always-on’ infrastructure creates a ‘Virtual Hearth’, a digital domestic space where the ambience and daily rhythms of the home in Serbia are transmitted in real-time. For the Serbian diaspora, these connections are not merely functional but serve as a technologically mediated habitus that reproduces the emotional and ritual

atmosphere of the homeland, bridging the phenomenological gap between 'here' and 'there'. The smartphone does not just transmit voice; it transmits the ambiance of the home. This state of ambient co-presence is crucial for the transmission of values because it allows for the monitoring and reinforcement of norms in trivial, everyday situations, rather than just during significant life events. It creates a “socialization buffer” where the migrant is physically in the West but socially enveloped by the origin culture, a formulation that deliberately employs the shorthand “East/West” as a heuristic reference to axes of cultural difference identified in the comparative value literature (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), while acknowledging that this binary is a contested analytical construct rather than an ontological reality (cf. Said, 1978; Todorova, 1997).

Acculturation Strategies in the Digital Age

Berry's (1997) classic model of acculturation identifies four strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Traditionally, “separation” (retaining original culture while rejecting the host culture) required physical segregation (ethnic ghettos). The “Virtual Hearth” hypothesis suggests a new form of “digital separation” or “segmented integration.” A migrant may be fully integrated professionally (e.g., speaking fluent German at work) but exist in a state of separation privately (living entirely within the Serbian digital sphere). This aligns with what some scholars call “transnationalism from above” versus “transnationalism from below”, where the latter is a grassroots maintenance of identity that resists the assimilatory pressures of the state.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the “Virtual Hearth” hypothesis, this study employs a qualitative comparative synthesis method. Given the inherent difficulties in surveying a dispersed population regarding subtle value shifts, we utilize a triangulated approach combining secondary data analysis and theoretical modeling. This approach allows us to construct a composite picture of the “connected migrant” by synthesizing disparate data sources that would otherwise remain isolated.

The primary dataset for the “Home Context” is the Youth Study Serbia 2024 (Stojilković Gnjatović et al., 2024), published by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. This comprehensive empirical study maps the values, digital behaviors, and future aspirations of the population currently residing in Serbia (aged 15-29). The “Diaspora Context” is constructed through a synthesis of established profiles of the Serbian intellectual diaspora (Dinić, 2018; Pavlov et al., 2020) and specific data on digital usage patterns among Serbian migrants (Filipović, 2018). Filipović's study is particularly instrumen-

tal, as it provides qualitative evidence of the frequency and nature of communication, noting that the majority of Serbian migrants communicate with families “on a daily basis or several times a week” using primarily Viber and Skype.

This comparative framework focuses on four key dimensions of axiological orientation:

1. Digital Behavior Orientation: The directionality of digital consumption (Inward vs. Outward).
2. Intergenerational Dependence: The nature of ties to parents and elders (Economic vs. Psychological).
3. Perception of Homeland: The cognitive framing of Serbia (Critical/Realist vs. Romantic/Nostalgic).
4. Acculturation strategy: The assimilation values and identification with globalised norms (Separation/segmentation vs. Modernization/Preservation).

It is important to acknowledge the methodological limitations inherent in this approach. The reliance on secondary data synthesis, while allowing for broad theoretical modeling, cannot capture the nuanced, lived experiences of individual migrants with the same richness as direct ethnographic observation or in-depth interviews. This study does not quantify the precise relationship between hours of digital contact and specific value retention metrics, nor does it account for potential mediating variables such as age at emigration, educational background, or socioeconomic status in the host country. Furthermore, the comparative framework assumes a degree of homogeneity within both the “home” and “diaspora” populations that may oversimplify internal diversity. These limitations position this work as a foundational theoretical contribution that establishes the plausibility of the Virtual Hearth hypothesis and provides a conceptual framework for future empirical research. Subsequent studies employing longitudinal digital ethnography, time-use diaries tracking digital consumption patterns, and psychometric assessments of value orientations across migrant cohorts will be essential to validate and refine the propositions advanced here.

ANALYSIS: THE DIGITAL MIRROR AND VALUE RETENTION

The Infrastructure of Intimacy: Viber as the Virtual Hearth

According to Filipović (2018), the digital habits of the Serbian diaspora are characterized by high-intensity usage of VoIP (Voice over IP) services. The study revealed that “the most commonly used applications are Viber and Skype, while participants tend to communicate on a daily basis.” This is not a trivial finding; it represents a structural shift in the phenomenology of migration. Unlike the Gastarbeiter of the 1970s and, by exten-

sion, those of subsequent decades who relied primarily on landline telephone calls and, later, early internet messaging, who relied on monthly letters, the contemporary migrant engages in synchronous, multi-modal communication.

Ivanović Barišić (2023) notes that Viber in Serbia functions as a specific cultural zone. It is the site of digital ritual: the daily exchange of “good morning” images, religious greetings during Orthodox holidays, and photos of children. For the diaspora, participation in this “Viber-sphere” is mandatory. Failure to respond rapidly is interpreted not as a technological lapse but as a moral failure, a rejection of the family collective. This constant connectivity acts as a mechanism of social control. The values of the homeland (collectivism, respect for elders) orientations documented as relatively prevalent in Serbian society by cross-national studies (Hofstede, 2001; EVS, 2017; Mojić, 2011, Gavrilović, 2014), though their distribution is uneven across generations, educational levels, and regions are policed remotely. As one participant in Filipović’s study noted, the connection is so constant that “I usually stay with my mother while my husband is abroad... it’s much easier to use Viber while I’m there.” This blurring of geographic lines ensures that the migrant never truly “leaves” the surveillance of the home community.

Comparative Matrix: Stayers vs. Leavers

To systematically evaluate the shifting relationship between digital practices and value orientations, we developed a comparative typology of ‘stayers’ and ‘leavers.’ This matrix serves as a heuristic analytical device designed to illustrate the ‘technological inversion’ effect, wherein identical communication tools facilitate modernization in the home context while serving as instruments of cultural preservation for the diaspora.

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Table 1 The Digital Divergence Matrix: Value Orientations in Home vs. Diaspora Contexts

Dimension	Home context (stayers)	Diaspora context (leavers)	Technological function
Primary digital focus	Global/outward (Instagram, TikTok)	Local/backward (Viber, WhatsApp)	Window vs. Mirror
Dependence type	Economics (structural necessity)	Psychological (emotional necessity)	Resource transfer vs. Validation
View of “home”	Critical/systemic failure	Romantic/cultural refuge	News feed vs. Memory curation
Acculturation strategy	Westernizing (in values)	Separation/segmentation	Modernization vs. Preservation

Note. The matrix was constructed by cross-referencing quantitative indicators from the *Youth Study Serbia 2024* (Stojilković Gnjatović et al., 2024) for the “stayers” dimension with qualitative profiles synthesised from Dinić (2018), Pavlov et al. (2020), and Filipović (2018) for the “leavers” dimension. It is intended as a heuristic analytical device rather than an empirically verified matrix.

Dimension 1: Primary Digital Behavior. This dimension draws on the *Youth Study Serbia 2024* (Stojilković Gnjatović et al., 2024), which surveyed respondents aged 15–29 currently residing in Serbia; the diaspora column synthesises Dinić’s (2018) doctoral research on value orientations and Filipović’s (2018) study of digital communication habits. The *Youth Study Serbia 2024* which, as indicated, covers the 15–29 age group and should not be extrapolated wholesale to older cohorts, namely, data from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2017) for Serbia indicate a pronounced generational gap in internet use. Following on that this Dimension (1) indicates that young people in Serbia utilize digital platforms primarily for global consumption. They look “outward,” engaging in what might be termed “imagined migration.” Conversely, the diaspora utilizes digital tools to look “backward.” For the migrant, the primary digital activity is local connection. Thus, the same technology serves opposite psychological goals: for the youth in Serbia, it is a tool of modernization; for the diaspora, it acts as a tool of conservation, a pattern that, while analytically useful, should not be treated as a rigid binary; empirical overlap between these orientations is both possible and expected, and the dichotomy is intended as a heuristic tool to illuminate divergent tendencies rather than to establish mutually exclusive categories.

Dimension 2: Family Dependence. A critical finding in the *Youth Study 2024* is the prolonged economic dependence of young people on their parents. In contrast, the intellectual diaspora, often economically successful abroad, exhibits a psychological dependence. constant video calls, the migrant seeks emotional validation and identity stability from the parents in Serbia, a pattern consistent with Baldassar et al.’s (2016) findings on transnational care and Filipović’s (2018) data on communication fre-

quency, though direct empirical measurement of this psychological dynamic among Serbian migrants specifically remains a priority for future research. This digital tether ensures that the parental authority structure remains intact. The “child” abroad may pay the bills via remittances, but the “parent” in Serbia still dictates the moral compass via the daily video call.

Dimension 3: Attitude Toward Serbia. Perhaps the most striking divergence is in the perception of the homeland. The “stayers” in Serbia often hold a highly critical view, focusing on systemic corruption and “brokenness” (Stojilković Gnjatović et al., 2024). The “leavers,” however, often succumb to digital romanticism. Mediated by the screen, their experience of Serbia is filtered; they engage in the warmth of social intimacy (Slava, holidays) while being physically removed from the systemic hardships. This “virtual version” of Serbia reinforces a nostalgic attachment that anchors their values in a patriotic, often traditionalist, framework.

Dimension 4: Acculturation Strategy. The fourth dimension concerns the overarching acculturation orientation adopted in each context. Among the “stayers,” the dominant orientation trends toward Westernising assimilation in values, driven by aspirational identification with globalised norms encountered through digital media. Among the diaspora “leavers,” the prevailing strategy corresponds more closely to Berry’s (1997) “separation” or “segmented integration” mode: full structural participation in the host society is combined with private maintenance of origin-culture values, facilitated precisely by the digital infrastructure described above.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE VIRTUAL HEARTH: DIGITAL RITUALS

The Digital Slava: Performing Identity Online

The *Krsna Slava* (Patron Saint Day) is a cornerstone of Serbian cultural identity, traditionally requiring physical presence, hospitality, and the breaking of bread. In the era of digital transnationalism, this ritual has been adapted rather than abandoned. It is increasingly common for the diaspora to “attend” the *Slava* via video link. However, this is not a passive viewing. The tablet or laptop is often placed at the head of the table in Niš or Belgrade, occupying a physical seat. The migrant “guests” participate in the toast (*Zdravica*), interact with other guests, and are subjected to the same social expectations as if they were present. These observations draw on Ivanović Barišić’s (2023) ethnographic documentation of digital ritual practices in contemporary Serbia and should be treated as illustrative of emerging patterns pending systematic empirical validation across diaspora communities. Crucially, this digital attendance reinforces the traditional hierarchy. The migrant, despite being a successful doctor or engineer in the West, may submit to the patriarchal authority of the host (usually the father

or elder brother) in Serbia during the call. This ritual performance can act as an annual “reset” of values, reminding the migrant of their specific place within the collective, thereby counteracting the individualistic autonomy they practise in their professional lives abroad, a theoretically coherent proposition grounded in the literature on hierarchical family structures (Dinić, 2018; Pavlov et al., 2020), but one that requires dedicated ethnographic or interview-based research to substantiate empirically. It is a moment where the “transnational habitus” tilts decisively back toward the origin culture.

Remote Grandparenting and Intergenerational Digital Care

Perhaps the most potent mechanism for value retention is the intergenerational transfer of norms via remote grandparenting practices. For young migrant couples raising children abroad, the grandparents in Serbia often play a daily role in child-rearing via screens (Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla, & Wilding, 2016). Unlike a weekly phone call, modern “connected presence” involves leaving the video connection open for hours while the child plays or eats. Through this “ambient co-presence” (Madianou, 2016), grandparents transmit language, folklore, and moral imperatives (“Sramota je” – It is shameful, “To se ne radi” – That’s not what (one) should be doing) in real-time.

This creates a “socialization buffer.” The child is physically attending a German or Swiss kindergarten, but their domestic socialization remains heavily Serbian. For the parents (the migrants), this relieves the guilt of emigration but could also constrain full adoption of host-country parenting norms, given the virtual presence of “traditional” grandparents monitoring and commenting on upbringing in real time. This scenario is theoretically consistent with Baldassar et al.’s (2016) research on remote grandparenting and Dinić’s (2018) findings on diaspora value profiles, but it constitutes a hypothesis for future empirical testing rather than an established finding. This mechanism suggests that the transmission of values is not ruptured by migration but is merely mediated by technology.”

DISCUSSION

The Digital Loop and the Pause on Acculturation

Gordon (1964) argued that “structural assimilation” (entering the institutions of the host society) inevitably leads to “identificational assimilation.” Digital transnationalism disrupts this link. A Serbian engineer in Munich may achieve perfect structural integration (high salary, German fluency), but if they invest a substantial portion of their daily digital time in the “Virtual Hearth,” their axiological profile remains “frozen” in the Serbian context. They inhabit a “Virtual Moratorium,” where the pressure to

adapt their core values, such as collectivism, power distance, tradition, values documented as relatively salient in Serbian society (Mojić, 2011; EVS, 2017; Hofstede, 2001), though unevenly distributed across age cohorts, educational levels, and regions, is neutralized by the constant affirmation they receive from their digital network in the homeland.

Comparative Perspectives

Comparing these findings with other diasporic groups reveals both similarities and specificities. Studies on the Turkish diaspora in Germany (e.g., Ogan, 2001) have long noted the role of satellite television (TRT International) in creating a “parallel society.” Similarly, research on Polish migrants in the UK highlights how cheap flights and Skype allow for “transnational commuting” (White, 2011). However, the Serbian case presents a distinct intensity due to the specific combination of “high cultural distance” (Orthodox heritage vs. vs. Western European secularism, a distinction that, like the Turkish-German or Moroccan-French case, represents one of several possible axes of perceived cultural distance rather than a configuration unique to the Serbian migration context) and “high recent trauma” (post-conflict transition). Unlike Polish migrants who operate within the political ease of the EU, Serbian migrants often utilize the digital sphere as a refuge from the perceived exclusion or “othering” they face as non-EU citizens. The digital tether is tighter because the external environment is perceived as colder.

Furthermore, the “collectivist” nature of Serbian society, measured as having high Power Distance and high Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede, 2001; a characterisation supported by more recent comparative data in Mojić (2011) and the European Values Study (EVS, 2017), though Hofstede’s original country scores were derived from surveys conducted in the 1970s–1980s and should be treated with appropriate caution when applied to contemporary Serbia, makes the digital tether more binding. For a culture that prioritizes family loyalty over individual autonomy, the obligation to be online is heavier than for migrants from more individualistic cultures. The smartphone acts as a digital umbilical cord that the culture refuses to cut.

The Demand for Rigor in the Digital Echo Chamber

The study of digital transnationalism necessitates a stringent methodological approach, particularly when analyzing the subjective domain of value orientations. In *The Demon-Haunted World*, Carl Sagan (1995) famously advocated for science as a “candle in the dark,” an essential tool for parsing reality from comforting illusions in an increasingly complex world. This principle is vital for contemporary sociology. There is a temptation in modern migration studies to rely on anecdotal assumptions, either the illusion of seamless global integration or the romanticization of the resilient migrant.

However, the “Virtual Hearth” is not a mere metaphor; it is an observable, structural phenomenon requiring the rigor of Sagan's “baloney detection kit”. Recognizing how digital platforms manipulate intersubjectivity requires sociologists to look past the surface utility of technology (e.g., free video calls) and empirically dissect its axiological consequences. Just as Sagan warned against the uncritical acceptance of pseudoscience, researchers must not uncritically accept that digital connectivity equates to cosmopolitan openness. As demonstrated by the Serbian diaspora's use of digital spaces for value conservation, technology often reinforces existing cultural paradigms rather than dismantling them. Therefore, applying rigorous, objective scrutiny to these digital spaces is the only way to accurately map the shifting realities of the modern connected migrant.

CONCLUSION AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

The digital revolution has significantly altered the phenomenology of migration. As this analysis suggests, the contemporary Serbian migrant is no longer necessarily the “uprooted” individual of the 20th century, forced to choose between the culture of origin and the culture of destination. Instead, through the mechanisms of digital transnationalism, they appear to be evolving into “anchored” migrants, physically present in the West but retaining a strong psychological tether to the Balkans.

The “Virtual Hearth” hypothesis posits that the ubiquity of platforms like Viber and WhatsApp functions as a conservative force on value orientations. By maintaining a continuous “digital habitus,” the intellectual diaspora replicates the social dynamics of the homeland, including its hierarchies, rituals, and moral codes, within the private sphere of their new lives. This creates a potential sociological paradox: the technology that was expected to globalize us may, in this specific context, allow for the preservation of the local.

These findings have significant implications for policy. Host countries should recognize that integration in the digital age is non-linear and cannot be measured solely through traditional metrics. Specifically, integration programs should move beyond language acquisition and employment to assess the quality of social ties. For Serbia, the implications are equally profound and actionable. Namely, intense digital connection presents opportunities for virtual mentorship and “digital commuting”. Future research must move beyond theoretical modeling and prioritize digital ethnography, as well as longitudinal and comparative studies to further validate these propositions. Further finding could potentially illuminate the possibilities of digital value preservation, particularly in the sense of new generations and the generations yet to come. In the age of the smartphone, it seems possible to travel thousands of kilometers without ever truly saying goodbye.

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ДИГИТАЛНИ ТРАНСНАЦИОНАЛИЗАМ: УЛОГА КОМУНИКАЦИЈЕ НА ДАЉИНУ У ОЧУВАЊУ ВРЕДНОСНИХ ОРИЈЕНТАЦИЈА СРПСКЕ ДИЈАСПОРЕ

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Резиме

Овај рад истражује на који начин дигиталне комуникационе технологије трансформишу феноменолошко искуство миграције и доприносе очувању вредносних оријентација српске дијаспоре. Полазећи од класичних теорија миграција, које претпостављају културолошки раскид и линеарну асимилацију (Park, 1928; Gordon, 1964), рад показује да дигитална револуција 21. века нарушава ову линеарност и омогућава настанак „повезаног мигранта” (Diminescu, 2008). У фокусу је високообразована српска дијаспора, која, упркос физичкој дистанци, посредством свакодневне комуникације преко Viber-a, WhatsApp-a и видео-платформи, одржава снажну психолошку, емоционалну и вредносну повезаност са матицом. Ова појава се концептуализује као „виртуелно огњиште”, које делује као конзервативни механизам очувања традиционалних вредности.

Теоријски оквир рада заснива се на Бурдијевом појму хабитуса (Bourdieu, 1977) и феноменологији Алфреда Шница, посебно концептима интерсубјективности и „свега свакодневног живота” (Schutz, 1967). Дигиталне технологије ублажавају ефекат хистерезе, јер мигрант не напушта у потпуности старо социјално поље, већ га „носи” са собом. На тај начин настаје транснационални хабитус (Salazar, 2021), који мигранту омогућава да истовремено функционише у два друштвена простора: професионално у земљи домаћина и приватно у дигитално реконструисаном простору Србије. Поред тога, теорије полимедија и амбијенталне ко-присутности (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Madianou, 2016) објашњавају како стална „прикљученост” омогућава одржавање интимности, свакодневних ритуала и породичних хијерархија на даљину.

Методолошки, рад примењује квалитативну компаративну синтезу која обједињује секундарне податке из студија о младима у Србији (Stojiljković Gnjatović et al., 2024), профила српске интелектуалне дијаспоре (Dinić, 2018; Pavlov et al., 2020) и истраживања дигиталних навика миграната (Filipović, 2018). Овим приступом се конструише упоредни оквир вредносних оријентација у матици и дијаспори.

Анализа показује снажну инверзију у улози технологије: млади у Србији користе дигиталне медије за глобалну модернизацију (Instagram, TikTok), док дијаспора исте инструменте користи за очување локалног идентитета, традиције и емоционалне блискости. Дигитални ритуали, попут виртуелног присуства на Слави или свакодневног видео-надгледања унука, омогућавају пренос језика, норми и моралних императива у реалном времену (Baldassar et al., 2016). Таква „амбијентална ко-присутност” одржава породичану хијерархију и колективистички оквир вредности, упркос физичкој дистанци.

Закључно, рад показује да дигитални транснационализам ремети претпоставку да структурна интеграција у земљи домаћина нужно доводи до вредносне асимилације. Српски мигранти често остварују високу професионалну интеграцију, али истовремено задржавају традиционалне вредности посредством „виртуелног огњишта”. Ова појава има значајне импликације: земље домаћини треба да унапреде програме социјалне укључености, док Србија може да развија виртуелне менторске мреже, modele дигиталног комутовања и механизме за подстицање инвестиција дијаспоре. Рад предлаже да се даља истраживања фокусирају на дигиталну етнографију и дугорочна праћења мигрантских кохорта.