Mobile sociality and the use of the network of personal technologies

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The article investigates how personal technologies interact with the sociality of young people in a context of long-distance mobility. We focused on a group of individuals -expatriate and internal migrants- who are highly mobile, multilingual, multicultural, sometimes also multinational, highly educated and who extensively use personal technologies to support their sociality. Long-distance mobility of these young adults has been discussed so far in socio-economic terms (brain drain, cognitive capitalism), but scholars have quite neglected to explore how these young persons manage their sociality and communication as well as the sustainability of their life in the long run. We adopted a qualitative approach and conducted 23 interviews with a convenience sample. The main results highlight three main implications, due to the intense use of a set of personalized technologies: a) when the spatial distance is great, close relationships are strengthened; b) the relationships with the new friends are evaluated less than those with the friends left behind; c) the role played by digital media is only positive (not ambivalent as in sedentary contexts) since it is only thanks to these that these young adults are able to manage their overall sociality. Moreover, these people tend to stay in a mobile status, which risks to be detrimental for them. Finally, but not unexpectedly, mobile sociality emerges as a dimension full of tensions and contradictions.

Keywords: long-distance mobility; digital technology; mobile sociality; young people.

# 1. Introduction

This article aims to explore the notion of mobile sociality, a generative concept that elaborates the notion of sociality on the move and in the light of people’s experiences of digital media (Hill et al., 2021). In particular, we investigated how a particular group of young adults who have experienced a consistent physical displacement –also called long-distance mobility- in order to work or study, recur to information and communication technologies (ICT) or to their network of personal technologies (Fortunati & Taipale, 2017b, p. 2) to manage and organize their social life and their mobile lifestyles (e.g. Elliot & Urry 2010). Long-distance mobility usually means a fracture with the sociality, the culture and the language of the country of origin that people leave behind. So far, there have been many ethnographic studies exploring the role of the various forms of mobility in the everyday lives of individuals and communities (e.g., Adey et al., 2014; Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012; Larsen, 2008; Urry, 2007). As Hannam, Sheller, & Urry (2006) argued, multiple and intersecting mobilities involve very different types of people: from tourists to workers, from migrants to business people, and so on. In the present study, we investigate the role played by this network of technologies in the daily sociality and communications of a particular social group which is constituted by multilingual, multicultural and sometimes also multinational, highly educated young adults. This social group, which is different from the “globals”, the super-elite studied by Elliot & Urry (2010), has been investigated extensively in the literature from a socio-economic perspective. The phenomenon of which they are protagonists has been often defined as brain drain (Beltrame, 2011; Vinokur, 2006) or studied within the framework of cognitive capitalism (Fumagalli & Lucarelli, 2007: Leonardi, 2010). These young adults were foreseen to become the ruling classes of the future in their countries of origin, but the reorganization of labour processes brought by the advent of the information society ended up making superfluous many of them. Many highly skilled jobs have been embedded in operating systems and external organizations due to their inherent complexity (Hardt & Negri, 2000) and several intellectual processes have been delocalized by globalization to developing countries (Grover Goswami et al., 2012). Several national prerogatives were also transferred to international agencies and organizations (e.g. the European Union, the OECD), thus reducing further the amount of highly skilled tasks performed by national administrations. This bunch of phenomena has produced a further stiffening of upward social mobility in oldest industrialized countries. By upward social mobility, we mean the shift of an individual -or a group- from one social stratum to a higher one (cf. Sorokin, 1927). Following these phenomena, its relative rates have decreased in Europe (Goldthorpe, 2013)[[1]](#footnote-1) and have worse more than before, as even the normal turnover of the high positions in public administration and organizations slowed down. This has generated disruptive effects on society, since upward mobility has the task to justify capital ideology by demonstrating that each individual equipped with talent can succeed in moving to a superior position from that of birth.

The growth of long-range mobility by highly educated young adults fits into this theoretical framework, in which the upward social mobility is congested (Breen & Luijkx, 2004). This kind of social immobility is the result not so much of the oxidation of the vital, internal mechanisms of social dynamics (Savage, 1988; Van de Werfhorst & Luijkx, 2010), but of the reorganization of the capital system and public institutions on a supranational level. As Fortunati (2021) argues, these processes mean that for many workers it is no longer sufficient to sell their work capacity, but they also need to contextually sell their capacities to physically move and to mediate mobility with the aid of personal technologies (Fortunati et al., 2013). The increase of spatial mobility should also be interpreted as a powerful expedient that helped people cope with the rigidity of the congestion of upward social mobility, described above. However, if mobility has a dark side because it contributes to valorisation of capital (Fortunati & Taipale, 2017a, 2017b), it has also a bright side, as it is a way for individuals to enrich their lives. It represents for an increasing number of people, and of young persons in particular, a great leap forward in expanding their mind, observing and dealing with other lifestyles, and coping with other mentalities and languages. Consequently, by exposing themselves to the wider world the individuals could become less parochial.

Although at present there are over twenty years of research investigating long-distance mobility and the related practices in the use of digital technology (e.g. Kellermann, 2012a, 2012b; Larsen, 2008; Larsen et al., 2007; Urry, 2000, the literature that dealt with the phenomenon of the long-distance mobility of this specific group has not addressed the analysis of the consequences that this mobility has on their social and communicative life.

The study aims to fill this gap by investigating the social and communicative life of a convenience sample of highly educated young adults living in a city which is different from their home city (most of them outside their national borders) and how these young persons use the current set of personal technologies in order to support their sociality. Thus, this is a study on the intersection between long-distance mobility, sociality and the practices of use of personal media. Given that mobile sociality is a relatively recent notion, our first research question is about 1) how this group of young adults do experience and elaborate this dimension. The other research questions are: 2) What is the role of the network of personal technologies on the mobility of these young professionals? 3) Which specific changes did these technologies originated in the mobility of these young people? 4) Which specific changes did these technologies originated in their sociality?

The article is organized as follows. The next section deals with the attempt to illustrate the method that we adopted to investigate the mobility and sociality of these young adults. The following section is devoted to report the results, while the final section sets up the discussion and proposes some final remarks and future research paths.

# 2. Methodology

This research was designed before the diffusion of COVID19, so it does not deal with the consequences of the pandemic. It has a qualitative and an explorative approach and uses written, semi-structured, and informational interviews (Farinosi et al., 2019). These interviews consisted of four broad questions followed by a series of sub-questions that tried to stimulate the inclusion of certain sub-topics in the responses. The choice of the written interview responds to the main needs of these very busy participants to answer when and where was more convenient to them, to take the time to reflect before answering, and then maybe re-read and eventually correct what they wrote. Along with these advantages, the written interview presents also disadvantages: the grid is static; there is not the possibility for researchers to explore further some issues of interest; it does not allow to easily build a relationship with the interviewee nor does it give the and does not have the ability to read and interpret their body language (Burtt, 2020; Hawkins, 2018).

Participants have been sought among high-educated expatriates working within international organizations, universities or business. The technique used to recruit the participants was the snowball method (Corbetta, 1999) applied this context with the purpose to identify just young persons who experienced long-distance mobility. The interview was sent by email to 30 young persons who agreed to participate in the study and we received back 23 answers. Participants also received a cover letter explaining the context and purpose of the interview, thus turning it into an ‘informational interview’. This strategy was borrowed from the political domain, where it has been used to enhance the quality of citizens’ participation (Farinosi et al., 2020). This type of interview first provides information to interviewees and then asks them for information. As such, it is more peer-based, as the interviewer's role is conceptualized on the same level as that of the researcher. At the beginning of each interview, in accordance with ethical principles, informed written consent was obtained from all research participants to use their data anonymously for analysis and publication.

The interviews were analysed by using the thematic content analysis method (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The textual corpus was treated with an inductive procedure to identify the most relevant and significant thematic categories that described the experience of the participants. The interview extracts were then rearranged according to these categories.

The participants, in the end, were as follows. Their average age was 32.2 years, with 87% of the participants under 40 (one was 41 and, other two, 43). The gender balance showed a slight prevalence of males (13 males and 10 females), while participants’ education was quite high (9 of them had a PhD and the rest had a master degree). The majority of them worked as high-level professionals. Most of the participants were Italian, but respondents also included ten other nationalities: American, Belgian, Brazilian, Croatian, French, Hungarian, Indian, Japanese, Portuguese and Spanish.

# 3. Results

The analysis of these interviews has highlighted four main areas of content. As this study is at the intersection of mobile sociality and practices of use of the network of personal technologies (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) by this group of young adults, we report first the sociality structure of these young persons ; then, we describe their practices of use of digital devices. Then, we elaborate some insights on the changes that occurred on the long-distance mobility and sociality of these young adults.

## 3.1 The mobile sociality of this group

To answer to our first research question, we found that the type of mobile sociality these young adults experienced seems to be mainly describing an urban phenomenon. This aspect differentiates this kind of mobility from that of other, less educated types of migrants, which does not have such a strong urban characterization (Fortunati et al., 2012). Although the long-distance mobility of these young persons shows a basic homogeneity in its final destination - a city -, these interviews highlight that the type of city they move to affects the internal structure of sociality that they build. We distinguish four different cases. The first is moving to a foreign city with deep cultural differences. The second is moving to a foreign city with moderate cultural differences. The third corresponds to moving to another foreign city and being characterized by hybrid cultures. The fourth case concerns moving to another city in the same country. The difficulties for establishing a new sociality decrease from the first to the fourth case.

In the first case, building a sociality can be very challenging and, as it turns out from the finfings, the personality of mobile people affects how they deal with this challenge. Some of the interviewees denounce the experience of a cultural shock that has complicated their sociality.

I have just moved from Japan where rules, values, cultures and people’s personality are very different. I became less socialized and less extraverted since I moved to Paris not because of language barrier, but by my stress caused by the new work environment. I have to mention that moving from Asian countries to European countries makes things very different. (Male, 40 years, Japanese)

Moving to France has been the real watershed move in my life so far… (Male, 34 years, Brazilian)

Other interviewees state that they did not feel a similar shock. For example, an American woman of 28 years writes:

When I moved from Seattle, I did not feel that I had important aspects of ‘culture’ in my everyday life. I embraced the French culture in any way that I could: reading up on history, modern aspects of Parisian life and visiting many cultural spaces.

The second case concerns moving to another foreign city characterized by moderate cultural differences, for example from a European country to another one. This case presents less difficulties than the previous one in managing sociality and it is not rare that people who move have some friends or acquaintances who function as a kind of bridge with the new environment. There is also an issue of personal affinity with the new city and culture. A respondent talks about an ‘urban psychology’ that every city expresses. Thus, the type of city counts in making easy to foreigners accommodating themselves in the new culture.

The adaptation to my current city was quite smooth, even if this was not always the case for previous cities where I have lived. (Male, 34 years, Italian)

The third case concerns the move of young adults coming from a multicultural and multi-ethnic family.

I was excited about discovering a new town in another UE country, even though France is not as new for me as my mother is French. But this doesn’t mean that life is easier, as I don’t enter groups of pure-foreigners or pure-locals, and I rather stay in-between as a hybrid: this sometimes makes me struggle a bit, as even if I have a good French, sometimes I feel comfier with English and, of course, Italian. (Female, 33 years, Italian-French).

The fourth case regards the moving from a city to another one in the same country. This mobility is based in principle on sharing the same culture and language. However, also this move can present various unknowns if people, for example, move from the South to the deep North.

My transfer coincided with the beginning of a new training and work path, first as a PhD student and then as a postdoc researcher. I was in a culturally very distant area from that to which I was accustomed and this has amplified the difficulties of getting in touch and interacting with other people, although speaking the same language. (Female, 39 years, Italian)

Another issue immediately connected to long-distance mobility is the nexus with language and culture. Local language is an important tool to comprehend deeply the way of thinking and the culture of a country (Bruner, 2001; Vygotskij, 1962) and to deal with the organization of daily life, work and sociality. However, there are countries such as France and Belgium (at least the francophone part) which share the same language but develop some cultural differences. A Belgian man (34 years) who moved to Paris says that he found some cultural differences, but not very big. The encounter with the local language seems not having been a big problem for the majority of the interviewees. But especially at the beginning many of these young adults struggled with the language barrier.

Language posed a problem to build networks with locals. Networks of migrants from my own country has allowed me to relate to a broader range of people outside the work network and have been a connection point to meet other locals that I would not have had encountered otherwise. (Female, 32 years, Spanish)

The problem lies not only in learning another language, sometimes from scratch, but also in the fact that embracing another language and using it all the day can be mentally tiring.

The constant shift from one language to another (French, Italian, and English) was a bit tiring at the beginning. (Male, 32 years, Italian-French)

I definitely work everyday almost 100% in French and I must say that at the end of the week (even now), my brain is exhausted from working in another language all week. (Female, 27 years, US)

Other times the problem comes from the difficulty to grasp the local dialect. For example, there are some regions in Italy, like the Veneto, where the dialect is spoken by a large majority of the population. This dialect, with all its city variants is not so easy to be understood or practiced.

I never found welcoming the fact that everyone spoke dialect even in front of my different accent, it is an aspect that has always bothered me, to understand Venetian dialect as well. (Female, 31 years, Italian)

## 3.2. How did the network of personal technologies affect mobile sociality?

To give concreteness to the sociality structure, Simmel (1908) introduced the intermediate concept of social circles, which include family relationships, relative relationships, school and university relationships, friends, acquaintances connected to recreational, social and political activities, and so on. Long-distance mobility imposes a complex regime of sociality, since it adds different layers to the relationship with the partner and children. In addition to the relationships with family and friends from the country of origin, first, it adds the relationships with the other expatriates and their partners, to whom these young persons turn their attention because they share a common path of long-distance mobility and offer them a more direct acceptation and often an easier interaction. Second, it adds the relationships with locals (Geeraert et al., 2014; Moskal, 2015). Here, the relationships with ‘the others’ are more articulated than in sedentary contexts, since the social circles usually need to be based on recognizing and sharing some historical, social and cultural background in order to be developed and maintained. If this sharing fails, managing social relationships requires more efforts and thus is more fatiguing. Maybe people culturally different are also potentially more interesting as they introduce elements of novelty, but they are more challenging and this explains why most interviewees said that they created relationships preferably with other expatriates. Research on migrants and new ‘globals’ (Elliot & Urry, 2010) has identified how locals are often hostile to foreigners. So, these are obliged, at least in the first instance, to socialize with other expatriates (Fortunati et al., 2012).

Interacting with locals was very difficult because of the language but also because of the different understanding, I believe, they have of socializing. (Female, 38, Spanish)

The effect of these behaviours on the structure of sociality is that expatriates develop separate social circles, which only sometimes include locals.

Networks of migrants from my own country have allowed me to relate to a broader range of people outside the work network, and have been a connection point to meet other locals that I would not have had encountered otherwise. (Male, 32 years, Spanish)

The preference of the expatriates to create relationships among themselves rather than with locals does not always depends on the resistance of the locals, but also on their decision to go for easier social relationships. Expatriates also prefer not to cope with the fatigue required by opening social relationships with the locals.

My circle of friends is smaller but in some cases the friendship and trust bonds are stronger because most of my closest friends are also expatriates and we share similar experiences. I believe that due to language and cultural differences it has been hard to include locals in my social circle, also because I have not done many efforts in that sense. (Female, 38 years, Portuguese)

The ‘others’ are also seen as the locals, with whom the relationships are often difficult because of the cultural distance.

With locals I feel a sensation of dissonance, distance, or ‘double absence’, as for them you’re not reliable, you could always suddenly leave. Hence people don’t really invest on what is immediately perceived as a transitory relationship, and I understand them. (Male, 32 years, Italian)

Finally, the other social relationships are made of those left behind and who represents their roots as well as their memory: family, relatives and friends of origin. Previous sociality means the personal roots, the most affective ties and the biography of these participants including the steps and rituals of passage. Contrary to the first three typologies of social relationships occurring in a mixed regime where in person communication competes with and complements mediated communication (Polson, 2016), this last typology takes place only in a regime essentially of mediated communication. In the first three typologies of relationships, the use of digital technologies does not differ from other contexts of sedentariness. However, in the relationships with family and friends of origin, given the long distance from them, the use of these technologies is the only way to nourish and maintain over time these relationships. The communicative web that is woven with family members, relatives and friends of origin is essential to stay in constant contact with them and one's roots.

When it comes to my family (parents & sister), nothing has changed communication-wise. I talk to every member of my family at least twice a week (phone conversation or FaceTime) and we text nearly every day (we’re a close-knit family!). My French fiancé finds this insane to talk with family members so often in the same week (cultural differences maybe), but sometimes family is just calling someone up to hear their voice and say hello, it doesn’t need to be an hour-long phone conversation! With my family, we use text messaging (iMessage), FaceTime, and sometimes e-mails/Facebook. (Female, 27 years, American)

This communicative web also serves as a bridge between one trip and another: those of these young people back to their hometown and those of their families, relatives and friends who come to visit them in their new city of residence.

With my sister (living in Switzerland) and parents (living in Montenegro) I talk daily via video (WhatsApp). With my best friends (living in Italy) I also send daily messages via WhatsApp. With some old friends from my hometown we keep in contact via WhatsApp, Facebook, and emails. (Female, 41 years, Croatian-Italian)

Obviously, the frequency of use of digital technologies varies according to the preferences of each interviewee and also to the type of relationship. Interviewees tend to talk to family members by mobile or fixed phone and possibly choose a technology that allows them to see each other (like Skype or Facetime). As an American, young woman, 28 years old writes:

With my family, we try to FaceTime whenever possible because seeing each other, even on a screen, helps to feel closer.

However, this does not rule out sending messages, pictures or video via Whatsapp. There are interviewees who call every day, others once a week or less often.

Typically, I am in contact with my parents every day, at least twice a day, in the morning, just after waking up, and in the evening, after dinner. I call them on the phone, but we also keep in touch using one-to-one chat on Whatsapp or a family group-chat on Whatsapp in which we mainly share photos or other types of visual content […] With my closest friends we have group-chats on Whatsapp that we use almost every day to share ‘silly’ messages, in-jokes, and images, audio clips, short videos or to comment on something that has happened, participating in this way into each other lives in small ways, hanging out, even when we’re busy or distant. And then we talk on the phone about once every couple of weeks, but there is no fixed rule. It really depends on the time of year and everyone's commitments. (Female, 39 years, Italian)

While in sedentary circumstances, actual friends are usually more important than the family of origin (Garelli et al., 2006), in young adults’ life experiencing a long-distance mobility there is a kind of inversion in the sociality scale, where family becomes more crucial than friends of origin.

The contact with friends is more irregular but we always stay in touch at least once a month. It has become harder to find more conversation topics in common, especially with friends. (Female, 38 years, Portuguese)

The answer to our second research question on the role played by digital technologies on these young persons’ mobile sociality seems to be quite easy, since there is a spread belief among respondents that it is only through and thanks to digital media that they are able to manage all these different layers. This opinion resonates with the results of the research carried out in Europe by Fortunati et al. (2013) in which it came out that the increasing use of digital technologies did not serve to increase in-person sociality but to avoid that the forms of sociality could suffer a relevant decline. If it had not been for the help provided by these technologies, sociality could have diminished. The recent diffusion of digital devices has further facilitated communication and thus the management and the organization of sociality, according to some research (Ulises A Mejias, Nancy Baym), while other voices are more critical ( ). Computers, laptops, smartphones, but also the telephones and, in one case, even letters, are used to communicate and nourish this network of relationships. But this was not the case a few years ago. In addition to emails, social media like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and services like Face Time and Skype are the tools most frequently used by this group of people. However, the device that has made a substantial difference for these young persons is the smartphone. This finding resonates with another result of the same research carried out in Europe, where the smartphone emerged at the front edge in the network of personal technologies (Fortunati et al., 2013; Ling, 2004, 2008; Ling et al., 2020).

I would say it’s a 70/30 mix, 70% smartphone (on the go) and 30% laptop (when I’m at home or working). (Female, 27 years, American)

Smartphones, social media and messaging applications (Whatsapp, Facebook messenger, Instagram, etc.) are a great help and support to keep each other up to date, sharing pieces of our lives, photos of their growing children, or simply memes or nice cartoons. (Female, 39 years, Italian)

## 3.3 Insights on the changed mobility of these young professionals

## Thanks to digital media and to the development of transportation means, long-distance mobility today includes for the first time in history a certain continuity in the management of previous sociality. These people have the possibility to move along with their families and friends of the country of origin, at least virtually, as they can maintain contact with them in their daily life. At the same time, they are perceived by the environment of origin like a kind of outposts of new territories and this is the context in which cross-mobility between the departure and arrival environments develops. Those who moved usually plan to meet families and friends in person by visiting them for holidays or by receiving their visit in the new city where they live. Thus, to answer to our third research question, from this study it emerged that this kind of mobility generates other forms of long-distance mobility, whose organization is facilitated by the use of digital technologies. The motivations to move for these young adults are the most varied: from the travels to go back at home to those for vacations or touristic visits, from participation in weddings to the celebration of birthdays, from participation to baptisms, confirmations and funerals to support people with health problems. On the other hand, parents and friends move to visit those who have moved and these are the occasions for them to see a foreign city not like mere tourists, but as insiders, as their children or friends can show it in a more authentic way. As consequence, the moving of a member of an inner social circle involves the mobility of many other members, whereby societies become overall more mobile. I have had quite a few friends come to visit me over the years and I feel a stronger connection with them because they have seen my little life in Paris and know a bit more about my daily life. I return home to visit my family about twice a year (once in the summer for 2-4 weeks and once in the winter for 10-14 days). Someone in my family tends to visit once a year for a week or two at a time. When I am home to visit family, I limit seeing my friends because I miss my family and want to spend as much time with them as possible. (Female, 28 years, US)

This framework becomes even more complicated since families are often affected by multiple mobilities. These families in several cases have more than one child abroad, and they are almost always in different cities (if not countries). This generates even more mobility for parents and siblings themselves. Actually, this group of young adults complicates the possibility for their families of origin to meet just because of their mobility.

I am married with a woman from another country (France)… My brother, slightly younger than me, also lives abroad (Austria) and got married with a woman from another country (Finland). We are a truly international family, with ties in different countries. This comes with a big cost – difficulties in organizing family meetings. Every part of the family (in Italy, in France, in Finland) needs to be taken into account and therefore much planning and coordination is required to be able to meet all of us in the same place. (Male, 43 years, Italian)

When analysing the interviews, it also emerged that long-distance mobility does not involve only leaving one place for another, but it can be a perennial state of moving that becomes a compulsion to stay mobile all their life. Many interviewees talk about a series of moves they experienced: for example, a respondent moved from Italy to Finland, to Belgium, to Slovakia and to Belgium, while another one from Spain to the US, to the UK and to France. Long-distance mobility becomes a condition of life, whereby, when you lose the relation with a territory, it becomes difficult to settle stably in a new place and also to come back to the country of origin. Many interviewees seem to be destined to be stuck in a mobile modality all their life. Rarely, they are able to make the relation with the place of origin more stable, as in the following case.

I’m from Treviso, which has a reputation for being a conservative and provincial town. When I was a teenager I always wanted to leave, which I did in 2007 when I finished high school. Since then, I’ve been living at different times in London, Padua, Milan, Berlin, Coventry, Tunis, Rabat, and Bristol. (Male, 32 years, Italian)

The long-distance mobility, which generates additional mobility in the form of visits to family and friends and visits of friends in the new cities, has also a tiring effect on people. And this is the reason for which these travels diminish over time for many respondents.

When I lived in Milan, I went back to Rouen three or four times a year. The last few years, I would say rather 2 or 3 times, but this is mainly related to the fact of moving house very often and suffering travel fatigue. (Female, 30 years, French)

## 3.4. Insights on the changed sociality of these young professionals

According to Simmel (1908), sociality is the set of forms of relationship that are built by the individuals who compose a given society. Human sociality consists in the individuals’ activity of meeting, speaking, and doing things with other individuals. Given that social relationships need spatial continuity to be carried out with a certain frequency and flourish, the ideal context is that of a sedentariness or local mobility. Handling the social sphere requires physical presence and to switch from the set of potential relationships that could be experienced to the relationships that people are actually able to have. We mentioned before that the sociality structure generated by long-distance mobility is more complicated than in sedentary contexts. But what are the changes introduced by the combination of a long-distance mobility and the intense use of personal technologies on the sociality of these young adults? To verify these overall effects and be able to answer our fourth research question, we asked our participants if their sociality had improved or worsened (our fourth question). The answers we received are contrasting.

I would definitely say I now have a mixed regime of sociality – I feel partly still American and miss home, yet I feel completely French in a way as well (living with a French person, picking up traditions with his family and friends, carrying out everyday life in France for the past nearly 5 years) – home feels like it’s here in France, but I always feel ‘at home’ when I go back to the States to visit, it’s a weird feeling! Honestly, I would say that my current sociality living in Paris has worsened! (Female, 27 years, US)

My sociality has certainly improved and expanded and my "regime of sociality" more than mixed is multi: I have family members, friends and colleagues in many different places, especially in Italy and Europe, and in turn I'm on the move. I believe this is to be considered a wealth, since in this way I have the opportunity to discover new realities through their eyes (Female, 33 years, Italian)

These excerpts testify the tensions and the contradiction that mobile sociality incorporates from the dark and bright side of long-distance mobility. The dark side is that long-distance mobility disconnects people from their local space, by creating often wounds and traumas. Sociality, when accompanied by mobility, becomes separation, discontinuity, distance from the social relationships of origin and it introduces the need to identify strategies in order to cope with these conflicting dimensions. The bright side is that several of these young persons greatly enjoy the opportunity that long-distance mobility offers them to become free from their family of origin and to meet people from everywhere, belonging to many different cultures. Mobile sociality becomes an open window on the world and may incorporate colleagues and new friends (often expatriates) who share the same condition of life and who make the life of these youths particularly exciting.

Families behind these youths reacted in different ways to their going away: some have encouraged them, others have shown their suffering.

My move was definitely more difficult for my Mom and sister. My Dad was already living in London when I moved to Paris in 2015, so he was thrilled I was going to be closer to him! My Mom, my sister and I have always been very close and being long distance from them is very hard at times. (Female, 27 years, US).

My family has always been supportive towards my academic and professional fulfilment, even if this meant for me to go abroad. (Male, 34 years, Italian)

The young adults we interviewed in this study have parents who can almost be defined as young elderly, and thus they are usually in a good health. The mobility of these youths does not generally pose problems of material support to their parents, except in some cases, in which children’s distance can be problematic.

With time, and with my parents getting older, I now wish I was closer to them and being able to see them more often, and to support them more. (Male, 34 years, Italian)

From these interviews, it emerges that while families had contrasting reactions to the departure of their children, the reaction from friends was always positive. This is understandable, because the relationships between parents and children are of a differed exchange kind (Fortunati & Taipale, 2017a): when children are small, parents are expected to take care of them, but once they have become adult, children are expected to take care of the parents who became old. Of course, this exchange is regulated in differently, according the various cultures and welfare systems. Namely, northern countries have developed an efficient system of social assistance for the elderly that relieves children of the material assistance of their elderly parents, while in southern countries, where social assistance for the elderly is less developed, children are expected to assist, even materially, elderly parents (Iacovu, 2000; Zlotnick et al., 2020). Friendship, instead, is a type of relationship that is freer than family relationships, and is based on a reciprocal, peer and immediate exchange.

I don’t think it affected them very much, the thought of leaving Hungary is almost omnipresent in my network (i.e. among young and middle aged highly educated people [who don’t share the political views of the current political power]). (Female, 41 years, Hungarian)

Long-distance mobility, as we saw, is not even accompanied by an easy relationship with the sociality in the place of arrival. Mobile sociality is a concept full of tensions given that sociality needs a certain degree of sedentary lifestyle, and when the sedentariness is put into crisis sociality inevitably suffers (Fortunati, 2021).

Another issue that emerged from the interviews is the communication difficulty due to the distance. The geographical distance by preventing the continuity of relationships interrupts their fluidity and the knowledge of contexts and events linked to everyday life. Furthermore, jumping from a distance into the lives of friends and family members can present problems of opening and managing the communication flow. However, when relationships are solid, it seems to take very little to overcome this.

My sociality with friends in my home town is sustained by seldom calls (maybe once a month?) and somewhat frozen, but ready to come back to life whenever I visit them. (Male, 34 years, Italian)

All these tensions reflect also in the lives of these youth and explains why several of them express a negative evaluation of the development of their overall sociality.

When asked to evaluate on a 10-point scale the importance of the social relationships connected to their family and network of origin and to the one established in your new home, they evaluated the importance of the former with an average score of 9.7 (with the exception of one participant who attributed a score of 4) and of the latter with an average score of 8.0. The exciting relationships opened in the new place remain somehow on the surface, in the sense that they struggle to acquire that depth which is necessary to perceive them as significant. In fact, these relationships received an average score of 7.0. By contrast, the sociality they left behind them continues to represent the most profound social nucleus in the life of these mobile people. In this concern, the use of personal technologies has really made a difference. This finding differs from those of researches on values, where in a situation of sedentariness young adults usually put at the first place friends and at the second place family (e.g. Pavlíková & Šmídová, 2017). Thus, the first, important implication of mobile sociality is that when the spatial distance is great, close relationships are strengthened. Within these, relationships with the family of origin become closer than those with friends. At the same time, the second important, although not unexpected, implication is that these youths tend to socially invest on expatriates, although they maybe belong to very different cultures.

# 4. Discussion and final remarks

Mobile sociality emerges in this research in all its complexity, given by the intersection between long-distance mobility and the use of digital technologies. Against the background of this study we can see important, sociological elements, such as the structure of sociality, organized in communication circles which are an important layer for its functioning, the life cycle of individuals which is an important variable in shaping social and communicative behaviors, the relevance still of the gender issue, the resistance of the local to integrate the extra-local, the hybridization of cultures and the bi-nationalities, the generative capacity of mobility and its destiny to become a stable dimension in daily life of many people, the beneficial (in this case not ambivalent) role of digital technologies (Raffini, 2014).

This study has produced three important findings. First, mobile sociality highlights some implications, due to the intense use of the network of personalized technologies (Wellman, 2001): a) when the spatial distance is great, close relationships are strengthened. Within these, relationships with the family of origin become closer than those with old and new friends; b) the relationships with the new friends are evaluated less than those with the friends left behind; c) in a context of long-distance mobility the role played by digital media is only positive (not ambivalent as maybe it happens in sedentary contexts) as it enables these young adults to manage their overall sociality. The second finding is that these young people tend to stay in a mobile modality, which risks to be detrimental for them. Coming back home or settling stably somewhere often becomes a dream, since the cutting especially of the weak ties with a specific territory makes it difficult for them retie those relationships as well as get the information that, for example, allow to find a job (Granovetter, 1973). In this context, long-distance mobility becomes a permanent condition of life. Viry et al. (2014) found some evidence that long-lasting high mobility is associated with better incomes, but that having various experiences of high mobility does not automatically have a positive impact on managerial responsibilities or socio-economic status. Further research is needed for evaluating the overall well-being of these youth. Experiencing repeated mobility does not help in achieving upward career mobility on the long run. The third, not unexpected, finding is that mobile sociality is a dimension full of tensions and contradictions.

Obviously, these results must be taken with great caution since they are not generalizable to expatriate young adults and represent only the voices of our participants, due to the low number of participants.

Another limit of this study is the fact of having so many Italians, which inevitably creates distortions, especially in the eyes of other nationalities. It would be interesting in future studies to conduct the same research with wider, if not representative, samples of this population in order to explore if the findings emerged in this study are confirmed and verify if they are really indicative of the mobile sociality of young adults. It would be as well interesting to apply other adopt other methodological tools and to apply them in order to gain a multiple glimpse regarding the issues explored here.

Although these limitations, the qualitative approach adopted has allowed us to explore the mobile sociality and related practices of the use of digital technologies by these young professionals and to depict a significant picture of a social group little investigated so far.

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1. And also in United States, see Breen, 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)