Social Inclusion
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 12119
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.12119

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Midlife Digital Care Work of the Highly Skilled Migrants

Aija Lulle [1,2] **and Elza Lāma** [2]

[1] Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, University of Eastern Finland, Finland
[2] Faculty of Social Sciences, Riga Stradins University, Latvia

Correspondence: Aija Lulle (aija.lulle@uef.fi)

Submitted: 9 February 2026 **Accepted:** 11 May 2026 **Published:** 24 June 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Mobility and Relationships in Digitally Saturated Social Worlds" edited by Aija Lulle (University of Eastern Finland) and Ieva Puzo (Riga Stradins University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i536

Abstract

Digital technologies now shape nearly every stage of high-skilled migration: recruitment, relocation, professional networking, transnational work, and everyday relationship maintenance. Yet digitalisation in relation to migration during midlife remains underexplored. In this article, we develop the concept of midlife digital care work to explain the capability-based, relationship-sustaining labour through which highly skilled migrants maintain intimate, intergenerational, and professional ties across borders. Drawing on 23 semi-structured interviews with Latvian middle-aged professionals living transnationally, we show that digital care work is especially intensive in marriage and partnership, while also extending to children, parents, friendships, and professional communities. We argue that digital infrastructures form the enabling conditions of such care, while purposeful midlife mobility provides its life-course context. Interlocutors' accounts demonstrate the limits of mediated connection: Digital communication cannot replace embodied co-presence, touch, shared material space, and being together. By foregrounding midlife digital care work, the article extends scholarship on midlife mobilities and digital migration studies by showing how migrants evaluate digital connections as part of their capability sets and as integral to crafting meaningful, relationally sustainable lives across borders.

Keywords

capabilities; digital care work; highly skilled migrants; midlife

1. Introduction

Digital technologies now shape how high-skilled migration is organised and lived, from maintaining professional relevance across borders to sustaining family relationships and everyday belonging at a distance (Alam et al., 2025; Bradley et al., 2025; Godin et al., 2025). These and other authors show how digital

technologies are embedded in migration governance, including skilled migration channels. Yet, while age and generation clearly matter in geographies of migration (Hopkins & Pain, 2007), we still know very little about digitalisation and migration in midlife. Building on emerging scholarship on midlife mobilities and digital migration studies, this article asks: How do highly skilled migrants in midlife use and evaluate digital connections in their transnational lives?

Drawing on interviews conducted between 2024 and 2025 with Latvian professionals living transnationally in early to late midlife, we argue that digital connections are best understood as infrastructures and practices of midlife digital care work: capability-laden forms of sustaining marriages and partnerships, intergenerational ties, friendships, and professional communities across borders. In this sense, digital media are not merely communication tools; they are central to how migrants organise mobility, care, and professional continuity across place.

Theoretically, we develop a layered conceptual framework that brings midlife mobility scholarship into conversation with transnational social field approaches to simultaneity, mediated co-presence, care circulation, infrastructure-informed digital migration studies, and the capability approach. This framework enables us to analyse not only how digital connections are used, but also how they are evaluated as part of migrants' efforts to sustain meaningful, relationally dense, and professionally viable lives across borders.

Empirically, the analysis proceeds in four steps. We first examine digital infrastructures as enabling yet unequal conditions of mobility, work, and care. We then situate these practices within purposeful midlife mobility, understood as more reflexive, time-bounded, and responsibility-laden than youth mobility. Third, we conceptualise midlife digital care work as the routine labour through which migrants sustain intimate, familial, and professional relationships across distance. Finally, we show why embodied co-presence, touch, and shared material space remain indispensable. In so doing, the article extends Lulle's (2024a, 2024b) work on midlife mobilities by bringing in new empirical and conceptual knowledge on digital care.

2. Midlife on the Move

Midlife mobilities scholarship (e.g., Lulle, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c) invites us to rethink the situated, relational process of unfolding lives in the middle years. We define midlife loosely as roughly the mid-thirties to around sixty, but without rigid age brackets. Rather, midlife is marked by dense responsibilities and ongoing reassessments: caring for children and elderly parents, navigating career peaks or shifts, and re-evaluating past trajectories alongside future planning. In this view, living in the middle of generations and multiple ongoing projects entails caring, maintaining work roles, and simultaneously imagining new possibilities. This aligns with theorists who argue that life stages are not fixed biological categories but socially constructed contexts of meaning (Hopkins & Pain, 2007).

The midlife perspective is under-examined: Most migration and wellbeing research focuses on youth or old age, overlooking how midlife experiences intersect with other generations. Yet for migrants, midlife is often defined through ties to family and community. Midlife migrants frequently sustain or reconfigure bonds with children, parents, siblings, and partners across borders. These ties shape both migration decisions and daily wellbeing (Baldassar & Brandhorst, 2021; Kelley et al., 2024). For example, caring for grandchildren abroad or sending remittances home are as much part of migrants' well-being narratives as career advancement.

Recognizing these relational commitments reveals midlife as a unique juncture: Individuals may still pursue self-actualization, as in youth, but must also balance intensified care roles, which are more typical of later life.

Recent empirical studies underline that migrants' wellbeing is age-specific. Andronic and Constantin (2025) find that age significantly moderates how migrants adapt culturally and psychologically: Midlife migrants face identity stressors that younger migrants do not, due to earlier life anchoring. Their review shows that age, along with gender, education, and length of residence, shapes well-being trajectories, with midlife standing out as a point of variation. Similarly, Lulle (2024b) argues that midlife migrant transitions—such as career shifts—mirror those of younger people but are complicated by heavier care duties. Taken together, this research suggests that midlife migrants balance youthful mobility (career change, relocation) with lifelong responsibilities (family support), making their pursuit of a good life distinctively complex.

Broader scholarship reinforces this picture of midlife as relational and networked. For instance, Morgan (2009) highlights that weak ties (acquaintances, colleagues) occupy more psychological space in midlife, which is critical for mobile adults building new networks abroad. Population geographers also stress that mobility decisions are life-course dependent (Bailey, 2009). Moreover, transnational family studies show that kinship ties evolve unevenly over time and distance: Siblings or cousins may drift apart or become closer, and caregiving roles shift in unpredictable ways (Baldassar & Brandhorst, 2021). These findings underscore that midlife migrants' wellbeing must be understood through dynamic family geographies rather than through isolated individuals. Levitt and Schiller's (2004) notion of simultaneity is particularly useful here: Migrants are embedded in multiple social fields at once. Midlife migrants enact such simultaneity daily through digital communication and long-distance routines. A midlife migrant, for example, may follow cultural debates in her home country online while working full-time abroad. The good life, in such cases, may mean achieving professional success while also maintaining cultural fluency with the society of origin.

Scholarship on home and belonging helps interpret this complexity. Brickell (2012) argues that home is continuously produced through practices beyond physical residence, while Carling (2017) emphasises how personal conjunctures—the intersection of life events, timing, and mobility—shape transnational lives. Research on welfare regimes further illuminates how middle-aged migrants navigate welfare and care responsibilities across states, families, and themselves (Frericks & Höppner, 2019). Conceptualising midlife mobilities therefore requires integrating age, relations, and mobility, because this is a dense intersection where past, present, and future coexist. Understanding midlife migrants' wellbeing also demands acknowledging that digital ties are tools for crafting simultaneity. Evaluations of digital communication must be embedded in this broader life-course context: They help sustain presence across professional, familial, and cultural spheres, enabling migrants to live simultaneously in overlapping worlds. This integrated lens moves us beyond seeing midlife migrants as caught between ages; instead, it presents them as agents who produce purposeful movement while maintaining social connection.

2.1. Digital Midlife

Digital communication is not merely a technical infrastructure but a relational field within which migrants actively negotiate intimacy, obligation, and everyday presence. In contexts where multiple channels are available, the choice of medium becomes socially meaningful. Madianou and Miller's (2013) concept of

polymedia emphasises that media forms are not interchangeable: Rather, individuals select and combine messaging, video calls, and social media interactions to enact distinct relational practices. Within such polymedia environments, communication choices acquire moral and emotional weight, allowing migrants to signal care, manage distance, or express ambivalence.

These dynamics are further illuminated through the notion of mediated co-presence. Digital exchanges, whether synchronous video calls or asynchronous messages, create forms of presence that are not reducible to face-to-face interaction yet remain socially consequential. Licoppe's (2004) concept of connected presence highlights how frequent, lightweight contacts such as brief updates and routine checking-in sustain relationships and cultivate a sense of ongoing togetherness despite physical separation. Such interactions do not aim at depth in every instance; rather, their cumulative effect generates relational stability and emotional reassurance. Building on this, the idea of ambient co-presence captures how ubiquitous digital media create a background awareness of others' lives that is both peripheral and affectively charged. Through continuous digital traces—status updates, photos, shared links—migrants can monitor and remain attuned to distant family members, thereby reshaping practices of intimacy, responsibility, and care in transnational settings (Madianou, 2016). This ambient relationality complements more intentional forms of communication, together producing multilayered emotional geographies across distance.

The differentiated use of media channels also reflects the varying strength of social ties. Close kin and partners typically rely on intensive, routinised communication patterns involving richer media such as video calls or prolonged messaging, while acquaintances and situational friendships are more likely to be maintained through low-intensity platforms. Here, Granovetter's classic distinction between strong and weak ties is analytically useful: Even minimal digital maintenance of weak ties can yield social resources, continuity, and occasional support without requiring sustained emotional labour or intimacy (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, digital communication practices reinforce not only emotional bonds but also the broader social networks that shape migrants' mobility trajectories and everyday lives.

2.2. Digital Midlife Care Work

To theorise digital midlife care work, we draw on the care circulation framework developed within transnational family studies. Rather than conceptualising care as a unidirectional "transfer" from caregiver to recipient, care circulation emphasises its multidirectional, negotiated, and temporally extended nature. This framework is particularly well suited to our interview material, as it provides a conceptual language for discussing routines, reciprocity, and the organisation of care amid mobility—dimensions that are especially salient in partnership arrangements and intergenerational relationships during midlife. Crucially, care circulation theory also clarifies why digital communication can be *necessary* yet not *sufficient*: Although digital channels are indispensable for managing obligations across distance, caring relationships depend on ongoing negotiation and embodied practices over time. Thus, our emphasis on embodied presence should be read not as a rejection of digital care, but as a theorisation of the situated limits of mediated caring practices.

Situating digital care within broader infrastructures allows us to consider digital connections not only as interpersonal communications but also as the infrastructural conditions that enable or constrain mobility itself. Insights from infrastructure studies highlight that infrastructures are relational and often remain invisible when they function smoothly (Cantwell & Shukla, 2025; Larkin, 2013; Minchilli & Ponzanesi, 2025).

They become analytically salient through breakdown, friction, or uneven access. This perspective enables a more nuanced understanding of the practical affordances underpinning migrants' mobility—such as cross-border financial transfers, arranging housing online, or sustaining remote work—and the unequal digital conditions across geographical contexts that shape these affordances. Attending to infrastructure thus complements the relational analysis of digital communication by revealing the socio-technical environments that underwrite mobility.

Attention to everyday digital practices also aligns with scholarship emphasising the mundane and habitual nature of digital engagement in migrants' belonging-making and relational maintenance. Rather than viewing communication as exceptional or episodic, this perspective foregrounds routine digital acts—scrolling, messaging, sharing—as socially productive and central to the formation of transnational lifeworlds (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2022). Such an orientation is particularly important in midlife, a stage characterised by dense care responsibilities, negotiated interdependencies, and ongoing reassessments of mobility.

To interpret variation in digital practices, we also draw on digital inequality research as a sensitising lens. This scholarship demonstrates that digital divides extend beyond access to encompass disparities in skills, types of use, and the benefits that individuals can derive from digital engagement. Age is frequently implicated in such differences, making digital inequality a relevant dimension for a life-course analysis even among highly skilled participants. In this light, digital engagement is not a uniform resource but a differentiated terrain in which unequal capabilities shape the quality and payoffs of online participation.

Finally, to theorise what it means for migrants to evaluate their digital connections, the analysis adopts the capability approach as a normative-evaluative framework. The capability approach conceptualises wellbeing as the real freedoms individuals have to achieve valued ways of being and doing (Robeyns, 2005, 2025). This perspective is particularly apt for interpreting participants' reflections on the meaningful life, as it accommodates multidimensional evaluations that include maintaining intimate relationships, sustaining meaningful work, preserving cultural continuity, and exercising mobility with security and dignity. Digital connections can thus be understood as part of migrants' capability sets: They enable social participation, continuity of care, and forms of professional agency across distance, but they can also introduce strain through time pressure and emotional labour, and they may be unable to deliver the valued togetherness that depends on embodied co-presence. Recent work arguing for capability-based migration policy underscores this multidimensional view of migrant wellbeing, suggesting that social, cultural, and digital dimensions of life should be considered alongside economic self-sufficiency (Anthias, 2012). Such insights align with growing evidence that migrants' quality of life is shaped by access to social networks, meaningful activities, and freedoms of mobility.

This layered theoretical framework helps us analyse the capability sets of our interlocutors (Robeyns, 2005). Midlife migrants bring diverse skills, obligations, and accumulated biographies to their transnational lives, and they evaluate digital connections in relation to what kinds of lives remain achievable across borders. We therefore analyse digital media through co-presence concepts that explain differentiated communication practices as digital care work with close family, acquaintances, and professional communities. Below, we empirically explore digital infrastructures as enabling yet unequal conditions for sustaining those capabilities.

3. Methodology

This article draws on 23 semi-structured interviews carried out by both authors. Fieldwork took place in Latvia between 2024 and 2025, combining in-person interviews with online conversations (via Zoom and WhatsApp) when participants were abroad. All interlocutors were in early to late midlife, and a life-course perspective was central to how they reflected on their mobility trajectories (Lulle, 2025). All but one participant had higher education; the exception possessed specific high-demand skills that enabled the selection of work abroad that was both engaging and oriented towards personal growth. Participants had diverse family situations: Some were already young grandparents, others had teenage or early adult children, and some did not have children. Professional skills and educational backgrounds were also diverse, and many no longer worked in the profession they had originally trained for in their youth.

Interviews were conducted in Latvian, the participants' preferred language. All recordings were transcribed in Latvian, and interview excerpts were translated into English for publication. Interviews were recorded with informed consent and subsequently anonymised, with particular care taken to remove potentially identifying details. For instance, the countries in which participants were residing are not disclosed.

Interviews ranged from one to nearly three hours in duration. Each began with an outline of the project's focus—particularly the intersections of work, family life, and mobility. A small set of semi-structured prompts guided the discussions; however, interviewees generally narrated their experiences freely and often introduced themes that had not been anticipated, such as the importance of physical presence and the joy associated with receiving handwritten letters. In addition to the formal interviews, informal conversations with participants and other community members deepened the contextual understanding, particularly regarding gendered expectations and generational dynamics. Sampling began through social networks, which provided introductions to individuals not previously known to the researchers, and continued through snowballing.

The analysis foregrounds narratives and practices, interpreted through what participants did, how they acted, and with whom they maintained connections across relocations (cf. Hitchings, 2012). Four broad analytical themes emerged from conceptually guided coding. We first conducted hand coding focusing on mobility, then digital and non-digital engagement with social networks, the frequency and intensity of communication—ranging from daily to monthly rhythms—platform choices, participants' explanations for differing intensities, and the dynamics of social ties, including family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, and how these ties strengthened, weakened, or shifted over time. We treat our interlocutors as experts of their own lives whose words do not merely report reality but help constitute it (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Terry et al., 2017). The themes that emerged most clearly were the broader infrastructures of contemporary digital capitalism, the distinctiveness of midlife professional mobility, digitally mediated care work, and the value of physical objects and embodied togetherness. We then analysed digital connections as part of migrants' capability sets: They enable migration, continuity of care, and professional agency across distance, yet remain insufficient for embodied presence.

4. Analysis

4.1. Digital Infrastructures

In this section, we trace the infrastructural capabilities that enable movement and relationship maintenance across borders. At the macro level, these capability sets include highly developed digital access to travel, housing, banking, and the internet—conditions that many Western migrants have come to take for granted. What distinguishes our participants is not digitalisation as such, but how they use digital environments through the temporalities of the life course, long-distance mobility, and exceptional events such as the Covid-19 pandemic. For many, the pandemic dramatically intensified dependence on digital tools for education, work, and social contact. Remote learning and remote work blurred the boundaries between physical and virtual space, producing new possibilities but also new forms of social cost. As one participant, Gundars, reflected: "Covid time was the only time when I felt really lonely. I couldn't meet anyone."

For Elsa, the shift to remote education reorganised her spatial choices:

> All my classes were now online. So I decided I could spend the year at home in Latvia [and] not travel to the country of my studies.

The words of our interlocutors echo what Leurs and Ponzanesi (2024) and Hine (2020) describe as the mundane and embodied character of digital life, further intensified by fast-paced digital economies and pandemic convergence, reshaping the lives of migrants and non-migrants alike. These shifts also decoupled work from place, creating new mobility options for highly skilled migrants able to work remotely across borders (Bilan et al., 2025; Triandafyllidou, 2025). Participants working in fields such as translation and banking gained substantial geographical flexibility compared to those whose jobs required physical presence abroad. Digital infrastructures thus offered autonomy and mobility in professional life while simultaneously redefining the texture of sociality.

Digital communication among our interlocutors is structured by dual logic: Different media serve different relationships. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are used to maintain situational friendships and weak ties through low-intensity engagements: birthday greetings, photo exchanges, and simply keeping track of acquaintances' lives (Granovetter, 1973). In contrast, strong ties with family, parents, siblings, and close friends rely on more intimate channels such as WhatsApp and other video-calling apps. These mediated forms of proximity began in daily life in Latvia but continue to structure longer-term periods of physical distance.

Weak ties, although low-maintenance, can become reminders of Latvian networks. In her spare time, our interlocutor Laura started playing quizzes on social networking sites; it became, in her words, "almost an obsession," driven by the clickbait and attention economy. However, through such activities, dormant ties were revived as she was often online and able to follow closely and re-engage with distant acquaintances.

Digital infrastructures also anchor professional identities, especially when geographical mobility or local labour market constraints limit access to conventional employment. For example, Gunita described turning to digital expression while abroad and unable to work because of language barriers. She started writing a blog and said that it gave her a sense that she could still do something meaningful. For her, the capability of digital

production restored a sense of professional competence and continuity. Others used digital communication strategically to maintain international professional relevance. As Ilze emphasised:

> I'm constantly in contact with colleagues from Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Asia, Western Europe. Keeping those ties alive is part of my job; otherwise, you lose international relevance.

Another participant, Ingrida, spoke of the global reach of her digital labour in a similar way, explaining that she still works digitally as a consultant after retiring early from her international career.

Linda exemplifies a fully digital career path:

> Almost all my work is digital. I can write articles, run investigations, coordinate projects from everywhere where the internet is good….It is one of those few professions where mobility is possible. But of course, all my work is oriented towards Latvia.

Digital infrastructures thus enable economic participation across borders, sustaining professional trajectories that would otherwise be impossible. Midlife also entails purposeful identity work, as suggested, for example, in Smahina's (2025) netnographic research with Ukrainian forced migrants in Finland. Digital infrastructures facilitate work, while semi-private chat communities enable individuals to negotiate professional identity and self-worth—a highly significant dimension of midlife identity.

Digital infrastructures also shape how public-facing work abroad is experienced by loved ones at home. Arta, who appeared regularly on TV from crisis zones, described how this created a particular digital persona. Yet intimate digital conversations with her partner and siblings softened the pressures of this visibility through everyday private communication.

Finally, our interlocutors highlight the often-invisible infrastructures that make mobility possible. As Ilvars noted, about travelling in Western Europe:

> I go to Amsterdam by train. I have my Latvian bank card, my payment system that is global. I can pay and travel and be mobile without giving it a thought.

Such frictionless digital infrastructures contrast sharply with contexts where digitalisation is limited. Elfrida reflected on her work in Central Asia, where the internet was so slow that it taught patience to both her and her husband as they tried to keep their marriage alive through obligatory daily internet calls.

Digital infrastructures are also central to practical aspects of mobility, such as securing housing. Dina recounted finding accommodation during Covid-19: "I found a flat myself—seven nights on the internet—and I got it."

The embeddedness of digitalisation becomes particularly visible here: it smooths mobility but also reveals inequalities in technological environments. This echoes Bradley et al. (2025), who emphasise that routine digital literacy, in this case, finding a flat online, is now essential for migrants' daily navigation of host societies.

These digitally enabled capability sets comprise the financial, professional, and relational uses of digital tools through which migrants maintain close and distant relationships, sustain professional relevance, preserve cultural belonging for themselves and their children, and navigate the practicalities of mobility. Yet midlife remains anchored in identities formed earlier in life. Most of the middle-aged participants, regardless of skills or cosmopolitan orientations, remained strongly pulled towards what Rita succinctly expressed: "I rather belong to the Latvian information sphere."

4.2. Mobile Midlife

Midlife mobilities among highly skilled professionals are characterised by conscious decisions, reflexive self-knowledge, and a clear sense of purpose. Unlike youth mobilities, often marked by experimentation and open-ended exploration, midlife migrants generally know why they go abroad, what they want to achieve, and how mobility fits into their broader life projects. As Gundars succinctly put it: "I moved because I found a very good job that suits my interests and my skills, not just because of moving."

This clarity of intention emerged consistently across interviews, which we interpret as accumulated professional and life-course capabilities. Interlocutors emphasised that they intentionally sought professional challenge, growth, and meaningful work. Their mobility decisions were neither accidental nor impulsive but aligned with long-term aspirations and self-understanding.

Importantly, midlife should not be treated as synonymous with family life—a common assumption in migration and life course theories (cf. Bailey, 2009). Many of our interlocutors in midlife are childless or live alone, and their mobilities reflect this diversity. Kristine articulated this clearly:

> I realised that I don't want children. It is not an active refusal, just a lack of desire. For me, a good life means stability, meaningful work, and freedom.

For her, stability does not mean being tied to one physical location; rather, it means belonging to a high-skilled professional environment that encourages continuous growth. As she continued:

> The wandering life gives me joy. I love arriving at a new place not quite knowing the rules, that sense of being slightly outside the familiar, that's my happiness.

This stance exemplifies freedom as a capability to live a life of one's own choosing. Another important dimension of her story is that highly skilled professionals can forge forms of professional belonging that are enacted across multiple places and sustained through international networks, mobility infrastructures, and digital connectivity. Professional work, for Kristine, provides stability even as countries and places change.

Friendships in midlife often unfold across borders. Many of our interlocutors have peers with similar levels of education, ambition, and global orientation who also live transnational lives. These parallel mobilities support the maintenance of long-standing bonds. As Elfrida explained:

> I have colleagues, old friends, study friends—very special people. My friends live in Sweden, in Amsterdam, elsewhere. Our friendships continue through regular visiting, WhatsApp, and going to

> common events. These women are highly accomplished professionals, and it is important for me to maintain our ties.

Such friendships provide emotional anchoring and reinforce shared identities shaped by education, career trajectories, and cosmopolitan professional fields. They need to be nurtured as living collective capabilities and allow midlife migrants to cultivate transnational social worlds that do not depend on co-residence or proximity.

Many interlocutors referred to frequent travel back to Latvia, forming regular rhythms that structure their midlife mobility. For highly skilled professionals—whether supported by employers or self-financing their stays—regular returns home became essential. Artis described his mobility pattern with precision: His own scheme was about returning home nine times a year; for Ingrida, it was "three weeks [away] and then [one] week I'm back in Latvia. Whether it's Covid time or not, I am there." These rhythms accommodated family commitments, including care for a young child. Even when participants held demanding international roles, they sought ways to remain embedded in family life and maintain continuity in their relationships with Latvia.

While midlife migrants often achieve high levels of professional satisfaction abroad, establishing new, deep social ties can be challenging. As Viktors emphasised: "In our age, friendship is the biggest value."

Many echoed the difficulty of forming new friendships in midlife, an age when people's social circles tend to stabilise and time becomes fragmented. This challenge is amplified in mobility contexts, where social integration is uneven, and transnational routines limit opportunities for sustained local engagement. Artis described this thoughtfully:

> Life is quite lonely despite professional achievements. If I didn't have my regular intense work and regular connection with professionals in my sphere, this loneliness would be a very important reason to end this period abroad.

For him, the sense of purpose and mission provided future planning, a temporal structure, and a sense of meaning:

> I know I am here for four years, on a professional mission. And I know I will return to Latvia, where I belong.

This sense of a clear timeframe and an eventual return acted as a psychological anchoring mechanism, allowing participants to tolerate loneliness or instability while abroad.

The midlife mobilities of our interlocutors are highly purposeful. Participants know *why* they are abroad, primarily for professional development, and most know they will eventually return to Latvia. We caution against generalising these findings to all midlife migrants, given the socioeconomic selectivity of our sample. Yet the pattern is clear: Midlife mobilities among highly skilled professionals are marked by intentionality, professional purpose, and a strong sense of where "home" is. This purposefulness distinguishes midlife mobility decisively from youth mobility, where uncertainty, experimentation, and open-ended exploration often predominate.

4.3. Digital Midlife Care Work

What we call digital midlife care work refers to the everyday labour of maintaining and creating ties while being geographically mobile: caring digitally for parents, partners, and children, and simultaneously sustaining professional communities across borders. Our interlocutors described well-developed routines for this digital care work, showing how midlife mobility requires constant attention to relationships at a distance—emotional, temporal, and technological.

For partners, parents, and close family members, WhatsApp was by far the most frequently used medium. As Gunita put it: "WhatsApp. 98%."

Several participants also recalled the role Skype played before its decline, especially for communication with parents. Migrants use digital tools mundanely to maintain everyday sociality, affection, and solidarity. Ponzanesi and Leurs (2022) show that digital migration practices are complex negotiations of the everyday.

Importantly, digitalisation does not fundamentally change relational patterns that have developed over the life course. Some ties continue much as before migration. For instance, Artis reflected on his relationship with his father:

> My relationships with [my] dad were and remain rather distant, and it's not a result of migration. I communicate rather seldom with him simply because this is our way of communicating.

In other families, distance intensified contact. Gunita explained that she communicates more with her parents now than before migration, a pattern shaped by their life course. When her parents were younger and more physically active, they communicated through work, shared tasks, and everyday physical presence. Now, with less mobility, digital closeness has become essential:

> Every evening, I called them on Skype. Communication was slow due to poor internet, especially when I was in [a non-Western destination], but it was so important for us to be in touch.

This reflects a capability to value and routinely work on what matters, something similarly expressed by Amanda. Her current digital routines reproduce earlier patterns of intimacy:

> Among my family, ties are unchangingly warm with my mother—those are very long calls once a week. With [my] father, a bit less. With my brother, it's regular but different—photos and news.

She added: "Mother and I call [each other] once a week, then we speak long and from the heart."

Maintaining marriages and partnerships across physical separation was described as emotionally demanding and labour-intensive, requiring intentional, structured digital routines. As Ingrida explained:

> During my long postings in different countries, the only way to protect the marriage was to talk twice a day, morning and evening. Without that routine, we would not have been together; we would have drifted apart….One sentence took half a minute to land…these tiny connections held our family together.

Diana echoed a very similar midlife capability and effort, saying that with her husband she "talked every day—every morning and evening. If not, the marriage would simply not have survived." This aligns with van Hoof's (2013) analysis of how changing economies and everyday life reshape couples and, in our case, what couples do to maintain relationships when such changes are compounded by physical separation. Across our interviews, this digital midlife labour emerges as intense and purposeful care work—sustaining marriages, maintaining family ties, nurturing friendships, and preserving professional networks. Participants recognised that distance was ever-present and that, while digital communication could not fully replace physical presence, touch, or domestic intimacy, routine digital connection became a strategy of compensation. Morning and evening calls, regular check-ins, and sustained messaging were all forms of conscious relational work.

Friendships and acquaintances follow comparable patterns (Morgan, 2009). Many interlocutors described stronger or more regular contact while abroad than when living in Latvia. Amanda explained that she uses WhatsApp with one friend, direct calls with another, and that these patterns reflect their earlier modes of communication when they lived in the same country. Although many admitted that forming new friendships in midlife is challenging, some, especially single participants, did engage in romantic relationships across borders. Santa, who has lived in several countries over the past decade, revealed:

> I had a sweetheart in [in another country]….They entered my life via digital routes—of course, Tinder. It helps me shift the conversation away from work, [to] have a digital romance.

Digital care work also involves professional identity. Many interlocutors created new WhatsApp groups or digital networks that replaced earlier academic or community affiliations in Latvia. As Elmārs explained, his new group of Latvian professionals abroad substitutes the university associations and local communities he once belonged to, demonstrating accumulated capability to create and recreate communal relationships:

> This new WhatsApp group with Latvian professionals in different countries replaced my old networks. Now I have to create such a community myself.

Across all these accounts, digital midlife emerges as a dense landscape of emotional, relational, and professional labour. Digital communication cannot replace physical presence, but it enables people to sustain what matters to them: intimacy, care, professional belonging, and a sense of home carried across borders.

4.4. Embodied Presence and the Limits of the Digital

In this final section, our interlocutors remind us that digital care work, however intensive and meaningful, cannot replace the embodied realities of being physically present with loved ones. Real presence, real touch, and the materiality of "being there" continue to hold profound emotional value. Gatis illustrated this vividly when describing his relationship with his grandmother, with whom he is very close. He shared a moving story about surprising her:

> I always surprise her. For instance, I sat next to her in the theatre…without announcing that I would be in Latvia. I appeared next to her, to show with my body and my presence how dear this connection is to me.

Such moments signify the irreplaceability of embodied affection, especially for older generations who value tactile, face-to-face encounters. We follow Sun's (2021) argument that migrants do not take intimacy for granted. We also extend emerging discussions of ageing in networks by showing that grandchildren, too, can be active producers of intimacy, connection, and touch across generations.

For almost all participants, the most important form of care is physical presence with children. Many spoke of travelling "as often as it takes," regardless of cost or distance, when their children lived separately. Prioritising this trip—financially and emotionally—was considered essential. Similarly, being physically together with a partner was repeatedly emphasised as crucial to sustaining relationships. Linda recalled a moment that captured this sentiment:

> At some point, he said: "I am here, I have come halfway across the world, and you need to look at me, not at my emails." And he was right.

Her husband's insistence that distance cannot be an excuse for avoiding embodied time together illustrates the emotional labour required to sustain partnerships across borders. Arta recounted a similar experience, also echoing the financial capabilities of our interlocutors:

> My partner said: "I have money, I can buy tickets for you, but we cannot be seeing each other only through the screen. You need to come here. Distance doesn't matter—I will cover the costs."

These accounts underscore how midlife couples, especially those in demanding international careers, negotiate the boundaries between digital connection and physical presence.

Materiality—objects, letters, gifts, and familiar places—also plays a central role in sustaining deep emotional ties. As highlighted earlier, summers spent in specific places in Latvia anchor families in landscapes of belonging. The receipt of tangible objects can hold equally deep meaning. Ingrida described how receiving a handwritten letter remains profoundly special: "It is something very special. I have a friend, a teacher. We exchange letters from time to time."

Such material exchanges exemplify the affective power of physical objects, reinforcing that digital communication, while essential, cannot replace the sensory and symbolic richness of tangible presence. Across these accounts, it becomes clear that digital communication sustains relationships during absence, but real presence—arriving in person, touching, sharing space, exchanging physical gifts—remains central to how midlife migrants maintain and express love, loyalty, and belonging.

5. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that digital care work constitutes a distinctive and still under-theorised form of midlife relational labour among highly skilled migrants. Marriage and long-term partnerships, in particular, require intensive digital labour—what our interlocutors described as communication "every morning, every evening"—accompanied by a conscious understanding that, otherwise, "the marriage would not survive." Maintaining intimacy at a distance is therefore not incidental but a continuous emotional effort embedded in daily routines.

We have shown that midlife mobilities unfold within highly digitalised environments, yet these environments are uneven across the globe. In Western countries, many highly skilled professionals can move almost frictionlessly through interoperable infrastructures. By contrast, those working in regions with limited or slow digital connectivity encounter constraints that significantly shape mobility, social ties, and work practices.

Our findings also demonstrate that midlife mobilities are purposeful planning capabilities. Participants know why they relocate and, unlike many younger migrants, they no longer have the time or desire to experiment with paths that can easily be abandoned. Midlife mobilities and digital care work are marked by rituals and stabilised patterns that distinguish them from both youth and older-age mobilities. By this stage, professional lives are already substantially formed, and mobility becomes a deliberate strategy: to pursue meaningful work, acquire new skills, or gain relevant international experience.

In dialogue with scholarship on care and digital connections (Baldassar & Brandhorst, 2021; Baldassar & Merla, 2013), we emphasise that digital practices have limits. While digital tools sustain intimacy across borders, people still go to great lengths to create rituals of presence, prioritising embodied, co-present encounters despite the financial and logistical costs of travel. Co-presence extends beyond the body: It also includes the exchange of material objects, handwritten letters, and physically returning to places that hold emotional significance. These practices show how migrants cultivate belonging through both digital and material means.

Our findings align with Hine (2020) and those of Leurs and Ponzanesi's (2024) call to recognise mundane digital practices as infrastructural to migrant life. Digital everydayness supports emotional bonds, financial management, cultural participation, and the rhythms of social life. Migrants' ordinary digital routines illuminate their agency, resilience, and the ways in which they craft belonging across borders. At the same time, digitalisation expands opportunities for highly skilled mobility—through remote work, online recruitment, digital nomad visas, and platform-based labour—making new forms of midlife mobility possible.

As a future research agenda, we invite scholars to explore the rich, dense, and diverse lives of middle-aged migrants across varied geographical, professional, gendered, and familial contexts. Midlife mobility is neither derivative of youth mobility nor is it reducible to family obligation; it is a purposeful, emotionally complex digitalised way of being in the world full of intergenerational relations.

Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank our research interlocutors.

Funding

This research was supported by (R)E-TIES: Managing Mobility and Human Relations in Digitally Saturated Social Worlds project no. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/I/CFLA/005 ("RSU internal and RSU with LSPA external consolidation grant"), financed by the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Mechanism and the Latvian state budget. Lulle also received support from the Research Council of Finland, funding no. 363258 ("Menopausing: Exploring Diversity, Awareness and Activism"). Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Riga Stradins University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Ulf R. Hedetoft (University of Copenhagen).

Data Availability

Data are not publicly available due to our duty to protect anonymity and personal details throughout the interviews.

LLMs Disclosure

Microsoft Co-Pilot was used for language correction.

References

Alam, A., Badihi, B., & Nel, E. (2025). Technology-mediated care as infrastructure: The role of social media in supporting international migrants settling in New Zealand small towns. *Digital Geography and Society*, *9*, Article 100141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2025.100141

Andronic, A. M. T., & Constantin, T. (2025). Acculturation and well-being among migrant populations: A systematic review. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *26*, 127–174. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-024-01178-1

Anthias, F. (2012). Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, *2*(2), 102–110. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0032-y

Bailey, A. (2009). Population geography: Lifecourse matters. *Progress in Human Geography*, *33*(3), 407–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508096355

Baldassar, L., & Brandhorst, R. (2021). Sibling support in transnational families: The impact of migration and mobility on sibling relationships of support over time and distance. In A. Buchanan & A. Rotkirch (Eds.), *Brothers and sisters: Sibling relationships across the life course* (pp. 239–256). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55985-4_14

Baldassar, L., & Merla, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Transnational families, migration and the circulation of care: Understanding mobility and absence in family life*. Routledge.

Bilan, Y., Mishchuk, H., & Oliinyk, O. (2025). Migration of highly skilled workers as a driver of digital economy development. *Knowledge and Performance Management*, *9*(2), 113–123. https://doi.org/10.21511/kpm.09(2).2025.09

Bradley, L., Guichon, N., & Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2025). Migrants' and refugees' digital literacies in life and language learning. *ReCALL*, *37*(2), 147–156. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344025000047

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2014). Thematic analysis. In T. Teo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* (pp. 1947–1952). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_311

Brickell, K. (2012). "Mapping" and "doing" critical geographies of home. *Progress in Human Geography*, *36*(2), 225–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132511418708

Cantwell, J., & Shukla, P. (2025). Migrants, knowledge connections, and digital trade in the information age. *International Migration Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183251388052

Carling, J. (2017). On conjunctures in transnational lives: Linear time, relative mobility and individual experience. In E. Mavroudi, B. Page, & A. Christou (Eds.), *Timespace and international migration* (pp. 21–35). Edward Elgar.

Frericks, P., & Höppner, J. (2019). Self-responsibility readdressed: Shifts in financial responsibility for social security between the public realm, the individual and the family in Europe. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *63*(1), 65–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218816805

Godin, M., Ozkul, D., & Humphris, R. (2025). Digital technologies and migration: Behind, beyond and around the black box. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *51*(14), 3571–3589. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2513153

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360–1380. https://doi.org/10.1086/225469

Hine, C. (2020). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085348

Hitchings, R. (2012). People can talk about their practices. *Area*, *44*(1), 61–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2011.01060.x

Hopkins, P., & Pain, R. (2007). Geographies of age: Thinking relationally. *Area*, *39*(3), 287–294. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.2007.00750.x

Kelley, J. A., Gubernskaya, Z., & Saenz, J. L. (2024). Lives in motion: New frontiers in research on immigration and aging. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, *79*(3), Article gbad190. https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbad190

Larkin, B. (2013). The politics and poetics of infrastructure. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, 327–343. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522

Leurs, K., & Ponzanesi, S. (Eds.). (2024). *Doing digital migration studies: Theories and practices of the everyday*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463725774

Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society. *International Migration Review*, *38*(3), 1002–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x

Licoppe, C. (2004). Connected presence: The emergence of a new repertoire for managing social relationships in a changing communication technoscape. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *22*(1), 135–156. https://doi.org/10.1068/d323t

Lulle, A. (2024a). *Midlife geographies. Changing lifecourses across generations, spaces and time*. Bristol University Press . https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529228892

Lulle, A. (2024b). Middle-aged migrants: Expanding an understanding of lifecourses and linked lives. *Global Networks*, *24*(4), Article e12483. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12483

Lulle, A. (2024c). Midlife mobilities. In V., Preston, S., McLafferty, M. Maciejewska, & B. Yeoh (Eds.), *Handbook on gender and mobilities* (pp. 128–137). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035300860.00017

Lulle, A. (2025). Diplomat and international worker mobilities. A family lens on power dynamics. *Population, Space and Place*, 31(7), Article 70096. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.70096

Madianou, M. (2016). Ambient co-presence: Transnational family practices in polymedia environments. *Global Networks*, *16*(2), 183–201. https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12105

Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013). *Migration and new media: Transnational families and polymedia*. Routledge.

Minchilli, C., & Ponzanesi, S. (2025). Digital/postcolonial belongings: Migration, digital practices & the everyday. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2025.2502942

Morgan, D. (2009). *Acquaintances: The space between intimates and strangers*. Open University Press.

Ponzanesi, S., & Leurs, K. (2022). Digital migration practices and the everyday. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *15*(2), 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcac016

Robeyns, I. (2005). The capability approach: A theoretical survey. *Journal of Human Development*, *6*(1), 93–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034266

Robeyns, I. (2025). Why economic inequality should be central to strategies for the future. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, *26*(2), 161–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2025.2479028

Smahina, M. (2025). "More than sufferers": Digital boundary-making and belonging through work among Ukrainian forced migrants in Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, *16*(1), Article 4. https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1024

Sun, K. C. (2021). *Time and migration: How long-term Taiwanese migrants negotiate later life*. Cornell University Press.

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig & W. S. Rogers (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 17–37). Sage.

Triandafyllidou, A. (2025). Migration, advanced digital technologies, and the future of work. *International Migration Review*, *60*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183251359176

van Hoof, J. (2013). *Modern couples? Continuity and change in heterosexual relationships*. Ashgate.

About the Authors

Aija Lulle is an associate professor at the University of Eastern Finland and a guest associate professor at Rīga Stradiņš University. Her research spans migration, gender, life course, ageing, care, and feminist geography.

Elza Lāma holds a PhD in social sciences and is a senior researcher at Rīga Stradiņš University. Her research interests include communication, digital cultures, mediatization, motherhood, emotion work, and life-making practices.