

Caring at a Distance: Digital Anchors and the Relational Work of Academic Mobility

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Abstract

This article examines how Latvian early-career researchers in the United Kingdom navigate academic mobility by cultivating relational moorings through digitally mediated practices in their professional and personal lives. We introduce the concept of digital anchors—socio-technical infrastructures that sustain affective stability and continuity, and afford care under conditions of ongoing movement and precarity. Digital anchors are not reducible to individual platforms, devices, media choices, or communicative practices. Rather, they function as relational infrastructures across spatial separation by stabilising rhythms of interaction. Using life history interviews with ten early-career researchers, we analyse how digital anchors enable the orchestration of transnational care, support, and collaboration, while also revealing the techno-emotional gaps. We provide an in-depth engagement with biographical narratives that illuminate processes that remain largely invisible in large-scale mobility statistics and macro-level datasets. The findings show how professional trajectories and personal lives intertwine, as digital anchors structure how work, care, and relationships are sustained across distance. Although digital communication provides everyday presence and coordination across borders, embodied co-presence remains crucial for renewing relational depth, trust, and professional rapport. Moments of crisis, life course transitions, and ageing relatives further expose the fragility of digitally sustained ties. We argue that digital anchors function not as substitutes for proximity but as dynamic relational infrastructures that make academic mobility liveable, while simultaneously generating new forms of relational work, ambivalence, and vulnerability within transnational academic careers. Importantly, the digital anchors are maintained through ongoing techno-emotional labour. The contribution of the article is in advancing the concept of digital anchors as a way of understanding how stability is enacted under conditions of academic precarity and mobility.

Keywords

academic mobility; digital anchors; early-career researchers; Latvia; precarity; transnational care

1. Introduction

This article explores how Latvian doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers in the UK navigate the complexities of maintaining and reshaping social and personal ties in an increasingly digital world and precarious academic labour market. Boundaryless career theory (Arthur, 2014; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) frames academic trajectories as flexible and self-directed, shaped by transnational mobility. The concept of protean careers (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Hall, 1996) and Wellman's (2001) notion of "networked individualism" highlight the shift toward individualised, digitally mediated social networks. These theoretical advancements suggest the importance of personal meaning and relationships as well as autonomy in analysing human movements. In this article, we focus on more personal and intimate relationships (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024) situated in a broader transnational and mobile academic career context. We also draw on Digital Diaspora Theory (Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Nedelcu, 2018) to explore the evolving nature of diaspora in the digital age and focus on how digital engagement sustains transnational personal and professional relationships of caring and intimacy among Latvian early-career academics abroad.

Transnational mobility has become an imperative for early-career researchers (ECRs), shaping academic legitimacy within global knowledge economies. Yet this mobility imperative frequently places care relationships under threat, as geographic dislocation disrupts the emotional and practical bonds essential for wellbeing and career support (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018; Ivancheva et al., 2019; Puzo & Lulle, 2025). The professional trajectories and personal lives intertwine when ECRs engage in relational mooring—the ongoing, multi-sited work of sustaining social connectivity and continuity across borders (Moon, 1995; Zechner, 2019). In this article, drawing on the new mobilities paradigm (NMP; Sheller, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006, 2016) and the concept of mooring (Moon, 1995), we introduce the concept of digital anchors. We define digital anchors as socio-technical infrastructures that provide points of stability, orientation, or continuity under conditions of mobility, uncertainty, or spatial dislocation. Digital anchors are not reducible to individual platforms, devices, media choices, or communicative practices. Rather, they function as relational infrastructures across spatial separation by stabilising rhythms of interaction and enabling relationships, routines, care, and intimacies to persist across spatial distance. Anchors function not to immobilise but to make movement liveable and intelligible by enabling continuity, relational maintenance, and temporal coordination. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the study examines if and how digital anchors produce relational moorings for transnationally mobile ECRs, and contributes to our understanding of how digital infrastructures mediate transnational academic careers, reshaping distance, continuity, and care in a mobile digital age.

2. Boundaryless Careers, Affective Relations, and Academic Precarity

Boundaryless career theory posits trajectories decoupled from single organisations, emphasising cross-institutional moves, networked capital, and self-managed progression (Arthur, 2014; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). In contemporary academia, this translates into international postdoctoral stints, serial contracts, and multilocal dwelling as scholars pursue mobility to accumulate "international capital" (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018; Wakefield & Dismore, 2015). The NMP offers an analytical angle to exploring these continuous moves by foregrounding how mobility creates and depends on infrastructures that relationally shape the movement and its consequences (Adey, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2016). Courtois and O'Keefe (2024) document how Irish academia valorises outbound mobility while externalising emotional and

logistical costs, producing precarious trajectories where ECRs must “go away and make a big thing” to gain recognition. Manzi et al. (2019) similarly show how neoliberal academic cultures exhort mobility—“enough wandering around!”—while masking the intimate calculations and sacrifices entailed. The mobility imperative intersects and clashes with the imperative to care that, while affecting academic women in particular (Ivancheva et al., 2019), shapes the (im)mobility decisions and career trajectories of both men and women scholars in multidimensional ways (Bataille et al., 2017; Schaer, 2021). ECRs orchestrate care at a distance and negotiate affective attachments to places, people, and communities under the temporal pressures of grants and short contracts, while managing time-space complexities and constructing and maintaining relationships that travel through routines (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018; Schittenhelm, 2022).

2.1. Mobility and Relational Moorings

The NMP reframes mobility as a complex assemblage, a socio-technical process involving bodies, objects, affects, infrastructures, and representations (Sheller, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2016). Rather than treating mobility as a derivative of migration or transport, the NMP interrogates the co-mobilisation of people and things, the rhythms and frictions of movement, and the embedded moorings (Hanam et al., 2006). Mobility is never frictionless; it depends on moorings—the stabilising structures, routines, and attachments that enable movement and make it meaningful (Hanam et al., 2006; Moon, 1995). Rather than treating moorings as static places, recent scholarship advances a relational perspective, emphasising that moorings are processual, multi-sited, and affective, enacted through ongoing social and material relations (Adey, 2006; Zechner, 2019). Moorings thus become relational infrastructures, co-produced through rhythms, narratives, and socio-technical mediations (Botterill, 2018; Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018). This relational turn foregrounds continuity-making practices during mobility, and this is what we focus on in our article. We consider how Latvian ECRs sustain relationships, belonging, and care across spatial and temporal (dis)locations and how their professional trajectories and personal lives intertwine.

Within the NMP, moorings are not antithetical to mobility; they are part of the same relational assemblage—the “fixities” (homes, servers, infrastructures, institutions) and anchoring practices (messaging, caregiving, supervision, collaboration) that enable mobile trajectories. Building on this, relational mooring shifts emphasis from fixed sites or infrastructures to the ongoing social, affective, and material relations through which people hold lives together across space and time. Zechner (2019) illustrates this relational orientation by showing how older adults narrate mobility through care relations, intimacies, and intergenerational ties—not only physical places or transport systems. Adey (2006) similarly argues that if mobility is conceived as universal, it risks emptiness; instead, a relational politics of (im)mobility foregrounds how mobility is constituted through uneven power relations, affective attachments, and situated practices (see also Salazar, 2022). “Relational moorings” (Hanam et al., 2006; Moon, 1995) capture the affective ties and social infrastructures that stabilise mobile lives and anchor the decision-making of staying or moving. Relational moorings are processual and ongoing; they are made and maintained through everyday routines, communications, and obligations, rather than being given once and for all (Adey, 2006; Moon, 1995; Zechner, 2019).

Boccagni (2012) emphasises the transnationalism of everyday life—the mundane routines through which migrants sustain ties, responsibilities, and belonging—a fitting lens for ECRs whose care relations (partners, children, ageing parents) shape mobility choices and thresholds for relocation. Studies of transnational care

reveal ambivalent intimacies that both sustain and strain relationships over distance (Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023; Humbracht et al., 2023). For ECRs, relational moorings in addition to more personal ties include professional ones as well: mentors, peer communities, and disciplinary networks whose support (references, collaborations, moral backing) can make mobility viable, while their absence intensifies vulnerability. These moorings are not simply place-bound; scholars frequently “dwell-in-motion,” assembling portable routines and relational supports that travel and stretch across time zones (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018). Thus, we examine how moorings are enacted through digital anchors: How the work of relational mooring is happening, what digital tools, platforms, and infrastructures may make mooring possible, and how it is achieved, if at all, by Latvian ECRs in the UK.

2.2. Digital Anchors: Mediating Relational Moorings in Academic Mobility

For early-career researchers, whose trajectories are increasingly shaped by internationalised CV-building, short-term contracts, and multi-sited collaborations, relational moorings are crucial to making boundary-spanning academic work liveable amid intensifying precarity (Courtois & O’Keefe, 2024). Synthesising scholarship on mobilities, transnational intimacy, and digital migration studies, we introduce the concept of digital anchors. And we ask if and how the ECRs’ digital anchors may operate as core relational moorings that enable care, collaboration, and affect-in-motion (Adey, 2006; Dixon, 2019) to sustain continuity of relationships across spatial (dis)placements.

Digital anchors as infrastructures encompass portable devices (smartphones, laptops) and platform ecologies (messaging apps, video conferencing tools, networking sites) that mediate both professional and personal life in conditions of precarious mobility. However, these anchors are not merely technical tools; they are socio-material assemblages comprising devices, platforms, and communicative practices that are strategically orchestrated as polymedia practices (Madianou & Miller, 2013; Patterson & Leurs, 2020) to manage intimacy, care, collaboration, and conflict. At the same time, digital anchors are not reducible to polymedia practices even though they are enacted through them. Digital anchors emphasise the infrastructural dependence that emerges when digitally mediated relational mooring becomes essential rather than optional. The concept of digital anchors demonstrates how routinised polymedia practices acquire a stabilising function to compensate for the absence of sustained co-presence and structural instability. Stabilising digital anchors allows ECRs to maintain ties with family, partners, and professional peers while navigating multilocal dwelling and serial relocations (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018).

Digital anchors can serve dual roles. First, they sustain relational moorings by enabling transnational care routines—bedtime stories via video calls, shared meals through screens, and continuous messaging that simulates co-presence (Alinejad, 2021; Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023). Dixon’s (2019) concept of “affective mooring” underscores the emotional dimension of these anchors: The smartphone, for instance, becomes a portable locus of security and belonging, mitigating disorientation while amplifying expectations of perpetual availability. Second, they underpin professional continuity, facilitating collaborative research, virtual conferences, and networking across borders (Wakefield & Dismore, 2015). Digital migration studies highlight that platforms are socio-technical environments where diasporic and professional communities are imagined, maintained, and contested (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024). Digital diasporas offer connective infrastructures for solidarity and knowledge exchange, while “staying with the trouble” of platform governance—moderation, algorithmic visibility, and datafication (Candidatu & Ponzanesi,

2022; Nedelcu, 2018). These practices are vital for ECRs whose career progression depends on maintaining visibility and productivity despite geographic fragmentation. Wellman's (2001) notion of "networked individualism" reframes these dynamics: Rather than relying on bounded communities, scholars curate personalised, digitally mediated networks that operate as portable moorings.

2.3. Affective and Temporal Dimensions

The anchoring function of digital technologies is deeply affective and temporal. Platforms compress distance and accelerate rhythms of communication, enabling "real-time" intimacy but also intensifying the pace of academic and personal life (Patterson & Leurs, 2020). This creates techno-emotional labour—the work of managing presence, responsiveness, and visibility across multiple channels (Alinejad, 2021). For ECRs, such labour intersects with professional precarity: The imperative to remain digitally present for collaborators and employers compounds the emotional weight of sustaining care relations at a distance. Dixon (2019) argues that these anchors offer stability yet tether individuals to devices, producing ambivalent dependencies. For ECRs, this means that digital anchoring involves affective negotiation in addition to techno-emotional labour. Therefore, digital anchors are integral to the lived experience of academic mobility. They enable ECRs to navigate precarious trajectories by maintaining relational and professional continuity, yet they also entangle scholars in regimes of constant connectivity and emotional labour. In our study, we explore these dynamics. We question if and how ECRs' digital anchoring may create relational mooring to ensure that life, care, and love remain connected across institutional demands (Manzi et al., 2019; Puzo & Lulle, 2025) and locations.

3. Methodological Approach

This study adopts a life history approach (Elder, 1994) to explore how early-career researchers from Latvia navigate academic mobility, relational moorings, and digital anchoring practices during their doctoral and postdoctoral trajectories in the UK. The life history method is particularly suited to this inquiry because it foregrounds temporality, subjectivity, and relational complexity, enabling the capture of biographical narratives that reveal how mobility decisions intersect with care obligations, institutional expectations, and digital practices over time. We used a combination of timelines and qualitative interviews that allowed, while relying on the importance of chronological event data, to explore the sense-making of individuals of their own trajectories and the affective relationship between events and people involved (Lalanda Nico, 2016). It also allowed us to explore the role of digital anchors in the creation of relational moorings for liveable lives. This approach aligns with the epistemological commitments of the NMP, which emphasises the relational and infrastructural dimensions of mobility. While we considered contextualising the findings with macro-level datasets (e.g., Eurostat or OECD), no existing datasets capture the specific techno-emotional and relational dimensions we aimed to examine, and the study is not positioned at a stage that would support quantitative triangulation. Instead, the value of the analysis lies in its fine-grained engagement with biographical narratives, which bring into focus processes that remain largely invisible in large-scale mobility statistics.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 10 Latvian ECRs who were based in the UK during their doctoral studies or postdoctoral appointments. This group was selected for its relevance to the research focus: Latvian scholars represent a smaller EU academic community navigating mobility within the

context of a fragmented and uncertain academic employment landscape in Latvia (Puzo, 2023), Brexit-related uncertainties, and globalised higher education and research. Participants were identified through academic networks, diaspora associations, and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to have completed or undertaken doctoral/postdoctoral work in the UK within the last 5 years, ensuring temporal proximity to current mobility regimes and digital practices. The aim of this study was not to generalise from a small purposively selected sample, but to explore in depth how individuals experience and make sense of mobility across their personal and professional life trajectories and how the concept of digital anchors could be applied as a way of understanding enactments of stability under conditions of academic precarity.

Data were collected through in-depth life history interviews, lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. Participants were asked to draw their academic career timeline (Adriansen, 2012) with key people, events, and turning points (Elder, 1994) that were then discussed during the interview. Interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing platforms (Zoom or MS Teams), reflecting participants' dispersed locations and the study's interest in digital mediation.

Interviews were semi-structured but narrative-driven, inviting participants to recount their academic trajectories, mobility decisions, and experiences of sustaining relationships and professional networks. Prompts explored were: mobility pathways (doctoral/postdoctoral moves, institutional transitions); relational moorings (family, partnerships, friendships, mentoring); and digital anchors (use of platforms, devices, and polymedia practices for care and collaboration).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Riga Stradins University. Participants received detailed information sheets and consent forms outlining the study's aims, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article and some details were changed or taken out to protect the anonymity of the participants. Given the sensitivity of discussing precarious employment and personal relationships, interviews were conducted with care, allowing participants to skip questions and pause as needed. Data were stored securely in encrypted formats, in compliance with the GDPR.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic narrative analysis, combining inductive coding with sensitizing concepts from the NMP (e.g., moorings, [im]mobility, affective labour) and digital migration studies (e.g., polymedia, digital anchors). Analysis for this article focused on relational mapping of moorings and digital anchors across trajectories to examine patterns of digital mediation, care strategies, and structural constraints. This design enables a nuanced understanding of how Latvian ECRs negotiate academic mobility through relational and digital infrastructures, offering empirical depth to theoretical debates on mobility and digital intimacy.

4. Digital Anchors for Relational Moorings: Shaping Distance and Social Continuity

4.1. Care Regimes With Digital Anchors

Latvian early-career researchers in the UK actively curate relational moorings by combining everyday digital care with episodic co-presence in ways that stabilise intimacy amid mobility (Hanam et al., 2006; Moon,

1995). For example, Markus's relational moorings across borders are maintained through digital communication and episodic, but routinely sustained, co-presence together, which nurture ties with family and friends. His routines of return—"on average I go once in summer and again for Christmas and New Year"—demonstrate the role of cyclical mobility in anchoring familial bonds (Boccagni, 2012; Zechner, 2019) and were reflected in the narratives of other research participants. Digital communication provides continuity in between visits, offering affective reassurance and everyday presence: "Of course, there is some virtual contact, messaging, and calling." It demonstrates how techno-emotional mediation is practised in transnational care routines (Alinejad, 2021; Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023; Hillyer, 2021).

Similarly, for Larna, her relations with her mother and sister are anchored through continuous digital attentiveness. As she put it, "we write every day on WhatsApp, send pictures, send messages...and we also have video calls," showing how the pragmatic orchestration of polymedia across platforms (see also Madianou & Miller, 2013; Wellman, 2001) works for relational mooring. Yet she frames digital media as a logistical bridge rather than a substitute for co-presence, if and when possible: "We use electronic communication to arrange when we'll meet...and then we sit for four hours and talk, and it's great," highlighting the embodied encounters as key mooring events (Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023; Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018).

Markus also explained how, among his friends, shared mobility trajectories shape relational closeness through routinely sustained meetings, and friendships are maintained through coordinated visits—"we all try to return to Latvia at the same time"—or through travel to each other's cities—"Paris, London, Copenhagen." Here, mobility itself becomes a relational practice, enabling forms of circulating care and situated intimacy (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Humbracht et al., 2023). However, here again, as in Larna's case, digital communication serves primarily as a coordination tool—"a lot of our messaging is arranging where and how we could meet"—demonstrating that for Markus, digital anchors stabilise the possibility of relational moorings while embodied encounters carry their emotional depth.

Anna's transnational family relationships further demonstrate how digital media structure everyday routines of attentiveness, emotional presence, and the circulation of care across distance (Alinejad, 2021; Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023), forming part of a hybrid care assemblage that combines mediated communication with periodic co-presence. Annual reciprocal visits—"I go home at least once a year...my sister and parents also come at least once a year"—function as relational moorings (Zechner, 2019) that anchor transnational care of everyday life (Boccagni, 2012) in embodied encounters. She describes maintaining regular contact with her parents through "WhatsApp video calls...at least once a week," while with her sister she engages in "more texting," reflecting differentiated patterns of digital care shaped by relational closeness, generational preferences, and life-course positioning. At the same time, Anna distinguishes between the informational and affective affordances of digital contact, noting that online communication is mainly to "keep in touch and find out how things are," whereas in-person visits involve shared embodied activities and a stronger sense of connection—"when we're together, we usually go somewhere, do something active." Such differentiation illustrates the techno-emotional gaps whereby digital media support routine relational maintenance but cannot fully replicate the embodied affective richness of co-presence and doing things together synchronously, not only at the same time, but importantly in the same place (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018).

In his interview, Markus expressed how digital communication feels more transactional: “Calls feel like going through a list of points you need to say.” Such statements reveal the affective limitations of mediated co-presence compared with embodied time together. Similarly to Larna and Anna, he notes that the “couple of weeks spent in Latvia far exceed the time spent talking online,” capturing how co-presence produces intensified relational density and affective renewal that digital interactions cannot replicate (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018). Dace’s personal relationships also reveal how digital anchors support routine contact but cannot replace the affective depth of co-presence. Maintaining ties with family and friends in Latvia required significant coordination due to time zones—“calls had to be planned carefully...when I could talk, it was night in Latvia”—highlighting the material and temporal constraints of transnational care (Alinejad, 2021; Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023). While Skype and WhatsApp enabled ongoing connection, Dace emphasises that long-term relationship maintenance depended on embodied encounters: “Whenever I go to Latvia, I always meet people for coffee....If I go to Latvia and don’t meet them, something feels lost.”

This resonates with all other Latvian ECRs, showing that digital care sustains continuity, but co-presence acts as a key mooring event, anchoring affective ties in ways that digitally mediated communication cannot fully replicate. Ultimately, Latvian ERCs’ patterns of communication and visitation reveal a routine ecology of transnational care, in which digital anchors sustain continuity while periodic in-person encounters reinvigorate affective bonds, ensuring that mobility does not erode relational moorings.

At the same time, not mobilising digital anchors enables low-conflict distancing. As Larna explains: “The contact is minimal...that was largely a decision from my side because we no longer have much in common.” Thus, affective moorings are sustained or unmade through everyday media practices (Candidatu & Ponzanesi, 2022; Dixon, 2019). At the same time, digital minimalism does not mean that relational mooring is not possible. In the same interview, Larna discussed how, with some people, “we don’t really communicate digitally; once a year when I’m in Latvia, we meet...and then again we don’t talk for a year.” This statement illustrates how selective affective engagement sorts relationships in transnational everyday life (Boccagni, 2012; Urry, 2002), suggesting uneven affective charge of mobility infrastructures (Adey, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Whereas family WhatsApp threads anchor belonging, one may not need the same digital routines to sustain relations with friends or professional networks.

As we can see from the interviews with Latvian ECRs, digital communication offers a bridge, but it cannot fully sustain affective intensity without periodic in-person encounters (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Madianou & Miller, 2013). The emotional limits of digital anchors particularly impact relational moorings where more affective labour needs to be invested, such as in the case of non-kin ties. For example, in Dace’s case, family remains a stable mooring, but friendships and social ties require conscious relational labour to keep them alive across borders. Over the years, as she became more settled in the UK, the affective calculus of care shifted: “More and more, my life is here...if I spend too much time on online contacts, it feels like I’m stealing time from relationships here.” Leo, on the other hand, invests in relationships established in the UK during his doctoral program, but that now span different countries around the world, each with their own digital infrastructures. Leo prizes the built friendship as one of the main gains of graduate schools and hopes that he will be able to maintain this relationship throughout his life, even if he has to rely on MS Teams to stay in touch with his friends in a country that prohibits voice and video calls on WhatsApp. This shows how transnational ties evolve as everyday life (Boccagni, 2012) and relational moorings reconfigure around new localities, new digital media, and shifting digital infrastructures.

Dace acknowledges that some friendships become “very irregular” when they remain entirely digital, noting that relationships “change” without embodied renewal. Yet, digital anchors still enable a sense of continuity, as she maintains intermittent contact and reconnects through visits—“if I travel, I visit them, or they visit me.” Laura also continues to stay in touch with her relatives in Latvia and travel there, despite the complicated emotions such visits have started evoking in her over time, especially when she travels with her partner, whom she met in the UK: “When I travel to Latvia with [my partner], those are not trips for fun. It’s such a rush.” While during the first years of her studies in the UK she travelled to Latvia “for every holiday,” she now goes twice a year: “We sort of have a family week when everyone takes time off, and then we all spend time together.” These reflections reveal how care, affect, and relational moorings are dynamically recalibrated over time, shaped by mobility, local embeddedness, and the possibilities for co-presence.

4.2. Digital Affordances for Careers

Digital technologies have expanded the possibilities for remote work, thereby affording greater flexibility for dual-career couples as they negotiate their professional and educational trajectories. In Larna’s case, the widespread shift to home-based work during the pandemic enabled her partner to maintain his employment while remaining geographically mobile. This flexibility created the conditions in which Larna could accept a promotion that required relocating to a different city—an opportunity that would likely have been inaccessible without the altered spatial requirements of work. Her partner subsequently secured a more desirable position in the new location. Fiona, on the other hand, during the early weeks of the pandemic, moved to the UK city where her partner lived. In her case, the relocation, digital infrastructures, and academic precarity intersected in a specific way. During the first months of lockdown, she continued to do short-term project-based work at the institution where she earned her doctoral degree, but then she “got sick of the three-month contract extensions” and decided to look for a more stable job close to her partner’s location.

In this context, digital technologies operated as digital anchors, supporting the couple’s ability to sustain relational continuity despite spatial relocation. They provided a form of relational mooring that stabilised the partnership during a period of mobility and generated new forms of “network capital” (Elliott & Urry, 2010) that enable individuals and couples to coordinate movement, preserve emotional ties, and maintain intimate relations across space. Larna’s and Fiona’s cases illustrate how migrant early-career researchers may leverage, even if temporarily, such digital infrastructures to navigate the tensions between mobility, career advancement, and intimate relational commitments.

Anna’s account further illustrates how digital affordances play a crucial role in sustaining relational moorings within dual-career academic mobility, enabling couples to remain emotionally and logistically connected despite asynchronous trajectories and geographically staggered relocations. When she moved to the North ahead of her partner, they relied heavily on mediated communication—“we relied a lot on WhatsApp and phone calls”—a practice that reflects the strategic use of polymedia (Madianou & Miller, 2013) to bridge spatial separation during periods of career transition. Digital tools also supported the coordination of co-presence, as Anna frequently travelled back to the South of England and worked remotely. As she put it: “I sometimes travelled back and worked from a place where my partner still lived.” Thus, she leveraged workplace flexibility to maintain the relational rhythm of the partnership. Such practices further exemplify network capital (Elliott & Urry, 2010), where digital anchors and mobility infrastructures combine to sustain

intimate ties and relational moorings. At the same time, Anna and her partner engaged in deliberate relational affective labour to synchronise their careers, with Anna forwarding the partner a job advertisement: “I saw a position...they applied and got the job.” The couple then negotiated who would move when. This aligns with existing research showing how dual-career academics navigate boundaryless mobility regimes by integrating professional opportunities with relational commitments (Arthur, 2014; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2024). Through these digitally mediated practices, Anna maintains relational moorings that are resilient yet flexible, revealing how digital infrastructures act as digital anchors that help couples choreograph mobility without dissolving intimacy (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018; Sheller & Urry, 2006).

4.3. Limits of Digital Anchors in Sustaining Care Relationships

The digital world is continually evolving, but so too are our lives and relationships, and our moorings also have to adapt. While the aging of parents and other close relatives did not appear as a major theme in the narratives of most of our research participants, it emerged strongly in Magda’s story. In describing how contemporary messaging practices have shifted toward increasingly brief exchanges, Magda reflected that it was not the digital tools that reshaped her conversations, but the changing circumstances of her mother’s ageing. This underscores that relational moorings—the practices, routines, and infrastructures that stabilise intimate ties across distance—are shaped by life-course transitions first and only then by technological affordances (Adey, 2006; Zechner, 2019). As her mother has grown older and less able to process lengthy text-based communication, the form and tempo of mediated communication have had to adjust accordingly. As in many transnational families, communication choices across space and time are negotiated relationally rather than determined by technology alone (Boccagni, 2012; Madianou & Miller, 2013). As Magda put it:

I would write maybe just as much, but now my family situation has changed. I have a very elderly mother, and I can’t really tell her everything anymore. She’s very interested in what I was doing twenty years ago, and back then, I wrote a lot, but now she no longer has the ability to take all that in. So now communication with her is shorter. Videos or, actually, these days, more phone calls through FaceTime, where we deal with practical matters.

Although video calls have enabled the maintenance of an affective connection across distance, their use is shaped by the bodily, cognitive, and emotional demands of ageing, reflecting the “techno-emotional gaps” that characterise digitally mediated care (Alinejad, 2021; Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021). In this sense, video calling functions as a digital anchor—a mediating device that helps sustain continuity, routine, and affective presence across physical separation (Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024). Yet its anchoring capacity is contingent on the relational needs and abilities of both parties, illustrating that digital anchors only “hold” when they remain accessible, meaningful, and manageable for ageing parents.

The limits of digital connectivity within transnational care relations can also be illustrated by Larna’s story. When Larna’s grandfather passed away, and the responsibility for organising the funeral fell largely on the family members residing in Latvia, tensions emerged between Larna and her sister. Her sister perceived Larna’s position in the United Kingdom as comparatively “easy,” interpreting her geographic distance and relative professional stability as a form of disengagement from the immediate emotional and logistical pressures faced by the family. In the context of transnationalism of everyday life (Boccagni, 2012), geographically uneven distributions of care work often become a source of friction within dispersed families.

While digital communication technologies can facilitate some practical support—coordinating tasks, providing updates, arranging logistics—research consistently shows that such technologies struggle to reproduce affective or embodied dimensions of care where co-presence is essential (Alinejad, 2021; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Moments of bereavement, uncertainty, and crisis often require physical co-presence, which digital devices can only partially approximate, underscoring the “techno-emotional gaps” observed in transnational family life (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023). This experience constituted a critical turning point for Larna. The tensions with her sister, combined with the recognition of the constraints of digital support, prompted her to question the long-term sustainability of living abroad and to begin considering a return to Latvia.

Similar questions were of importance to Karina as well. Remarking upon the fact that, during the pandemic, she had not met her family in person for a lengthy period of time, Karina said:

A year and a half had passed since I had last seen my family members in person. And then I realised—I noticed this very specific thought—that I had started to perceive them almost like digital avatars. I could no longer connect them with memories of touch or even a person’s smell; it felt as though they had somehow become...digital.

Such moments of crisis—whether personal or, as in the case of the pandemic, global—are significant disruptions that can unsettle established mobility trajectories, revealing the relational fragility underlying ostensibly “boundaryless” careers (Arthur, 2014; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2024). The cases of Magda, Larna, and Karina demonstrate how migrant ERCs actively renegotiate the relational moorings that anchor them across borders (Adey, 2006; Zechner, 2019), particularly when digital anchors prove insufficient for maintaining the emotional intensity and mutuality required during periods of family stress. The data show that while digital anchors can support logistical coordination and provide some emotional connection through ongoing awareness and digitally mediated presence over time, they cannot substitute for embodied and hands-on care or spatial co-presence. Crises become key events that reconfigure the interplay between mobilities and immobilities (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Sheller & Urry, 2006), prompting new assessments of where, with whom, and how to build a life and career.

4.4. Professional Life and Digital Affordances of Trust

Our interview data illustrate the hybrid academic networks characteristic of boundaryless careers where mobility, digital infrastructures, and relational labour are interdependent (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Wakefield & Dismore, 2015). Our interlocutors’ experiences highlight how ERCs’ professional networks and collaborations, and not only their personal relational moorings, are shaped through a mix of digital infrastructures and episodic co-presence, illustrating the hybrid relationality characteristic of contemporary academic mobility (Arthur, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Our data demonstrates that embodied co-presence also plays an important role in professional relationships, particularly for the development and reinforcement of trust, even where digital anchors support everyday coordination and continuity.

Markus’ training included six months of in-person coursework in the Northern part of the UK, which he described as crucial for relationship-building: “That created contacts outside my own university.” This underscores how embodied co-presence continues to serve as a key relational mooring in academic fields,

supporting trust formation and collegial familiarity (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018; Patterson & Leurs, 2020). Yet after this initial immersion, most collaborative work shifted online: “Of course, communication happens through Teams or Zoom.” Such statements reveal how digital platforms function as digital anchors for sustaining professional ties across institutions once initial rapport is established (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Markus noted clear differences between those he has met only digitally and those known first in person: “People I’ve only met digitally don’t feel three-dimensional...our conversations stay focused on the project,” signalling the limited affective bandwidth of digital-only ties and “techno-emotional gaps” (Alinejad, 2021). Nonetheless, he also emphasised that once embodied familiarity is established, digital communication “isn’t very different,” suggesting that digital affordances can successfully carry professional relationships forward when grounded in earlier co-presence.

Similar sentiments were echoed by Leo: “If you’ve seen the person, you kind of feel like you know them better; if you haven’t met them [in person], you feel like you don’t know them at all—it’s just sort of like a film.” In the interview, Leo emphasised several times that, with every new connection, he would try to invite the person for a coffee, “just for five, ten minutes or so,” because “it’s very important that there is that meeting—an in-person meeting—when a person, as they say, shakes your hand and shows who they are.” For digital infrastructures—through further online meetings and collaborations—to serve the digital anchor function in enabling professional connection, the in-person connection, then, is crucial.

On the other hand, Dace’s professional and civic engagements demonstrate how shared purpose functions as a powerful digital anchor, enabling trust and cohesion even in predominantly online networks. Her involvement in a civic activity-based association in Latvia began entirely online: “I first joined not-in-person...they were looking for volunteers, and they added me to the Facebook group where we discussed everything.” This illustrates how digital platforms can successfully initiate and stabilise collective action when underpinned by a common goal, showing how digital anchors can strengthen relational moorings when participants collaborate on shared tasks, building what Alinejad (2021) calls techno-emotional scaffolding, and what Madianou and Miller (2013) describe as polymedia environments oriented toward relational work. Dace then explained how, through daily interactions, “we communicated almost daily on Facebook” and “when I was on the board, we talked every day.” She formed affectively meaningful ties despite geographical distance, reflecting how relational moorings in transnational civic communities are produced through sustained, purposeful collaboration (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Boccagni, 2012) with the support of digital anchors.

Crucially, trust was not pre-existing but emergent and interactionally produced, as Dace explained, “because our communication was very regular and we had shared goals, so it worked very well.” This supports Patterson and Leurs’ (2020) and Dixon’s (2019) insights that trust in digital spaces depends on ongoing participation, shared labour, and repeated exchanges. This links with other transnational, but familial relational moorings and care practices discussed before: Magda’s experience of sustaining relationships with her elderly mother and Larna’s affective participation in her family life during bereavement, in both cases demonstrating how digital infrastructures stabilise and yet are incomplete anchors of everyday life and need to be supplemented and grounded in embodied and ongoing affective practices.

Dace later in her interview articulated the limits of digital anchoring where relational moorings lack a purposeful centre, further demonstrating that digital intimacy and solidarity require work, coordination, and

shared stakes (Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023). For Dace, the absence of a shared project made digital anchoring difficult in academic relationships in Latvia: “With academic contacts in Latvia, I never had a common goal...those connections stayed social and not very strong online.” Thus, Dace’s professional story illustrates that digital networks flourish not through technology alone but through the relational labour of shared purpose, which produces trust, cohesion, and durable transnational moorings.

The limitation of digital anchors on their own in creating trustworthy relations appeared in other participants’ professional stories as well. Having been asked if she had any strong professional connections with people she had not met in person, Karina stated emphatically that she did not. Referring to negative and even traumatic professional interactions in the past, she said:

Because sometimes I feel like I’m kind of...extra attentive, you know. And I try to sort of read or calculate a person—to understand who they are. But digitally, there are nuances you just don’t see—like body language, for example. And maybe I don’t always trust my instincts, or even the right people, given that I still end up in unpleasant situations despite past experiences. Some part of me still feels like I need to try to understand what’s going on. And that’s something you simply can’t fully replace with telecommunication.

Karina’s reflection on embodied co-presence (face-to-face) with mediated co-presence (recorded online) highlights how trust is emergent, contingent, and interactionally produced rather than guaranteed—a point well established in mobilities and intimacy scholarship (Sheller, 2014; Urry, 2002). In hybrid or online-only encounters, the early, low-stakes exchanges that typically facilitate disclosure and establish rapport are compressed or absent, aligning with research showing that digital environments often demand intensified relational labour to build and maintain interpersonal trust (Dixon, 2019; Patterson & Leurs, 2020). Digital intimacy must therefore be explicitly scaffolded, as the micro-temporalities of warmth, humour, and shared presence are less easily co-constructed when communication is mediated (Alinejad, 2021; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Moreover, many affective and embodied micro-cues, such as reciprocal eye-contact calibration, posture shifts, subtle turn-taking, or synchronous laughter, are harder to perceive or reproduce on screen. These limitations mirror findings in work on transnational digital care, which emphasise the “techno-emotional gaps” that arise when digital tools struggle to transmit embodied affect (Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2021; Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023). Ultimately, Karina’s experience reinforces the relational insight that trust is not merely transported through media technologies but is continually co-constructed through situated, embodied interaction; something that digital mediation can enable, but rarely without additional effort (Adey, 2006).

5. Conclusion

Empirically, this study contributes fine-grained biographical accounts that capture how relational mooring and digital anchoring are lived, negotiated, and emotionally managed in everyday practice. As mobility scholars emphasise, mobile lives are continually renegotiated around changing relational obligations and vulnerabilities (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2002). Within professional and personal relational moorings (Hanam et al., 2006; Moon, 1995), digital communication becomes part of the temporal and affective organisation of everyday life. As technologies and relations evolve, digital anchors acquire infrastructural significance under conditions of uncertainty and distance rather than functioning as merely discretionary tools of connection.

For early career researchers navigating boundaryless and protean career conditions, mobility is both a resource and a demand. Their curated practices of anchoring and mooring—across borders, platforms, and relationships—constitute deliberate relational labour to sustain significant personal and professional ties (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2024; Hou et al., 2021; Puzo & Lulle, 2025). Digital infrastructures allow for an ongoing awareness of others’ lives across distance (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2024), yet they stabilise relationships only when they resonate affectively and are supplemented by moments of co-presence. In this sense, digital anchors function less as optional communicative choices than as background conditions that enable relational continuity reconfiguring distance through proximate presence and asynchronous intimacy (Gorman-Murray & Bissell, 2018; Sheller, 2014). Rather than mirroring polymedia choice alone, these anchors emerge when routinised and emotionally charged digital practices become essential for maintaining relational moorings. They sustain narratives of continuity but also introduce ambivalences: heightened emotional labour, blurred boundaries, and new vulnerabilities. Digital anchors as infrastructures thus simultaneously enable and constrain as they facilitate relational moorings and afford care as well as trust while exposing the boundaries of digital mediation beyond an interim stabilising function.

The key site where the interim nature of digital anchors becomes visible is care, especially for ageing relatives or young children, which is one of the main relational mooring dimensions and remains only partially digitisable. Although digital tools support “doing things together” and maintaining routine forms of contact that allow logistical coordination and emotional reassurance at a distance, hands-on forms of care, such as physical assistance, accompanying someone to medical appointments, or providing everyday practical support, require embodied presence and cannot be mediated digitally. Therefore, any digital anchors operate largely as provisional maintenance rather than substitutes for embodied co-presence (Alinejad, 2021; Hillyer, 2021). As we could see in the narrative of Latvian ECRs in the UK, care-related disruptions, such as illness, dependency, or sudden changes in need, often unsettle established relational moorings in ways that digital anchors cannot adequately absorb or stabilise. These techno-emotional practices and disruptions highlight that digital anchors need to be grounded in ongoing circuits of intimacy, obligation, and care (Cabalquinto & Hu, 2023; Madianou & Miller, 2013). Furthermore, precisely because digital anchors require periodic re-stabilising, ritualised mobility—such as annual visits to Latvia—continues to renew relational depth in ways that everyday digitally-based communication cannot, revealing the limits of digital anchors as care and affective infrastructures.

Across multiple locales, digital anchors fulfil an interim function: effective for sustaining ties yet insufficient as long-term moorings (Urry, 2002; Zechner, 2019). This aligns with mobilities scholarship, underscoring the interplay of mobility, (im)mobility, and the socio-material infrastructures that shape relational life (Adey, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Digital anchors may compress time and intensify immediacy, but they do not fundamentally alter relational norms; instead, digital anchors are enacted in familiar repertoires of maintaining closeness with enduring expectations of presence and care.

Ultimately, these patterns echo wider research on multilocal dwelling and academic mobility: Despite heightened global connectivity, embodied attachments and life course temporalities persist. Contemporary digital infrastructures operate as stabilising yet incomplete anchors of everyday life that need to be further grounded in enduring human, affective, and embodied forms of relational mooring, particularly where professional and personal lives intertwine.

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Data Availability

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the authors upon reasonable request, in order to protect the anonymity of research participants.

LLMs Disclosure

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