7. Digital Communication, Transnational Relationships and the Making of Place Among Highly Skilled Migrants during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Elisabetta Costa

Abstract
This chapter contributes to the growing field of digital migration studies by exploring the relationship between digital communication practices, (im)mobilities and everyday experiences of place among professional migrants living in Groningen, the Netherlands, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Under the disruptions resulting from restrictions on movement and social life, digital communication reshaped their experiences of (im)mobility and perception of the global and the local. On the one hand, social media enabled mobility from offline to online and enhanced transnational connections; on the other hand, non-digital practices recreated new forms of emotional attachment to the local space of the city. This study foregrounds questions on intra-European mobilities and migration, and the role of digital media in shaping social relationships, mobilities, and place-making.

Keywords: Covid-19; (im)mobility; the digital; social media; highly-skilled migrants; place-making.

7.1 Introduction

Over the last two years, my more frequent daily interactions are with the yoga trainer on YouTube, and with my dad on Skype!
Federica, an Italian woman in her mid-30s who has lived in Groningen with her partner for almost five years working as communication officer at the university, in this way jokingly described her social contacts in the two winters during the coronavirus pandemic. She ridiculed herself because the yoga trainer on YouTube replaced her richer social circles of local acquaintances and colleagues she had before the pandemic. In a similar way, Rob, a German man in his early 40s who worked remotely for a European organization in Amsterdam, often complained about sitting alone every day in front of the computer at home. He confessed that his rewards at the end of the day were the long walks in the park while talking on WhatsApp with friends living around Europe. For several days in a row, he had no face-to-face contact with other human beings, with the exception of his partner. These two European residents based in Groningen spent the months of the Covid-19 lockdown and partial lockdown engaging in communicative practices with people living in different parts of the world, but had very few mediated interactions with friends and acquaintances in Groningen. The local was not inhabited online during the pandemic. What are professional migrants’ digital practices revealing about the role of digital communication during the pandemic, their desires and practices of mobility, and their attachment to physical locations and online places?

This chapter explores the lived experiences of highly skilled migrants, broadly defined as highly-educated middle-class individuals who crossed national borders to move and work in a different country. The Covid-19 pandemic shaped their social life, mostly through forced immobility and heightened digital communication. During the two years following the outbreak of Covid-19, I participated in several conversations with internationals living in Groningen, the Netherlands, who liked discussing how their relationships to family and friends, and their attachment to the city, changed during the pandemic. On a few occasions, they questioned their presence in Groningen and their life as foreign residents: “What are we doing here? Why are we here?” Groningen was viewed as a cosy and comfortable base from which to frequently travel elsewhere for work or leisure, and where to enjoy work-related events and activities. But during the pandemic, both travel and work-related events were interrupted. From being one among many other lived localities in the context of high geographic mobility, Groningen became the place where they were now forced to be, a place emptied of all the activities that brought them there in the first place. Professional migrants’ mobile sense of place (Polson, 2016) and their sense of belonging across multiple localities and groups, were significantly disrupted by the lack of

1 All research participants have been anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.
mobility. While they were physically stuck in the city, social media enabled mobility from the offline location of the city to multiple online places made up of transnational connections. My research participants did not give up on their desire for mobility. Rather, they moved online, and there re-experienced their transnational relations. Through the use of digital communication technologies, they recreated a new sense of place largely detached from physical locations. As a result, the digital played little role in strengthening and facilitating connection to the city and people living in the city, with the only exception of dating apps. The digital instead strengthened pre-existing transnational relationships and forms of belonging, and on some occasions opened up new global contacts and social worlds. By contrast, the sense of belonging to the physical location of the city was recreated through new daily routines in which digital technologies played little or no role, such as solitary daily walks in the parks and in the city outskirts, bi-weekly strolling at the fish markets, visiting of historical buildings, and dinners with small groups of friends when allowed by government measures. These and other daily and weekly routines recreated a new sense of control over a physical space that people inhabited but did not feel they fully belonged to.

In her epistemological manifesto on the connected migrant, Dana Diminescu (2008) stressed how mobility and connectivity define the migrant in the 21st century. Along the same lines, Nedelcu (2012) emphasized the transnational and cosmopolitan life of modern migrants in the digital age. More recently, a growing body of literature is examining the life of mobile and transient migrants (Gomes, 2017; Lee, 2020), and the concept of “digital place-making” (Halegoua, 2020; Halegoua & Polson, 2021; Hjorth, 2012; Wilken & Goggin, 2012; Fast et al., 2018), viewed as the “use of digital media to create a sense of place for oneself and/or others” (Halegoua & Polson, 2021, p. 574) within the context of mobility and migration. Other research has specifically examined social media usage and the making of place among mobile middle-class professionals (Polson, 2015; 2016; Kraemer, 2014; 2018). And in 2021, the Routledge Handbook to Mobile Socialities (Hill et al., 2021) demarcated a new area of research that foregrounds the relation between mobile media, mobility and sociality. This chapter contributes to the emergent area of research that investigates the ways in which digital technologies contribute to the life of highly skilled mobile professionals. It takes up the question of the role of digital communication among mobile migrants during the period of forced immobility brought on by the pandemic, and shows the relationship between digital communication, mobility and everyday experiences of places.

I informally talked to friends and acquaintances throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022, and in the autumn and winter of 2021/2022 carried out ten
semi-structured interviews. Because public places like restaurants and cafes were either closed or at high risk of Covid-19 infection, I conducted the interviews at home. On one occasion, I conducted an interview wearing an FFP2 mask because the interviewee was waiting for the results of a PCR test after being in close contact with a colleague who had tested positive (see Figure 7.1). Despite Covid-related difficulties in meeting people face-to-face, after several months of digitally mediated interactions, all research participants and I preferred in-person rather than online interviews. The digital fatigue affected us all. The choice of carrying out interviews without online observation of digital interactions was determined by the private and individualized nature of the communication practices I studied. WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, SMS, but also YouTube or Skype were mostly used as private and semi-private places that could not be examined via digital content analysis or online participant observation, research methods that are best suited for the study of public and semi-public online platforms.

7.2 Groningen and Its International Population

Surrounded by the countryside and intensively cultivated farmlands, Groningen is a university city and the largest urban centre in the North of the Netherlands. It is the capital of the province of Groningen, and an important
city for Drenthe and Friesland, the other two less densely populated rural provinces of the North. Located less than 200 km away from Amsterdam, Groningen portrays itself as a vibrant and progressive city. It has around 235,000 inhabitants, and students make up a third of its total population (OECD, 2020). The inhabitants of the metropolitan Randstad area tend to view Groningen as a remotely located city, and would rarely take a train to visit it. At the same time, the inhabitants of Groningen tend to look down on people from villages and rural areas living in the same province, and they view themselves as the urban inhabitants of the North. The international population moved to the city to work at one of the three universities (the University of Groningen, the Hanze University of Applied Science, and the University Medical Centre), in businesses affiliated with big multinational companies such as Shell or Philips, at the Google Data Centre in nearby Eemshaven, in high-tech start-ups, and in some cases also to enjoy the lively cultural and music scene. Attracted by the relatively low cost of living, several cycling paths, the quiet lifestyle, and the beautiful nature surrounding the city, many highly skilled migrants view Groningen as a very good place to live most of the year. Yet, at the same time, they enjoy the possibility to have frequent travel and keep a mobile lifestyle. This chapter focuses on international professionals working at the University of Groningen either as academics and support staff, and their partners or former partners. Internationalization became one of the main focuses on the agenda of the university, which attracts more than 5,000 international students and 1,200 international staff members, around 20 percent of the total. Both the city and the university are characterized by a tension between international and local ambitions, at an institutional and individual level. For example, the Dutch local population is fluent in English, and often welcomes progressive and well-educated foreign-born residents. On the other hand, Dutch social circles tend to remain closed to internationals, who more often engage with international or mixed groups of friends. This trend can be seen as a consequence of internationals’ poor Dutch language skills, but also of what was often perceived, by some of my research participants, to be the more individualistic and less convivial Dutch sociality. A tension also characterizes the attitude of many professionals employed at the University of Groningen: their desire for a state of transience and temporariness in the city goes hand in hand with aspirations for a more permanent and open-ended stay, which is also encouraged by employment contracts that are viewed to be more advantageous than those in other Dutch and European cities. Transient and mobile migration has been foregrounded in recent literature (among others see Gomes, 2017; Gomes et al., 2017; Lee, 2020; Polson, 2016; 2019).
and is often contrasted with permanent migration. Yet, the life of highly skilled professionals included in this research is characterized by desires for both permanency and mobility, with one existing in close connection with the other.

7.3 Digital Communication, Place-Making and Mobility

An extensive body of interdisciplinary literature has shown how contemporary forms of mobility and the diffusion of digital technologies have created new forms of connection and attachment to places (e.g., Halegoua, 2020; Hjorth, 2008; Polson, 2016; Urry, 2007; Wilken, 2011; Wilken & Goggin, 2012). In the context of increased mobility and digitalization of everyday life, scholars have called for analysing the role of digital technologies in shaping the meanings that people give to places in terms of “digital place-making” (Halegoua & Polson, 2021; Motta & Ava, 2016). Places are viewed as constituted through people’s interactions, relationships, practices and routines that are also mediated by digital technologies. The study of digital place-making has been approached from a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives, such as geography, media studies, anthropology, design studies and information studies. And it has adopted a variety of methodological approaches, such as discourse analysis and ethnography. This chapter views place-making as the interplay between spatial materialities, digital technologies, sociality and culture, which transforms a space into a culturally charged place (Motta & Ava, 2016). It builds on the anthropological understanding of places (Kraemer, 2018; Low, 2009; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003), which stresses the role of social relationships, technologies and material culture in the making of places, and highlights places’ mutable characters.

In this chapter, I show how my research participants replaced the lack of geographic mobility and face-to-face transnational interactions brought by the pandemic with the mobility to the online place of social media, inhabited by friends and acquaintances from different parts of the world. When Covid-19 hit Europe and the Netherlands, the new everyday routines of forced immobility led to a collapse of meanings associated with the city of Groningen, and to the search for online interactions with people living elsewhere. In a previous work (Costa, 2021), I conceptualized “immobile mobility,” the (im)mobility from the offline physical place of the home to the online digital place of social media among homebound women in the southeast of Turkey. In a completely different geographic and social context, but similarly characterized by forced immobility, highly skilled migrants
used and experienced social media as digital places in their own rights. Also, Miller et al. (2021) argued that the digital can create a place within which people live, showing how the smartphone has become a transportable home, especially within the context of migration and mobility. The authors argue that the transportable home erases distances, but can also erase experiences of proximity in physical locations. Miller and colleagues (2021) also show that the movement to the online place of social media and digital apps does have consequences for the ways localities are lived. Also in Groningen during lockdown, social relationships in digital places had consequences for meanings and feelings associated to physical locations. In most cases, online transnational communications and interactions went hand in hand with disengagement from local relationships, and contributed to recreating a mobile sense of place (Polson, 2015) that was a constitutive element of highly skilled migrants' lives well before the pandemic started. The pandemic and the ubiquitous presence of social media took to the extreme a trend that was already observed by Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) in relation to the development of mass media: the detachment from spatial physical settings. Examining social relationships and interactions during the pandemic, we can see that highly skilled migrants did not give up on their practices of mobility when stuck in the city. Instead, their online social relationships and interactions contributed to the making of digital places that had very little connections with the physical space of Groningen. At the same time, they engaged in new non-digital practices that aimed at recreating an attachment to the physical location of Groningen in the new conditions of everyday life.

7.4 The Digital Peak in the First Wave of the Covid-19 Lockdown

All interview narratives identified two main timeframes: the first months of the pandemic and lockdown in spring 2020, and the two winters of 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. The summers of 2020 and 2021 were not included in the analysis as they were characterized by the lifting of restrictions, a return to travelling and to a sort of normality. All research participants described the spring of 2020 as a period with massive use of social media to communicate with friends and relatives abroad. Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, Twitter and Viber were creatively used for several hours per day to keep in touch with relatives and friends living abroad, while interactions with people living in Groningen became less intense and frequent. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, connections
with friends and colleagues in Groningen were mostly based on face-to-face communications and gatherings in public spaces, such as cafes, restaurants, museums and universities. Very few of these relationships moved online.

Federica, the Italian woman introduced at the start of the chapter, described in great detail how, in the spring of 2020, her local activities and interactions with people in Groningen were completely interrupted. Through WhatsApp text messages, she barely kept in touch with her Groningen best friend. Even with her, conversations were poor and limited because there were no events to organize, and “nothing to look forward to.” By contrast, Federica talked to her family in Northern Italy every day on Skype, sometimes even several times per day. Relatives became her main interlocutors. She organized online yoga sessions for her parents to emotionally support them while her grandmother was in the hospital. She had daily collective calls on Skype with her two parents and three siblings, and frequent individual calls with each of them. The family group on WhatsApp was particularly active too, as well as the one-to-one interactions with each member of the family. She particularly appreciated the possibility to have long conversations with her older brother, who had been previously very busy managing a restaurant and thus unavailable for calls at comfortable times. She felt closer to her family than ever before. She also intensified her interactions with an old friend from Italy with whom she previously had only sporadic conversations. Interactions with two WhatsApp groups with old friends from Italy also intensified, as well as calls to other friends spread around the world. WhatsApp and Skype were the most used platforms that fulfilled her search for intimacy, support, and private connections. By contrast, the more public-facing Instagram and Facebook were perceived as being inappropriate for her need for emotional proximity with friends and family.

Federica’s experience of Groningen was completely disrupted by the start of the pandemic, forced immobility and transnational digital communication. She described in detail how, in those few months, she did not view Groningen any longer as a place of social relationships, a place to inhabit and identify with. Activities and relationships located in Groningen vanished, and as a result, the city as a place of meaningful sociality disappeared too. Her life was lived inside her house, in her street, and in Italy through digitally mediated communications. She no longer felt Groningen to be a place of belonging. She claimed:

I could not experience Groningen as a city. In those months, I could only view me, my house, my street, and Italy. There was nothing between the street where I lived and Italy. But Italy was unreachable, and it would
have been so for a while. It was like if Groningen did not exist for me anymore. Even if I went out for a stroll, all shops were closed. Everything was closed and nothing was going on.

Similarly, Chrissy, a 37-year old woman from Greece, extensively used her mobile phone to communicate with her family. She had long daily calls on Messenger with her extended family in Greece and the UK. They shared information about the lockdown and rate of infections in their country of residence, and satisfied their need for deeper and meaningful connections. They had fun using filters on Messenger to experience a sense of lightness that helped them cope with the heaviness of the situation. Chrissy also had daily calls on Viber with her nuclear family of origin based in Greece, which includes her two parents and one sister. And she had daily calls on Messenger with her nephew and godson, with whom she also played games. She used to call her grandmother every day. She would share with her relatives several images related to the pandemic, such as pictures of a deserted Groningen. And she would receive photos from her hometown in Greece. The spike in video calls and communication on Viber stopped at the start of the summer of 2020, and it did not come back anymore with the following waves of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Federica’s and Chrissy’s intensified usage of digital communication to enact intimacy and care remotely was common to many other professionals living in Groningen. While Federica and Chrissy interacted a lot with their biological families, Rob, the German man introduced at the beginning of the chapter, intensified communication with his friends spread around the world. Rob had a very mobile adult life, and lived in eight different cities around Europe before spending five years in Groningen. When the pandemic hit the Netherlands, he was recovering from major surgery that disrupted his life, and the lockdown forced him to continue his convalescence at home. In the spring of 2020, he communicated several times a day with friends scattered around Europe, in London, Paris, Milan and Istanbul. He had frequent individual and group video calls and regular interactions on WhatsApp with many of them. A WhatsApp group with other three friends based in Brussels, Rome and Paris became the place for hundreds of daily text messages, memes, pictures and jokes, as well as serious political and philosophical conversations. He went back to Facebook to scroll the feed to see what his old friends and acquaintances around the world were doing, and to reach out to friends via Facebook Messenger. He enjoyed listening to an old friend who played live music on Facebook, and dancing in front of the screen with his music in the
background. Like the other research participants, he did not use social media to maintain contacts with friends from Groningen, but to communicate with people across the globe. He felt close to them as never before. He explained:

We were all sharing similar experiences of immobility even if living apart. And it seemed organic that I felt closer to them. We were away from long working days at the office and from travelling around the globe for work. I can surely argue that in my personal experience, forced immobility and digital technologies erased distance!

Rob's emotional attachments to physical places and people from older times became more important than ever before, and filled the vacuum left by uncertain futures.

All the interviewees recalled using social media to maintain in touch with dear ones abroad, and only sporadically with friends and colleagues from Groningen. Previous research (Costa et al., 2022; Esteve-Del Valle et al., 2022) showed the important role of WhatsApp and other platforms in creating feelings of proximity at distance during the first wave of Covid-19 among non-migrants living in different European cities. Yet residents with non-migratory backgrounds did not question their relationship to the city they inhabited, and did not interrupt social relationships with people living there. Digital interactions replaced face-to-face communications, especially closer contacts and strong ties. By contrast, in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, mobile professionals' experience was characterized by the intensification of transnational relationships, the interruption of interactions with local inhabitants and significant disruption of their sense of place and their feelings of belonging to the city of Groningen. I explain this difference as a consequence of skilled migrants' attachment to multiple places and mobile life.

7.5 Transnational Relationships in the Winters of 2020/2021 and 2021/2022

The research participants perceived the use of digital media during the first lockdown as “exceptional,” as a way to “go back to the roots,” and as “a moment of deep nostalgia." They all portrayed it in contrast to a more ordinary usage of social media in the autumn and winter of 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. In these months, long video calls on Zoom, WhatsApp and
Skype, and the massive sharing of memes and images were replaced by less intensive usage of social media.

At first, the research participants tended to minimize the amount of online interactions with relatives and friends, but when asked to open WhatsApp, Telegram, or Facebook Messenger, and describe their list of actual interactions, the findings were quite different. Peter, for example, a man in his early 40s who worked at the University of Groningen as an assistant professor, found out that he had WhatsApp interactions with 55 different individuals or groups in the time frame of 48 hours. And he estimated that this number was reflective of his average WhatsApp usage during the partial lockdown, and that more than half of these contacts were friends and acquaintances living outside the Netherlands. Peter recognized that his usage of WhatsApp increased significantly during the pandemic, and was embedded in local habits that emerged during this period. He described his long walks in the park, which replaced the exercise he used to take at the gym, and were always combined with long calls with friends living abroad or the recording of long audio messages. He installed WhatsApp on his computer and used it during the day when he worked from home alone. When working from the office in pre-pandemic times, he did not use WhatsApp because he could easily chat face-to-face with colleagues. WhatsApp communication replaced all those opportunities of face-to-face interactions that disappeared with the lack of office work, social events, travels and mobility. But even in this case, digital communication facilitated mostly transnational interactions. WhatsApp sustained relationships with acquaintances, friends and colleagues abroad that Peter used to meet in his frequent pre-pandemic travels that did not take place anymore. Relationships with friends from Groningen did not move to WhatsApp or other social media.

Federica, who had used social media on a massive scale to communicate with her family in the spring of 2020, described a similar pattern. She significantly restricted her network in Groningen, and stopped contact with many local acquaintances and friends, such as three international colleagues she used to see at work almost every day for lunch and occasionally outside work, and two others she used to hang out with in the evenings. She spent the months of partial lockdown seeing only five or six close friends. At the same time, Federica, exactly like Peter, became more active on WhatsApp with friends living abroad. She did not necessarily strengthen the relationships with them, but the frequency of interaction increased.

Todd is another research participant. He is a musician from the US who had lived in Groningen for 18 years. During the pandemic, all his work-related
activities, music gigs and private classes, were disrupted. He spent a lot of
time at home playing music on his own and online. For him, the most remark-
able novelty brought by social media during the two years of pandemic was
the possibility to play music with other musicians spread around the world,
and to post the tracks on YouTube, Instagram and Facebook. He ended up
playing with musicians from different countries in Europe and the US,
some of them completely new to him. He described this as an amazing
experience that reminded him of the reasons why he started playing music
in the very first place, which was not the pursuit of money or fame, but
rather the possibility to talk to “people’s soul” and to “make them happy.” He
appreciated the spontaneity of these activities, which were not performed
to generate income, and brought him joy and new connections with artists
around the world. The other noteworthy digital-enabled activity was the
weekly group Skype calls with his brother and sister in the US.

Peter, Federica and Todd, like other interviewees, greatly relied on social
media to engage with people abroad and fulfil the space left empty by the
absence of work-related activities, social and sport events, and travels. At
the same time, they all pointed out high levels of digital fatigue and the need
for outdoor non-digital experience. Walking became a regular common
practice that counterbalanced the excess of indoor digital usage. Groningen
was lived through the practice of strolling around the city centre, parks or
in the outskirts of the city around lakes and fields, alone or in the company
of one friend. Some interviewees mentioned the weekly or biweekly walk at
the farmer’s market as an important practice to maintain a connection with
the city. Others stressed the importance of long jogs in the countryside or
the search for new nice nature spots. Another participant gave a thorough
description of how the lack of interaction with people from Groningen was
compensated by a new interest in the history of the city. His daily walks
revolved around the discovery of new old buildings and identifying edifices
he had seen in a documentary on Groningen he had watched before. Social
media played little role in maintaining a connection with people living in
the city. Attachment to the city was instead maintained through a wide
range of non-digital solitary practices.

In the two autumns and winters during the pandemic, when government
lockdown restrictions were in place, the research participants intensified
their communication with friends and family abroad. Transnational online
interactions did not have the same extraordinary character they had in the
first few months of the pandemic, but became a routine embedded in new
daily schedules made up of work-from-home, solitary walks and limited
face-to-face encounters.
7.6 Concluding Thoughts

The government measures to control the spread of the coronavirus generated new routines of digital communications that shared similar patterns among my research participants. The movement to digital places of transnational relationships replaced pre-pandemic physical mobility and a mobile sense of place, two important components of highly skilled migrants' life. In this conclusion, I show that enhanced digital communication during partial and full lockdown had consequences for my research participants' experiences of physical locations. Some experienced an emotional detachment from Groningen. Rob, for example, described how, over these two years, he increasingly felt he did not belong to the city anymore. He said:

Perhaps in pre-pandemic days, this feeling of disconnection was simply more unconscious because you could easily jump on a plane and visit a friend in London or Athens. I had no idea what being stuck here was like!

Social media became Rob's home where he spent a few hours every day. He added:

This feeling of not-belonging reminded me of the concept of imagined communities! Social media have become my imagined communities, my place of belonging where I can hang out with friends.

The feeling of not-belonging also characterized Chrissy's experience. Chrissy spent the winter of 2020/2021 in her home country. When her job moved entirely online, she decided to go back to Greece to spend time with her family and close friends. She then went back to Greece again for a few months in the summer of 2021, and again for a few weeks over Christmas in 2021/2022. She remained in Groningen since January 2022. During this period, online and offline local connections were limited to a few close friends, and face-to-face activities remained limited despite the re-opening of restaurants, shops and universities. When the usual weekly Friday drinks with colleagues started again in February 2022, she did not participate. Yet, her daily mediated interactions with family in Greece continued to be an important part of Chrissy's everyday life. Over the five years she spent in Groningen, her emotional life was divided between her hometown in Greece and Groningen. But the pandemic brought the balance back to Greece. At the time of the interview in February 2022, she did not feel as connected to Groningen as she had before. She viewed the city as a place to work and move away from as soon as possible to go back to her
home country. On the other hand, Bettina, a 54-year-old woman and mother of two who had lived in Groningen for almost six years, explained to me that life under the pandemic strengthened her attachment to the city, despite the augmented interactions with transnational contacts on social media. WhatsApp interrupted the boredom of her life, broadened her horizons, and put her in touch with people and events elsewhere. She used to obsessively check her smartphone for updates from friends spread around the world, to the point that her teen daughter was keeping track of how many minutes she spent on the phone every day. At the same time, at the start of the pandemic, Bettina started a new professionalizing course that put her in touch with new people. Thanks to this course and her children's school network, she did not isolate herself from local contacts. She declared with a bit of a smile:

Well, I feel like I had the Stockholm syndrome! I have been complaining about my life here in this city all the time, but after these two years, I feel like I am now emotionally closer to it. My connection to this place has strengthened. I could not travel anymore, I had to stay here all the time, and I’ve developed new friendships.

Peter similarly felt that his emotional connection to the city was not threatened during the pandemic, even though he spent long hours every day talking with friends around the world. His pre-pandemic life was largely spent outside the city, travelling for conferences and research trips. The lack of mobility forced him to be in Groningen and reinforced the relationships he had with a few closer friends.

All the international professionals I talked to recognized the increased frequency and significance of digital transnational communication with friends and family during the two years of pandemic. Against the backdrop of forced immobility, highly skilled migrants moved to social media to experience multiple places and maintain a mobile lifestyle. By doing so, they reorganized multiple belongings and affiliations online. In most cases, but not all, transnational online socialities, as well as the suspension of in-person social and work activities, contributed to detaching them from the physical location of Groningen. Thus, digital practices of online place-making did not affect attachments towards the physical locations in a linear and direct manner. Instead, they recreated multiple belongings to different online and offline places that were profoundly disrupted by the pandemic. Social media enabled the move through places and the crafting of a mobile self in the context of forced immobility. While the people described in this chapter do not speak for the thousands of other skilled migrants living in Groningen and elsewhere in
Europe, they nevertheless shed light on the importance of mediated relationships in the making of digital and non-digital places. They also address the role of digital communications in recreating mobile selves and a mobile sense of place when opportunities of physical mobility are limited. These stories also call for more research that foregrounds the study of digital technologies, social relationships and the production of places in the context of mobile migration.

References


About the Author

Elisabetta Costa is a social anthropologist and media scholar researching social media, personal relationships, politics, gender and social inequality in Europe, the Middle East and Turkey. She is Associate Professor in Visual and Digital Culture at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Belgium.